

*age gap  
arranged marriage  
holiday romance*

A man with a dark beard and hair, wearing a bright orange Santa suit with white trim, looks intensely at the camera. A woman with dark hair, wearing a red and white Santa hat, is shown in profile, looking up at the man. They are embracing. The background is a plain, light grey.

*Grumpy*  
BRATVA  
HITMAN

SONJA GREY

# Grumpy Bratva Hitman

*Age Gap Arranged Marriage Holiday  
Romance*

Sonja Grey

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Grumpy Bratva Hitman

# Blurb

**Instead of a stocking full of coal,  
this year my grumpy ass is getting a wife.**

I hate Christmas.

I hate everything to do with the holiday.

So why am I suddenly obsessed with the Christmas-caroling, little ball of winter cheer that's found her way into my life?

She likes candy canes and hot mugs of cocoa, and I kill people for a living.

These two worlds were never meant to collide.

But all that changes when she sees me taking out my latest target.

I don't leave witnesses—not even cute ones in reindeer-decorated, knitted caps.

Now, I'm left with a choice: take her out of the equation permanently or make her my wife and give her the protection of my name.

The last thing I'm expecting is the raw desire between the two of us or the fact that I'm falling so hard and so fast for her.

This Christmas just got a whole lot more complicated.

“There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as  
laughter and good humor.”

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*



## Chapter 1

### *Holly*



Christmas carols fill my small bedroom, forcing me from the deep sleep I'd just been enjoying and into the harsh reality of another day. I hit snooze on my phone and snuggle even deeper under the thick, down comforter, not quite ready to face the chilly room and then suffer through what will most likely be a tepid shower. I've just managed to sink back into sleep when Perry Como's smooth voice starts back up on "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," and soon my foot starts tapping, and I can't help but sing along.

"Damn it, Perry, you know I can't resist that one," I fake grumble before swinging my legs out of bed and immediately into my giant, fluffy fox slippers. Pulling back the curtains, I let out a big, goofy grin at the snow-covered city. Big, fat flakes are still floating down, and it looks so beautiful that not even hearing my stepsister scream at me to "Turn down that goddamn Christmas music!" can put a damper on my mood.

Ignoring Shelly, I take my phone into the bathroom so I can listen to my Christmas playlist while I shower and get ready for work. We've been sharing this apartment for almost a year now, and she never lets me forget that she doesn't want me here and is just letting me stay until I can afford my own place. I'm guessing that will be a while since the department store I work for pays shit. I save everything I can, but most places want you to make three times what your rent is, and that's just fucking insane, so shacking up with Shelly it is.

The shower decides to favor me with enough warm water to actually fog up the mirror, and once I'm dressed snugly in

my thick, green-and-white striped tights and red dress, I grab my red, knit hat and head for the kitchen. I've been working as an elf in the toy department for most of December, and now that Christmas is right around the corner, it's been crazy busy. My boss is a giant dick who likes to give all the women leering looks that make you feel dirty anytime you happen to have the bad luck of falling under his gaze. He's never actually crossed the line, though, so there's nothing we can really do. I've been looking for another job, but so far I've had zero luck.

Pouring a bowl of cereal, I scarf it down while standing at the sink, waiting for the ancient coffeemaker to work its magic. It's still gurgling out a thin, brown stream when Shelly walks in, yawning and looking like she's still half asleep.

"You look ridiculous," she says, eyeing my elf outfit.

I return the favor by eyeing her fuzzy monstrosity of a robe but don't say anything. Instead I fill my travel coffee mug, the one that has dancing reindeers on it wearing plaid scarves and leg warmers, and let out a silent groan when I hear Billy's voice from behind me.

"Hey, babe, do you have any orange juice?"

I turn around and give Shelly's boyfriend a smile before dumping a healthy amount of sugar in my coffee and screwing the lid on. It's not that I hate Billy. It's more that I hate that he's such a loser, and that knowing that doesn't stop me from getting jealous that she has someone to snuggle up with at night and I don't.

Bitter at twenty-three. It's all downhill from here, the grim part of my brain screeches at me. I ignore it and start to hum "White Christmas" while I wash my breakfast dishes.

"Off to be an elf again?" Billy teases, pouring himself a large glass of the orange juice I bought for myself the other day.

"Doesn't she look ridiculous?" Shelly teases, a big, smug grin on her face.

Billy snorts and pulls her onto his lap, making her squeal and toss back her blonde curls in what I'm assuming is a practiced move. I hum even louder and grab my bag before leaving. Fumbling with my scarf, I carefully make my way down the icy stairs that lead to the parking lot and veer to the left after I've checked to make sure no one is watching. The forgotten, old room that used to hold yard supplies when the apartment complex housed their own groundskeeper has been vacant since I got here, and when I open the door, I smile at the loud meow that immediately greets me.

“Hey, Nutmeg.” I scoot into the tiny room and squat down so I can pet him properly. I'd found him a month ago, cold, hungry, and so damn cute I couldn't turn him away. He reaches his head up even higher, rubbing against me and purring like crazy, watching me with his big, green eyes that stand out so sharply against his pitch-black fur. When I'd tried to sneak him into my room one night, Shelly had pitched a massive fit and threatened to throw me out if I ever did it again. I bought him a crate and filled it with blankets, but I still feel guilty making him sleep out here all alone in this cold, dark room.

When he sees me reach into my bag, he meows even louder and circles around my ankles. I pop the top on a can of food and set it down before refilling his water dish with some bottled water. I scratch his soft head while he purrs and devours his bowl of food.

“You know the drill. I'll keep the door open enough for you to sneak out, but keep it stealthy, Nutmeg. I'll be back later with more food.”

He looks up at me, which I take to mean he fully understands and will do as I ask, so I give him one last rub and sneak back out the door, leaving it open just enough for him to squeeze through if he wants to use the bathroom or explore for a bit. Looking at my watch, I groan and speed walk as fast as I can on the ice-coated sidewalks to the bus stop at the end of our street. It's stopped snowing, but it's still bitterly cold, and by the time I get there to see the bus turning the corner, my

lungs feel like they're on fire, and I'm pretty sure my nose is beet red.

I take my usual seat in the back by the window and watch the city waking up as we head towards downtown. The bus smells strongly of coffee and eggs, thanks to a breakfast burrito that a man is trying very hard to eat without spilling. We're all packed into our winter gear, making the bus feel even more crowded than it actually is. Even though I recognize most of their faces from riding this same bus five days a week, no one smiles or says hi. They've all got their heads buried in their phones or are staring numbly out the windows. I do give a big smile to a happy toddler I see squirming on his mom's lap. He gives me a big grin before getting shy and burying his head against his mom's puffy coat.

When it's my stop, I get off, waving a quick goodbye to the little boy, and then walk to Leeman's Department Store, giving Frank, the security guard on duty, a big cheery grin.

"Morning, Holly," he says, making his big, grey eyebrows lift up even higher when he shoots me a broad grin.

"Hey, Frank. Is your wife feeling any better?"

"Yeah, the doctor said it's just a bad cold, so I've been making her stay in bed and bringing her chicken noodle soup."

"You're a good man," I tell him, making him blush and swat my compliment away with a large, hand that's red and chapped from the wind. "Tell her I hope she feels better soon."

"I will. Thanks, Holly."

I give him another smile before rounding the corner and walking into the employee-only area. I manage to clock-in with two minutes to spare and toss my bag and empty travel mug into my locker before pinning on my name tag and giving myself a quick look in the small mirror that's tacked to my locker door. I don't linger on my reflection, just give a quick glance to make sure I don't have anything smudged on my face or too many hairs out of place.

When I shut my locker and turn around, I let out a startled gasp. Mr. Belsky is leaning against his office door, giving me

that pervy stare of his and making my skin crawl. His substantial paunch is pushing tight against his horrendous, brown suit, making his olive green tie buckle a bit above the straining buttons. He may look like a pessimistic, old bastard, but anybody who hangs on that tightly to their comb over, must be an optimist at heart. I try very hard to not stare at the poor, scraggily lines of dark hair plastered across his mostly bald scalp.

“Good morning, Mr. Belsky,” I mumble, already making my way across the deserted room, not wanting to spend one more second alone with him than I need to.

“Come see me later, Holly, after your shift. I need to discuss your schedule with you.”

That stops me cold. The last thing I want to do is meet him alone after the double shift I got suckered into because of my inability to come up with a good excuse on the fly.

“Can you just ask me about it now? I mean, you can just put me down for whatever. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

He grunts and sucks on his bottom lip, a gesture that has my cereal threatening to come back up. “Nope, I’m going to need you to meet me in my office. There’s no time now, and you’re supposed to already be out on the floor.” He taps a pudgy finger against the watch that’s wrapped so tightly around his wrist it’s making his bulk spill over on either side to further make his point.

“Okay,” I finally say, making a mental note to ask one of my coworkers to come with me. No way am I meeting him alone. I turn my back on him and push the door open with my shoulder, slipping out and into the main part of the department store, smiling at customers as I pass them on my way to the back. In a moment of pure genius, or pure evil, depending on who you talk to, the builders decided to put the toy department right at the opening that leads out into the mall, forcing every single customer who’s entering the store from that direction to walk through the maze in the hopes of getting their kids to entice them to spend money before they can even fully enter Leeman’s and do the rest of their shopping.

Everything gets louder the closer I get to the toy department, and even though it's still early, school is out so the place is packed. Kids run around, their eyes lit up with the excitement that I rarely see in the frazzled adults who are following along behind them, trying like hell to keep them in sight.

"Welcome to hell," Jess, my coworker says, rolling her heavily lined eyes at me.

I laugh and nudge her shoulder with my own. "It's not that bad. I mean, look at how happy they are. Don't you remember how exciting the holidays were when you were young?"

"Not really. I was always a morbid kid. The sugar-coated cheeriness used to drive me crazy. It still does. Christmas is for suckers. Halloween is really where it's at."

I smile when I see that she's wearing the mandatory elf costume, but has chosen to add her own touch of black combat boots and a pin beneath her name tag of a smiling skull wearing a Christmas hat.

"Cheery," I say, pointing at it.

She shrugs her shoulders, her brown eyes lit up with mischief. "I thought so."

A woman being pulled by a young girl comes up to ask about our selection of dolls, and I lead her away, looking back to see Jess shooting me a grateful smile and mouthing a "Thank you."

The next few hours fly by in a rush of activity that leaves my feet sore and my head starting to hurt. I'm fixing a display of action figures when I glance up and see a man staring at me from across the busy mall's walkway. He's near the store right across from us that specializes in bedding and housewares, and he sure as hell doesn't look like a guy just out for a stroll to buy a new duvet cover. He's wearing so much black I'm guessing he could give Jess a run for her money when she's all gothed up to go clubbing. I catch a glimpse of a neck tattoo when he briefly turns his head before looking right back at me. He scrubs a hand over his dark beard, and the movement has

me sucking in a soft breath, wondering what in the hell is going on. I don't drool over men. I appreciate a gorgeous man as much as the next person, but I don't gawk, at least not openly. I'm much more likely to make myself as invisible as possible and enjoy some eye candy stealthy style. I can't seem to take my eyes off him, though.

He watches me for a few more seconds before walking off without so much as a backward glance. Well that was pleasant, I think with a groan. God, he was probably just trying to see if a toy was in stock for his kid or something, and then he was probably wondering what was wrong with the sad little elf who worked here. Feeling my cheeks heat up with embarrassment, I force myself to turn away and go back to stocking the shelves. My mind keeps wandering back to the mysterious stranger, though, and as soon as it's noon, I make sure Jess is okay and then head for the food court.

Leeman's butts up against the center of the mall, so it doesn't take long at all for me to get to the massive food court. Sure, I get a few odd stares in my elf getup, but it's totally worth it for Mister Wok's kung pao chicken and egg rolls. My mouth is already watering by the time I'm placing my order. I add in an order of crab Rangoon and a large sweet tea. If I'm going to gorge, I might as well do it right.

I find an empty table towards the back and sit down. Right when I take a massive bite and let out a moan of appreciation, I lift my eyes and see the same mysterious stranger looking at me. He's sitting across the room, a tray in front of him with a scrunched up wrapper and an empty fry carton. I slowly chew the mammoth bite I took and look down at the embarrassing amount of food I've ordered. There's easily enough for two people here, maybe even three, but I'm really hungry, and this meal needs to last me until closing time, so really it's my lunch and supper, which makes it look not so bad. I have the ridiculous urge to go and explain this to Mr. Sexy Stranger. Thankfully, I stifle that need and pick my fork back up. Whatever. I'm hungry.

I eat my meal quickly since my lunch break is only thirty minutes. My eyes keep drifting back to the man. He's no

longer openly staring at me, and I'm surprised by how much that bothers me. It was nice having his attention. It's been so long since anyone has even bothered to give me a second glance, mostly because I usually keep my head down and stick to myself, but even so, no one has ever stared at me as intently as this guy does.

When I look up again, he's looking at his cell phone, swiping his thumb over the screen before holding it to his ear. I wish I was closer so I could hear what his voice sounds like. A sudden impulse overtakes me, a moment of pure insanity that has me standing up and taking my now empty tray to the garbage can that's only a few feet away from where he's sitting. I toss my stuff inside and start to walk past him, stepping closer to his table than I technically need to. My feet freeze when I hear him speaking a language I don't understand in the sexiest voice I've ever heard. Looking over at him, I realize he's older than I first thought, probably early to mid-thirties, and even more handsome this close up. The vivid green of his eyes has my body responding in ways that have my cheeks heating up.

He arches a dark brow at me, saying another sentence of pure sexy, as I will my feet to keep moving. I'm frozen, feeling like an idiot in my elf costume and my stomach painfully full of Mister Wok's finest. Before I can decide what to do, the man says something to whoever is lucky enough to be on the other end of that phone call before giving me one more lift of his brow as he stands and turns his back on me, walking away without a backward glance yet again.

I'm mortified by the obvious and deliberate snub, and I curse my own stupidity. God, that was probably his wife he was talking to. They're probably laughing in their sexy language about the young woman who's ogling her husband at the mall. With a groan, I get my ass back to work, determined to forget all about this. It doesn't work. I replay it over and over in my head as I help customers and joke around with Jess during the few moments when it's not busy. When her shift ends at five, Gary comes in to take her place. We share a quick hello before we get bombarded by the after supper shoppers. When we finally get a lull in the crowd, I hum along to the



Christmas music and work on stocking and straightening everything up until it's almost time to close. I'm not sure if I'm relieved or sad that I didn't get another glimpse of that guy. Relieved, I try to tell myself. Most definitely relieved.

At nine, I walk over to Gary, watching him empty the cash register into the large, blue pouch we always put it in. "Hey, do you think you could stick around for a bit? Mr. Belsky asked to speak with me about the schedule, and he kind of gives me the creeps."

Gary gives me a sympathetic look, but I can tell what's coming even before he opens his mouth. "Sorry, Holly. I really need to get out of here. I have to run and grab some diapers on my way home. My wife will kill me if I'm late."

"That's okay. I understand. How's your daughter doing? She's two months old now, right?"

He beams at the mention of his little girl and tucks a strand of brown hair behind his ear. "Yeah, two months. She's doing great." He laughs and adds, "Just goes through a lot of diapers."

"Yeah, I bet," I say, giving him a smile to let him know there's no hard feelings.

"Keep your phone out while you talk to him."

"Huh?"

"Mr. Belsky, when you talk to him, keep your phone out like you're texting someone. If he thinks you've got someone waiting to hear from you and knowing exactly where you are and who you're talking to, it might make you feel safer. I know the guy is gross, but I've never heard anything about him actually crossing the line. He does like to stare, though."

"That he does," I say with a groan. "But thanks for the phone idea. I'm definitely going to try that."

He goes back to counting the money while I get the rest of our department ready to go. As soon as he's finished, I grab the bag of money since I have to go to Belsky's office anyway.

"Thanks, Holly. See you in a couple of days."

“No problem, Gary. See ya.”

I take my time on the way to his office, thinking that maybe he'll get tired of waiting and just decide to leave. I've got twenty minutes until the next bus anyway. No reason to rush and wait in the cold. My mind starts to drift to memories of last Christmas, remembering the way my dad woke me up early so we could make cookies and watch our favorite holiday movies. I can still hear the way my stepmom had laughed when he'd brought her a plate of misshaped, not fully cooked cookies with a proud grin on his face. I gotta hand it to her, she'd eaten every damn one and told him they were delicious.

After my mom died when I was five, my dad remained single until I was a teenager, not wanting to let anything come between us, but finally I'd convinced him that he needed to start living life again. Marie was perfect for him, the breath of fresh air we both needed, and Shelly and I got along great before she decided she hated me.

Pushing the thoughts aside, I step into the empty employee locker room and realize I shouldn't have dawdled. I've just made it to where I'm the only damn person left in the building. Everyone else bolted out of here the second they could, and I'd lingered like that dumb girl in the scary movies that everyone yells at for being so damn oblivious.

I quickly grab my bag and tiptoe closer to Mr. Belsky's office, hoping that maybe he won't be here so I can just slip out and then tell him later I tried, but he wasn't in. I'm about to make my sneaky escape when I hear a familiar voice speaking that same language I'd heard earlier. It's coming from further in the back by the fire escape and the old closet that's used for storing random office supplies and the staff lost-and-found box.

Curious what's going on, I tiptoe closer, wondering how in the hell Mr. Belsky knows my sexy stranger. I hear my pervy boss's nasally voice speaking that same language, and I swear his voice sounds a bit shaky. The stranger speaks again, his voice hard-edged and no-nonsense, and a little shiver runs up

my spine, and maybe it should be from fear, but it's not, or at least not *only* from fear.

I decide that one more quick peek at Mr. Handsome wouldn't be the worst thing I've ever done. Besides, I doubt I'll ever see him again, so this one more look will have to last me a lifetime. I walk past the last line of lockers and turn the corner to the small hallway that leads to the emergency exit. As soon as I look over, I hear two soft pops and then watch as blood blooms on Mr. Belsky's ill-fitting, ugly suit. His mouth gapes open in a silent scream before he falls with a thud to the hard ground.

I clamp my hand over my mouth to stifle the scream, but he hears me. The sexy stranger that I just had to have one more glimpse of looks over at me with a hard look in his eyes and a gun in his hands.

## Chapter 2

### *Aleksandr*



“F uck,” I groan in Russian when I look over and see the young woman I’d spent the afternoon eye-fucking. Her eyes are so wide I can see white all around, and she’s clutching at her mouth in an attempt to stifle her screams and not get my attention.

Well, too late for that, sweetheart.

When she runs, I’m ready for it. I chase her, knowing it’s not going to be difficult to catch her. She’s half my size and scared to death. She still manages to look surprised when I grab onto her from behind, though. Her arms and legs thrash about, annoying me more than anything, and when she starts to scream, it’s my turn to clamp a hand over that pouty mouth of hers.

“Quiet,” I whisper close to her ear.

Her body shakes against mine, her chest heaves with her heavy breathing, and when my body starts to respond, I pull far enough away so she doesn’t start screaming for a different reason. Turning her around, her blue eyes stare at me, and I recognize the wild look in her eyes and the way she keeps gasping for air like she can’t get enough.

“Look at me,” I say, waiting for her eyes to focus enough so I know she’s listening. “Close your mouth, and follow my breathing.”

I slowly breathe in through my nose, waiting for her to do the same, and then slowly let it out. She mimics me, and we stand in the deserted locker room about twenty feet from her

dead boss, the man I just shot, and do some breathing exercises. The scar on her cheek that I noticed earlier stands out even more now that her skin has gone so pale, and I'm more curious about it than I should be. When she's calmed down enough so that I'm not worried about her passing out, I try and figure out what in the fuck to do.

I've been a hitman for over a decade, and no one has ever snuck up on me. No witnesses, no evidence left behind, end of story. I'm damn good at my job, and that's what makes this so infuriating. I knew I shouldn't have kept watching her earlier. It was too risky letting her see me more than once, but something about her kept calling to me, and I couldn't resist. Now we were both paying the price for that carelessness because there's no way in hell I can just let her go.

"You're not going to like this," I say, noticing the way her eyes widen again. I've shoved the gun back in the holster under my arm, but she still looks scared to death of me. Maybe that's for the best. I keep a tight grip on her upper arm and dig my phone out of my pocket. Finding the name I need, I push the button to call him and look down at the frightened girl in my arms, hoping like hell she doesn't do anything stupid.

I switch to Russian as soon as Ivan answers. "I need you to come clean up. You know where I'm at. I've run into a slight snag, but it's not an issue. I need to go take care of it, though."

"I'm on my way," he says before hanging up.

I know he'll have questions for me later, but he's a professional and knows that business always comes first. Wanting to get her out of here before he shows up, I start to guide her towards the emergency exit I disabled earlier. As soon as I pull on her arm, she snaps to attention when she realizes what I'm trying to do.

"No, no, no, no, no," she says in a rush, eyeing the door I'm trying to pull her through.

"I'm afraid you have no choice." I grip her arm harder and try not to laugh when she freezes in place like a stubborn toddler. Her red, knitted hat with prancing, white reindeers looks adorable as fuck on her, and there's no denying she's

beautiful, but that doesn't change the fact that she just witnessed me kill a man and has gotten herself into a very dangerous situation. When she keeps her knees locked, I let out a frustrated groan and bend down, slinging her over my shoulder.

She yells and thrashes her body. Small fists hit my lower back and ass, and when I've taken all I can, I give her ass a hard enough smack to catch her attention and say, "Keep screaming and hitting me and I'm going to gag you and tie you up. Your choice."

I hear her huff out an angry breath, but she keeps her body still and her mouth shut. When I'm fairly confident she's going to keep quiet, I carry her past her boss, hearing the muffled cry she gives when she sees his dead body before opening the door and walking out into the bitter cold. I know Ivan will get rid of the body and not leave a trace of evidence, but I still keep alert as I walk toward my black truck, making sure there aren't any other witnesses lurking about. The dark alley is empty, though, and when I open the driver's side door and shove her into it, she gives me a frightened look and scurries to the passenger side. I click the fob, locking the doors when I see her reaching to try and open it. That earns me a nasty look that has me laughing as I get in and start the truck, turning the heat on high.

"Can't you just let me go? I swear I won't say anything."

I don't even bother wasting the energy to roll my eyes. Instead, I start driving us away from the building and ask, "What's your name?"

"Holly," she says. I swear I can see her mind frantically trying to come up with a plan, and I'm not at all surprised when she turns to me and asks, "What's your name?"

"Aleksandr," I tell her, since there's really no use lying about it.

"Okay, Aleksandr," she says, making me smile at her attempt to talk me down and negotiate with me. "I think this is just a big misunderstanding. I'm not even sure exactly what I saw." She gives a laugh that sounds slightly unhinged. "I

mean, I'm just trying to get home. As far as I'm concerned nothing happened here. I tried to speak to Mr. Belsky, he wasn't in his office, so I just went home. End of story."

I ignore her and ask, "Did you like him?"

She hesitates before saying, "I didn't really know him."

"Did you like what you did know of him?"

"I don't see how that matters," she finally says in more of a whisper.

"He was an asshole," I say, surprising her and, I guess, shitting all over her idea that you shouldn't ever speak ill of the dead. "He was a lowlife, sex-trafficking pervert, and he pissed off the wrong people. He deserved a whole lot worse than what I gave him."

She doesn't say anything, and I'm guessing by her silence that she can't think of a single thing to say in his defense.

"People are generally jackasses, Holly. You're what, twenty? Twenty-one? Old enough to not be so damn naïve."

"I'm twenty-three, and I'm not naïve just because I think most people are decent."

I can tell she's getting pissed at me, and maybe that's a good thing. Hate will help get her through this because being all sugar-and-spice isn't going to cut it.

"Who are you anyway? Who the hell just goes around killing people?"

I hit a red light, so I turn my head to look at her. "I'm a hitman, and I work for the most powerful Bratva in this city, and now I have a decision to make."

"You're an actual hitman?" she whispers, scooting closer to her door to put as much space between us as possible. "And what the fuck is a Bratva?"

I actually smile at her innocence. "Yes, and it's the Russian mafia."

"Russian," she says, her voice trailing off as she whispers, "so that's what language it was."

I can tell she's getting dangerously close to losing it by the way she's avoiding the elephant in the room of her having witnessed my crime and the very obvious fact that most people don't leave witnesses alive.

"You're not going to let me go, are you?"

The light turns green. I don't bother looking at her when I say, "No."

After a few minutes of silence, the sound of her wheezing has me turning my head sharply to look at her. "What's wrong?"

She's huddled up against the door, and her breaths are shallow and wheezy.

"I have asthma," she says, forcing her words out in between her painful-sounding breaths.

"You have your bag. Use your inhaler."

Her hands clench the strap of her messenger bag so tightly I see her knuckles turn white. "I forgot it at home."

"Fuck," I growl, pulling over to the side of the road before turning to her. "Is this a joke? Are you faking this shit?"

The scared look on her face and the eerie sound of her wheezing tells me she's not at all faking this. When she starts to cough, it's a hoarse, dry, painful sound that's ripped from her lungs, making her clutch her bag even tighter.

"Where do you live?" I finally ask, not quite sure why I'm doing it. I mean, if she dies from an asthma attack, that means my problem would be solved. So why the hell am I rushing back across town after she gasps out her address? I don't take the time to dissect my actions, I just get her there in record time and pull up to the sad apartment building with the chipped, white paint next to an all-night laundromat. There's a line of Christmas lights along one of the railings, but most of the bulbs aren't working, so it comes off being way more depressing than if they hadn't bothered to string up anything at all.



As soon as I turn the truck off, she's reaching for the door handle. I reach across and grab her arm before she can leave. Ignoring the way her wheezing has gotten worse and the slight blue tinge to her lips, I say, "Don't fucking try anything, Holly. We get your inhaler, and we get the hell out. Don't make me do anything that you'll regret."

She nods her head slightly, not even bothering to waste precious oxygen on an actual answer. I follow right behind her, and when she attempts to climb the stairs, coughing and wheezing even harder now that she's breathing in the ice-cold air, I groan out another "Fucking hell," and pick her up, cradling her against my chest as I run us up the stairs and to the apartment door she's pointing at.

"Do you live alone?" I ask, just now wondering if maybe I'm going to walk in on a husband or boyfriend. She's not wearing a ring, but that doesn't mean anything for sure. This is going to really get nasty if there's a man waiting inside.

"No," she rasps out, cutting through my fears. "Stepsister."

I kick the door, not bothering to knock. Stepsister, I can handle. I give the door another hard kick, hearing someone yell, "Jesus Christ, Holly! You have a fucking key!" before roughly yanking the door open with a pissed-off look on her face. As soon as she sees me, her face changes, morphing into a smile. She's so focused on me that it takes her a second to lower her eyes to a still-wheezing Holly.

"Get her inhaler," I say, pushing my way inside.

"Huh?" She steps back, giving me room, and then shuts the door behind me.

"Get her fucking inhaler," I growl, carrying Holly over to the couch and setting her down while her stepsister finally gets her ass in gear and runs for one of the bedrooms, returning with a red-and-white inhaler.

Holly paws for it, grabbing it and giving it a good shake before greedily putting it into her mouth to take a hit. Her small body is shaking, and I can't help but think about how bizarrely this night has turned out. I'm used to my work going

smoothly without a hiccup in sight, but this is most definitely a major hiccup. She sucks in another puff of medicine and holds it in her lungs for as long as she can before slowly exhaling.

“Better?” I ask, running my eyes over her for any sign that things aren’t improving. After a few minutes, her breathing is steady, the bluish tinge to her lips is gone, and I’m not hearing any wheezing. “We should go,” I say, seeing no point in drawing this out.

“Who the hell are you?”

I turn around to see her stepsister glaring at me. Her look is a mix of open curiosity, anger, and jealousy.

“It’s fine, Shelly,” Holly cuts in, trying to diffuse the situation, even though she’s still working on getting herself fully back under control.

“That doesn’t answer the question,” Shelly presses, giving me a pointed look, and I get the feeling that none of this is because she’s worried about Holly and being overprotective. I think she’s just pissed that she opened the door to a man carrying her stepsister.

“I’m her boyfriend,” I say, making Shelly’s eyes widen in surprise and Holly give a choked cough from behind me.

Shelly barks out a laugh and puts her hands on her waist. “Bullshit.”

“What the fuck is your problem?” I ask, unable and unwilling to stop myself.

I can tell she’s startled by my bluntness, but she covers it by giving Holly a nasty look and then turning her brown eyes on me. “Holly doesn’t have a boyfriend.” She gives another harsh laugh. “No man would ever be willing to look past her —”

She’s cut off by Holly who jumps up and says, “I’m going to grab a few things, and then we’ll get out of here.”

Knowing I can’t leave with Shelly even remotely suspicious about us, I grab Holly’s arm when she walks past and pull her towards me, angling her so only I can see her

face. Cupping her face, I arch a brow at her, silently telling her to keep her damn mouth shut before I lean even closer and press my lips to hers. I expect her to struggle or remain stiff or, hell, even bite my lip for daring to kiss her, but she doesn't do any of that. She freezes for a few seconds, but when I run my tongue over her lips, gently parting them, she lets out a soft moan and relaxes into me, opening her mouth for me and running her tongue along mine until I'm the one who feels completely off balance.

I pull back, knowing I need to get this under control, but when I see the desire in her blue eyes, I realize just how big of a mess I've really gotten myself into. I watch her face heat up in a blush when she realizes she just kissed the hitman who's in the middle of abducting her, however poorly a job I may be doing of it at the moment.

"Hurry up," I tell her, letting her go and turning to face her stepsister whose mouth has dropped open at the kiss she just saw. "She's going to be staying with me from now on." Thankfully, Holly is already in her room and doesn't hear me say that. I'm guessing her acting skills aren't good enough to hide that kind of shock

"You expect me to believe that *little miss I have to follow every rule* went out and got herself a buff boyfriend with a neck tat?"

"Yes," I say, not feeling the need to elaborate.

"Whatever." Shelly huffs out another breath and then goes to sit in one of the chairs. It doesn't escape my notice that she angles her body so I'm getting a view straight up the short sleep shorts she's wearing.

I turn away with a bored look on my face but not before I see the anger in her eyes. She must be a real blast to live with. I don't know why I care enough to be pissed off on Holly's behalf, but I am. I cross the small apartment and walk into the tiny bedroom that's really more like a large closet. Holly is stuffing a duffel bag full of clothes, blushing even harder when she sees me walk in. Her room is tidy with a twin bed, a

bookshelf stuffed to bursting, and a small dresser and nightstand.

Seeing a photo of a smiling Holly with an older man's arms wrapped around her has me pausing. They have the exact same blue eyes, and when I hold it up to her, she grabs it and shoves it in her bag without a word, cramming a pair of big, fox house shoes on top. I run my hand over the fuzzy fox face.

"You going to need to call him to let him know you won't be in touch for a while?"

"Nope," she says, avoiding my eyes and scanning her room for anything else she might need. I want to tell her to take a good look because she'll never be coming back here, but I don't.

"Come on, *lisichka*, time to go, and make sure you have that damn inhaler."

"What does that word mean?"

I look down at her, noticing yet again how damn stunning she is with her dark hair and blue eyes, and for reasons I don't want to investigate, I can't bring myself to admit that I've already given her a cutesy nickname of little fox, so instead I give her a smug grin and say, "It means pain in the ass. Now, hurry up."

Her lips turn down a bit at my words, but I ignore it and wait for her to finish packing before grabbing her overly stuffed duffel bag. When we walk out, Shelly is sitting normally, no longer flashing me her panties, but she still has a sour, pouty look on her face. It makes me want to laugh, but I resist, and instead dig the knife in a little deeper by wrapping an arm around Holly and pulling her close to me. I'm guessing she's been treated like shit for years by her stepsister, and I feel kind of like I'm doing a good deed by giving Shelly a taste of her own medicine. My one good deed for the year, I think as I lead Holly out the door, shutting it on Shelly's gawking, angry face.

As soon as the door is shut, I drop my arm from Holly's shoulders and put some distance between us. She darts her

eyes around, looking at anything and everything that's not me before carefully making her way down the stairs. I push the memory aside of how good her body had felt against mine when I'd carried her up these damn stairs not all that long ago and instead focus on not falling on my ass. At the bottom, instead of turning right to go to my truck, she makes a quick turn to the left, zipping down a tiny, dark hallway.

"Holly!" I yell, but she doesn't turn back to look at me, just walks faster until she's pushing open a door I hadn't noticed was there. "What the fuck?" I growl at her, forcing my way into the dark room behind her. When my eyes adjust enough to see the black cat she's holding and the hopeful look in her eyes, I say, "No, fuck no," assuming that'll be that.

She straightens her spine, gathering up all her height, which isn't much at all, and glares at me. "Look, I've gone along with everything you've said so far, but I'm not leaving Nutmeg to freeze to death, so either he goes or I'm not."

I bark out a harsh laugh, equal parts pissed and impressed because it's been a long-ass time since anyone has dared to talk to me the way she just did.

"The cat is coming with me."

She holds the scraggly-looking thing even tighter against her red, down jacket and juts her chin out at me in a defiant unspoken fuck you. Seeing it has my cock giving an annoying twitch of desire, which just pisses me off.

When I continue to silently stare at her, she starts to fidget before finally giving in and saying, "I took him to the vet when I first found him and got him neutered and up to date on his shots. If I don't take him, he'll freeze to death or starve."

"I should care about this because why?"

She lets out a soft sigh, petting the cat again like she's trying to make up for my harsh words.

"Shoot me if you want, but I'm not leaving without him." She takes a shaky breath and keeps her eyes locked on mine.

Well fuck.

## Chapter 3

### *Holly*



**A**leksandr's green eyes bore into mine, but I hold my ground and hope like hell he doesn't actually call my bluff. I don't want Nutmeg to be left behind, but I also really don't want to get shot in this nasty stairwell. While he keeps me in suspense, I shift my weight from foot to foot and try my best to not piss my pants. I don't know if there's a hitman school that teaches how to give a deadly scowl, but Aleksandr's got it down pat. Finally, he lets out a heavy sigh, making it seem like I'm the world's biggest burden for walking in on him while killing my boss, and says, "Fine," before grabbing my arm and pulling me towards his truck.

I hold Nutmeg even tighter and let him drag me to his vehicle. I should probably be kicking and screaming and trying to get away, but I know he has a gun and he obviously knows how to use it, and I'm guessing I'd get about five feet before I slip on the ice and come crashing down on my ass. Besides, if he wanted me dead, I'd already be dead, right? I'm assuming he's going to just keep me with him until he leaves the country and goes back to Russia or wherever the hell he's from.

When we're back in his truck again with only a small bit of space between us, I can't help but remember that kiss he'd given me. I know it had just been for show to keep Shelly from becoming suspicious, but there's no denying how much I'd enjoyed it. My face heats up when I think about how I'd responded by parting my lips even more for him and moaning like the sex-starved woman I am. God, how embarrassing. I'm

pretty sure Stockholm Syndrome is supposed to take longer than sixty minutes.

“So, how’d you get into the hitman business?” I ask to fill the silence.

He shoots me a quick look before turning his attention back to the street. “I’m not talking to you about that.”

“Okay,” I say, drawing out the word. “Mind if I turn on some music?”

“Yes.”

I give up and stare out the window, petting Nutmeg and wondering how long this kidnapping is going to last. Tomorrow’s my day off, but the next day I’m due to be in at eight. When Aleksandr pulls into a quiet subdivision and parks in front of a cute, craftsman-style house, I start to think that maybe I’ve gotten myself into more trouble than I originally thought.

“This is like a safe house, right?” I ask, turning to look at him. “A place for you to lay low until you can escape back to Russia?”

“You’ve clearly watched too many movies, *lisichka*. This is where I live.”

“Well, this can’t be good,” I mutter, making him sigh again before he opens his door.

“Don’t scream. My neighbors have no idea what I do for a living, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

I can’t get a good read on him. He’s obviously capable of murder, but he could’ve shot me as soon as he saw me. He didn’t, and I can’t help but think that’s a good sign. Maybe he’s a hitman with a code: No women, no children.

“Do you kill women and children?” I ask, inwardly cursing my inability to keep my damn mouth shut.

“No children,” he says, getting out of the truck and ignoring the other part of that question. That can’t be good.

I follow him, noticing that all his neighbors have Christmas lights strung up along the fronts of their houses and big, lit-up trees in their windows, but Aleksandr's house is noticeably dark. When I step inside, it isn't much different. We hang up our coats on hooks by the door, and I kick off my shoes, wishing I'd worn a more mature pair of socks instead of my dancing Christmas moose ones. They look fantastic on top of my green-and-white tights. Looking around, I see that the house is clean, cute even with all the built-in shelves and comfy, leather furniture, but there isn't a Christmas decoration in sight.

"You don't celebrate Christmas?" I ask, setting my bag down but keeping a firm grip on Nutmeg.

"No."

"What do you celebrate?" I look around for a menorah but don't see one.

"Nothing."

"That's grim," I mutter, watching him walk into a small mudroom and then going through another door that must lead into the garage. I'm surprised when he comes back carrying a litter box, setting it down in the mudroom before going back out and coming in with a couple of food dishes and a bag of cat food.

When he doesn't offer an explanation, I ask, "You have a cat?"

"Did."

"You don't talk much, do you?"

He lifts a dark brow at me as he fills the dish with food. "Some might say you talk too much."

His thick Russian accent mixed with his insanely good looks makes it difficult to remain unaffected by him. He makes me nervous, and I'm grateful when he sets the bowls down, so I can put my focus on Nutmeg and get myself under control. I hear him banging around behind me, and turn to see him shoving a frozen pizza into the oven.



“I watched you eat about ten pounds of Chinese food, but that was hours ago. Watch this while I make a phone call.”

I refuse to be embarrassed about my big lunch. I was hungry, damn it, and it just so happens I’m hungry again, so I just nod my head and watch him walk back into the living room. It’s not long before I hear him growling something in Russian. Nice to see I’m not the only one he’s short with. I’m guessing he’s talking about me, but I haven’t the faintest idea what he’s saying. I know I like the sound of it, though. If he wanted to kill me, he could’ve shot me at work or let me die from my asthma attack. I’m alive for a reason, and I take comfort in that. Plus, as strange as it sounds, there’s something about him that settles me. I know I shouldn’t feel comfortable around a murderer, but I do. I’m not justifying what he does, but Mr. Belsky was an absolute perv, and if what Aleksandr said is true, he was downright evil, and the world is a safer place without him in it.

I’m trying not to psychoanalyze my feelings too much when he walks back into the kitchen with an even grumpier look on his handsome face. “Everything okay?” I ask as casually as I can.

“No.” His one-word answer is blunt and to the point.

“What are you going to do about me?” When he turns to me, I try not to fall headlong into those green eyes. “I mean, I’d rather know what you’re planning.”

The silence stretches out between us. I break it. “Are you going to kill me, Aleksandr?”

“If I wanted you dead, you’d already be dead.”

I’m not sure if his gruff response is supposed to be comforting, but it kind of is, and I freely admit that’s all sorts of fucked up.

“What are you going to do with me?” I ask again.

“I’m not sure yet.” He checks on the pizza, and then shuts the door to give it a few more minutes.

“I’ll be staying here until you decide?” I ask, watching Nutmeg’s hesitant steps as he goes to investigate the living

room.

“Yes.”

“If you don’t decide by Monday, let me know, because I’ll need to call in sick to work.”

He lifts a brow at me like I’ve lost my mind, and maybe I have. I’m not sure exactly how I’m supposed to react in this kind of situation. It seems like a good idea to plan ahead, though, so I can at least pay my bills when he decides to release me. I mean, yay for rich people if they don’t need to worry about such things, but I’ve got rent due soon, and I’d like to be able to buy some groceries.

“I’ll call in for you if it comes to that,” is all he says before turning his back on me and taking the pizza out. Placing it on a cutting board, he slices through it with a quickness, making me wonder if he’s ever killed a man with a pizza cutter. I don’t ask.

“Are you okay splitting a pizza with me, or are you going to need your own?”

My look must say it all because the corners of his mouth lift up in the smallest hint of a smile before he gets control of it and squashes it down. He fills two plates and passes me one. Grabbing a couple of sodas from the fridge, he takes a seat at the small table on the other side of the counter, setting one of the cans in front of the seat opposite. I’m guessing that’s as much of an invitation as I’m going to get, so I walk over and sit down.

After I’ve eaten a slice, I take a drink and ask, “Is it true what you said about Mr. Belsky?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to answer my question about whether or not you kill women?”

He finishes chewing his bite while he studies me. The vivid green of his eyes is downright distracting, so I focus on my next slice of pizza instead.

“Your boss had a partner, a woman who helped him lure young girls in off the streets. I paid her a visit last night and found three teenage girls locked and drugged in her basement, not a single one of them looked old enough to drive. So tell me, do you think I should have let her live just because she’s a woman?”

I don’t have an answer for that, so I don’t say anything.

“I’m glad you’ve lived such a sheltered life, but the real world is all kinds of fucked up. I’m not about to let someone go who’s done things like that just because that person happens to have a pussy.”

“So you killed her?”

He raises a dark brow at me and leans closer. “You really want me to keep confessing my sins, *lisichka*?”

He’s right. I know he’s right. The last thing I need right now is to learn about more crimes. I’m practically digging my own grave, for fuck’s sake. So I settle for a, “Are the girls okay at least?”

“They are now.”

I leave it at that and go back to eating my pizza. We finish the meal in silence, and when we’re both done, he picks up my plate and sets them both in the dishwasher.

*Hmm, a domesticated hitman.*

Looking around, I see that the house is quite tidy if a bit sterile and sparse. There aren’t any knickknacks, personal items of any kind, not even a framed photo as far as the eye can see. I don’t even see a pile of junk mail on the counter.

“How long have you lived here?”

“Five years.”

Damn, he either doesn’t spend a lot of time here, or the man is a definite neat freak. Maybe his line of work has taught him to always pick up after himself. I can’t help but wonder if he routinely scrubs the place of fingerprints, just in case.

“Come on,” he says, grabbing my bag and starting up the staircase near the living room. I follow, trying not to stare at what has to be a perfectly chiseled ass and failing miserably. My eyes stay glued to him until I follow him into a large bedroom.

“You don’t have to give up your room for me. I mean, I’m fine on the couch,” I say, wondering why in the hell I’m trying to be accommodating to the guy who fucking kidnapped me.

He laughs and sets my bag down at my feet. “I’m not giving up my room. You’re sleeping in here with me.”

My eyes dart to the bed. Sure, it’s a big one, but still. “I’m not so sure I’m comfortable with that,” I finally say, remembering that kiss we’d shared.

“Tough shit. I need to be able to keep an eye on you.”

“Shouldn’t you at least offer to sleep on the floor?”

That really makes him laugh. “Why the fuck should I do that? It’s my house. You’re the one who butted into my business. I’m not about to walk around with a sore back.” When he sees how tense I am, he gives me a smirk and says, “Relax, I’ve never forced myself on a woman in my life, and I’m not about to start now.”

I’m not surprised to hear him say it. After everything I’ve seen tonight, he’s never once made me feel like Mr. Belsky did. He may be a paid killer, but he clearly has a moral compass of some sort.

“The bathroom is in there,” he says, pointing to a door across from the bed. “I have an extra toothbrush in the top drawer. Feel free to shower or whatever.”

He crosses to the other door in the room and opens it, revealing a large, walk-in closet. When he turns his head, meeting my eyes, I realize I’ve just been standing and gawking after him. Embarrassed at getting caught ogling him, I grab my bag and hurry my ass into the bathroom. There’s a large countertop with two sinks, a huge, walk-in shower, and there’s even a clawfoot tub. Knowing I’m snooping, but not quite caring, I start to very quietly open the drawers. I see an electric

razor and deodorant, several odds and ends that everyone has in their bathrooms, and the new toothbrush he said I could use. Seeing his cologne on top of the counter, I open the lid and hold it up to my nose. God, he smells good. I'd been too out of it when he grabbed me earlier to notice, but there's no denying it now.

I set my bag on the counter and decide that the clawfoot tub is a temptation I can't say no to. Turning the water on, I find some vanilla scented bubble bath and feel a slight twinge of jealousy, which is absurd. I know it's absurd, but this whole damn night has been so bizarre that I guess feeling jealous at the idea of my sexy kidnapper having another woman in his tub isn't too far gone a thought.

While the tub fills, I pull my hair into a messy bun and brush my teeth before stripping down and carefully stepping in. A satisfied moan escapes when I'm neck deep in bubbly, hot water. God, a girl could get used to this. The bathroom I share with Shelly is barely functioning. There's zero hot water most days, and it's barely big enough to get dressed in. I hate it with a passion, and it doesn't help that Shelly refuses to clean it. I tried to wait her out one time, digging my heels in and promising myself I wasn't going to touch it, that it was her damn turn this time. I'd held out for an admirably long time, but when hair covered every surface and I started to see mold growing, I gave up and bleached the hell out of it. I couldn't bring myself to try that experiment again, so the cleaning duties fall to me. Well, she's going to have to clean it now, I think with a small laugh, at least for the time being.

I stay soaking in the tub until the water grows tepid and I worry I might accidentally fall asleep. The towel I grab is ridiculously soft, and I start to wonder just how much a Bratva hitman makes. A lot, I'm guessing. I have so many questions about how he got into this line of business and how he's able to explain his bank account to the government. A thousand questions float through my mind as I step into my flannel pajamas, the ones with the polar bears in Christmas hats, that cover me from neck to ankle and groan when I see my reflection.

It's for the best, I tell myself. Nothing is going to happen between us, and it's not like I'd run out there in sexy pajamas if I had any. I pull on some socks and make sure I've cleaned up my mess before walking out and sucking in a quick breath when I see Aleksandr in bed, propped against a stack of pillows and shirtless. There are several tattoos on his tan, muscled chest, and I suddenly feel even more ridiculous in my polar bear jammies.

He looks like he's fighting a smile when I climb in on the other side of the bed, keeping myself as far away from him as possible and tucking the blankets up to my neck. When he turns out the light, I hear the laughter in his voice when he says, "Goodnight, *lisichka*."

I mumble a goodnight, convinced that I can sleep the whole night while remaining on my side, butting up against the edge, but at some point during the night, my body finds his just like a moth to the fucking flame.

## Chapter 4

### *Aleksandr*



I wake to the feel of a soft, feminine body clinging to me. The soft vanilla scent wafts over me, seeping into my barely conscious brain and making me rock hard in seconds. It takes a minute for me to remember everything. I'd had a hell of a time falling asleep, and my brain feels sluggish to the extreme. Despite her falling asleep as close to the edge of the bed as humanly possible, Holly's managed to not only make it over to my side of the bed but is now draped over me like she's trying to maul me in my sleep.

Or fuck me, I can't help but think as I look down at the way her arm and leg are draped over me with her head resting on my chest, rising and falling with my breaths. Her red-and-white polar bear pajamas are adorable, even though it pains me to admit it. I'm not much for cutesy things, but she has a way of pulling them off. Before I can talk sense into myself, I brush her dark hair back, exposing the side of her face to me and the long, silver scar that I'm so curious about. She keeps sleeping, so I don't stop. I let the silky strands of her hair slip between my fingers, but when I get greedy and run my finger along the smooth skin of her cheek, I feel her body tense and know she's woken up.

“Good morning, *lisichka*.”

“I'm so sorry,” she mumbles, and when she starts to rise up and move, my arms tighten around her, holding her in place before I've even made the conscious decision to do so.

“Leaving so soon?” I tease, enjoying the feel of her hand on my chest, even if she is just using me for leverage to get up.

When she wiggles and her thigh bumps up against my erection, she sucks in a quick breath of air, making me laugh at her embarrassment as she stutters out a quick apology and tries harder to roll off me.

“You squirming isn’t going to make it go down,” I tell her just in case she didn’t know.

She finally sighs and falls still. “Can you please let me go?”

I immediately loosen my grip on her, watching her scurry to her side of the bed and then pull the covers up to her neck for further protection.

I laugh and say, “You’re the one who found me in the night, *lisichka*.”

She hops up and runs for the bathroom, shutting the door on my laughter. I give a big stretch, willing my cock to go down, but it’s a stubborn bastard and doesn’t listen. I ignore it and think about what I need to do today. There’s no way in hell she’s going to like what’s coming, but it’s unavoidable, and I can’t put it off any longer.

Several minutes later, she comes out dressed in jeans and a red sweater with a white argyle print of snowmen stretched across her chest.

“Do you own any clothes that aren’t Christmas related?” I ask, noticing the way she looks at the tent my cock is still making of the sheet. Her cheeks blush almost as red as her sweater.

“Yes,” she says, avoiding me and looking off to the closet. “Do you own anything that isn’t black?”

“I have a few dark grey sweaters, and I might even have a dark blue one in there somewhere, possibly a green one, too.”

She bites her bottom lip, trying to hold back her grin.

“You’re not going to like this, but I need to shower, and I can’t leave you alone just yet.”



“Um,” she starts to say and then stops.

I get out of bed, laughing when she realizes I’m naked.

“Holy shit!” she gasps, blushing beet red and covering her eyes with her hand.

“Never seen a cock before, *lisichka*?”

She ignores me and keeps her gaze averted while I grab some clothes and pull her into the bathroom.

“I’m not going to run off,” she protests, tripping over her feet because she still has her eyes covered.

“I’m afraid I can’t take that chance.” I set my clothes on the countertop and start the shower, letting it heat up while I brush my teeth, watching her in the mirror as she looks around and finally sits down on the edge of the tub. I wink at her in the mirror when I catch her eyeing my cock. She blushes and quickly darts her eyes away.

“Look all you want. In fact, feel free to join me. I’d love some help in getting rid of this.”

Her mouth drops open. “Don’t you dare,” she whispers at me like we’re in church and I’m about to offend the entire congregation by standing up and showing them my hard cock.

I laugh and step into the shower. It’s a large shower, easily enough room for two people, and lucky for Holly, she’s got a clear view of me thanks to the glass that I just recently sprayed some anti-fog spray on because I hate having the mirrors and glass fog up every time I shower. I like being able to see my surroundings, and not being able to see the bathroom door while I shower just isn’t an option for me. You can never be too safe in my line of work.

Keeping my eyes on Holly, I lather up my body and scrub myself clean, smiling at how she keeps stealing glances at me. When I grip my cock and start to jerk myself off, she’s unable to look away. Her eyes stay locked on the way I’m gripping my shaft, working myself in a brutal pace that’s borderline violent because there’s something about this adorable, naïve girl that drives me fucking crazy.

My balls start to tense, and I know it's not going to take me much longer, not with her cute little ass sitting on the edge of my tub, squirming in place while she eyes my dick with a hungry look in her eyes. Memories of this morning flood my head—the way her small body had felt against mine, her sweet scent that I swear I can still smell on my skin, and the way her cheek and hair had felt under my fingers. All of it works together to have me slamming my hand against the tiled wall and growling out a “Fuck!” as I come so hard the edges of my vision start to darken.

Her eyes meet mine as the orgasm rolls over and through me, lighting up every damn cell in my body, and I hold her stare, letting her see this side of me, exposing myself to her like I normally wouldn't do for anyone. By the time I'm empty, I'm gasping and my fucking ears are ringing. I keep my hand on my dick, growing soft while I catch my breath and get a hold of myself.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter, giving her a wink before rinsing myself off and then washing my hair and the light beard I've been sporting all winter. By the time I turn off the water, I'm feeling a hell of a lot better.

“I can't believe you did that,” she whispers, back to avoiding my eyes, her face still as red as her sweater.

With the towel wrapped around my waist, I walk to stand in front of her, reaching down to hook a finger under her chin and force her face up to mine. Her breath hitches as I watch her pupils expand with her desire.

“It sure didn't look like you were hating the show, *lisichka*.” I run my thumb over her full, bottom lip, smirking at the sigh she gives. “If you ever want me to help you get rid of all that sexual frustration, you just let me know.”

I step back, giving her a wink before dropping the towel and getting dressed. She stubbornly juts her chin out and stares at the wall until I'm fully clothed and my cock is safely concealed.

“I need to piss,” I say, biting back a laugh when she turns to me with her eyes even wider than before. “Relax. Go

downstairs and feed your cat.”

“Aren’t you worried about me running?”

Her sarcastic tone makes me want to bend her over my lap and smack her ass until it’s as red as her sweater, but I don’t. Instead I say, “You won’t have enough time to get far. I could easily catch you, and believe me when I say you won’t like it if I do.”

I watch her slender throat move as she swallows. “Would you hurt me?”

“No more than you’d want me to,” I say, giving her another wink. Her reaction isn’t what I’m expecting. Instead of disgust or anger or fear even, there’s a quick flash of pure, raw desire before she clamps it down and storms out of the bathroom. Interesting. Before I think too much about it and end up so hard I can’t piss, I hurry up and use the bathroom and then follow her downstairs.

She’s just finishing up with her scraggily-looking cat when I walk in and start to pull out ingredients for blueberry pancakes. I grab a package of bacon and a skillet and hand them to her. “Make yourself useful.”

She looks like she wants to argue, but she doesn’t. She just grabs the stuff and gets started on cooking the bacon. I watch her fill the skillet with as much bacon as will fit and bite back the laugh I want to give. I’ve dated women who can barely clean a plate, always complaining about not wanting to put on weight or starting whatever nonsense diet is making the rounds at the time. It’s refreshing to see someone who just eats what they want. I don’t know where the fuck she puts it all, but it’s nice to see.

We work in silence, and I’m surprised that it doesn’t feel awkward. I’m not used to having someone in my home, and I find myself wanting to ask her a million questions about herself, which is not something I’m prone to do. Once everything is cooked, we sit back down at the table, and I watch as she loads her pancakes with more butter and syrup than can possibly be healthy.

“Do you have any chocolate milk?” she asks while cutting into her huge mountain of sugar.

“No.”

“That’s too bad.”

“I’m thirty-six years old. I don’t keep chocolate milk on hand.”

“You think you have to stop drinking tasty things because you’re getting old?”

I point my knife at her. “I’m not old.”

She hides her grin with another huge bite.

“I’m just old enough to know that you can’t live off sugar and expect to thrive. It’s called taking care of yourself and eating a well-balanced diet. Maybe you should try it sometime.”

She shrugs and takes a bite of bacon. “You only live once, Aleksandr.”

“Exactly, and I’d like to enjoy the one life I have with some sort of vitality and good health. Besides, shouldn’t you take better care of yourself because of your condition.”

“It’s asthma, not diabetes,” she says with a laugh.

“Have you had it your whole life?”

“Yeah, I can keep it under control most of the time, but sometimes if I get really stressed or worried it’ll flare up.”

Something dark seems to flash through her eyes, but she takes another bite and seems to push whatever memory it was away as she makes quick work of finishing her plate in what has to be a fucking world record. It reminds me of how I’d watched her eat that humungous plate of food at the mall yesterday. I swear she must’ve downed it in fifteen minutes. I’ve never seen anything like it.

“Have you ever tried breathing in between bites?”

“Now who’s being a *lisichka*?” she asks.

It takes me a second to remember I told her it means pain in the ass, and when I do I start laughing, noticing the way she's trying hard to not join in.

“You don't look near as scary when you're laughing.”

“You think I look scary?”

“You can definitely look scary. I was wondering yesterday if there's a hitman school that teaches you how to scowl. If there is, I bet you aced that particular class.”

“No, there's no school,” I tell her, gathering up our plates and walking to the sink. “It's nice to know my hitman scowl is up to par, though.”

She comes to stand next to me, helping me with the dishes like we've done this a million times before, and I can't help but think about how angry she's going to be when she finds out what's about to happen. We make quick work of the kitchen, and when I've put it off long enough, I pull out my phone and dial my uncle's number.

Uncle Viktor has been head of the Orlov Bratva ever since his older brother was killed by a rival Bratva that was trying to take over an area of Moscow that my mom's family had owned for years. The resulting war had been long and bloody, and my own father hadn't survived it, but it had taught me many things. The most important being that I had no desire to ever be a Bratva boss, and the second being that I had an uncanny ability to orchestrate and perform hits on whatever target was given to me.

At this point, I've killed more people than I can remember, but I haven't lost a minute's sleep over it. I don't kill indiscriminately. Every person I'm told to kill, I research, and if I feel they're guilty, I go through with it. I've never not gone through with a hit, because every single one of those fuckers was guilty as hell.

My uncle's voice cuts through my thoughts and brings me back to the reality at hand. I don't bother going into another room since Holly can't understand me anyway.

“Uncle Viktor, I’m guessing Ivan’s filled you in on what happened last night.”

“He did.” My uncle gives a harsh laugh and then says in his gravelly voice, “I never thought anyone would get the upper hand on you.”

“I would hardly call it getting the upper hand,” I say, feeling my pride start to get a bit bruised at getting caught red-handed by a pint-sized woman dressed like an elf.

“She’s still walking around, isn’t she?”

I eye her from across the room, watching as she cuddles with her mangy, black cat. “Yes, she is.”

He lets out another laugh. “So you’ll be here soon then?”

“Yeah, we’ll be there.”

“Can’t wait to meet the woman who made my top guy falter.”

“I didn’t falter,” I correct. “I made a choice.”

“Whatever you say, nephew. See you in a few.” He hangs up before I can say anything else.

“We need to go somewhere,” I tell Holly, who looks up at me but doesn’t stop petting Nutmeg. He leans into her touch, stretching his neck to rub against her hand even harder. My cat lost a long battle with cancer a month ago, and as much as I hate to admit it, it’s kind of nice having another one in the house. Plus, every time I look at him, I remember how Holly had stood her ground and told me I’d have to shoot her if I didn’t let her bring him with her, as if I couldn’t have just ripped him from her hands and hauled her over my shoulder if I’d wanted to. It reminds me of how naïve she is, and that’s a quality I haven’t been around in a long, long time. Everyone I spend time with is jaded as hell. They never assume the best in people because they’ve learned that the best is rarely what you get. To be around someone who is still capable of seeing the good is refreshing, even if I can’t share in it. It’s still nice to be around.

“Where are we going?” She puts Nutmeg down and comes over to me when I hold out her jacket.

“You’ll see soon enough.” I help her slip her puffy, down coat on, and then hand her the knit scarf and hat before grabbing my own black, down jacket.

She shoves her hands in her pockets and looks up at me. “You haven’t changed your mind about just offing me, have you?”

I groan and scrub a hand over my face. “For fuck’s sake, *lisichka*, I’m not going to hurt you. What’s about to happen is because I won’t hurt you.”

“Oh, God, you’re not handing me off to someone else to do it, are you?”

Cupping her face, I lean in close, ignoring the desire that immediately fills her eyes. “That’s insulting. I’m going to forget you suggested I was going to hand you off to be killed because it really pisses me off that you would think it. No one is going to lay a hand on you. Just remember that what is about to happen is because I want to ensure you’ll be safe.”

“Okay,” she whispers, dropping her gaze to my lips.

Instead of kissing her like I really want to, I pull back and grab onto her arm, leading her out the door to my truck. She looks around at the neighborhood, almost falling on her ass because her eyes are focused on the neighbors’ outdoor Christmas decorations instead of the icy patch of driveway she nearly broke her tailbone on. I’m apparently going to have to spend the rest of my life making sure she doesn’t hurt herself.

Professional hitman to full-time babysitter. Lovely.

Once she’s safely inside, I walk around to the driver’s side and get in, starting it up and turning the heat on, even though I know it’s going to be freezing air coming out. The drive to the Russian restaurant, one of the many businesses the Orlov Bratva owns and uses to funnel money, is only about twenty minutes away, but I swear it feels like it takes even less than that. I keep worrying about what Holly is going to do when she finds out. I’m not crazy about getting married this quickly

either, but it's going to be a whole lot shittier if I'm saying "I do" to a crying, hysterical bride who makes it clear she'd rather a bullet to the head than me for a husband.

When I pull into the parking lot, she looks out the window. "You wanted to get more food?" Then she thinks for a second and says, "I guess I could eat again," making me laugh despite my nerves.

I don't answer her. I wouldn't know what to say even if I wanted to explain things. My hope is that she won't want to make a scene in front of the others, and then I can try and explain things when we get back to the house. If she'll even hear me out, that is. Opening the door, I lead her through the main dining area and into the back room where we always conduct business. My uncle is seated behind his large, mahogany desk, smoking a cigar, a habit he's had since he was a teenager and the reason for his deep, raspy voice.

"Uncle Viktor," I say in English when we walk in. I take our jackets and toss them in a leather chair by the door. "Holly, this is my Uncle Viktor, head of the Orlov Bratva."

I notice she scoots closer to me when Viktor turns his dark eyes on her. Even in his late sixties, he's an intimidating man and has brought many people to their knees. I'm not sure if she wants it, but I wrap an arm around her shoulder, giving it a soft squeeze to let her know it's okay. She doesn't push me away, just leans in a little harder and lets me comfort her in this small way.

"Getting close, I see," my uncle says in Russian. "Does she know what's about to happen?"

"No."

He blows out a puff of smoke before standing up and walking towards us, switching back to English. "It's nice to meet you, Holly," he says, giving her as friendly of a smile as he can manage. It still comes off looking more sinister than anything else, but Holly stands her ground.

"It's nice to meet you too, Mr. Orlov." She leans in even closer to me and asks, "So are you like the *Don* or



something?”

I bite back the laugh at her adorable ignorance of the crime world.

“We’re not Italian, sweetheart,” my uncle says. “I’m the *Pakhan*.”

She repeats the word, her accent thick around the unfamiliar word.

“It seems you walked in on something that you shouldn’t have last night.”

“I won’t say a word,” she quickly says. “I promise. As far as I’m concerned, nothing happened. I just went home as usual.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” my uncle says, her words not fazing him in the slightest. We’ve all heard it before. The begging and pleading, things anyone will say when their life is on the line. They’re just words, though, and we all know it can’t be trusted.

“But we can’t let you go. You must know that.”

Holly looks up at me, confusion clearly etched across her features. “But I don’t understand. If I can’t go home, where will I be going?”

Uncle Viktor gives her a big smile that doesn’t reach his eyes and points a hand at me. “Why, you’ll be going home with your husband, dear.”

## Chapter 5

### *Holly*



I look up at Aleksandr, sure that I must have heard his uncle wrong, but his expression isn't giving anything away. He's just staring at me, his green eyes as unreadable as ever. The only sign that he's in any way aware of my shock and confusion is the slight squeeze he gives my shoulder as if he's silently willing me to keep my shit together.

I try. I really, really do.

"I don't understand," I finally say, looking between the two of them.

His uncle takes my hand and gives it what I'm guessing he thinks is a reassuring squeeze. I resist the urge to yank my hand away, figuring that pissing off a Bratva boss is probably not in my best interest. I'm suddenly feeling nauseated, and I'm not sure if it's the shock or the cigar smoke.

"When Aleksandr found you, he had one of two choices: shoot you or marry you. Be happy he chose this one," he says with a wink.

"But I swear I won't say anything."

He waves my promise away as if it's nothing. "If you're married, then you can't be forced to testify against him in court. I'm afraid you don't have a choice, dear."

"But is a marriage legal if I'm forced into it?"

Viktor laughs and shoots a *Is she really this naïve* look at Aleksandr that I don't appreciate at all, before turning back to me and saying, "It is for the right price. It will be a legally

binding marriage, witnessed, and the officiant will swear you were the happiest, blushing bride he'd ever seen."

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but I am. I know I should probably keep my damn mouth shut, but instead I open it like a dumbass and say, "A marriage just means I can't be forced to testify, not that I can't if I want to."

Viktor arches a brow and says something in Russian to Aleksandr who immediately answers him in a tone that has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end, but he gives my shoulder a soft squeeze, and that one small gesture has me instantly feeling more relaxed.

His uncle turns back to me and says, "My nephew assures me I have nothing to worry about. Let's hope he's right."

I'm still trying to process everything when another man walks in and says something to Aleksandr in Russian before smacking him on the back with a laugh. He's almost as tall as Aleksandr with brown hair and a nose that looks like it's been broken one too many times to ever be fully straight again.

"Nice to meet you, Holly," he says, holding his hand out to me. "I'm Ivan. Aleksandr's cousin. Welcome to the family."

I try to return the big grin he's giving me, but it's hard. I still feel like they're going to say this is all a joke at any second, but no one does. An older man walks in, carrying a stack of papers. Viktor leads him over to his desk before they wave us over.

"What's your last name, Holly?" Viktor asks.

"Knightly," I say, and then when he asks for my address, I mumble the number and street to my shitty apartment that I guess I no longer share with Shelly. Aleksandr looks down at me when I say that my parents are dead, but he doesn't say anything. Once the questions are done, we stand next to one another with Viktor and Ivan as our witnesses while the officiant goes through the quickest ceremony in the world.

Aleksandr takes two platinum bands from Ivan and slips one on my ring finger, making me wonder if they keep an

assortment of rings on hand for situations like this. His deep voice says, “I do,” and then it’s my turn.

I pause. The man in front of me is for all intents and purposes a complete stranger, but he doesn’t feel like one to me. I remember the kiss he gave me, waking up in his arms, the sight of his powerful naked body when he’d showered, and the feral look in his eyes when he’d come. Would a life tied to him really be all that bad? And what choice do I have anyway?

I do the only thing I can do, and whisper an “I do,” slipping the matching band on his thick finger before the officiant pronounces us man and wife and tells Aleksandr to kiss his bride.

He cups my face, leaning closer so our lips are almost touching. His green eyes search mine. He whispers, “I’m sorry, *lisichka*,” before giving me a gentle, chaste kiss and then stepping back. I know it’s stupid, but I can’t help but feel disappointed. He doesn’t love me, I remind myself. I mean, clearly, he just called me a pain in the ass during our wedding ceremony. He doesn’t feel anything for me, and it’s very likely he never will. I’m surprised by how much that bothers me.

Viktor smacks Aleksandr on the back and gives me a smile that I’m assuming he thinks is warm. “Welcome to the family, Holly.”

We’re given one last certificate to sign, and when I go to sign my married name, I realize that I have no idea what it is.

“I don’t know your last name,” I say, looking up at Aleksandr.

“It’s Lenkov,” he says, searching my eyes like he’s looking for signs that I’m about to crack.

I sign my new name, Holly Lenkov, and set the pen down. I know I’ve just crossed a line that I can’t ever uncross. I belong to Aleksandr now, and that means I’m a part of a mafia family that does all kinds of illegal shit that I really hope I never find out about. Knowledge isn’t power in this scenario. Knowledge just gets your ass shot. Ivan hands us both a shot of vodka, and I happily down it, needing the alcohol to calm

my nerves. The last thing I want is an asthma attack in front of my new relatives. I imagine I'm embarrassing enough to Aleksandr as is. He's probably wishing he'd just shot me last night and been done with it.

My wedding band feels strange, and I keep fiddling with it while I watch the three men speaking in Russian. Ivan says something that makes Viktor laugh and Aleksandr turn his green eyes to me. I really need to learn to read him. His face is like stone, though, and I can't tell if he's pissed, happy, or just plain bored. I have the insane urge to grip his beard and pull him down for another taste. He arches a dark brow at me, cutting into my thoughts and making me assume that I'm not near as difficult to read as he is. My dad always said I was an open book, that I always wore my emotions for everyone to see. When I start to think about what he would say about my marriage, I push the thought aside and instead focus on the men in front of me.

Aleksandr says something to them and then reaches for our jackets, holding mine open to help me into it in a gesture that almost lets me pretend we're an actual couple in love before putting his own on and leading me out the door.

"It was nice meeting you," Ivan yells to me before the door shuts.

The silence between us when we're back outside and getting into his truck is awkward as fuck. I try to ignore it, try to tell myself that it doesn't matter, but not even the Christmas decorations all around the city can cheer me up, and by the time we're pulling back into the driveway, I'm fighting the tears with everything I have. Knowing I'm about to crack, I jump from the truck and run for the front door, impatient to get inside so I can hole up somewhere and cry my heart out.

As soon as he unlocks the door, I try to bolt toward the stairs, but he surprises me by grabbing onto me and pinning me against the wall, kicking the front door shut with his black boot. His green eyes bore into mine, and when my own eyes start getting watery, I see his soften the tiniest bit.

"What's wrong?"

I let out a half-laugh, half-sob and try to turn my head away. He cups my face, forcing me to keep looking at him. He doesn't say anything, just keeps holding me until I finally give in.

“A lot of things are wrong, Aleksandr. I just got married to a man who can't stand me, and I have no idea what's going to happen next. I don't know you. I don't know if you're even going to be faithful to me.” My voice shakes, and tears are streaming down my face, but I keep going, unable to stop now that I've started. “I mean, we're married, but that doesn't mean you won't just go out and have a ton of mistresses and then come home and treat me like shit.”

He waits several agonizing seconds before saying, “Why do you think I can't stand you?”

“Why wouldn't I think that? I mean, I know you didn't really choose to marry me, but you didn't have to call me a pain in the ass during our vows.”

The side of his mouth quirks up in a grin as he runs his thumbs over my cheeks, brushing away the tears. The feel of his skin against mine sends a rush of warmth through me before it pools right between my thighs.

“*Lisichka* means little fox.”

“What?” I'm having a hard time concentrating with his body so close to mine and the intense, raw desire I see in his eyes.

“It means little fox, not pain in the ass. I call you that because of your enormous, fox house shoes.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling my face heat up. The nickname is cute now that I know what it means, and I secretly hope he keeps calling me it because I like the way it sounds in his deep voice and the intimacy of it makes me feel things that I'm not quite ready to investigate.

“Would it bother you if I had mistresses?”

I feel like this is a trick question, but I answer it honestly. “Yes, it would bother me a lot.”

“Why? You don’t love me. You sure as hell didn’t eagerly jump in the shower with me earlier.”

Remembering how damn good he had looked jerking off in the shower has my heart speeding up and my panties growing wetter by the second. “You’re my husband now, and I wouldn’t like it if you fucked other women.”

That smug grin plays at his lips again. It dies when I ask, “Would you have a problem with me fucking other men?”

He presses his body against mine, letting me feel the hard length of him. “Careful, *lisichka*, I’m not a man to toy with.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” I say, refusing to back down.

He hovers his lips above mine and brings one hand down to grip my hip as he digs his cock in even harder against me. “I don’t fucking share, sweetheart. You’re mine now, and that means that any man who dares to lay a hand on you is a dead one.”

My breath hitches at his words, and when he hears it, he lets out a groan before pressing his lips to mine. The kiss is hard and hungry, and when I run my tongue over his before giving it a hard suck, he slides his hand behind my head, cupping it and pulling me tighter against him. I’m so lost to him that it takes a second to realize his other hand is undoing my jeans. I’m about to protest, to say that I think we should wait, to explain that I’ve never done anything like this before, but then his hand is snaking under my panties and cupping my pussy in a possessive grip that makes my head spin.

“Mine,” he growls, gripping me tighter. “This is mine now.”

I shake my head yes as he slides two fingers into me and starts to finger me in a rhythm that has my knees threatening to buckle. He gives my bottom lip a suck, working me even harder with his fingers. The wet sounds of my arousal fill the entryway, and when he brings his soaked fingers to my clit, I let out a gasp and squeeze my eyes shut.

“No,” he growls. “Look at me when you come.”

I open my eyes to meet his, moaning when he starts to rub me harder, long strokes that hit my clit the whole way as he dives inside my aching pussy only to pull back out again. It's an intoxicating rhythm that leaves me panting and my whole body shaking.

"I'm close," I moan, digging my fingers into his broad shoulders for support.

"Come for me, *lisichka*. Come for your husband."

His words and the desire in his eyes pushes me over the edge. I come with his name on my lips and my head swimming with the feel of him all around me. When I'm completely spent and shaking so badly it's only his tight grip on me that's keeping me from sliding down the wall and onto my ass, he leans closer and kisses me softly, letting his fingers dance around my overly sensitive clit. Each stroke sends a shiver of pleasure through me until I'm rocking my hips for more, not caring if I look desperate or needy.

When he gives me one more soft stroke before sliding his hand out, I let out a moan of protest, and then gasp in surprise when he brings his hand up and swipes it over my mouth, covering my lips in my own arousal. He lets out a growl at the sight of my glistening lips and kisses me with a hunger that threatens to undo me. He sucks on my top lip before doing the same to my bottom one, licking and sucking my juices from me, each taste making him all the more ravenous until he's pulling back with a gasp and looking at me like a man on the brink of losing all self-control.

He rests his forehead against mine, catching his breath while I debate telling him about my complete lack of experience. The decision is taken from me when he says, "I can't wait to fuck that tight little pussy of yours, *lisichka*, but I don't think you're ready yet."

He gives me a soft, gentle kiss before taking a step back to put some distance between us. "No more talk about other people. This may not have been a traditional wedding, but I meant my vows when I said them. I will remain faithful to you and take care of you."



I feel lightheaded from the orgasm he just gave me. I know I should probably try harder to protect my heart, but I'm falling fast for him. There's no denying it. Aleksandr runs a hand over his light beard, and all I can think about is how much I like it when he kisses me. His beard is softer than I thought it would be, and the way he takes charge and kisses me like his whole world depends on it has my heart speeding up again. It makes me curious about what else he's good at.

Trying to get my body under control, I ask, "You're still going to be a hitman?" I'm not sure if that's a question I'm allowed to ask, but I figure I have a right to know. Plus, talking about his work helps keep my mind off my very wet pussy and how every cell in my body is screaming for him to fuck me.

"My job isn't one that you can just quit when you feel like it. It won't ever touch you, though. I can promise you that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you won't be aware of it, you won't know any details, and I'm damn good at it, so it won't ever come back to touch us personally."

"What do you tell people you do?"

"I tell them I own a few businesses downtown." He gives a slight grin. "I'm very good at deflecting questions."

He watches me button my jeans and hang up our coats. He's still eyeing me like he's a starved wolf and I'm a juicy lamb, but he makes no move to touch me. Instead he says, "We can go back to your apartment and get the rest of your things today, if you want, and then we need to decide when you can quit without it looking suspicious."

"I won't be working at the department store anymore?"

He smiles and shakes his head. "No, you don't need to work, but you can't just quit right now because that will be noticeable, and that's the last thing we want. I said I would take care of you, and I meant it. When are you supposed to be at work again?"

"Tomorrow."

He thinks for a second and then says, "I'll bring you in. When you find out your boss has gone missing tomorrow, it will shock and upset you, of course, and then you can quit because your new husband is too worried about you continuing to work in a place that may be unsafe."

"How do I explain you to people?"

"I'm an old friend of the family who recently came back into your life. Sparks flew. You're madly in love with me." He gives me a wink that has me smiling like the lovesick woman he's just painted me as. "We decided to elope because we couldn't wait any longer."

"Okay, I'll do my best, but if I manage to pull this off, then we get to go shopping tomorrow for some Christmas decorations."

He groans like I've just signed us up for caroling with one of the local churches. "Fine, if you insist."

"I do." I look around at the undecorated inside of the house. "You can't even tell Christmas is a few days away."

"Exactly," he says, walking into the kitchen. "Don't think that wasn't planned."

"I'll make a Christmas lover of you yet. We can even do matching sweaters and make cookies together."

He groans again while I stop to make sure Nutmeg has plenty of food and water. "It's still okay if I keep my cat?"

"I'm not going to make you give up your damn cat." He eyes the black bundle that's cuddled up on one of the chairs in the living room. "I don't mind having him around."

I don't even try to hide my grin.

"Okay, enough gloating. Let's go get the rest of your stuff. Your stepsister will be so thrilled to see us again. What's the deal with her anyway?"

"It's a long story." I turn my back and look in the fridge for a bottle of water, hoping he'll just drop it. It's not an explanation I want to give today. When I shut the door and take a drink, he's still looking at me.

Finally, he says, “I’d like to hear about that one day.”

I nod my head and take another drink. “Okay, let’s get this over with. Maybe we’ll get lucky and she won’t be home.”

We do not get lucky. As soon as I unlock the door, her annoyed face is glaring at me from the kitchen. She smirks at me, her eyes lit up with smug gloating, before she says, “Your boyfriend get tired of you already? Can’t say I blame him.”

She’s barely started her harsh laugh when Aleksandr steps in with the boxes we brought and wraps an arm around me. “Husband, actually.”

Shelly’s mouth drops open. “What?”

Aleksandr kisses the top of my head and holds me tighter. “We decided to just go for it. Life is short, and I didn’t want to waste another second of not having Holly as my wife.” He shoots me a grin. “I finally convinced her to elope with me.”

I’ve got to hand it to him. The man is good. I almost believe the lie, or maybe that’s just wishful thinking on my part. Either way, it feels good to be held by him, and seeing my stepsister’s pinched face is icing on the damn cake.

“I didn’t even know about you until yesterday, and now you expect me to believe that you’ve run off and gotten married?”

“Believe it or don’t believe it. I don’t give a shit. We are married, though, and we’re getting my wife’s things.”

Shelly turns her angry gaze on me. “So you’re just bailing on rent?”

“Please, you never wanted me here anyway. You’ve made that abundantly clear. Besides, now Billy can move in with you. I’m sure he’ll love that.”

I can tell by Shelly’s face that inviting her lazy-ass boyfriend to live with her is not going to happen anytime soon. Ignoring her as best I can, I grab Aleksandr’s hand and lead him into my room. He starts to build the boxes while I look around and figure out what I’m going to take with me. The bed was already here when I moved in, and the other stuff I just

picked up from used stores, and it all looks like it's not going to survive much longer.

"I just want to bring my books and personal things," I say, pointing to the bookshelf that's stuffed so full the shelves dip in the middle.

"I'll start on the books," he says, already grabbing a stack while I walk over to my small dresser and start shoving clothes into a box. My face heats up when I empty my underwear drawer and realize how unsexy every single thing I own is. I bite back a groan and shove my gingerbread cookie panties under a pile of socks and quickly close the lid. When I look over to make sure Aleksandr didn't see, he's reading the back of the first book in one of my favorite fantasy series.

"Do you mind if I read this?" he asks, surprising the hell out of me.

"Of course. I mean, they're kind of yours now too. You can read any of them you want."

He gives me a small smile and finishes packing the last row of books while I fill another box with some of my childhood things that I don't want to part with. The last thing I pack is a photo album from when I was young. Taking in the now pretty much empty room, I realize that I don't have much to show for twenty-three years of living.

"I guess that's it," I say, feeling a little embarrassed about my lack of shit. We grab the few boxes and carry them to the living room where Shelly is waiting with a large drink in hand. From the looks of her, she's been chugging wine since we first started packing. Her face is an angry, blotchy red, and her eyes are bright with a mix of alcohol and rage. I'm hoping she'll just silently glare, but then she starts to open her mouth, and all I can do is hope that nothing too bad comes out.

## Chapter 6

### *Aleksandr*



Holly's face goes pale at the sight of her clearly intoxicated stepsister. I don't know how in the hell she's survived living with her for as long as she has, because I couldn't have endured one day with her.

"All packed up?" she says before taking a drink that ends up draining half her damn wine glass. I notice the bottle is resting beside her—open and ready to be poured.

"Yeah, I've got everything I want. The rest of the stuff is yours anyway," Holly says, holding the box tightly in front of her like a piece of armor.

Shelly lets out a snort and turns her red-rimmed eyes on me. "Congratulations on your marriage, brother-in-law." She lets out another harsh laugh. "Not too many men would've been able to stomach her scarred body."

I see the sneer Shelly gives me, watching my reaction, and I want to laugh at her ridiculous attempt to piss me off. I don't know if she's trying to trick me or catch me off guard, but she's going to need to do a lot better than that. I may not know what in the hell she's talking about, but my profession has taught me many things, one of which is having a pretty damn unreadable face. I look over at Holly who's looking mortified and shrinking in on herself, trying to take up less space.

Giving her a smile, I say, "My wife is beautiful." I turn back to Shelly and add, "And you're a bitch."

Shelly's eyes widen in surprise before her face contorts into pure rage. "Fuck you, the both of you. Get the hell out of

my apartment.”

“Gladly,” I say, walking over and holding the door open for Holly who’s speed walking to the exit. I slam the door on Shelly’s pissy face before she can holler out any other insults.

“God, how the hell did you put up with her?” I lower the tailgate and start to put the boxes in the back, taking the one that she’s still holding, relieving her of her armor and leaving her fidgeting with the strings of her knit snow hat.

“She’s not always that bad.”

“Right,” I say, not believing that for one second. “Well, she’s never talking to you like that again. If she wants a relationship with you, she’s going to have to treat you with respect. I won’t allow her to make you feel like she just did ever again.”

I take a step closer and cup her face, wondering how in the hell she’s managed to get under my skin so damn quickly. “Do you understand?”

She shakes her head yes, but the look in her eyes is turning dark, just like she’d looked pinned against the wall when I’d made her come. There’s so much raw desire in the look she’s giving me, that I’m not at all surprised when my cock hardens yet again.

I run my thumb over her full lips. “What the hell are you doing to me, *lisichka*?”

She sucks in a quick breath, making me groan and wish I could just bend her over the tailgate and fuck her right here and now. Her blue eyes stay locked on mine, waiting to see what I’ll do, and I’m not sure which one of us is more disappointed when I step back and open the passenger door for her.

We’re both quiet on the drive home. I’m not sure what she’s thinking, but I’m wondering what in the hell Shelly was talking about. I don’t like not knowing something, especially when that something has to do with the woman who is now my life. I usually spend hours researching my targets until I know every damn detail of their lives, but I know nothing

about the woman I've just joined my life to. I remind myself that she's not a target, but that doesn't take away my curiosity.

Once we're inside with her boxes stacked on the living room floor, I grab her arm and lead her up the stairs to the bedroom. She doesn't struggle, just lets me pull her along, and when she's standing before the bed, she crosses her arms over her cheery Christmas sweater and keeps her eyes averted.

"Look at me," I say, making no move to touch her.

She finally turns her eyes up to mine.

"What was she talking about? What scars?"

"It's nothing." She tries to duck her head, but I grip her chin and keep her face looking up to me. I run my thumb over the only scar I can see on her perfect skin, wondering how many more of these there are.

"You're my wife now. Do you want a marriage of secrets? Is that the kind of future you want?"

"You're one to talk. Your whole life outside this house is one big secret."

"That's different."

"How?"

I almost laugh at the way she narrows her eyes at me. "Because that is me keeping you safe. This is just you hiding something from me, and unless you're planning on never getting naked in front of me, then I'm going to find out anyway."

When she still doesn't say anything, I lower my face closer to hers. "Are you planning on never getting naked in front of me?"

She moans when I run my tongue over her bottom lip before giving it a soft suck, letting her feel my teeth graze along her skin.

"I want to see my wife," I say, running my fingers under her sweater just enough to lightly dance them over the soft skin of her lower back. "Let me see you, *lisichka*."

Her head gives a barely noticeable nod before she steps back enough to kick off her shoes. I watch, my cock so fucking hard it's painful, as she undoes her jeans with trembling fingers. I drink in the sight of her, watching her peel her jeans off one intoxicating inch at a time until she's in nothing but her sweater and a pair of white, cotton panties that have little candy canes all over them.

“You really do love Christmas, don't you?”

She blushes and looks even more nervous, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

“Relax.” I reach out and brush her hair off her shoulder, letting my fingers graze her neck. “I think they're cute.”

Her shaky fingers grip the bottom of her sweater. Before she pulls it off, she says in a voice so low I have to strain to hear, “My dad and stepmom died in a car crash close to a year ago. I was with them.” Then she pulls off her sweater, revealing a patchwork of long, jagged scars that run over her arms and across her chest. Some of them are still red; others have turned a silvery white that matches the one on her cheek. My eyes follow them, noticing the way several disappear into her bra. When she reaches back to undo it, I see that there are a couple on her breasts, but she looks so damn beautiful that I barely notice any of them. My brain freezes at the sight of her, and all I can do is stare like an idiot, my brain refusing to work and form words.

“You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen,” I finally manage to say, eyeing the way her chest is rising and falling with her fast breaths. Unable to resist touching her, I slide my fingers up her stomach, feeling her scars as I make my way to one of her perfect tits, groaning when her nipples harden right before my eyes.

“Fuck,” I groan, picking her up and laying her on the bed, hovering my body above hers and looking into her eyes. Pressing the hard length of my cock against her panty-covered pussy, I grind against her, making her gasp and cling to my shoulders. “Do you feel what you do to me?”

“Yes,” she moans, rocking her hips up to me.



“You are beautiful, *lisichka*, so fucking beautiful it takes my goddamn breath away.”

She lets out a soft whimper, and when I see the tears start to fall down her cheeks, I let out a growl and lick them up, coating my tongue with the salty taste.

“No more tears, baby,” I whisper against her lips.

When I bring a hand to her hips to tug her panties down, she tightens her legs around me and says, “Wait, Aleksandr. I have to tell you something.”

My hand freezes while my cock presses firmly against the wet slit that I’m dying to slide into. Just the thought of her clenching around my thick shaft has me nearly growling with need. She drives me wild, like no other woman has, and I know I’m close to losing all control, to giving a part of myself to her that I’ve never giving anyone, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“What do you need to tell me, *lisichka*?”

She takes a breath and taps her fingers on my shoulders nervously. “I’ve never actually done this before.”

It takes a good five seconds for me to understand what she’s saying because my brain refuses to believe it. Each passing second, her face grows a little redder. “Just forget I said anything,” she says in a rush.

“Wait, what?” I lift up so I can see her better. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

I keep looking at her, trying to grasp the fact that my wife is a virgin and that I was about two seconds from slamming into her so roughly it would’ve had her crying from pain. I don’t think I would’ve ever forgiven myself.

“I’m glad you told me.” I lean closer and give her a soft kiss. “My perfect, sweet, *lisichka*. You’re going to be the end of me, sweetheart. I’m not used to touching something so pure and innocent.”

“Don’t treat me like that. Don’t treat me like I’m something breakable just because I’ve never had sex. I’m a rule follower,” she says with a shrug. “When I was younger, there’s no way I could’ve had sex knowing that I wasn’t supposed to, and then I got older and just didn’t meet anybody that I wanted to have sex with. After the accident, I was too embarrassed to try and get close to anybody. I thought I would disgust any man who saw me.”

“I’m glad you waited, even if it does make me sound selfish to say it. I’m glad this really is only mine,” I say, rocking my hips and pressing into her pussy again. Sitting back, I tug my sweater off and watch her eyes widen when I grab her hand and run her fingers over all the scars I have. “Does this disgust you?”

Her fingers softly run over old cuts from training, stab wounds from when I was first starting out and learning, and a gunshot wound that I took to my shoulder about five years ago when I’d jumped in front of Uncle Viktor to save his life.

“No, it doesn’t disgust me,” she whispers, tracing the line of a jagged scar that runs along my hip before tracing the lines of one of my tattoos. “But scars are sexy on guys.”

“Everything is sexy on you,” I say, giving her a wink and making her smile.

Leaning back down, I groan at the feel of her bare tits against my chest. “I want to taste you,” I whisper against her lips, giving her bottom lip a soft suck. “I want to taste my virgin wife.”

She shakes her head quickly, making me smile as I kiss a line down her neck, greedy for the taste of her. I want to devour every damn inch of her. Kissing, licking, and sucking on her skin, I slowly work my way down, stopping to give the crook of her neck a soft bite. My teeth graze her skin, giving her soft nips until she’s whimpering and rocking her hips up to me, desperate to get me inside her, desperate for what she’s never had.

When I run my tongue over one of her hard nipples, she moans my name, making me wonder for one horrible second if

I'm actually going to bust a damn nut in my jeans like a fucking teenager. I wrap my mouth around her tit, sucking her in and hoping like hell I can finish what I've started without embarrassing myself.

Her hands run over my back before fisting my hair and holding me tighter against her, whimpering when I give her nipple a soft bite. I kiss my way to her other breast, needing to taste and claim every part of her. When she moans my name, I lift up enough so I can say, "Call me Sasha."

"Why?" she asks, lifting her head up enough to look at me.

I smile and run my tongue over her nipple while she watches. "Do you really want me to give you a Russian lesson right now, *lisichka*?"

She sucks in a quick breath when I cup her pussy over her panties, resting my thumb against her clit.

"No, Sasha" she whispers, rocking her hips up against me.

"Good girl."

Her eyes grow heavy-lidded at my words, and when she falls back onto the bed, I start to kiss my way down her stomach, paying special attention to her scars, kissing each and every one of them until my lips reach the top of her panties. Grabbing onto her thighs, I spread her wide and bury my face between her legs, breathing in the scent of her until I feel drunk on it. I kiss her pussy, groaning at the wet stain blooming on the candy-cane pattern, and when I hook my fingers under the strings at her hips, she lifts her ass so I can pull them off.

The sight of her takes my breath away. I nuzzle my face against her soft, dark curls, groaning when I feel how wet she is.

"You're so perfect," I murmur against her pussy, noticing how thick my accent is getting. She makes my entire brain freeze, and soon I know I'll forget all my English, but for now, I grip the backs of her thighs even tighter, letting my fingers dig into her skin as I spread her wide enough to part her soaked lips.

With a growl, I bury my tongue inside her, needing to taste my virgin wife like I've never needed anything before. She whimpers and grips my hair even tighter, trying her damndest to buck up against me, but I tighten my fingers even more and fuck her with my tongue until her whole body is quivering beneath me. By the time I kiss my way to her clit, all it takes is one firm lick and she's screaming my name and coming hard for me.

Easing up, I run my tongue around her overly sensitive clit, giving her a chance to catch her breath. Her breaths are fast and sharp, and even now I find myself listening for any signs of her asthma getting out of control. I can barely think with the fog of lust and desire brewing inside me, but my desire to keep her safe trumps everything. When I'm satisfied she's okay, I bring my lips back to her clit and give her a soft suck.

"I can't," she pants. "Sasha, I can't take any more."

I smile around her clit and give it one more suck before saying, "You will come as many times as I want you to, wife."

"I can't," she pants again when I give her a hard flick.

"You will," I growl, pressing my mouth against her again, licking and sucking her sensitive bundle of nerves until she's screaming my name and digging her heels into my back as her whole body arches up with pleasure.

"Again," I growl, sliding two fingers inside her soaked pussy and fingering her while I coax another orgasm out of her already spent body. Unable to resist my cock any longer, I practically rip my damn button off my pants in my haste to get my dick out. Fisting myself, I start to jerk myself off while I lick and suck and finger the pussy that I'm now completely and utterly obsessed with.

"One more, baby," I groan in between licks. "Be a good girl and give me one more."

"Fuck," she moans, rocking her hips even faster, and when I feel her whole body tense, I work my cock harder. I'm slick with my own arousal, and my movements are borderline

violent as everything narrows down to the feel and taste of her and of how badly I need her. When she moans my name in an exhausted, raspy cry, I let myself go with a growl, lifting up enough so I can shoot my load all over her perfect skin.

The feel of my hot seed hitting her pussy and stomach has her clenching even tighter around my fingers and whimpering as the last of the aftershocks run through her. My whole body is buzzing with pleasure, every part of me consumed by her. I've never let my guard down for anyone, and in less than two days my sweet *lisichka* has managed to undo me.

Sliding my fingers out of her, I give her pussy one last gentle kiss before laying down and pulling her on top of me, not giving the slightest fuck that we're both a sticky mess now. My hand runs through her hair, cupping the back of her head while my other hand dances along her back and ass.

She lets out a soft laugh and runs her fingers through my chest hair, sending little shivers of pleasure all through me. "That was amazing."

I smile and kiss the top of her head. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Why didn't you want to do more?"

I can hear the worry in her voice, and it guts me. "Look at me."

When she lifts up enough so I can see her, I run a finger over her flushed cheek, smiling at the adorable *I just came hard* look she's still sporting.

"I want to fuck you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life," I say, slowly dragging my finger over the smile that spreads across her face at my words.

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because I don't want you to regret anything with me. Things have been unusual enough between us, and your first time is something special, something that shouldn't be rushed." When she starts to say something, I press my finger against her lips, stopping her words. "Plus, I just really like the idea of an insanely horny virgin who's dying for my cock."

She laughs and rolls her eyes at me.

“I’m serious. I may keep you a virgin forever.”

“Don’t you dare!” she squeals and then laughs when I give her ass a soft smack.

Her fingers run through my beard, each touch making me fall a little harder for her.

“Thank you for showing me your scars.”

“Thanks for not being horrified by them.”

“Every inch of you is perfection, *lisichka*. I’ll never let you forget that. I’m sorry about your family. I’m sorry you had to go through it alone.”

She shrugs her shoulders and gives me a small smile. “It’s been really hard, but I know they would want me to be happy. That’s why I’ve tried so hard to stay cheerful and to hold onto the good memories. When things get bad and I start to feel depressed, I just think about how much it would hurt my dad to see me like that. My mom died when I was five, and it was just the two of us for the longest time. Then he met Marie, Shelly’s mom, and it was so good to see him so happy. He taught me that life is meant to be enjoyed, that you have to grab onto every second of it with both hands and never take a moment of it for granted.”

“What happened with Shelly? Was she always like this with you?”

“No, we used to be really close, but my dad was driving the car that day, and she’s never forgiven me for that. It doesn’t matter that the accident wasn’t my dad’s fault. I know she’s just hurting, and I guess I’ve become her punching bag over the last year.”

“Not anymore,” I tell her, pulling her closer so I can kiss her.

She softens into my touch, opening her mouth for me and unknowingly claiming every damn part of myself as hers.

## Chapter 7

### *Holly*



I get ready for work in an absolute daze. So many things have changed in my life, but instead of being freaked out, I'm actually happy, and every time I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I put my elf costume back on, I see the ridiculous grin that I can't seem to stop giving. It's insane. I know it is. I shouldn't feel this way about the hitman who forced me into a marriage, but every time I see him, I feel all light and fluttery. He may be a professional killer for a powerful Bratva, but he's gentle and sweet with me, and I know I'm falling in love with him.

As soon as I step out of the bathroom in my green-and-white tights and red dress, his strong arms are around me, and his mouth is pressed against my neck, kissing a line along my skin and sparking every cell in my body back to life. Last night I'd hoped he would give in and fuck me, but he didn't. He just held me all night long, making me feel safer than I ever have in my life.

"You're making me a Christmas lover," he murmurs, running his hands under my skirt to cup my ass.

I laugh and wrap my arms around him. "Soon it'll be your favorite holiday, Sasha."

He pulls back, his eyes softening at my words. I still like to call him Aleksandr, but after he explained to me that Sasha is a more informal nickname, I've taken to calling him it when I feel especially close to him.

"We'd better go if I'm going to get there in time."

He sighs and gives me one more kiss before reluctantly letting me go. He'd looked horrified this morning when I told him I could just take the bus, so when he grabs his truck keys, I just smile and get our jackets. Once we're both bundled up and on our way, I start to think about facing work again. It feels like a lifetime ago when I walked in on Aleksandr killing my boss, but the reality is that it's barely been two days, and I can't show up for work and hear the news about my missing boss with a lovesick, goofy grin on my face. When we're parked out front in the mall parking lot, I'm surprised when he immediately gets out of the truck and starts walking around to my door.

"You can just drop me off here," I say, wrapping my scarf even tighter around my neck when a sharp gust of wind hits us.

"I'm not leaving you alone here."

"I'll be fine." I start to say something else, but he stops me with a kiss. The warmth of his mouth is a sharp contrast to the icy cold wind, and I open wider for more, feeling my whole body start to heat up.

Resting his forehead against mine, he says, "You're mine now, baby, and I'm not leaving you alone." He kisses the tip of my nose. "You look sexy as hell in that elf costume. I'm going to enjoy watching you all day again."

I smile, remembering the first time I'd glimpsed the sexy stranger who'd been staring at me. "Okay, but if you get bored, you can leave."

He gives me a wink. "I'm not leaving, and I'll never get bored watching you."

I wrap my arm through his when he offers it and lean into him as we make our way through the snowy parking lot to the main entrance. It's quiet this early in the morning, most of the shoppers are still at home, warm in their beds, but a few people are walking around, trying to get more gifts crossed off their Christmas lists. We walk past the lit up carousel, already spinning with a few kids on it, their moms waving each time they catch sight of their child spinning past, and walk into



Leeman's. As soon as I see two police officers standing by the door to the employee area, I freeze, my whole body tensing with nerves. Aleksandr feels it and turns me so I'm facing him. His smile is easygoing and sexy as hell.

"Relax, *lisichka*." He pulls off my winter hat and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "There's not a single thing to tie me to this. All they know is that Belsky has gone missing."

"What if it didn't get cleaned up well enough?" I think about all the crime shows I've seen, and how all it takes is the tiniest detail to be overlooked and you're fucked.

"Ivan cleaned up," he says as if that takes care of that. When he can still see how worried I am, he says, "The man never misses anything. All you have to do is act surprised and upset when you hear. Just remember less is more. You're not trying for an Oscar," he says with a laugh, making me wonder how in the hell he can remain so calm.

Leaning closer, he kisses me softly. "Do you need me to get you out of here?"

I shake my head no, because as crazy as it sounds, I don't want to do anything that will get this man in trouble. Maybe it's my moral obligation to turn him in and confess everything, but I know I'm not going to. Belsky was a perv, and I don't think Aleksandr was lying to me about his sex trafficking side business. From every direction I look at it, the world is a better place without him in it, and I'm sure as hell not willing to give up the man standing right in front of me just so the police can satisfy their curiosity.

"I'm fine," I tell him, giving another shake of my head. "I can do this."

"That's my girl." He kisses me again, sending a thrill through me at his words and at the soft brush of his tongue along mine.

When we pull apart, I take a deep breath before he grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. I don't question why he's walking me to my locker. I'm just happy to have his solid presence next to me. Right before I'm about to open the door

to the room, one of the officers steps closer and holds out his hand to us.

“Do you work here, ma’am.” he asks, flipping open a small notebook he’s carrying while his partner keeps leaning against the wall, eyeing two young women standing in line at a coffee kiosk.

“Yeah,” I say, trying my best to sound completely innocent and not involved in this in any way.

“Name?”

“Holly Knightly. Well,” I say, giving a smile and looking up at Aleksandr. “It’s Holly Lenkov now, but I haven’t had a chance to change my paperwork here yet.”

The cop looks at the two of us, and his brown eyes look more bored than anything. I had envisioned a CSI sort of thing with forensics walking around taking samples and instructing everyone to not walk in certain areas, but this is just sad. It almost makes me feel bad for Belsky and the obvious *I don’t care if this bastard is ever found* vibe that I’m picking up on.

“When was the last time you saw your boss, Mr. Belsky?” He flips through his notebook again. “One of your coworkers said that you mentioned you were going to talk to him after work the other night. Is that true?”

“Yeah, but what is this about?” I ask, proud of myself for remembering that I’m not supposed to know any details.

“Mr. Belsky didn’t show up for work yesterday, and no one’s been able to get in touch with him. We went to his house, but he’s not there. We’re just trying to find out what’s going on.”

“Oh, that’s terrible,” I say, leaning into Aleksandr even more. He tightens his arm around my shoulder and kisses the top of my head.

“I was supposed to talk with him that night, but he wasn’t in his office, so I just left. It’s not unusual for him to leave early. I figured he just forgot and left.”

“What were you supposed to talk to him about?”

“The schedule,” I say, and then I decide to throw in, “I told him I needed to put in my two weeks’ notice because of our wedding. I haven’t told my coworkers yet.” I smile at Aleksandr again. “Our marriage was kind of a spur of the moment thing.”

The officer makes a couple more notes and then asks for my cell number in case they need to get in touch with me again. Finally, he puts the notebook away and looks at the two of us. “Congratulations on your wedding,” he says before walking back to his partner.

I push the door open and walk through before he can ask me any more questions. As soon as the door shuts, Aleksandr is pressing his lips to mine, kissing me hard, making me forget all about how stressed and nervous I just was.

“You’re amazing,” he whispers against my lips.

“Did I do good?”

“You did perfect.” He smiles and gives me a wink. “Nice touch adding the two weeks’ notice detail.”

“Thanks.” I reach up and tug on the scarf he’s wearing. “Probably a good thing your neck tattoo was covered up.”

“And why’s that?” he asks, giving my bottom lip a soft bite.

“Because it makes you look dangerous.”

“But I am dangerous, *lisichka*.”

“I know.” My words come out in a breathy rush. I realize how close I am to jumping in Aleksandr’s arms and begging him to take me back home and to bed. “This is insane,” I finally whisper.

“It is,” he agrees.

“I shouldn’t feel this way about you already.” I look around at the empty locker room, groaning when I see the exact spot I was standing in when I saw Mr. Belsky get shot. “I shouldn’t be standing here thinking the things that I’m thinking.”

“What are you thinking?” The mischievous grin he gives me lets me know he knows exactly what’s on my mind.

“About this,” I say, running my hand over his hard cock and making him groan and narrow his green eyes at me.

“Careful, sweetheart. I’m on the last of my willpower as it is.”

I massage him through his pants, feeling him grow even bigger beneath my curious fingers. “Good.” I give him one last rub before pulling my hand away, smiling when he narrows his eyes even more. “You don’t scare me anymore.”

Before I’ve barely gotten the sentence out, he’s picked me up and pinned me against the lockers, pressing the hard length of him against me. I cup his face, running my fingers through his soft beard.

“You still don’t scare me,” I say, leaning closer and giving his bottom lip a soft bite. “I know you’d never hurt me, Sasha.”

“You’re wrong about that,” he says, making my heart speed up as I search his eyes. “Spankings hurt, and I’m looking forward to turning that little ass of yours red as soon as we get home.”

He laughs at the shocked look I give him. “That’ll give you something to think about while you work.” He digs his fingers into my ass, squeezing me hard enough to make me gasp. “That’s nothing compared to what I’m going to do to you later.”

When he sets me down, I let out a shaky breath and seriously think about just quitting and walking out the door with him. I’ve always been a rule follower, a good girl, and good girls don’t get spanked, but there’s no denying how badly I want one. Aleksandr’s deep laugh snaps me out of the fantasy that starts brewing in my head. I hurry up and drop off my purse and our coats into my locker and pull him out of the room with me, giving a smile to the two cops who are looking just as bored as when we left them.

I'm a few minutes late when we get to the toy department. Jess is already behind the register, and as soon as she sees me walk up with Aleksandr, her eyes widen in shock even though she tries hard to hide it. I give her a wave, and before I know it, she's crossed the distance and is smiling at me and eyeing the man beside me with open curiosity. I can't say I blame her. He's eye-catching. There's no doubt about that.

"Hey, Jess," I say, giving her a smile. "I kind of have some news."

Before I can say anything she looks down and sees the wedding ring on my left hand.

"Holy shit, did you get married?"

"She did," Aleksandr cuts in with a smile. "Hi, I'm Aleksandr, her husband."

Jess's mouth falls open, and it's the first time I've ever seen her speechless. "Hi," she manages to say after several awkward seconds of silence. "I had no idea you were even seeing anyone."

Aleksandr kisses my temple. "We wanted to keep it a secret, but we couldn't wait any longer. I finally convinced her to elope yesterday."

"Wow," Jess says, toying with the white fringe of the skirt that's identical to mine. "I mean, congratulations and all that. You know I'm not a super big fan of marriage." She gives a dramatic eye roll that makes us both laugh. "But I can see how happy the two of you are. You've obviously been in love a long time."

I don't say anything, just smile and feel myself blush. Aleksandr laughs and runs a finger along my flaming cheek. He leans down and whispers in my ear, "That's the exact color I'm going to make your ass later."

When he pulls back, my face is even redder. He smiles and says, "No, this one's even better."

Jess has no idea what we're talking about, but a customer comes up for help so she doesn't get a chance to ask any

questions. While she's helping them, I tell Aleksandr again that he can go home if he needs to.

"I'm staying. When do you get lunch?"

"Noon," I tell him, groaning when I see a large family headed our way.

He smiles and gives me another kiss. "I'll come get you and we can have lunch together. Have fun, *lisichka*." When he sees how much I don't want to be stuck here for the next six hours, he says, "Don't worry, baby. This will be your last day working here."

"What about the two weeks thing?"

"They can find someone else. I don't want you working here anymore. No one gets to see my wife in her cute elf costume but me."

He gives me a wink and walks off, leaving me horny and missing him already. I try to keep track of him, but he disappears into the crowd, and I'm soon so busy that I don't have time to worry about anything except helping customers and trying to keep them all happy and satisfied. When there's a lull right before lunch, Jess comes over and bumps my shoulder, giving a soft laugh.

"You sly dog, you."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, returning her smile.

"Oh please. You always acted so sweet and innocent, and this whole time you've been banging some sexy, older dude with a neck tat."

I laugh but don't admit that I'm not actually banging anyone, unfortunately. Instead, I say, "Yeah, he is pretty great. He wants me to quit now that we're married."

"Oh my God, do it. Why are you even waiting? I'd walk out right this second if I could."

"I feel bad. I don't want to leave everyone in a lurch."

She leans against the counter, hiking one big, black boot on the shelf that holds the extra receipt paper rolls and sales

tags. “Are you kidding? Gary has been dying for overtime, but Belsky always told him no because he said we were overstaffed. He’s going to love that extra money now that he’s a daddy.” She thinks for a second and says, “Can you believe they can’t find him? I bet that perv hit on the wrong woman and she finally just did him in. Serves the bastard right.”

“You really think something bad happened to him?”

Jess shrugs her shoulders and fiddles with her Christmas skull pin, twirling it while she talks. “I don’t know, and I don’t care. It’s nice not having him here. I knew one day he was going to cross the line and assault someone. Now I don’t have to worry about that. I hope he never comes back.”

“Yeah, he was creepy,” I admit, because it’s nothing I haven’t said before. “Hey, do you think you could do me a favor later?” I say, changing the subject.

She’s digging around in one of the candy jars, trying to find her favorite flavor of sucker, biting her bottom lip in concentration as her fingers grasp the end of the cherry-vanilla sucker. She pulls it out with a triumphant grin on her face and says, “Sure, whatcha need?”

“If it’s not busy, do you mind if I slip away super fast to try and sneak in a bit of Christmas shopping? I just want to grab Aleksandr a few things.”

Unwrapping her prize, she says, “Yeah, no problem,” before popping it in her mouth.

I help a few more customers and then scan the crowd outside the store, looking for Aleksandr and feeling disappointed when I don’t see him. The clock above the stuffed animals says there’s still twenty minutes until it’s my lunch break. For one horrible second I think about how I’d feel if he just doesn’t show. I mean, I did what he wanted, I talked to the police and didn’t say anything and didn’t do anything to cause suspicion. What if he’s done with me now? I’m still wallowing in my worst-case-scenario fears when I see him walk into the store. The sight of him has me grinning like an idiot and feeling like one too when I think about how

depressed I'd just made myself imagining things that aren't going to happen.

"Ready for lunch?" he asks, leaning over the counter and giving me a quick kiss.

"Yeah." Turning to Jess, I say, "I'll be back in thirty, okay?"

"Sure thing," she says, laughing to herself when I practically run over to Aleksandr.

He wraps me up in a big hug before kissing me hard enough to leave me breathless and blushing.

"Have a good morning?" he asks, leading me toward the food court.

"Yeah, it was okay."

"It looked like you were pretty damn busy. I thought you were going to lose it when that kid kept throwing the action figures on the ground and screaming," he says with a laugh. "You handled it like an absolute pro."

"You were watching me?" I stop and look up at him. "I didn't see you. I thought for a second that you might have left." I laugh to try and make it sound like I'm kidding, but he sees the truth in my face.

"My sweet *lisichka*," he says, cupping my face. "I will never leave you, and I was watching you pretty much the entire time."

"But I never saw you."

He gives me a wink. "That's because I'm damn good at my job, baby. People don't see me unless I want them to."

"So you wanted me to see you that day?"

He thinks for a second and says, "Yes. I've never done that before, but I couldn't take my eyes off you, and I wanted you to see me."

"I'm glad you did. I know it might sound weird to say that, but I'm really glad you did."



“Me too.” He smiles and threads his fingers through mine. “Don’t think your sweet talking is going to get you out of your spanking, though. I have my heart set on it, so it’s kind of a done deal.”

I laugh and bring our hands up so I can kiss the back of his. “Come on, let’s get some lunch. I’m starving.”

“I bet you are,” he says with a laugh.

## Chapter 8

### *Aleksandr*



**A**fter an enormous lunch of more Chinese food than I think I've ever eaten before in one sitting, Holly goes back to work, and I go back to watching her. All I can think about is getting her naked again. I've never been this obsessed over a woman before. I've had plenty of one-night stands over the years, and I even managed a relationship for all of three weeks once, but they all fizzle out eventually, and I'd never once cared enough to try to make anything last any longer.

None of them knew what I did for a living, so it's kind of nice that Holly does. If she hadn't wandered in and saw me doing what I do, I never would've been able to tell her about it. If we'd met under normal circumstances, she would've been given the same spiel that everyone got—business owner of my family's restaurant who sometimes has to work odd hours. If our relationship became serious and eventually resulted in marriage, she might slowly become suspicious, but suspicions are all it would be. I don't talk Bratva business with anyone outside of it. All that would do is endanger her, and I would never do that.

I watch her bend down to help a little girl who's grabbing onto her mom's leg for dear life. Holly says something to her that makes her laugh, and then she gives a big squeal when Holly shows her a remote control dog that can do flips and bark on command. She's going to make a great mom, I think and then rub the back of my neck, wondering where in the fuck that idea came from. Last week I was a bachelor, a guy

who, yeah, may have been lonely from time to time, but I'd come to terms with it. I knew I'd most likely spend the rest of my life alone, and that was fine.

And then I'd seen Holly in her cute little elf costume and that big, beautiful smile on her face, and everything had changed. I'd have sooner shot myself that night than harmed a single hair on her head. It's terrifying to see how quickly I've fallen for her, but I have. There's no denying it. I've fallen completely in love with her. Our forced marriage has become a real one to me, and I can't imagine my life without her.

I watch her scan the crowd, trying to find me. She doesn't see me, of course, but that doesn't stop her from giving a cutesy wave, hoping I'll see it.

I see you all right, *lisichka*.

She goes back to the counter and says something to Jess before slipping through a door by the video games. I wait for her to come back, but after several minutes, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Walking past her store's entrance, I weave my way through the frazzled shoppers and past the many kiosks taking up space in the middle of the walkway. The next store is obviously geared to the younger crowd. Peppy, upbeat pop music blares from it like a beacon call to teenagers everywhere.

I don't realize I'm holding my breath until I catch sight of Holly's red-and-white Christmas hat, bobbing through the crowd and let out a relieved exhale. She's trying her best to blend in while being sneaky, and the poor thing is failing miserably. I laugh out loud when she's so concerned with looking out for me that she bumps into a rack of discount shirts and nearly knocks the damn thing over. She doesn't know it, but trying to sneak away from me just earned her another three sharp smacks to her ass.

Curious what she's up to, I follow her, watching as she slips into a store with a display of men's sweaters that, I notice, are all cheery bright colors and nothing at all like anything I own. When she starts to look through them, holding up a red-and-white monstrosity with a happy snowman family

on the front, I let out a groan and realize she's Christmas shopping for me. I breathe a sigh of relief when she folds the sweater and sets it back on the display counter.

Wanting to give her a bit of privacy, I turn away enough so that I can make sure she's safe while not outright spying on her. No woman has ever given me a Christmas present, and I'm surprised by how much it means to me that she's taking the time to do this. I snuck off for a bit this morning while she was working so I could shop for her and sneak the bags out to the truck, but I hadn't planned on her getting me anything. It had surprised the hell out of me to find that I actually had fun shopping for her. I'd spent more than I'd planned, but I don't give a fuck about that. We have plenty of money, and I've never had anyone to spend it on. She's going to be a lot of fun to spoil.

I watch her leave the store with a bag in her hand and mentally start to prepare myself. There's a very good chance there's a godawful Christmas sweater in there, and I know I'll have no choice but to wear it, because the thought of hurting her feelings isn't something I'm willing to do. She scans the crowd again before ducking into another store, this one filled with Christmas decorations and the kind of earsplitting holiday music that makes you want to just skip ahead to next year and be done with it. She comes out with a big grin on her face and yet another bag.

Satisfied, she sneaks, or at least tries to, back to her own store, giving Jess a high-five before storing her bags behind the counter. I watch her, thinking she's the cutest damn thing I've ever seen, and when her shift is finally over, I try my best to act surprised when she walks up to me with her shopping bags.

She stands on her toes to give me a kiss, and I fall a little more in love with her just from watching her do it. I wrap my arms around her and kiss her back, wondering how long I'll be able to keep my little wife a virgin. I'm guessing not much longer. I'm kind of impressed with myself for lasting this long.

"Jess said that it'll be fine if I just quit and don't come back. One of our coworkers has been begging for overtime

since he just had a baby, and she said he'd be thrilled to pick up the extra hours."

I smile down at her and straighten the fuzzy, white trim of her dress that got disheveled from our hug. "Do you want kids?" The question is out before I can stop it. I let out a nervous laugh and shake my head. "Never mind, don't answer that. I shouldn't have asked."

"Why shouldn't you ask? I know this marriage started out unusual," she says, giving a soft laugh, "but I have big hopes for it, and yes, I want kids one day. Do you?"

"I never did before."

"And now?" she presses, resting one hand against my cheek, rubbing her thumb along my beard, something she's taken to doing that always sends a jolt of pleasure through me with each swipe of her thumb.

"Now everything has changed. *You've* changed everything, Holly."

She smiles and gives my beard a soft tug. "I'll take that as a yes then, but you realize what this means, right?"

"What?"

She leans closer and says, "It means you can't keep me a virgin." Her lips brush mine in the softest of kisses. "It means you're going to have to fuck me a lot, Sasha."

I groan and feel myself grow rock hard in record time. "Such a fucking temptress," I tell her, making her laugh. I set her back down before I do something embarrassing like bend her over in the middle of the mall and fuck the virginity right out of her.

"I see you snuck out and bought some things," I say, pointing at her bags and trying to act surprised.

"Did I really sneak past you?" Her eyes are lit up, and she looks so damn happy. I don't have the heart to take it from her, so I just smile and kiss the tip of her nose.

"Looks like I'll have to be extra careful about keeping an eye on you. I didn't realize you were so sneaky."

She laughs as we walk back to her locker to get her purse and our jackets. Once we're at the truck, I shove her bags in the backseat next to mine, and when she sees them, she turns to look at me, her brow scrunched in confusion.

"You're not the only one who can be sneaky," I tell her, giving her a wink.

She smiles and tries to peek into one of the bags. I swat her hand away.

"Don't even think about it. Now, are you going to want to go home and change first, or are you ready for the Christmas decoration shopping I promised you?"

Looking down at her red skirt with the white, fluffy trim and her green-and-white striped tights, she says, "Why wouldn't I want to go decoration shopping in this?" Her smile is huge when she lifts her face back up. "Christmas is just a few days away. This is the perfect get-up for today. Plus, I think it's hilarious that a holiday grump like you has to be seen in public with me like this."

"I told you the season is growing on me," I say with a laugh.

She sends out a text to upper management, letting them know she won't be back in to work, while I drive us further downtown to where I read they're having a Christmas bazaar of some sort with tons of booths selling handmade ornaments and decorations. It's the kind of thing I would've normally avoided like the plague, but now I find myself happily driving into the midst of all this holiday cheer and loving every damn second of it.

"What is this?" she asks, looking out the window and clapping her mittened hands so it's a soundless burst of joy and somehow all the more cute because of it.

"I read there was something going on down here today. I thought you might like it."

"Thank you," she says, beaming at me like I just bought her a diamond bracelet instead of drove her downtown to a Christmas market.

I smile and park the truck in the first available spot I find. It's still a bit of a walk, and it's bitterly cold today and probably going to start snowing any second. I eye her tights. "Are you sure you're going to be warm enough?"

"I'll be fine. These babies are super warm," she says, pinching her tights. "They have a fleece lining inside."

"Okay, but let me know if you get too cold."

We get out, and she gives me a sweet smile when I pull her hat down a bit more, making sure it covers her ears.

"I never would've guessed what a softie you are."

I laugh and press my finger against her lips. "Don't say that so loud."

She kisses the tip of my gloved finger. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me."

Wrapping my arm around her, we make our way towards the cheery music and crowds of people. The sharp scent of pine needles is all around us, and when we get closer, cinnamon, apples, and chocolate are added to the mix thanks to several vendors selling hot cider and hot chocolate. Holly turns her head around, trying to take everything in at once.

"Where should we start?"

She bites her bottom lip while she thinks. "Well, I don't have a ton of money, but I definitely want to make sure we get a wreath."

I turn her around so she's facing me. "Do you really think I'm going to make you pay for any of this stuff?" I groan when I realize that she really has no reason to think differently. "I'm sorry. I've been a husband for less than two days, and I'm already fucking things up. You're my wife, *lisichka*, and I'm taking care of you now. I'll call my bank and get you added to my accounts. We have plenty of money, so buy whatever the hell you want. Go crazy, Holly. Turn our house into the Christmas explosion you've always dreamed of."

Laughing I add, "My neighbors are going to wonder what in the hell is going on."

“That’s okay, we can explain it to them when we bring them all Christmas cookies.”

“You’re joking,” I say, hoping like hell I’m right.

She gives me a cute wink. “Not at all.”

I groan and pull her towards the first stand, watching as she charms everyone around her with her sweet smile. Her costume helps. Kids keep coming up to her thinking she works here, and she’s so damn nice to every one of them, telling them she works for Santa and that of course she’d be happy to put in a good word for them. She makes it damn near impossible to be in a bad mood, and I know she’s the only one on the planet who could get me to enjoy shopping in the freezing cold for decorations.

I give her free rein, and it results in several bags of handmade ornaments, garland, and a wreath that I have to admit smells amazing. I’ve never seen so many pine needles and fake cranberries in one place before, and I think I might go a bit crazy if I see one more plaid reindeer or decorative plate.

Her smile is worth it all, though, and when it starts to snow, she looks at me and says, “Today is perfect, Sasha. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“I would do anything for you,” I say, surprised that I actually mean it and that I said it out loud.

Christmas lights come on around us, turning the whole place into a sort of winter wonderland. I watch the thick flakes of snow come down, melting on her face and getting caught in her eyelashes. She blinks them away with a laugh.

“This marriage isn’t feeling so forced anymore,” she admits, giving me a shy smile and resting the side of her face against my chest.

I cup her cheek and kiss the top of her head, holding her tighter against me. “No, it’s not,” I say, wanting to say so much more but not wanting to scare the hell out of her.

“Let’s pick out a tree and go home.” She turns her head and kisses the palm of my hand. “I want to be alone with my husband.”



I'm embarrassed to say my heart does some sort of schoolgirl flip at hearing her say that. Before we go, I get her a cup of hot chocolate with extra whip cream to warm her up, and when she insists I try some, I reluctantly admit that it's pretty damn tasty. I ask the woman selling the cocoa to throw in a couple of candy canes and then tell Holly she has to wait until later to have one. She raises a brow at me but doesn't say anything.

She finishes her drink while we walk over to a large lot filled with freshly cut trees. We look around, trying to find the best one, and as soon as she sets her eyes on a giant beast of a tree, she turns to me with a hopeful look in her eyes.

I wave one of the workers over and point at the tree. "We'll take this one."

After I've paid for it, Holly waits by the tree while I go and get the truck. When I'm backing into the pickup area, I catch a glimpse of the young man I'd just paid standing way too close to Holly for my liking. She's not doing anything to encourage him. In fact, I watch her as she takes a step to the side, putting a bit more distance between them. I can't help but notice that he's a lot closer to her age than I am. Thoughts that I don't want to think drift through my mind faster than I can keep up with, but they all center around the single idea that I don't want her to be stuck with me if she'd rather be with someone else—someone better, someone her own age who doesn't kill people for a living.

As soon as I step out of the truck, Holly comes running over to me, putting her arm around me and making me feel instantly better. The look I give the man who'd just been hitting on her has him ducking his head and getting his ass back to work. I load the tree into the truck bed before opening the door for Holly. Once we're on the road, I can't get the image of the two of them out of my head. I can't let her go, I know that, but I don't want her just pretending to be happy with me, or worse, secretly hating our marriage and planning her escape.

When we're in our driveway, she turns to me, studying me in the soft light from the street. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing,” I say, giving her a smile and forcing my morbid thoughts aside.

She looks like she’s about to say something, but stops and instead reaches back and starts grabbing bags while I get out to bring our tree in. I barely get the fucker through the door, but when we’ve got it set up in front of the large bay windows in the living room, I have to admit it looks good.

Holly surprises me grabbing onto my hand and pulling me over to the couch. She pushes on my chest, trying to get me to sit down, and when I raise a brow at her, she smiles and says, “Please sit.”

I do and then groan when she straddles me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and keeping her face close to mine. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Please don’t lie to me, Sasha. I can tell your mood changed. What happened?”

“It’s stupid,” I finally say, knowing that probably won’t be enough to get me off the hook. It isn’t.

“Please tell me,” she says again. “Our marriage is going to have enough secrets because of your work, I don’t want any more than there has to be.”

I rest my hands on her hips, already feeling myself grow hard. “I saw that guy standing close to you, and I didn’t like it.”

“I knew you wouldn’t. That’s partly why I scooted further away.”

“And the other part?”

She smiles and brings one hand to my cheek. “Because I didn’t want to be close to him. I only want to be close to you.”

“But why? Is it because you’re forced to be?” I shake my head and run my fingers along the smooth skin of her waist while I think of what to say. “I can’t let you go, Holly. You know I can’t, but I don’t want you to be with me just because you’re forced to be. I’m thirteen years older than you. I’m not

so sure you would've ever chosen to be with me on your own. The decision was made for you, and now you're stuck."

Her eyes soften, and she looks at me like I'm a very dense man who's just not getting it at all. There's no denying that's exactly how I feel.

"Yeah, we were thrown together and forced to marry, and I know it sounds crazy, but I don't regret it. I'm happy with you, happy for the first time in a really long time. I don't care that you're older." She laughs and says, "I actually think it's pretty sexy."

Her fingers lightly run over my forehead, reminding me that my face is tense with worry and fear. When she rocks her hips, I let out a groan and grip her tighter.

"I know myself well enough to know that I couldn't give my body to someone that I didn't love." She cups my face and kisses me gently. "And I very much want you to take me to bed, Sasha."

"I don't deserve you," I manage to say. "I shouldn't even be allowed to touch you."

"Well, I'm hoping you'll do a whole lot more than that. I love you, Sasha," she says, tearing me wide open with those four words, "and I want you to be my first. I want you to be my *only*."

"My sweet *lisichka*," I groan, pressing my mouth to hers as I stand and carry her upstairs.

## Chapter 9

### *Holly*



**A**leksandr carries me up the stairs like a man possessed. His mouth never leaves mine. It's a hungry clash of lips and tongue that has me rocking my hips and desperately cupping the back of his head in an attempt to get him closer. I've never felt the ache in my pussy so strongly. It's a primal need to be filled, and I feel like I'm going to lose my damn mind if he doesn't get inside me right this second.

"Please, Sasha," I beg, when he lays me down on the bed.

"What have you done to me, *lisichka*?" he murmurs against my lips, sliding his hands down to pull my shirt off before making quick work of my bra. His fingers run over my stomach and chest, wanting to touch all of me at once. "You're all I can fucking think about."

I fist his sweater and pull it over his head, sighing when his upper body is bare except for the gun and knife he has strapped to him. The man never goes anywhere without at least one weapon on him. He makes quick work of the holster, setting the weapons carefully aside before hovering his body back over mine. His chiseled, tattooed chest is an absolute work of art. I run my fingers over him, greedy for the feel of his skin against mine. I lift my head up and run my tongue over his pec, loving the deep groan he gives at my touch. He runs a hand through my hair, fisting it and pulling me back so he can see my face.

"I've never loved anyone. I started believing that I wasn't even capable of it, but you've changed everything."

The pain in his green eyes breaks my heart, and my only regret about any of this is that I didn't meet him sooner. I hate knowing that he was lonely and in pain and that I wasn't there to take it from him. He traces a finger down my cheek, and I watch the pain in his eyes morph into so much love that I feel my own eyes start to water.

"I love you so much," he says. "I think I fell in love with you the first second I saw you. You were so damn beautiful. I couldn't take my eyes off you. I know I don't deserve you, but I love you, and I promise I'll do everything I can to make you happy."

"You already make me happy," I tell him and then rock my hips up, my eyes widening when I feel how hard he is. "But there is something you could give me that would make me even happier."

He smiles and gives my bottom lip a soft bite. "First things first, *lisichka*. I believe I promised you a spanking."

"You're seriously going to make me wait longer?"

He laughs, looking sexier than ever. "Yes, and I'm going to enjoy every damn second of it."

Before I can argue or plead or do anything, he's running back downstairs and returning with a string of lights and one of the candy canes he bought earlier.

"What in the hell?"

He laughs and plugs the cord in by the bed before turning out the overhead light. The multicolored lights illuminate his muscled chest and abs, making him look downright delicious.

"Hands and knees, baby."

The smug grin he's wearing looks sexy as hell on him, and when I turn to do as he says, I hear a "Good girl," from behind me that has me moving even faster to get into position. He walks around the bed, coming to stand in front of me, and when he leans closer to wrap the lights around my wrists, locking them together, I can't resist running my tongue along the peaks and grooves of his abs.

“Fuck,” he groans, freezing in place, letting me explore his body. I let my teeth graze his skin, and when I dip my tongue beneath his waistband, he pulls back with another groan and wraps the strand of lights around my chest and waist, weaving them around me so I’m lit up like a damn tree.

“God, you look amazing.”

The longing in his voice has my heart speeding up even more. I don’t feel embarrassed in front of him. He doesn’t care about my scars or think that my body isn’t good enough. He looks at me like he’ll never be able to get enough of me, and it makes me feel sexy as hell. His fingers dance over my back before lifting my skirt up and exposing my white-and-green-striped ass. He palms one cheek, giving it a firm squeeze.

“I’ve been dying to get my hands on your round ass, baby.”

In one quick motion, he’s yanking my tights down and taking my panties with them. I let out a shocked gasp at having my ass exposed, but the deep, appreciative groan he gives has me turning my head so I can see him, wanting to see the effect I have on him. His green eyes are dark with a pure, raw lust that has me sucking in a breath as my pussy clenches at air, wanting so badly to be filled by him.

“You are so beautiful, sweetheart.”

He dances his fingers over my cheeks, featherlight touches that have goosebumps rising all over my skin and my breaths coming even faster. His hand lightly pats my ass before he walks back around to my face, unwrapping the candy cane as he comes closer with a wicked grin on his face. He gives the end a suck before placing it between my lips lengthwise like I’m biting down on a stick.

“So you don’t scream,” he says with a wink.

The peppermint taste fills my mouth as I bite gently on the stick.

“Let’s see how long you can go without breaking it.”

He leans down and kisses me slowly with the candy cane between us. His tongue swipes along the stick, hitting my

tongue and lips and making me so eager and ready for him that I can barely stand it. When he pulls back, he slides his hand down and gives my nipple a hard enough pinch to have me sucking in a quick breath of peppermint-cold air.

“Patience, beautiful. You’ll get my cock soon enough.”

He walks back around to my waiting ass, and when he drags his fingers along my slit, he groans and says, “Goddamn, baby, you’re soaking wet.”

I arch my hips up to him when he slides two fingers into me, digging my hands into the bedding, feeling the string of lights stretch tight against the skin of my wrists. He fingers me in an excruciatingly slow pace, making my eyes roll back in my damn head. I’m so lost to the pleasure that it takes me by complete surprise when he brings his other hand down hard on my ass, filling the room with the sharp smacking sound. I yelp around the candy cane, turning my head to shoot him a look.

He laughs and runs his fingers over my stinging skin. “Spankings hurt, *lisichka*, but I know you can take it.”

His fingers speed up, making the pleasure mix with pain, and when I let out a soft moan and start to rock my hips, he laughs again and gives me another hard spank. By the time he gets to number five, I’ve bitten through the candy cane and my upper body is slumped onto the bed, and it’s only his possessive grip on my pussy that’s keeping me upright.

“One more, baby,” he says in a voice that’s so strained with lust I barely recognize it as his. The last spanking is the hardest one yet, and as I’m still reeling from the sting of it, he starts to rub my clit, running his slippery fingers over me and easily pushing me over the edge. I scream his name into the bedding, feeling my whole body come undone in a way that I hadn’t thought possible.

His fingers slide over me, careful to avoid my overly sensitive bundle of nerves as he kisses my sore ass cheeks before working his way up my spine. “That’s my good girl,” he murmurs against my skin in between kisses. He gives the nape of my neck a soft bite and pulls the lights off me, tossing them to the side so they’re still lighting us up, but I’m no

longer tangled in them. I roll over, still half-drunk on the orgasm I just had. My hands run over his back, and when I feel the waistband of his jeans, I give a whimper of protest.

“Naked,” I moan, making him laugh.

He pulls back long enough to shed his jeans and boxer briefs, and when he’s naked before me, every inch of him hard and powerful, I let out an appreciative moan and spread my legs wider in invitation.

“Make me yours, Sasha. Come claim your wife.”

With a growl he gets on the bed and hovers his body over mine, pressing the head of his cock against my pussy, letting me feel how big he is. I wrap my legs and arms around him, looking into his green eyes as he slowly starts to slide into me. When I wince, he kisses me gently, slowly working his way in, stretching me wider than I’ve ever been, wider than I ever thought possible, until I’m convinced I’m going to just split in two.

“Look at me, baby,” he whispers against my lips.

I hadn’t realized I’d been clenching my eyes shut. I open them and stare at my husband, the man I love, as he slides in the rest of the way, burying himself as deeply as possible inside me until we’re locked together and I feel whole in a way I’ve never known before.

“I love you.” He kisses me gently, slowly starting to move his hips, each slow thrust sending waves of pleasure and pain through me. “I love you in a way that terrifies me like nothing else ever has.”

“Why are you scared?” I ask, my voice coming out as more of a gasp when he slides into me again.

His green eyes lock on mine. “Because I know I wouldn’t survive if something happened to you. I could never go back to a life without you, *lisichka*, and I wouldn’t ever want to.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond. His lips are on me a second later, kissing me hard until he’s overtaking all of my senses, and all I know is Aleksandr, my husband, the man I love. He fills and consumes every part of me, and when he



starts to fuck me harder, I dig my fingers into his back, clinging to him for dear life as he sends me over the edge again.

“Sasha,” I moan, before a deep groan erupts from me, ripped from my throat with each hard thrust he’s giving me until my throat is hoarse and I’m gasping for air.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he says, fucking me harder.

I cling to him, consumed by pure ecstasy. The overwhelming urge to have him even closer has me tightening my grip on him, grasping his hair and sliding my tongue in to meet his. He groans and fucks me in a rhythm that has my toes starting to curl and my pussy clenching even tighter around him.

“Come with me, *lisichka*,” he growls against my lips, and all I can do is obey.

He slams into me, locking us together as his cock pulses inside me. He whispers something in Russian against my skin. I feel tears slide down my cheeks, but I don’t care. This is the most life-altering experience of my life, and I want to memorize every single second of it. Our bodies stay locked together, both of us lost to our own pleasure until I’m left shaking and breathless.

“I love you,” I say, kissing him again and running my fingers over his face and back. I will never get tired of touching him.

“I love you too, baby.”

I smile at his words, feeling happier than I ever have. He notices my tears, his eyes immediately narrowing in worry. Lifting up, he looks down at me.

“I was too rough,” he says, and the sorrow in his voice breaks my heart.

“No, you weren’t, Sasha. I mean,” I say with a soft laugh, “you’re huge, and I’m going to be sore, but it’s a good sore. I’m not crying because I’m in pain.”

His fingers brush across my cheeks, but he doesn't wipe away my tears.

"I'm just really, really happy," I tell him.

His eyes soften as his lips lift up into the sweetest smile, one I'm guessing he doesn't show many people, if any, which makes it all the more special.

"I'm happy, too, more than I ever thought possible."

He slowly slides out of me and rolls over onto his side, pulling me up against him and cradling his body around mine. He holds me tightly, our bodies lit up with the multicolored Christmas lights and a delicious ache between my legs, reminding me of what just happened. I turn my head to kiss him again, the taste of peppermint still on our tongues.

When he pulls back, he kisses a line along the scar on my cheek and cups my breast in his hand, holding me even tighter against him. "I wish I could give you a different life, a life you deserve, and I'm so sorry that I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"You Americans always want the fairytale ending. If this were a movie, the hitman would somehow magically be allowed to leave the Bratva, and the couple would live happily ever after with the past never coming back to haunt them, but that's not how this works, and I'm so sorry I can't give that to you."

"I disagree." I pull him closer and kiss his cheek, breathing in the comforting scent of him, the one I'd recognize anywhere, a perfect mix of his spicy cologne, the vanilla-scented soap he seems to love, and his own unique smell that always makes me feel like I've come home, like I was always meant to be here with him.

"We can still have a fairytale ending. Hell, I kind of feel like we're already getting one. I love you, and I know you can't just walk away from your work."

"I don't deserve you." He presses his forehead to mine and exhales slowly.

“Would you ever hurt me?”

He lifts his head, giving me a horrified look. “Never, *lisichka*.”

“How close were you to shooting me that night?”

“I could never have pulled that trigger. It didn’t even enter into my head as an option. I knew in that second that I was going to marry you, that I would do anything to keep you safe, even if it meant you hated me for the rest of your life.”

“I could never hate you, and no more talk of you not deserving me because it’s not true. I know it sounds crazy, but I feel like I was always supposed to meet you. The chances of us meeting like that are so slim it defies logic.”

“It does. I never make mistakes, and I had that hit timed perfectly so the security guard wouldn’t be walking past Leeman’s for another hour at least, because the old man is slow as fuck, and the security feed was looped to show footage from the night before. It was perfect.” He gives me a smile and kisses the tip of my nose. “Until your ass walked in and changed everything.”

“I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m not.”

He smiles and cups my face, gently kissing me before carefully picking me up and carrying me to the bathroom.

“What are you doing?”

He sits on the edge of the clawfoot tub with me on his lap and turns on the water so it’s coming out nice and warm.

“Let me take care of you, *lisichka*.” He pours in the vanilla-scented bubble bath I used the other night.

“Is that yours?”

“Whose else would it be?”

I fidget with his beard, starting to feel stupid for asking. “I don’t know. I thought maybe it was an ex-girlfriend’s or something. You don’t strike me as the bubble bath type.”

He laughs and says, “You don’t know me as well as you think you do. I enjoy a good bath as much as the next person.

As far as the past goes, I haven't really had what you would call a serious relationship before, certainly not one that would mean seeing their possessions lying around the house."

I can't help but smile at what he's just said. I like knowing that he's different with me, that he's giving a part of himself to me that he's never given anyone else. I may not be his first in bed like he is for me, but I'm still his first in many ways, and I love that.

When the water is high enough, he gets in the tub, positioning me in front of him so I'm resting against his chest. I sigh and lean into him, letting the hot water work its magic and loosen my muscles while soothing the ache between my legs.

"I really like your tattoos," I say, tracing a line over his forearm.

"I'm glad you like them." I can hear the amusement in his voice, but I can't help being enamored by him. He's the most gorgeous man I've ever seen, and I still find it hard to believe he's mine.

He surprises me by grabbing the handheld nozzle and scooting me up enough so he can start to wet my hair. His touch is so gentle, completely at odds with his brute strength and powerful build, and when he starts to massage shampoo into my scalp, I close my eyes and let out an appreciative moan.

"Careful making noises like that, *lisichka*. I'd like to at least give your pussy a chance to stop hurting before I fuck you again."

I smile and let my hands rest on his strong thighs while he finishes washing and rinsing my hair. When he grabs a sponge and some body wash, I prepare myself for what I know will be the sweetest torture imaginable. The sponge is soft, just enough coarseness to feel extremely sensual when he slowly drags it over my arm and across my collarbone.

"Stand up, baby," he whispers in my ear, giving my earlobe a soft suck and sending a shiver of pleasure down my

spine.

I stand, hearing him give a deep groan from behind me when he sees me wet and naked. The sponge runs over my back before slowly dipping lower to run along my still softly stinging cheeks and then finally the backs of my thighs and calves.

“Turn around.”

I do as he says, surprised by the look of pure lust in his eyes and the cock that’s now so hard the head is jutting above the water. He sees me staring and smiles.

“You drive me crazy, *lisichka*. You might want to get used to seeing me hard, It’s going to be a constant sight in your life,” he says with a sexy grin.

He drags the sponge over my stomach, working his way up to my breasts, and when he spends a ridiculously long amount of time sudsing up my tits, I start laughing and he just shrugs his broad shoulders and says, “Just want to make sure you’re all clean, baby.”

The sponge runs over my nipples, sending spikes of pleasure all through me, and when he starts to bring the sponge lower, I see him give a smirk when I part my thighs before he’s even made it below my belly button. The soft coarseness of the sponge drags over my pussy, making me gasp and reach down to rest my hands on his head, threading my fingers through his thick, dark hair.

He cleans me until I’m squeaky clean and so horny I can barely think. Dropping the sponge, he rinses my body clean, using his free hand to run over every inch of my body, washing me clean of the soapy water. When I’m all rinsed, he shuts off the water and grabs onto my ass, pulling me closer and burying his face between my legs again.

“Are you sore?”

“Yes,” I moan, “but I don’t care.”

He gives a soft laugh and runs his tongue up my slit, dipping inside just enough to gently part my lips and drive me crazy. I rock against him, needing more. He wraps his lips

around my clit and gives me a soft suck before kissing me and pulling back to look up at me.

“Remember how I said I liked knowing I had a horny little virgin eager and ready for me?”

“Yes,” I say, smiling at the memory.

“Well, I think I like this more. Now you’re a young woman who’s just recently been exposed to the joys of sex, desperate and eager for more.”

He laughs at the angry scowl I give him.

“You’re not seriously going to withhold your cock from me, are you?”

His green eyes are practically sparkling with mischief. “Don’t worry. I won’t make you wait too long. Be a good girl and you’ll get what you need,” he says with a wink.

## Chapter 10

### *Aleksandr*



**T**he greyish morning light hits Holly's body, revealing its perfection to me as I watch her sleep. She's snuggled in tightly against me again, her obvious preferred position for sleeping, and I can't take my eyes off her. This beautiful, perpetually optimistic woman, the exact opposite of me in so many ways, has changed my life so completely that the idea of going back to a time without her sends an actual pain to my heart. Just the thought of it has me tightening my grip on her, making her let out a soft moan and kiss my chest in her sleep before stilling again.

I know I need to get up and check out the file that was sent to me yesterday, but I can't bear to leave the bed just yet. Memories of yesterday are still fresh in my mind and knowing that I'm the only man she's ever been with has my possessive side rearing its ugly head like never before. She's so innocent and sweet, and I'll do anything to keep her safe. I don't ever want my line of work to taint her or whatever kids we may have. My eyes run down her naked body, already imagining her stomach round with our baby.

Before I wake her by sliding inside her again, I carefully roll her over, knowing she needs her sleep. We'd decorated the house last night and then stayed up way too late fucking and laughing, and it had been the most fun I've ever had. I kiss her cheek and pull the covers up so she won't be cold before tugging on a pair of black sweats and going downstairs. Feeling every damn year of my age, I immediately make a cup of coffee and grab my laptop.

Sitting at the table, I pull up the file I was sent on my new target. One of the many people employed by the Orlov Bratva is a hacker that many governments would love to get their hands on. The guy's a fucking ghost, and he outfitted all our laptops, making them completely hacker proof and safe for us to communicate freely. I don't know how the fuck he does it. The man's a legend and worth every cent Uncle Viktor pays him.

Opening the file, I click on the photo and see the man I'm going to be killing in less than twenty-four hours. He's older, mid-fifties according to the rest of his file, with a nearly bald head and saggy brown eyes. He looks like a man on the brink of a heart attack from too much stress. I read the rest of the notes, learning that he's part of the Italian mafia that's been slowly trying to encroach on our territory. The man I'm about to take out has been pushing his drug dealers onto our streets, ignoring the warning my uncle gave him a few weeks ago.

"Fucking moron," I mutter in Russian, already planning the job out in my head. The file contains everything I'll need—his schedule, address, layout of his house, his wife's schedule, and I even have the passcode to bypass his home's alarm system.

I send a message to Ivan through our secure chat that I'll be ready to move on this tomorrow. He responds with a snarky message asking how my hot, young wife is treating me. I tell him to go fuck himself, and he responds with the laughing emoji. I shut the laptop with a grin and go back upstairs. I have the insatiable urge to taste my wife again.

After I've woken her up with my tongue sliding into her delicious pussy that I'll never be able to get enough of, I make her come until I feel her muscles go limp, and then I bury myself inside her until we're both completely spent and gasping for air.

"Morning," I say, pressing my forehead against hers and laughing at the sweet, loopy grin she gives me.

"Your dick is the most amazing alarm clock ever."



I laugh and give her another kiss before carrying her to the shower. Washing her has become my new favorite thing, and she happily relinquishes the duty to me, letting me lather and scrub her to my heart's content. When we're both clean, we get dressed and then head downstairs for some breakfast. I pull up the closest grocery store on my non-work laptop and tell her to put whatever she needs in the cart so we can have it delivered this afternoon. The huge grin she gives tells me that soon there will be a lot of sugar in the house.

"I'm going to have to work my ass off to stay in shape," I say with a laugh, getting out the bacon and eggs and starting to prepare some breakfast.

She runs her eyes over me, the hungry look making me smile. "You look pretty damn good to me."

I give her a wink and go back to flipping the bacon while she tells me about the cookies we're going to be making later to bring to our neighbors.

"You're killing me," I say with a groan, scrubbing my hand over my face.

She laughs and gets up to give me a big hug. "Relax, I figured we could just make them and put them in cute bags and leave them on everyone's front step." Her hands rest on my chest, patting me in a *calm down* sort of way that makes me smile. "If you're really lucky, we can make the rounds completely undetected."

"You're so sweet," I tell her. "I doubt anyone takes the time to deliver Christmas cookies to their neighbors anymore."

She shrugs her shoulders and gives me a soft smile. "It's kind of a tradition in my family. My dad and I used to do it every year."

"Well, then it'll be a Lenkov family tradition as well. Just don't tell Ivan," I say, laughing. "He'll never let me live it down. I have a reputation as a Christmas grump, and I'd kind of like to keep it."

She gives me a cute wink. "Your secret is safe with me, Sasha."

I give her ass a squeeze and keep her pressed tightly against me while I finish scrambling the eggs and putting a couple of slices of bread in the toaster.

“Sexy and you cook, I might just have to hang onto you,” she says, lifting up to give my neck a kiss.

“You better.” I give her ass a sharp enough smack to make her gasp before letting her go so she can get some plates.

I can tell by her blush that she’s thinking about last night. An image of her wrapped in Christmas lights on her hands and knees, biting down on a candy cane pops into my mind and nearly has me groaning. God, she’d looked amazing. That memory alone will make me a lifelong fan of this holiday.

After breakfast, we cuddle up on the couch because I promised I’d watch whatever Christmas movie she wanted. When she finds out I’ve never seen any of them, the one movie turns into a shit ton of classic cartoons she grew up watching. I laugh when she insists on making us hot chocolate and then hands me a candy cane.

“Are you trying to give me diabetes?”

She laughs and then dips her candy cane into her hot chocolate before sucking it clean.

“Good God. I don’t know whether to be disgusted or turned on.”

“Just try it,” she laughs, bumping my shoulder with her own.

“Only for you would I do this.” I dip my candy cane into the mug and then put it in my mouth. I’m surprised when I actually like it. She sees my face and laughs.

“Told you.”

“You don’t have to be so damn smug about it,” I say, stirring my hot chocolate with the candy cane some more and then just leaving it inside to really mix the flavors.

She cuddles back against me as we finish our drinks and watch the kind of ridiculous Christmas shows that I’d always scoffed at before. They’re not so bad watching them with

Holly. I even surprise myself by laughing every now and then. When she sets her mug down and slips the last little bit of the candy cane into her mouth, I don't think anything of it, not until she gets on her knees, that is. Then she immediately has my full attention.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“Trying something I've never done before,” she says, giving me a shy smile.

She reaches for my jeans, undoing the button before slowly unzipping my pants, and leaning closer so she can nuzzle her face against my crotch. I'm rock hard in seconds, straining against my boxer briefs. She kisses the hard line of my cock, and that thin piece of fabric between us is killing me.

She lifts her head to look up at me. “Can I?”

I smile and cup her face. “*Lisichka*, you don't ever need to ask permission to touch my cock.”

She smiles and very carefully starts to try and maneuver my dick out of my boxers. I give her a wink and place my hand over hers, showing her that she doesn't have to be quite that gentle with me. When I'm out, I wrap her hand around my shaft and move her hand up and down the length of me, showing her how I like it. I let go, groaning when she keeps going, my own arousal making it easy for her to work me.

“Fuck,” I groan when she leans down and runs her tongue over my head, probing my slit and making my balls tense before she sucks my head in between her soft lips. The coolness from the peppermint on her tongue has me fisting her hair and using all my willpower to not thrust my hips up, filling her mouth like I want to.

I watch her dark head bob as she sucks on the top half of my cock, and it's the sexiest damn thing I've ever seen. When she tries to take me in some more, she gags and darts her eyes up to mine, embarrassment coloring her cheeks and making her look cute as hell.

“It's okay, baby. You don't have to take me all the way in.”

She lifts her head up so she can say, “But I want to. Will you help me?”

“That’s the best question I’ve ever been asked,” I say, making her laugh.

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

She smiles and leans down to run her tongue over me again. “Are you going to help me or not?” she asks before giving my head a hard enough suck to make my eyes roll back in my head.

“Aren’t you a bossy little thing.” I give her a grin and fist her hair tight enough to sting. “There’s something you should know, *lisichka*. I like seeing you choke on my cock.”

Her eyes widen at my words, and when she runs her tongue along my shaft, I let out another groan and bring one hand to her neck, squeezing her tight enough to get her attention.

“Just relax, baby, and take me in like a good girl.”

The moan she gives at my words goes straight to my balls and has me gritting my teeth. I raise and lower her slowly on the top half of my cock, letting her get used to the feel of me. Spit drips from her mouth, coating me and making it easier for her to slide up and down my length.

“Take a deep breath, *lisichka*.”

She sucks in a breath through her nose, and when she starts to exhale, I feed her another inch, tightening my fingers around her neck to make her focus on that instead of her gag reflex.

“You’re doing so good, sweetheart.”

My words are rough and strained, and I know I could easily orgasm just from this, but I want to feel the wet heat of her mouth wrapped all around me. I want to see the tears fall down her cheeks while her mouth stretches uncomfortably wide and she takes me in.

“Such a good girl,” I growl, sliding her down the rest of the way, gripping her neck harder when she starts to gag and then groaning when I see the tears finally spill over. Raising her up, she sucks in a quick breath through her nose and when I slide her back down, burying my cock in her throat, she digs her fingers into my abs and gives a moan that has me pulling her back up again. I raise and lower her in a steady rhythm that’s going to quickly push me over the edge.

“I’m so close, baby,” I growl. “Are you going to swallow me like a good girl?”

“Mm-hmm,” she moans around my cock, and that sexy, breathy moan vibrating straight to my balls is the last little push I need.

With a growl, I slam into her, coming so hard the edges of my vision darken and my ears start to ring. This small woman on her knees in front of me, swallowing my seed with a hungry look in her eyes has more power over me than anyone on earth ever has, and what’s most surprising of all is that I’m willingly giving it to her. I would give her anything, do anything for her, and kill anyone who ever dared to hurt her.

After I’m spent, she keeps her mouth wrapped around me, letting me grow soft as she licks and sucks me clean before finally lifting her face to mine. Her lips are swollen, her cheeks tear-streaked, her blue eyes still a bit watery, and she’s so beautiful it takes my damn breath away. Smiling at her, I massage her scalp, taking the sting away, and when she crawls into my lap, I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight, wondering how on earth I’ll ever let her go so I can do my job tomorrow.

She rests her head on my shoulder, keeping her face pressed close to me so I can feel the heat of her breath on my neck. I hold her, feeling more relaxed and content than I ever have in my life. There’s something so soothing about her, and it’s not just the amazing blowjob she gave me talking. It’s just her. She’s the part of my life that’s been missing that I never even knew I needed or wanted.

When the doorbell rings, she sits up and gives me an excited grin. “Time to make cookies,” she squeals, jumping up and making me laugh as I tuck my cock back in my jeans and follow her. Apparently we haven’t consumed enough sugar yet.

## Chapter II

### *Holly*



Seeing Aleksandr wearing a red apron with Santa's jolly face on it and a bit of powdered sugar in his beard is the most adorable thing I've ever seen, especially when I snap a quick photo and he gives me a glare that's probably made grown men piss themselves before, but I'm not scared of him. I know he'd never hurt me. So instead of backing away, I get on my tippy toes and give him a kiss, moaning when he immediately grabs my ass and deepens it by running his tongue along mine. He tastes of peppermint and sugar, and I can't seem to get enough.

I pull back when the kitchen timer goes off, laughing when he gives my ass a soft smack. Pulling the last batch of cookies out of the oven, I set them aside to cool and start preparing the cute Christmas bags I threw into the shopping cart earlier. They have smiling gingerbread men on the front and back and a red ribbon along the top so we can tie it closed with a bow. On every tag I've already written *Happy Holidays! From the Lenkovs*.

Aleksandr had smiled and then said, "They're not going to know who in the fuck that is."

"You've never met any of your neighbors?"

"Our neighbors," he'd corrected with a wink, "And no." He'd thought for a second and then added, "I did wave to the guy next door once, but that was a long time ago."

I'd sighed and added our house number at the bottom so people would at least know where the goods came from. I

didn't want people afraid to eat them.

"I thought you didn't want any more sugar," I say with a laugh when I catch him sneaking yet another iced cookie. He tries to look grumpy, but I'm not buying it. "They're pretty damn good, aren't they?"

"A little too good," he admits, finishing the last half with a big bite.

He finishes chewing while I tie the last bow. When his phone buzzes, he pulls it out of his back pocket and says, "My uncle wants to know if you want to go to the restaurant for lunch today."

"Really?" I tighten the bow and turn to Aleksandr. "Sure, I'd love to."

"Don't let him fool you. He just wants to see how we're doing," he says with a laugh.

"Is he dangerous?" I can't help but ask. There's no denying the older man is intimidating, but I'm not sure exactly how dangerous he is and how much I should worry about him.

"To you? Not at all," Aleksandr says, taking off the apron and tossing it onto the counter.

"Because of you?"

"You're my wife, *lisichka*. No one would ever dare hurt you because of that. If they hurt you, it's the same as if they're hurting me, and no one is that fucking stupid."

I smile because there's no denying that's hot as hell. I'm fully aware that I went from rule-follower to really straddling the morally grey line, and I'm surprised by how little it bothers me. I'm guessing it has something to do with the sexy man giving me fuck-me eyes. Yeah, it probably has a lot to do with that.

"We should drop these off if we don't want to keep your uncle waiting."

He stalks towards me like a wolf on the hunt, never taking his eyes from mine. I take a step back, a grin playing at my lips, until my back hits the counter and I realize I'm trapped.



The sexy grin he gives me is predatory and hungry, and I feel my heart start racing under that gaze of his. He steps closer, pressing his body against mine, filling up the space with his powerful body.

“Let him wait,” he says, sliding a finger under my sweater and running it along my stomach before dipping under my waistband and making me let out a small gasp. “It’s been too long since I’ve felt my wife’s pussy around my cock.”

By the time we leave the house to drop off the cookies, my legs feel rubbery, there’s a wonderful ache between my thighs, and I feel like I’m glowing from head to toe. Aleksandr looks over at me and laughs.

“Your *I just got fucked* face is adorable as hell and so painfully obvious, *lisichka*. My family’s going to have a field day with this.”

I blush even harder and set the last bag of cookies on the front porch in front of me. He smiles and bends down so I can hop on his back. He gives me a piggyback ride to his truck while I bring my face to his neck and breathe in the delicious scent of him that I can’t seem to get enough of. His boots crunch in the snow, and I’m nearly blinded by the bright sun that’s decided to come out today, so I close my eyes and just breathe him in until he’s opening the passenger side door and helping me in.

“Will Ivan be there?” I ask when he gets in on his side.

“Yeah, probably. He’s always there,”

“I’ve never eaten Russian food before,” I say, already getting excited about my lunch.

Aleksandr laughs and gives my thigh a squeeze before leaving it there, the weight of his hand comforting and arousing. “Some of it’s really delicious, but prepare yourself, the first ingredient isn’t sugar.”

I laugh and rest my hand on top of his, enjoying the ride as we make our way into the city. He doesn’t even complain when I turn on some Christmas music. The parking lot is full when we get there, and he must sense it when my nerves set in

because as soon as we're parked, he turns to me and cups my face, pulling me closer so our lips are almost touching.

"Don't be nervous, *lisichka*. I'll be right there with you the whole time."

"I'll try and not think about how I'm having lunch with a dangerous and powerful Bratva."

He smiles and kisses me gently. "Think instead about how you just got fucked by a powerful and dangerous Bratva hitman."

A soft sigh escapes at his words, making his sexy grin grow even bigger. "My surprisingly naughty wife," he whispers against my lips. "I don't think I'll ever get used to how perfect you are."

"I feel the same way about you, Sasha."

He smiles and gives me another kiss. "Let's go in so I can show off my beautiful, perfect wife."

We walk in and immediately bypass the gorgeous, blonde hostess who gives my husband a smile that I feel is altogether too familiar and head toward a separate dining area in the back that seems to be reserved just for us. There's a large table already loaded with more food than even I could eat and a smiling Viktor seated at the head of it. I notice that the table's angled so no one will end up sitting with their backs to the doorway.

"Good to see you again, Holly," Viktor says, standing up and coming over to pull Aleksandr into a warm hug and then surprising me by doing the same to me. "You're family now," he says as if that explains that.

He says something to Aleksandr in Russian and then laughs before turning to me. "Marriage suits him. I haven't seen him this happy since he was just a kid."

I smile and wrap my arm through my husband's, happy that I'm able to do that for him and that Viktor has noticed it. We sit down as Ivan walks in with a big grin on his face followed by a waitress who's even more beautiful than the hostess we'd passed on the way in. She's tall, incredibly thin,

blonde, with cheekbones that would make any model weep with envy. In other words, every single thing I'm not, and I suddenly feel very plain and very awkward and wishing we'd just stayed home.

In the next second, Aleksandr's mouth is pressed to my ear and he's whispering, "Remind me to play strip poker with you, *lisichka*. You're so easy to read, beautiful." He kisses my ear and then runs his tongue over my earlobe, making me suck in a quick breath. "Your jealousy is adorable, but I've never fucked her, sweetheart, or anyone else who works here. You're the only woman I want to slide my cock into, and you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, so stop worrying."

He gives my earlobe a soft bite. "And if you let another woman make you feel bad about yourself again, I'm going to bend you over my knee and spank your ass so hard you won't be able to sit down comfortably for days."

He hears the soft moan I give and lets out a deep laugh. "God, you're perfect," he whispers before pulling back and giving me a wink.

When I turn my head back around, Ivan is openly gawking while Viktor's curiosity and surprise is more hidden. There's only the slightest arch of his brow to show that he's even noticed our little exchange. The waitress is giving me more of a glare, but I keep my head held high and don't let it get to me.

"Good girl," Aleksandr says, giving my thigh a squeeze and then resting his arm across my shoulders, making it very clear that we're together and damn happy about it. He says something to the waitress in Russian that has her quickly turning her head away and Ivan barking out a laugh and saying something to her that has her blushing and smacking his shoulder before turning away to refill Viktor's glass with what I'm assuming is very expensive vodka.

Two more men enter the room and sit down. They're both wearing suits, but that's where the similarities end. One is tall with hair so blond it's almost white, and the other is several inches shorter with a substantial gut that's testing the strength

of his jacket buttons. So far they're holding out, but I'm not sure how much longer it'll last.

"This is Dmitri," Aleksandr says, pointing to the taller of the two men. "And this is Pyotr."

I say hi and squeeze Aleksandr's thigh under the table, feeling very much out of place. He kisses my temple and whispers a "You're doing great, baby," that makes me feel instantly better.

"Have you ever had Russian food before," Viktor asks me, starting to fill his plate, which apparently sends a signal all around the table that it's okay to dig in because soon there's a clanking of silverware and several male hands reaching for the various dishes.

"No, I haven't," I answer, smiling at Aleksandr when he swats Ivan's hand away and starts to fill my plate. "I'm looking forward to trying everything."

Before Aleksandr is even finished filling my plate, which looks very much as if his plan is *pile it high and deep*, the blonde waitress is setting a bowl of red soup in front of me. She gives me a friendly smile and avoids looking at my husband. I like her a lot better now, so I give her a grateful smile and say thanks.

"What is this?" I whisper to Aleksandr.

He smiles and says, "It's borscht. I think you'll love it."

I move the spoon around the ruby-red soup, noticing chunks of all kinds of things floating around inside of it, and there's a big dollop of sour cream on top. I mix it all together and take a bite, my eyes widening when my taste buds get involved.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" Aleksandr says with a big grin on his face. "We serve it cold at the restaurant in the summer, and it's just as good then, too."

I keep eating the beet soup while he finishes loading my plate, and when he sets it down beside me, I give him a *you've got to be kidding me* look that he just laughs off.

“Quit being modest. We both know you’re good for it.”

The playful wink he gives lets me know he’s just joking, but there is a lot of truth to his words. The chances are very high that I’ll be able to clean my plate. The men around me speak in Russian while I finish my soup and then switch out my bowl for the giant plate of food.

“Try these,” Aleksandr says, pointing at what looks like a round ball of dough.

I take a bite and let out a moan of appreciation. The bread is stuffed with meat and cabbage and spices that I can’t even begin to try and name. I’m in my own little food world when I look up and realize that everyone is staring at me.

“I like a woman with a good appetite,” Viktor says, giving me a nod of approval. “I bet she’ll give you many sons, Aleksandr.”

*Oh good God.*

He raises his glass in a toast, and I want to crawl under the table and disappear. Aleksandr lets out a deep laugh and kisses the top of my head. I swear if any of them make a move to try and measure my birthing hips, I’m so fucking out of here. When a small glass appears in front of me, I down it without a second thought and then nearly choke when I realize it’s straight vodka. It’s smooth as fuck and probably crazy expensive, but I still start coughing as everyone around me starts laughing. Aleksandr rubs my back and leans in closer.

“You okay, baby?”

I nod my head and whisper, “Water, please.”

He kisses my cheek and hands me a glass of water. I take a few sips, getting my body back under control, and when I’m finally calmed down, I can’t help but notice that I do feel a bit calmer after my accidental double shot of straight vodka. I can feel Aleksandr’s eyes on me, watching to make sure I’m really okay. When I start eating again, his body relaxes and he goes back to his own plate.

“So how’s married life treating you?” Ivan asks with a big grin on his face.

I blush while Aleksandr says, “Pretty damn good,” and gives me a wink. “I couldn’t have asked for a better surprise during work.”

The men laugh, and it suddenly occurs to me how damn lucky I got that night. I watch Pyotr chew, his mouth overstuffed with food, as his jowls work overtime to handle the load, and I realize that I could’ve just as easily walked in on him. A shiver runs through me at the thought.

I look over and see Aleksandr studying me. God, the man really doesn’t miss a thing. He doesn’t say anything, just gives my thigh a squeeze and turns back to Ivan who’s still grinning.

“Yeah, you got damn lucky,” he admits, giving me a wink.

“Careful,” Aleksandr growls.

Ivan holds up his hands and gives a good-natured laugh. “I’m just messing around. You know I don’t have a death wish.”

Aleksandr says something to him in Russian that has him turning a bit pale, and I’m guessing that’ll be the last time I get a wink from Ivan. Viktor chimes in with something that makes the others laugh, and Aleksandr gives a slight grunt that sounds more like amusement than anger before the tension eases in the room.

“Eat, eat,” Viktor says to me, smiling at me encouragingly and motioning toward my still full plate.

I smile and dig in some more. I had no idea Russian food was so good, and I make a mental note to get some of these recipes so I can try and cook them. The rest of the meal passes peacefully enough. They speak about who knows what in Russian, asking me the occasional question in English. I’m grateful to not be on display and don’t mind the Russian in the slightest. Besides, I really love hearing Aleksandr speak it. The language is sexy as fuck coming from his lips. He catches me staring at him at one point and gives me a wink as he runs his thumb over my thigh in a movement that both soothes and arouses. The man has a direct line straight to my pussy, and judging by the wicked glint in his green eyes, he knows it.

When I can't eat another bite, I sit back with a sigh and then want to cry when my plates are cleared away and a small bowl of ice cream is left in its place.

"I can't," I say, already shaking my head.

"Just one bite, *lisichka*," Aleksandr says, filling the spoon with ice cream and a bright red raspberry. "It's *morozhenoe*, and it's the creamiest ice cream you'll ever have. I promise."

I open my mouth for him, making him grin as he slides the spoon between my lips. The creamy ice cream hits my tongue, causing a spontaneous moan of pleasure before the tartness of the berry comes through and balances it all out perfectly.

"Holy shit," I whisper, making him laugh.

He leans closer and presses his mouth to my ear. "I'd be jealous if you hadn't had that same rapturous look on your face while you were sucking my cock just a few hours ago."

I smile at the memory and probably turn as red as the borscht I just ate, but I'm too happy to care. Married life with Aleksandr is turning out to be absolutely perfect. Surprising no one, I end up finishing my ice cream. While the plates are being cleared away, Viktor pours us all one more drink. Everyone raises their glasses and says *za ljubov*. I try my best to copy it, liking the way the foreign-sounding words feel on my tongue. This time I know what I'm getting, so I sling my drink back and savor the smoothness of it, not coughing once. It earns me a nod of approval from Viktor and a grin from the rest of the men at the table.

"What was the toast?" I ask Aleksandr as we all set our glasses down and get up, preparing to leave.

"To love," he says, giving me a smile and a quick kiss.

He goes to get our jackets while I thank Viktor for the meal. He pulls me into a hug. I smell the cigar smoke on his suit jacket and feel the strength of him despite his older age. I'm still not completely at ease around him, it's damn hard to be when I know what he's capable of, but I give him a squeeze and then a smile when we pull apart. Aleksandr gets a pat on the arm and a few words in Russian before we say goodbye to

the rest and make our way out of the bustling restaurant. The other diners in the main room seem completely oblivious to the Bratva in their midst, and I'm guessing that's for the best. I see several families eating and laughing and a few tables filled with businessmen on their lunch breaks, clearly enjoying the beautiful waitresses who are bouncing around from table to table with the grace of ballerinas.

Once outside, I smile when I see it's started snowing again. We get back in the truck, and as soon as his door is shut, I'm leaning over and pressing my lips to his, kissing him slowly and thoroughly until all I can think about is getting back home.



## Chapter 12

### *Aleksandr*



I still haven't told Holly I need to leave for a job tonight. She just looks so damn happy, and I don't want to be the one to take that beautiful smile from her. That must be how she gets me to agree to build a snowman with her when we get back to the house. Yeah, that has to be it. There's no other explanation for why I'm out here freezing my ass off and wrapping one of my old scarves around the snowman we just constructed in the front yard where anyone driving by or looking out their window can see.

I'm still ruminating on this when a ball of snow hits my face, shocking the hell out of me. I scrub the snow off my stinging cheek and look over at a laughing Holly.

"Oh, *lisichka*, you're going to pay for that one."

She lets out a squeal and starts to run around the side of the house, but she's no match for me, and in seconds I'm wrapping my arms around her and pulling her down onto a pile of snow. She's laughing so hard she's gasping, and her cheeks are an adorable red from the cold. I press my body against hers, keeping her pinned in the snow.

"A snowball to the head, huh? Not very sportsmanlike, sweetheart."

She laughs and struggles to get up, but there's no way in hell she's going anywhere until I want her to.

"I knew you could handle it."

The laughter dies in her throat when she feels how hard I am. Her blue eyes darken, and her breathing picks up for a whole new reason. I run a gloved finger over her cheek, tracing the line of her scar and following it along her jawline.

“Tell me what you were thinking at the restaurant earlier.”

“I thought the food was very good.”

I smile and say, “You know what I’m talking about. You were looking at Pyotr and you got the saddest look on your face. I want to know what you were thinking.”

She sighs and tries to dart her eyes away.

“No, *lisichka*,” I say, gripping her chin and forcing her eyes back on mine. “There’s no hiding from me.”

“I was thinking about how lucky I am. Pyotr could’ve easily been the one I walked in on, and then I would’ve been stuck eating at that table today with him as my husband instead of you. I would’ve seen you sitting across from me, the gorgeous man I could never have because I would’ve been stuck with him.”

She seems so horrified and saddened by this future that will never happen, and the idea of her sitting next to another man, of being married and bound to another man, has me seeing red. I tighten my grip on her, even though I know she’s mine and that no one else will ever have her. I still need the comfort of feeling her against me.

“You’re mine, *lisichka*, and that’s never going to change. And if you had walked in on Pyotr, I would’ve claimed you as mine the second I saw you. I never could’ve stood by and watched you marry him. I would’ve taken you and convinced you to marry me instead.

“How would you have done that?” The smile playing on her lips is one I know all too well, and my cock gives a healthy jump at the sight of it.

I press against her even harder, smiling at the way her eyes go heavy-lidded as a soft moan escapes.

“I probably would’ve let my cock do most of the talking.”

She laughs and pulls me closer, giving my bottom lip a soft suck that has my heart racing even faster.

“It is really good at being persuasive,” she admits with a grin.

“We should go inside before I mount you in the yard like a fucking animal.”

Her eyes widen at my words. “You wouldn’t.”

I smile at the uncertainty in her voice. “You wanna bet?”

When I reach down to unbutton her pants, she lets out a squeal and tries to wiggle away. “Okay, okay, you win,” she says with a laugh. “Let’s go inside before your caveman side fully comes out and we end up on the internet somewhere.”

The idea of someone posting my wife’s naked body online has me hauling her over my shoulder and storming for the house. No one gets to see this but me, damn it. I carry her in through the garage so we can take off all our snowy winter gear in the mudroom, and as soon as she’s kicked off her boots, she gives me a wicked grin and bolts for the living room. I laugh and chase after her.

“You should’ve run for the stairs, *lisichka*,” I say with a grin when I see her on the other side of the couch, shifting her weight from foot to foot as she darts her eyes around, trying to come up with an escape route.

“I panicked,” she admits, looking cute as hell with her nose still red from being outside and the hopeful look in her eyes that maybe, just maybe, she’ll be able to figure out a way to slip past me.

She won’t. There’s no way in hell I’m letting her escape. My little fox is trapped, and she knows it. That doesn’t stop her from giving one last attempt for the stairs, though. I know she’s going to do it before she even takes her first step, her entire body giving her away, making it easy for me to step to the left and cut her off with an arm around the waist. I lift her up and spin her around, pressing her upper body against the back of the couch so she’s bent over.

“Caught you, *lisichka*,” I murmur in her ear, smiling when she laughs and squirms beneath me. “Oh no you don’t. There’s no escape now, baby.”

I bring my hands to her jeans and make quick work of the button and zipper, roughly yanking them down before doing the same to my own pants. Running my hands up her hips, I grip her tightly and eliminate the height difference by lifting her up so the couch is supporting her weight and her toes aren’t even hitting the floor.

“Sasha,” she moans, looking over her shoulder at me.

“I’ve got you, baby. This is what it means to get caught, sweetheart,” I say, slamming into her from behind in one hard thrust that has her mouth opening in a gasp and her hands clutching at the couch tight enough to turn her knuckles white. She’s completely helpless in this position, and I take full advantage of it, teasing her with my cock until she’s begging for me to push her over the edge and give her what she needs.

I make her wait.

“Sasha,” she moans, smacking her hand against the cushion and glaring at me over her shoulder.

I laugh and slow down even more, which really pisses her off. When I finally take pity on her and bring my hand to her clit, her whole body is shaking with need, and all it takes is one firm rub and she’s letting out a muffled scream into the couch and clenching so tightly around me that I have no choice but to join her. I bury myself as deeply inside her as I can, locking our bodies together as I lean over her, needing her mouth on mine.

As soon as my face is close to hers, she turns, finding my lips and kissing me so sweetly that I swear it makes my chest hurt with how much love I feel for her. She smiles against my lips, her whole body limp and satisfied beneath me.

“I love you,” she whispers against my lips.

“I love you, too, baby, more than you can possibly know.”

I give her another kiss before sliding out of her and gently setting her back down so I can help pull her pants up. Once

we're clothed again, I sit down on the couch I just fucked her over and pull her into my lap. She relaxes into me, resting her head on my shoulder and running her fingers through my beard. I'd trimmed it up a bit this morning, and I think she misses the extra length.

"I have to go to work tonight, *lisichka*," I say, hating the way my words make her body instantly tense up.

She lifts her head and turns my face to hers. "What?"

I run my finger over her creased brow, massaging the worry out of it, but there's no taking away the fear I see in her big, blue eyes.

"I have to take care of something tonight."

"I know what that means," she says, and I don't bother denying it, but I'm also not planning on discussing it with her, and when I don't say anything, she gives a soft nod and leans her head back onto my shoulder, relaxing her body into me once more with a resigned sigh. I notice her grip on me is a little tighter, though, and I understand exactly how she feels because I'm doing the same thing to her. Just the thought of having to leave her has me holding onto her all the more.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, but it might not be until tomorrow morning."

"But you will come back?"

She says it so softly that I almost miss it. I cup her face and position her so she can see me. I hold her gaze and say, "I promise you, *lisichka*, I will come back. I will always come back."

"But what if something happens?"

"It won't."

"But what if it does?"

I kiss her and rest my forehead against hers. "I'll be back, sweetheart. I promise. I've been doing this a long time, and I'm damn good at it."

"What if someone walks in on you again?"

I pull back and raise a brow at her. “Please don’t ask me things you don’t want to know the answers to, baby. I am what I am. This is what I do, and there’s no changing it.” I run my thumb over her soft cheek. “Plus, I just want to add that not once has anyone ever caught me off guard except you. I don’t expect a repeat of that ever again.”

She gives a soft nod, and when I see her eyes start to fill up, I let out a pained groan and pull her against my chest again.

“Please don’t cry, *lisichka*. It hurts me so much when you do.”

Her head moves as she nods and then gives a soft sniff.

“I’ll be back before you know it, and don’t you dare go snooping through your presents. I’ll know if you do.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

Her voice is shaky, and I hate that I’m the one causing her pain, but there’s not a damn thing I can do about it. I have to work. Other married people still work. My job may be unconventional, but it still has to get done.

Nutmeg must sense her distress because he gets up from the leather chair in the corner that he has claimed as his own and saunters over to us. He jumps on the couch and puts his paws on her knees before starting to knead her legs and meow. She smiles and rubs his head. He immediately arches up for more, rubbing his head against her hand and purring like crazy. I can’t resist giving his soft fur a pet. He arches his ass for me, wanting me to scratch it, which makes Holly laugh. I give him an ass scratch because I’d do damn near anything to hear her laugh, including scratching her cat’s rump.

“Come on. I’ll make you supper, and we can eat before I have to leave. I’ll be back before you know it.”

She sits up and turns to me while Nutmeg gives another meow and then runs off to lay back down on his chair. “I know you have to keep working. I don’t mean to make it harder for you. I just worry that something might happen.”

“I know, baby, but that’s the beauty of being a hitman. No one is ever expecting you.”

I think about my next target, knowing there’s no way that arrogant prick is expecting me. I should be done quickly and sliding back into my wife before the sun rises.

“If you’re not back by tomorrow morning, I can’t promise I won’t snoop,” she finally says, doing her best to put on a happy face and not make me feel guilty, and God do I love her for it.

“If you look through those presents, I’m going to give your sneaky little ass a spanking you won’t ever forget.”

She smiles and blushes because we both know that just made her want to snoop all the more. I pick her up and carry her into the kitchen, sitting her on the counter while I take out a couple of steaks I put in earlier to marinate. The next couple of hours pass way too quickly, and all too soon, I’m turning to her and saying, “It’s time for me to get ready.”

## Chapter 13

### *Holly*



I try not to show how worried I am as I watch Aleksandr get ready to go. He changes into black, thermal wear, and then I watch as he straps some truly fierce looking knives to his forearms and one to his left ankle.

“Just a precaution, baby,” he says, giving me a wink before putting on his shoulder holster so his gun is tucked away under his left arm. He puts another gun on his right ankle, looking every bit the badass killing machine he is before dressing in his standard black jeans and black sweater. He sits on the bed next to me while he laces up his sturdy, black boots.

“I’m seeing a definite theme here,” I say with a laugh.

“Best to be as invisible as possible.”

“Did you have all these weapons the night we met.”

“Yes.”

“God, you really could have killed me if you’d wanted.”

“I could never have hurt you, *lisichka*.” He cups my face and leans closer, giving me a wink. “And I’m always wearing a weapon, whether you realize it or not.”

“I probably shouldn’t be thinking about how sexy you look right now, but I am.”

He smiles and gives my bottom lip a soft suck. “My wife is always so hungry.”

“It’s a good thing my husband knows how to keep me satisfied.”



I can't resist crawling into his lap and straddling him. Knowing he's covered in weapons and having this visual reminder of how deadly he is, but also knowing how gentle he is with me is a heady mix that's downright intoxicating.

He studies my face, reading me so easily before giving me a sexy smirk. "Aren't you just full of surprises."

"I can't help it. Everything about you turns me on."

"Now you know how I feel," he says with a laugh.

"God, I'm going to miss you," I tell him, gripping his shoulders and wishing I could keep him here with me.

"Not near as much as I'm going to miss you."

He grabs my ass, pulling me closer before pressing his lips to mine. The kiss is sweet and gentle, and there's so much love in it that it has tears springing to my eyes. I will them away, not wanting to make this any harder for him than it already is. I open my mouth even more for him, deepening the kiss, even though I know it's going to make it all that much harder to part. He groans when I run my tongue over his and give him a soft suck. His fingers dig into my ass as I feel him grow hard beneath me.

"My God, you make it difficult to say goodbye, *lisichka*," he breathes against my lips.

"Good. I'd hate it if it was easy for you to leave me."

The corner of his mouth quirks up in a smile. "You don't have to worry about that. Leaving you is the hardest thing I've ever done, but I've put it off long enough. You won't be able to contact me while I'm gone. I'll drop my phone off at the restaurant, and that's where it'll stay until I pick it up on my way back home."

I nod my head, not trusting myself to speak.

"If you need anything, call the restaurant and ask for Viktor or Ivan, but don't mention any details, baby."

I nod again, digging my fingers even harder into his broad shoulders.

“Do you have your inhaler?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “Don’t worry about me, Sasha. I’ll be fine. Just keep yourself safe.”

“I’ll always worry about you. It’s impossible not to.”

He gives me another kiss, this one much quicker and over far too soon, before lifting me up and setting me on my feet. He holds my hand as we walk downstairs, only letting me go so he can put on his black, down jacket. He grabs his gloves and a balaclava, and I can’t help but wonder how long he’s expecting to have to stay out in the cold.

Before he puts his gloves on, he cups my face and pulls me in for another kiss. I try not to think about how much this feels like a last kiss, like an *I’m not expecting to see you again* kiss, but the fears creep in all the same, and when he pulls back and sees the worry in my eyes, he gives me a smile and kisses the tip of my nose.

“Stop worrying, *lisichka*. I love you, and I *will* be back. Try not to eat too much sugar while I’m gone. If I come back and find all the cookies gone and you passed out with icing-coated lips, well, first I’m going to laugh my ass off,” he says with a big grin, “and then I’m going to bend you over my knee.”

“Promises, promises,” I say, pulling him closer and giving him a kiss.

He reaches down and cups my ass in both hands, giving me a firm squeeze before bringing his hand down hard enough to make my gasp at the sharp sting.

“Something to remember me by.”

He gives me a wink and another quick kiss before walking to the garage door.

“I love you, *lisichka*. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I love you, too, Sasha.”

He gives me one last smile before disappearing into the darkness of the garage and pulling the door shut behind him. I hear the lock click into place as he locks it from the other side

and then the mechanical whirring of the garage door seconds before the roar of his engine. I stand frozen in place until the door comes back down, and there's nothing left of my husband except the memory of him.

Grabbing Nutmeg, I cuddle into the couch and turn the TV on. The silence is like a heavy weight pressing down on me, making me feel like I'm suffocating and making me crave some noise to fill it. I mindlessly flip through the channels, telling myself that I'll just sit here and watch as many Christmas movies as it takes until he walks right back through that door.

I pet Nutmeg, so grateful that I at least have him with me and grab a blanket to cover us as I sink in deeper into the comfy cushions. He plops his furry body down on my chest while I pet him and let the strong vibrations of his purring calm me down. We stay like that for hours. I'm determined to stay awake until he gets back, but when the third Christmas movie starts, my eyes grow too heavy to keep open.

When I wake, it's to a brightly lit living room and a very stiff neck. Nutmeg abandoned me at some point during the night in favor of his chair, and when I throw back the cover and look around for Aleksandr, my heart is racing, and I'm jittery from all the adrenaline spiking through me. I race to the garage and pull open the door, sure that it must've been the sound of his truck coming in that woke me, but when I'm met with an empty, dark garage, it feels like someone's just come up and sucker-punched me.

I shut the door and let out a groan when I walk into the kitchen and see that it's already close to noon. I tell myself not to panic, that he must've just gotten hung up. It's probably just taking him a bit longer to complete this job, and it's not like he can just leave before he's offed whoever the hell he's supposed to off. I realize my inner voice is starting to sound like a lunatic, but I can't stop it. I just want my husband back home and in my arms so I can feel him and taste him and know that he's safe and okay.

Needing to do something, I go upstairs to shower, being careful to avoid the sight of our bed because it's just too damn

painful to look at while I'm stuck worrying and missing him. If only he could've kept his phone on him, but, of course, it makes sense that he'd leave it at the restaurant so it could tie him to that location if need be.

I tell myself that he'll probably be back by the time I'm done. I take my time, hoping he'll just walk in with a big smile on his face, his green eyes lit up with lust and mischief before he strips and joins me, pinning my hands to the tiled wall while he fucks me from behind just like he did the other morning, but the door stays shut until I finally turn off the water and step out.

Needing some serious comfort right now, I dress in my favorite old moose pajamas, the ones that are fuzzy from too many washings and threadbare at the knees and pull on my fluffy fox house shoes, feeling a lump form in the back of my throat at the sight of them. I swear I can hear Aleksandr's deep voice calling me his *lisichka* in his sexy accent. When I'm confident I'm not going to start balling, I go back downstairs and make some coffee. The thought of food leaves me feeling nauseated, which is worrisome in and of itself. The last time I felt this way was after the car accident.

Grabbing my cup of coffee, I pace the living room, too antsy to sit still. I briefly think about calling the restaurant, but what can they possibly tell me? They'll just say he's still at the restaurant busy with work and hopefully will be home soon. My only comfort is that if something was seriously wrong, they would be knocking on the door to tell me in person, at least I think so. I'm not sure how the Bratva works. It's possible they might just not say anything and let the police come by and explain that my husband's body has been found somewhere so that the cops can get an honest, horrified reaction from a grieving wife.

I let out an angry, frustrated groan when I can't get my mind to shut the hell up. Today is Christmas Eve, the day the car wreck happened, the day I lost my dad and stepmom. Surely the universe is not such a giant ass that it would take my husband as well. The harsh laugh I let out surprises even

me. Horrific things happen to people all the time. Why on earth would I be immune to it?

“He’s going to be fine,” I say out loud, needing to hear the words. Nutmeg lifts his head and gives me a bored look before stretching one leg up and licking his ass. “You’re clearly not worried.”

Deciding I need to keep the positive vibes going, I turn on some Christmas music and grab the gifts I’d bought on my last day of work from where I’d hidden them in the closet. I’m pretty sure Aleksandr had seen me sneak out to buy them, but I’m hoping he didn’t actually see what I’d bought. I look down at the bags and wish I’d had time to get more. The tree is already stuffed with presents that are all wrapped and labeled for me. I’d woken up the other day and come down to find them stacked nicely under our beautiful tree while Aleksandr watched me with that sexy smile playing at his lips. I finger the red bow on top of one of the boxes and smile. I can’t believe my Christmas grump of a husband had actually taken the time to wrap my presents and put bows on them.

I grab some scissors and tape and sit on the living room floor, listening to Christmas music while I wrap up his presents. The deep green sweater I bought him is going to look so good on him and really bring out the beautiful green of his eyes. Plus, the man needs some color in his wardrobe. I shove the wrapped box aside and set to work on the ornament that I had personalized to celebrate our first Christmas together. The last gift is silly, but I couldn’t resist. It’s one of the hottest items this year in the toy department, and it just looked fun. I eye the laser gun set and know he’s going to kick my ass with a quickness, but it’ll still be fun to run around and play laser tag with him.

After I’ve written his name on them and carefully stacked them under the tree, I realize that I haven’t killed near as much time as I’d hoped. I feel a headache growing from a nonstop straining to hear the sound of the garage door. Closing my eyes, I rest my head in my hands and try not to fall apart. It’s two o’clock, and he told me he’d probably be back before the sun came up, so even if I push it back to around eight o’clock

to account for some unexpected happenings, he's still six hours late. What could possibly cause that big of a delay?

When I hear my phone buzz, I nearly have a heart attack. I jump up and lunge to where my phone is sitting on the edge of the couch. When I see that it's just a text from Shelly, I let out a pained groan and sit down. My heart feels dangerously fast, and my hands are shaking when I look at the text. I'd so wanted it to be from Aleksandr.

*Hey, just wondered how you were doing.*

It's so unlike her to reach out that it makes me pause. We haven't spoken since I moved out, and I'm not sure what to say to her. I've missed my stepsister, but I'm done with her treating me like her own personal punching bag. I can't go back to that kind of a relationship with her.

I settle on a *I'm good. How about you?*

After a few minutes I get a *Just thinking about what day it is.*

*I miss them too*, I say, knowing that underneath everything, she's hurting and missing her mom.

*I'm sorry I was such a bitch to you. I've been thinking a lot about it, and I know it wasn't your dad's fault. You're the only family I have, Holly, and I don't want to lose you.*

I'm so stunned that I just sit there holding the phone and reading the text over and over again. Finally, I type, *I miss you too.*

*Maybe after the holidays, we can hang out or something.*

I think about inviting her over now, but I'm too upset and I don't want her to ask me a bunch of questions about my new husband when I don't even know where in the hell he is or when he'll be back, or *if* he'll be back.

Instead I type, *I'd love that.*

She gives me a smiling emoji and a thumbs up, and I set the phone aside, hopeful that maybe we can patch things up and I can have my stepsister in my life again. We used to have so much fun together, and I've really missed having her to talk

to. I know I won't be able to ever tell her the truth about my marriage, but it would still be great to have someone from my past in my life, someone who remembers the same things I do.

Forcing myself to get up and eat something, I make a quick sandwich and manage to eat about half of it while leaning against the counter and eyeing the clock on the wall, watching the seconds tick by in a frustratingly slow rhythm. Taking up my post on the couch and turning the TV back on, I mindlessly watch Christmas movies, my worries growing bigger and bigger with each passing hour until I get up and grab the photo album I'd put on the bookshelf in the corner when I'd unpacked my stuff. I'm already feeling about as low as I can get. It's not like seeing photos of my family is going to suddenly depress me. I'm already waist deep in that mire.

Sitting back down, I open the well-worn album, running my finger over the smiling face of my mom as she holds me in the hospital bed right after I was born. Her blue eyes, the same ones she passed down to me, are lit up with so much happiness and vitality. It's hard to believe that in five years this same vibrant woman would be lying in another hospital bed riddled with the cancer her body couldn't fight off and taking her last breath.

I flip through the pages, watching myself grow a little bigger with each new photo. There are several pages of photos of just me and my dad. I'm so glad he insisted on making me this photo album instead of being content to just have everything stored in a cloud somewhere. There's something so precious about being able to actually hold these memories, to have a book that I can open and feel them beneath my fingers. It makes it seem more real somehow.

Tears drip down my cheeks, but I make no move to brush them away. Instead I watch as my stepmom and Shelly suddenly start appearing in photos. It so easily goes from two smiling faces to four, and I'm so damn grateful that my dad was able to find happiness again before he died. I look at his face and miss him so much it's a physical ache. Knowing how badly he would want me to be happy and enjoy life is the only

thing that kept me going after their deaths, but I don't know if I can keep it up if Aleksandr is taken from me as well.

I sit there until the sun sets, looking at the family I lost and wondering about the one I may or may not have in the future before finally grabbing the blanket off the couch. I curl up on the floor by the Christmas tree, clutching my photo album and crying until there are no tears left. This may not have been the future I imagined, but I wouldn't change anything about meeting Aleksandr. I might be married to a Bratva hitman, but he's *my* Bratva hitman, and I love him, and I want him back. It might be fucked up, but I don't care. I love him, and when I think about meeting him and marrying him, all I feel is grateful and happy. I finally cry myself to sleep under the tree. My last thought is of him and how I hope like hell he'll be here when I wake, because I'm not sure I can endure another day like this.



## Chapter 14

### *Aleksandr*



I bite back a groan when my target still hasn't shown himself. Everything was going right on schedule. I'd arrived last night, watched his wife drive off to her sisters where she's supposed to stay until Christmas morning, and then watched his mistress show up less than an hour later. The bastard hasn't shown his face since. I've been freezing my fucking ass off in the woods behind his house, and I'm more than ready to put a bullet in this fucker's head so I can go home.

God, Holly must be worried to death. I push aside thoughts of my wife. I can't let myself think about her out here, not while I'm working. It's too dangerous and easy for my guard to drop when I'm thinking about her, so I put all my focus back on the house in front of me. I was supposed to be done with this job by sunrise at the latest, and now it's pushing midnight. The mistress is not part of the plan, so I keep waiting, hoping she'll wear the old guy out and leave with enough time for me to get in there and do what I need to do before his wife returns.

I turn my head to the hose sticking out by the neck of my jacket and grip the bite valve between my teeth, taking another drink from the hydration pack I have strapped under my jacket and wonder if I should eat my last protein bar or save it. I decide to wait in case this fucker decides to pop another Viagra. I've just about reached the end of my patience when I hear a shrill laugh cut through the quiet of the night. The tall redhead steps out of his house, calling out a goodbye and

blowing a kiss to her lover before walking back to her corvette in a very unsteady balancing act on four-inch heels across the icy driveway.

After she drives off, I wait exactly fifteen minutes to make sure she didn't forget anything before I slowly start to make my way across his backyard. I'm already wearing booties over my boots to cover up any tread marks, and with my balaclava, most of my physical features are hidden if any nosy neighbors happen to see something they shouldn't. My gun is already out and ready, silencer in place. The rush of adrenaline I always get with my work hits me hard, making me feel completely and fully alive. Until Holly, I'd never known I could feel that way outside of my job. It's not that I enjoy killing people. I enjoy the challenge of it, the skill and planning involved, and the physical endurance that's needed. I have a knack for it. The killing is just an unavoidable part of it.

When I'm at his backdoor, I pause and listen, making sure I don't hear anything before typing in the passcode I'd memorized earlier and silently slipping inside. The layout of his house is exactly like the plans I'd studied. I immediately head for the bedroom, knowing that's most likely where he's at, probably recouping from his 24-hour fuck fest that he'd timed with his wife's trip.

My whole body is on high alert when I enter his bedroom with my gun drawn. A quick sweep lets me know the room is empty, but the sound of a door opening has me turning quickly to the left, and as soon as Anthony Marcotti steps out from the bathroom, he barely has time to register my presence before I've fired two bullets—one in his heart and one right between his eyes. He drops to the floor with a loud, clumsy thud, dead before his head even hits the ground.

Satisfied, I leave the same way I came, shutting the door and re-arming the security system. There won't be any cleanup on this job. Viktor wants to send a message to the Marcotti family, a warning they won't be able to ignore.

Rushing back to the woods, I look behind and make sure I haven't left any obvious tracks in the snow. They'll be able to tell someone came this way, but they won't get anything that'll

tie me to the place. It's already started to snow, though, so I'm guessing what tracks are here will be covered in just a few hours.

I run through the woods to where I parked my truck about a mile away. As soon as I'm inside I turn the damn heater on, more than ready to get back home. I make a quick stop at the restaurant to grab my phone. I send a thumbs up emoji to Ivan to let him know it's done and went well, and then I send a text to Holly. When she doesn't respond, I groan and lock the restaurant back up before getting back in my truck. It takes everything I have to not break every traffic law and speed home to her, but I don't. I force myself to go the speed limit and calmly drive back to our house.

As soon as I see our dark house ahead, my heart gives a painful lurch. Holly not remembering to turn on the outside Christmas lights, especially on Christmas Eve, is such a foreign concept I can't even wrap my brain around it. Fear grips me unlike anything I've ever known. A thousand worst-case scenarios roar through my head. Images of her having an asthma attack and not getting to her inhaler in time or the possibility that maybe she's run off, maybe none of this was real for her and she took the first opportunity she could to get the hell away from me.

By the time I'm pulling into the garage and racing out of my truck, I've worked myself into a full panic. The garage door doesn't even have time to shut before I'm unlocking the door to the house and rushing inside, not sure I'm ready to face what's waiting for me. I'm so blinded by my fear that I almost miss the sight of her small body on the floor as I run past to get to the stairs. Doubling back, I look down at her, not even daring to breathe until I see the rise and fall of her chest, and when I do, I let out a shaky breath and squat down next to her, so overcome with relief and love that all I can do is sit there and stare at her while my body slowly relaxes and my blood pressure recedes from the stroke level it was just at.

I watch my beautiful wife, noticing the tear-streaked cheeks and pale tint to her skin. God, she must've been terrified I wouldn't ever come back. Noticing the album beside

her, I pick it up, carefully flipping through the pages that show her sweet face, watching her grow into the amazing woman before me. She looks so damn happy with her dad, and I know she'd fallen asleep after convincing herself that he wasn't the only man she'd lost from her life.

The image breaks my heart, and when I reach down to brush a dark strand of hair from where it had fallen across her cheek, she blinks her eyes open, letting out a gasp when she sees me.

“Sasha,” she sobs, reaching for me.

I pick her up and pull her against me, holding her as she cries against my neck.

“I'm here, *lisichka*. Everything's okay.”

She sobs harder, her whole body shaking, and it breaks my fucking heart.

“I'm so sorry,” I whisper against her ear. “I'm so sorry, baby. I got home as soon as I could.”

“Are you okay?” she says, her voice raw and shaky. “Did you get hurt?”

“No, baby. I'm fine. There was just an unavoidable delay before I could get started, and I couldn't leave until it was done.”

She clutches me tighter and presses her face against my neck, breathing me in and convincing herself that I'm really here. Her hands run over me, quickly skirting over my gun and knives, wanting to touch only me to make sure I'm okay. When she's satisfied, she touches the hose coming out from my jacket.

“It's from the water pack I have strapped to my back.”

“Nifty,” she says, making me laugh despite how terrified I'd just been.

She presses the palm of her hand against my cheek and draws me closer, and as soon as our lips meet, everything else disappears. All the worries and fears, the job I just completed, it all falls away, and all that's left is a raw, primal need to be

inside her. Her fingers are already busy undoing my pants when I slip my jacket off and then start to pull her pajama bottoms down, taking her panties with them.

She lets out a frustrated groan when she can't get my cock out fast enough thanks to the extra layer of thermal underwear I'm wearing. I take over, freeing my dick and then groaning when she immediately straddles me. Gripping her hips, I slowly lower her onto me, watching her lips part in a gasp. She wraps her arms around me, cupping the back of my head and bringing her lips to mine as I slide her down the rest of the way until I'm deeply seated inside her. The soft, satisfied whimper she gives has me groaning against her lips, so fucking hungry for more.

“Use my cock, *lisichka*. Take your pleasure, sweetheart.”

She doesn't make me ask twice. The feel of her hips moving beneath my hands as she rocks and grinds against me has me growling and digging my fingers in even harder. I give her bottom lip a soft bite before kissing my way down her neck, the scent of her making me groan after missing her so badly. Needing to feel her skin, I roughly yank her shirt off before resting my hand firmly against her back and pulling her toward me as I run my tongue over one of her taut, rosy-red nipples.

“Sasha,” she moans, working her hips harder.

“I've got you, baby.”

I let my teeth graze her nipple before giving her a soft bite. I kiss and lick first one breast and then the other until she's throwing her head back and moaning my name as she clenches even tighter around me, threatening to take me with her. I just barely manage to resist the pull of her tight pussy, and as soon as she starts to come down, I roll us over so I'm on top. She wraps her arms and legs around me before sliding her hands under my shirts and up my back.

“Careful, baby. I still have all my weapons on.”

She lets out a moan that has me biting back a laugh at how much she seems to like the idea of me being heavily armed

while we fuck, but then she runs her hands through the back of my hair and pulls me closer, giving my tongue a hard enough suck to have my laughter dying in my throat and turning it into a deep moan.

I fuck her harder, drunk on the feel and taste of her. My body covers hers. I brace my forearms on either side of her head, and still it's not enough. I need to be closer. Snaking my arms underneath her, I hold her against my body, tight enough to feel the rapid beat of her heart.

“I love you, *lisichka*,” I whisper against her lips.

“I love you too, Sasha.”

“I will always come back to you, baby. Always. You're my home, and this is where I belong,” I say, thrusting into her even harder.

“Yes,” she says in a breathy rush, still clutching the back of my head with her legs around my waist, and when I feel her body start to tense again, I know there's no way in hell I'm going to be able to resist this time.

“Goddam,” I groan, feeling her pussy pulse around my cock, sending me over the edge with a quickness. I slow my hips down, savoring every second of pleasure before burying myself deeply inside her and holding her even tighter as we both catch our breath.

When she lifts her head up and I hear her take a suck from the bite valve on the water pack I'm still wearing, I let out a deep laugh and kiss her cheek. She lets go with a huge grin on her face.

“It might be a good idea for you to wear one of those every time you fuck me.”

“It is important to stay hydrated,” I say, still laughing at how adorable she is.

Brushing aside a sweaty strand of hair from her cheek, I kiss her again and rest my forehead against hers. “I really am sorry I couldn't get back sooner.”

“I'm just glad you're safe. That's all I care about.”

I slowly slide out of her, wishing I could just stay buried inside her forever. Lifting up to my knees, I pull my pants back up over my ass and then reach down to get her.

“I’m in desperate need of a hot bath, baby, and then I’m getting us both something to eat. You look pale. Did you eat today?”

“I had a sandwich.”

I arch a brow at her, and she adds, “I threw most of it away.”

Another stab of guilt runs through me. I kiss her forehead and carry her upstairs, pressing her naked body tightly against mine. In the bathroom, I carefully strip off my clothes and place my guns and knives on the counter while she runs us a bath. When we’re both in and she’s resting against me, I lay my head back and close my eyes, letting the hot water seep into my body, finally feeling warm again. My thumb lazily caresses her wet breast while she does the same to my thigh.

“You make me so happy, *lisichka*.”

She tilts her head to kiss my cheek. “You make me happy too, Sasha. While you were gone I was thinking about how I can’t imagine not having you in my life. I know we had an odd start to our marriage, but I love you so much, and I would never want to go back to a life without you.”

I give her nipple a soft pinch that has her squirming and feeling entirely too good against my body. “You’re turning me into a big softie,” I tell her.

“I love that you show me a side of yourself that no one else gets to see.”

I laugh and kiss her temple. “You’re definitely the only person on earth who’s seen this side of me.”

She smiles and reaches for the bath sponge and body wash.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s my turn to take care of you.”

I let my wife bathe me. She's the only person I'd ever willingly submit to, but for her I'd do anything, so I let her tease the hell out of me while she washes my body and then bend my head and let her wash my hair and rinse it clean. By the time we step out of the tub, we're both squeaky clean, but my thoughts are dirty as hell. Knowing she's hungry and needs food is the only thing that gets me to resist sliding back into her.

While I cook us a pizza, she tells me about the text from Shelly and that today is the day the car wreck happened. I pull her in for a hug, apologizing again for not being here when she needed me.

"I'm glad Shelly wants to make things right with you. I want to be here when you meet with her, though," I say, remembering what an ass she'd been to Holly and not fully trusting that she'll behave any differently. I hope for Holly's sake she does, but I'd still like to see it with my own eyes. Holly just smiles and nods her head yes.

After we've eaten, I grab one of the wrapped presents from under the tree and hold it out to her. I laugh at the way her eyes light up at the sight of it.

"I should make you wait until the 7<sup>th</sup> of January since you're married to a Russian now."

"You wouldn't," she whispers, her eyes widening in horror.

"Be thankful I'm not a religious person," I say with a laugh, imagining how impossible it would be for her if I made her push her precious Christmas back a couple weeks to when we celebrate it in Russia. She'd probably explode. "You will have to wait till then to celebrate it with my uncle and the others, though. There's no taking the Russian out of those guys. It doesn't matter how long they've been in America. Christmas is in January. No exceptions."

"Do I get to open one early?" she presses, already trying to reach for it.

"You have been a very good girl," I say with a wink, handing it over to her.



She grabs the box and very carefully starts to open it.

“It’s okay to rip through it, baby,” I say with a laugh, already calculating that at this rate it’s going to take her about three hours to open all her presents tomorrow.

“It just looks so pretty,” she says, “and you worked so hard to wrap them.”

I smile at how sweet she is and watch her pull the rest of the paper off before opening the box and holding the red nightie with the white, fur trim that I bought for her. Her cheeks quickly turn the same deep shade of red just like I knew they would.

“It’s so pretty, Sasha.” She blushes even harder. “But I don’t think I’ll look good in stuff like this.”

I walk over to her and cup her face, wondering how anyone can be so oblivious to how gorgeous they are.

“Put it on, *lisichka*, and let my cock convince you otherwise.”

I spend the rest of the night convincing her just how good she looks in stuff like that.

## Chapter 15

### *Holly*



I wake to the feel of Aleksandr's strong arms wrapped around me. I'm smiling before I've even opened my eyes.

My body still feels a bit exhausted after the sex marathon we had last night, but it was totally worth it. When I reach my arms up for a good stretch, he murmurs my name and squeezes me tighter. I catch a glimpse of red lace hanging off the corner of the bed, and I can't help but be surprised that the nightie withstood last night and is still in one piece. Seeing him after I'd convinced myself that I'd lost him had felt miraculous, and it had produced a hunger in the two of us that took hours satiate. I still feel the need to run my hands over his body and feel his heartbeat against my ear just to remind myself that he really is here.

When I do just that, he lets out a deep chuckle and smooths my hair back from my face. "I'm really here, *lisichka*. You can stop worrying."

"Merry Christmas," I tell him, kissing my way up his chest.

"Merry Christmas, baby."

"I'm sorry I don't have more presents for you."

"Seeing you in that lace nightie last night was the best present I've ever been given. I don't need anything except you."

I smile at his words, wondering how in the hell I got so damn lucky. I give him a quick kiss before jumping up and pulling on his hand.

“Come on, Sasha. I want to see you open your presents.”

He laughs and throws back the covers, exposing his perfect, naked body and making me rethink my plans.

“Too bad, *lisichka*. You already made your choice. Presents first, then maybe if you’re a good girl, I’ll give you what you really want.”

I laugh and run into the bathroom to hurry up and brush my teeth and throw on some pajamas so I’m not opening my gifts naked. While Aleksandr makes coffee, I look out the window and clap my hands.

“It must’ve snowed a foot last night!”

He laughs and pours us each a mug, giving mine a generous dose of milk and sugar just like I like it while keeping his black. Once he’s sitting down on the couch, I grab his presents and hold them out to him. He smiles and takes the first package while I kneel in front of him and watch.

“I’ve never seen anyone get so excited to watch another person open a present,” he says with a laugh.

He tears through the wrapping paper and holds up the dark green sweater. “Oh thank God,” he says with another laugh. “I thought for a second it might have dancing snowmen on it or something equally nauseating.”

I laugh and give his arm a soft smack. “You have no idea how close I came to getting you one of those, but I actually wanted you to like and wear the damn thing, so I chose this instead.”

“I love it, baby. Thank you.”

I was right about the green of the sweater bringing out the color of his eyes. When he holds it against his chest, I suck in a quick breath at how damn good he looks. He gives me a wink before carefully setting it aside.

“I’ll be wearing that a lot, since it’s obviously going to get me laid a good bit.”

I try to give him a stern look, but just end up laughing. He’s not wrong. He’s going to look damn delicious in that

sweater, and I doubt I'll be able to keep my pants on for long when he's wearing it. I'm still thinking about it when he starts on his next present while Nutmeg saunters over to investigate and play with the discarded balls of wrapping paper.

"It's kind of a tradition in my family to buy a new, special ornament every year," I say when he holds up the ornament. "I thought maybe we could continue it."

He looks at the wooden ornament and smiles. It's a moose couple wearing snow hats and big goofy grins, and I'd had them write *Aleksandr and Holly Lenkov* underneath with the year beside it.

"I really love it," he says, standing up and hanging it on our tree so it's right in front and easy to see.

Instead of sitting back down, he starts handing me presents from beneath the tree until I'm surrounded by a stack of gifts.

"Your turn," he says, giving me a wink.

I want to carefully preserve every name tag and keep a scrap of the wrapping paper to remember today by, but aside from that, I tear into the gifts with an excited grin on my face. By the time they're all open, I'm so emotional that I'm biting my lip to keep from crying like a big baby. Every gift is perfect, not just generic presents that anyone could pick out, but genuinely heartfelt stuff that he took the time to shop for, knowing that I would love each and every one of them. I run my hands over the soft pajamas with foxes, the red-and-white argyle sweater, the set of tins with fancy hot chocolate flavors that makes my mouth water just reading them, and he even got me the new fantasy series I mentioned in passing the other day and said I wanted to read.

"You're not supposed to cry when you open presents, *lisichka*," he says, leaning forward and cupping my face in his hands, brushing away the tears I hadn't realized are falling.

"I'm just really happy," I tell him, making him smile. "I love everything so much. Thank you, Sasha."

"I have one more for you."

He grabs my hand and places a small, velvet box in it.

My breath catches in my throat at the sight of it. Everyone knows what those small, velvet boxes mean. I look up and meet his green eyes.

“Open it, *lisichka*.”

My fingers shake as I open the box, revealing the most gorgeous diamond I’ve ever seen. It’s huge and surrounded by smaller diamonds, all of it on a delicate platinum band.

“It’s so beautiful,” I whisper, running my finger over it, too afraid to actually take it out.

He senses my hesitation and removes the ring for me, gripping my left hand in his before kissing the palm of it.

“I never got the chance to properly ask you to marry me, so you never got an engagement ring.”

He slides my ring on, nestling it against my wedding band. They go perfectly together, and I can’t stop staring at how that big diamond sparkles every time I move my finger.

“Thank you for marrying me, *lisichka*. I know you may not have wanted to at the time,” he says with a soft laugh, “but you’ve made me happier than I ever thought possible, and I’ll always do everything I can to make you just as happy.”

“I am happy, Sasha,” I tell him, my voice shaky, and even though I try and stop the tears, they just keep coming. “I love you so much, and I’m so glad you came into my life. I don’t care what you do for work because I know the man you are. You have more morals and decency than a lot of so-called good guys in positions of authority. I know you think I’m naïve, and maybe I am, but I know that good and bad aren’t so clear cut. I know you, though, and I love the man you are.”

He smiles and pulls me closer, pressing his lips to mine. The kiss is gentle and sweet, but like everything between us, it quickly turns hungry, and soon I’m sprawled on top of a pile of wrapping paper, having my pajama bottoms roughly yanked off. I watch as he makes quick work of his own, and then lowers his body on top of mine before slowly sliding into me.

“I want to feel you against me, *lisichka*,” he says against my lips, pulling my shirt off while I tug on his at the same

time. Soon we're both fully naked, and the sight and feel of my husband's powerful body thrusting into me has me letting out a moan and holding onto him even tighter.

My hands run over his back, feeling the muscles move beneath my fingers as he kisses a line down my neck. He circles his hips, sliding into me even deeper, awakening every nerve ending in my body until my nails are digging into his back and I'm screaming his name. He murmurs something in Russian in my ear before letting out a deep groan as he gives in and lets me push him over the edge with me. I feel him grow even bigger inside me, a thing that always takes me by surprise and makes me gasp from the sheer pleasure of it. I hold him tighter, opening my mouth to him when he brings his lips back to mine. He kisses me softly as aftershocks race through me, making my body shake and then relax into an absolute bliss that I never even knew existed before meeting him.

"I love you so much," he whispers against my lips in between kisses.

"I love you too."

He laughs when I add, "You still have one present left to unwrap."

Rolling us over, he lifts up and scoots back so he's leaning against the couch with me on his lap, my head resting on his shoulder.

"This one is kind of silly, but I thought you might have fun with it."

Smiling he rips off the wrapping paper, his eyes lighting up when he sees the laser gun set. "Oh, *lisichka*, I'm so going to kick your ass with this," he says with a laugh. "I love it, baby. Thank you."

He tears open the box and grabs one of the sensors, slipping the vest over my head before buckling the straps. I look down and laugh at the serious side boob I'm sporting.

"What are you doing?"

“I’m going to play with it,” he says as if I’m the weirdo for not understanding that of course we’d be immediately jumping into a game of naked laser tag.

He slips the other sensor vest over his head, and even loosening the straps as much as possible, I’m still only able to buckle one side because his chest is just too damn broad and muscular, not that I’m complaining.

With a downright wicked glint in his eyes, he turns both guns on and hands me one.

“Better run, *lisichka*.”

I look at him like he must be joking, but all he does is give me a wink and lift me up, giving me a sharp smack on my bare ass to get me moving.

“I’ll give you a tiny head start, baby, and then it’s on.”

“This hardly seems fair since I’ve never shot a gun before in my life.”

He laughs and stands up, not seeming to give the slightest fuck that he’s still naked. I look down at him, admiring how big he still looks even when soft.

“Eyes up here, sweetheart.”

I look up to see his green eyes lit up with amusement.

“If you keep getting distracted by my cock, you’re going to be very easy to beat.”

“Two can play at this game, Sasha,” I say, taking a few steps back before turning around and giving him an eyeful of ass as I run off down the hall towards the spare bedroom. I hear the deep groan he gives right as I disappear around the corner.

## Chapter 16

### *Aleksandr*



I watch my wife's perfect, round ass disappear around the corner and force myself to wait a few more seconds before silently following her. Leaning against the wall beside the open door, I turn my head and look into the room. Darting my eyes around long enough to not see her anywhere, I walk towards the bathroom door, keeping my laser gun out and ready. She couldn't have found a better gift for me if she'd tried. Naked laser tag is my new favorite thing, and I'm guessing she's going to regret buying this for me pretty damn quickly.

Eyeing the shower curtain, I step into the bathroom and pull back the dark curtain, fully prepared to laser the hell out of my wife, but it's empty. When I turn back around, I see the closet door is now open, and I let out laugh.

"Sneaky little fox," I call out to her. "Keep running, baby. I'll find you soon enough."

I hear her let out a giggle right before I hear the sound of her thudding up the stairs. My wife could use some lessons in how to be stealthy. I take the stairs two at a time and step into our room. Holly lets out a yelp and tries to run for the bathroom, but I fire off a shot and hit her sensor, laughing when I hear the satisfying victory beep it gives, letting me know I've hit my target.

She laughs and turns around, shooting her gun several times and missing every single one. I'm laughing so hard, I feel my eyes start to water.



“Are you even aiming at me?”

She laughs and tries again. I spread my arms wide, giving her perfect access, and she still misses. I shake my head and laugh some more. Taking off my vest, I loop it over the doorknob to the bathroom and pull Holly towards me.

“I can’t have my wife being such a bad shot. It insults me on a deep level.”

She rolls her eyes at me, but she’s still grinning and trying not to laugh. I stand behind her, grabbing onto her arms and showing her how to position her arms and legs.

“Just relax, baby, and close one eye. Look down the sight, and try to have it aimed right where you want it to land. Take a breath, and with your exhale, gently squeeze the trigger.”

She does everything I say, and when she shoots the gun, the sensor lights up and gives the same beep mine did, making her jump up and down with a big smile on her face.

“Fucking hell,” I groan, watching her tits bounce under the vest that’s barely covering them.

“I’m totally going to kick your ass the next time we do this.”

“We’ll see,” I say, giving her a wink and pulling her vest off before tossing her on the bed. “But I won this round, *lisichka*, and now I want my reward.”

When we finally pull ourselves out of bed and shower, we’re both starving and in desperate need of replenishing some calories. I cook us breakfast while Holly picks up the discarded wrapping paper that Nutmeg has been having a blast shredding. We let him have his presents last night, and so far his favorite thing seems to be a small fish that’s stuffed with cat nip. He keeps pawing at it and cradling it against his body like he’s in love with the damn thing. It’s pretty cute, and I laugh at him while I finish up the French toast.

I pile two plates full and then bring extra powdered sugar and syrup to the table because I know my wife well enough to know she’ll need it. When she sees it, she shoots me a big grin and comes up to give me a kiss.

“This looks amazing, Sasha.”

“It’s not nearly as tasty as you, *lisichka*.”

She blushes and gives me another kiss before sitting down and covering her French toast in syrup and spooning out enough powdered sugar to make my teeth hurt from just watching her. She laughs when she sees the look on my face and takes a big bite, moaning in exaggerated appreciation.

“Careful, sweetheart, or I’m going to bend you over the damn table.”

Her blue eyes darken a bit at my words, and I smile at how neither one of us seems to be able to get enough of the other. I manage to get through breakfast without claiming my wife again, but that has more to do with the fact that I think her poor pussy needs a rest than anything else. Picking her up, I carry her to the couch, grabbing her photo album on the way. I sit down, keeping her on my lap and hand her the album.

“Tell me about your family.”

She gives me the sweetest smile before relaxing her body into mine and opening the book to the first page. I laugh at how damn cute she was as a baby. Dark hair, big, blue eyes, and a mischievous smile that reminds me so much of the one she just showed me before she’d run off naked down the hall.

“Our kids are going to be beautiful,” I tell her, making her laugh.

“You sound like your Uncle Viktor. *She will give you many sons*,” she says, imitating his deep voice and accent.

“I would pay good money to see you do that impression in front of him.”

“Yeah, that’s never going to happen,” she says with a laugh. “You’re right, though. Our kids are going to be beautiful.”

I smile and hold her tighter, listening as she tells me all about her parents. There’s a sadness in her voice, but I can hear the happiness too. She laughs at memories of her and her dad dressing up for Halloween and the time he taught her how

to ice skate and she fell so hard on her ass that she was convinced she'd broken her tailbone. I smile at the vivid images she puts in my head, and by the time we get to the end of the album, it seems like a weight has lifted from her.

“Thanks for asking me about them, Sasha.”

“I want to know everything about you, *lisichka*.”

“It makes me sad when I think about how much I miss my dad, but with you I have something to look forward to. I know we're going to create our own family and make our own memories, and I know that would make him so happy. All he ever wanted was for me to be happy, and that's a big part of why I tried so hard to remain positive and upbeat over the last year. I didn't want to disappoint him, and their deaths taught me to not waste a second of life.”

I cup her face and kiss her, savoring the taste and feel of her. “I'm not going to waste a single second with you, sweetheart. You make me happier than I've ever been, and I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you, making memories and raising a family. You make me want everything I swore I'd never want.” I laugh and say, “Everything changed the second I saw you, *lisichka*. I knew there was no going back.”

“I felt the same way when I saw you, Sasha. I had no idea it was possible to feel this strongly about another person. I didn't realize that love could be so all-consuming like this.”

“Me either,” I admit. “We have our whole lives ahead of us, baby. This is only the beginning.”

She smiles and rests her head on my shoulder. Her fingers run through my beard as I hold her and think about how damn lucky I am. My little fox may have been an unplanned surprise in my life, but she's the best thing that's ever happened to me and far better than I deserve. I'll happily spend the rest of my life loving and taking care of her because she's everything to me, and I could never go back to a life without her. I kiss the top of her head, knowing this is the best Christmas I've ever had and that the next one will be even better.

# Epilogue



One Year Later

Holly

“Oh my God, they look so stinking cute,” I say, laughing at the sight of our boys in their Christmas sleepers with dancing reindeer on them.

Aleksandr laughs and picks up Dmitri while I grab Dominic. We'd named them after our dads, and even at three months, I swear I'm already starting to see their different personalities shine through. When we found out we were having twin boys, I thought Aleksandr was going to die from pure happiness. Later, when we'd left the doctor's office, he'd said it must've been all that naked laser tag we'd been playing, which had made me laugh so hard I'd nearly peed my pants in the damn parking lot.

When we'd told Uncle Viktor, he'd patted me on the back in an *Atta girl* kind of way that had made me laugh and cringe a bit, and Shelly was so excited to become an aunt that she'd broken down in the world's longest fit of happy crying.

Our boys look at us, their big, green eyes following our every move. We carry them upstairs to the bedroom across the hall from us that we'd turned into a nursery. I hold Dominic closer, kissing his baby-soft, dark hair and watch the way Aleksandr talks to Dmitri in Russian and kisses his chubby cheek, making him smile and look at his daddy like he's a god. I can't say I blame him. I think I look at him the exact same

way. He looks over and gives me a wink before kissing Dominic's head and telling him he loves him in Russian. We want our kids to be bilingual, and I'm doing my best to learn the language, but it's damn hard. I'm guessing they'll pick it up before I do.

"They're so beautiful," he says, giving me the sweetest smile before kissing me and wrapping an arm around my shoulder with Dmitri tucked safely against his chest. He strokes Dominic's soft hair as our sons drift off to sleep.

"They should be. They look just like you," I say, making him laugh.

"I see their gorgeous mom in them." He kisses my cheek and says, "They definitely have your appetite."

Just the mention of it has my breasts aching. I've been nursing them, but, man, it's exhausting breastfeeding two babies at once.

"Don't mention appetites or food or breasts." I shoot him a look that has him fighting back a laugh. "They need their sleep, and I need a break."

He arches a brow at me. "Oh yeah, have any plans in mind?"

I smile but keep quiet, giving Dominic and Dmitri both a kiss on their soft heads before we carefully put them in their crib. They both let out sighs as if they synchronized it that way, and when their hands touch, they seem to settle into an even deeper sleep. I love how close they already are, and even though I'm sure the two of them will get into some serious mischief when they're older, I love the bond they share, and I'm so happy we had twins first. I'd like a single birth next, though. A little girl would really complete this family.

"What are you smiling about?" Aleksandr asks, pulling me closer and wrapping his arms around me from behind as we watch our sons sleep.

"I was thinking that all we're missing is a daughter." I hurry up and add, "But like a couple years from now."

He laughs quietly and kisses my neck. “That can definitely be arranged. The pregnancy, I mean. I can’t guarantee a girl.”

I turn my head and look at his smiling, gorgeous face.

“Last Christmas I told myself that every Christmas was just going to get better, and I was right. You made me the happiest man alive by being my wife and loving me and letting me love you, and now you’ve made me a father to two beautiful, healthy sons. Every time I think I can’t possibly get any happier, you prove me wrong, *lisichka*.”

I cup his face, pulling him closer so our lips are almost touching. “Take me to bed, Sasha. Let me make you even happier.”

He lets out a soft groan before giving my bottom lip a suck and picking me up with an ease that reminds me of how strong he is. I’ve got a long way to go before I lose all the baby weight that carrying twins packed on, but he’s never once made me feel unattractive. While I was pregnant, he couldn’t keep his hands off me, and even after giving birth and all the changes to my body, he still looks at me like I’m the sexiest, most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, just like he did when I first showed him my scars.

As soon as he lays me on the bed and I start tugging on his shirt, he laughs and gets undressed, giving me exactly what I want—an up close and personal view of his gorgeous body.

“Damn, Sasha,” I say, lifting up onto my elbows so I can see him better. He’s already fully hard, and the sight of his big cock always sends a shiver of pleasure straight to my pussy.

“Now you know how I feel every time I look at you,” he says, giving me a wink when I start to blush.

He pulls my yoga pants off and then my top, and when I start to get insecure about my extra weight and stretch marks, he cups my face and gives me the sweetest smile.

“Please don’t hide yourself from me, *lisichka*. You have no idea how much I love looking at you. Everything about you is perfect to me, baby, every fucking thing.”

I nod my head and relax my arms at my side instead of using them to cover the imperfections that apparently only I can see.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, already bringing his mouth to my inner thigh and kissing his way up my leg. “Now let me worship your body like I want to.”

I lay my head back and grip the blankets when I feel him run his tongue up my wet slit. He keeps his head buried between my legs as I bite my lip to keep from screaming and waking our babies with my release. His lips and tongue keep my body right on the edge of another orgasm, and just when I feel like I’m going to lose my mind from this sweet torture, he gives my clit a soft suck and pushes me over the edge again.

I rock against his mouth, taking as much pleasure from him as he wants to give me until I’m shaking and gasping and clawing at him to bring him up to me because I’m starved for the taste of him and want to feel the heavy weight of his body against mine. I hear the crinkle of the condom wrapper seconds before he’s positioning himself on top of me.

“Sasha,” I moan, wrapping my arms around him and pulling him closer.

“I’m right here, baby.”

I kiss him hard, tasting myself on him and wanting more. Our tongues meet in a hungry kiss as he slides into me, making me groan at his thickness and how perfectly he spreads me wide for him. He fucks me slowly, neither one of us wanting to rush this. Sliding a hand under my ass, he grabs a cheek and tilts me up a bit, making me let out a breathy “Fuck!” at how it makes every stroke feel so much deeper.

He’s hitting everything I need him to, and this time when I start to come, I cup his face and look into the green eyes that I love so much.

“God, I love you,” he says, his voice strained as I clench around him even tighter, forcing him to come with me, and when I feel him pulse inside me, it sends a new wave of

pleasure through me, joining us together in the way I love most.

He presses his forehead to mine as I cup his face and wrap my legs tighter around him, locking us together as tightly as I can. He smiles and keeps himself buried inside me just like I like him to.

“I love you, too, Sasha, so much it scares me sometimes. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

His thumb caresses my cheek. “You won’t ever have to find out, *lisichka*. I’ll always be here, baby.”

He knows I still worry about his work, but his jobs have been few and far between, and I’m holding out hope that maybe he can quietly retire sometime soon. Maybe that’s my naïve optimism shining through, but I don’t care. For now, things are perfect with our healthy twin sons across the hall and my amazing husband looking down on me with so much love in his green eyes. I run my fingers through his soft beard, memorizing every detail of this moment, so excited to see what our future holds.



# Thank You!

Thank you so much for reading, and if you'd like to leave a review, I would appreciate it so much! I hope you enjoyed Holly and Aleksandr's story. It was so much fun to write, and I can't wait to hear what you all think of it!

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More stories are on the way!!

# About the Author

Just like her last name, Sonja loves morally grey characters and alphas with a hidden heart of gold. She loves strong men with mile-wide soft spots for the women they love and who will stop at nothing to keep them safe.

She writes mainly age gap, steamy romances where the lines between good and bad blur into a beautiful, sexy shade of grey.

Zero cheating and HEAs are always guaranteed!

