



AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS
MAFIA ROMANCE

PAINTED

PERFECTLY IMPERFECT SERIES

scars

NEVA ALTAJ

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[About The Author](#)

Author's note

Dear reader, there are a few Russian words mentioned in the book, so here are the translations and clarifications:

Malysh – мальш (little one) is used as an endearment in lieu of “baby”. The word is masculine, but can be used as gender neutral. There’s also a feminine version – малышка (malyshka), and that, too, can be used to address a (female) partner, but most prefer “malysh”.

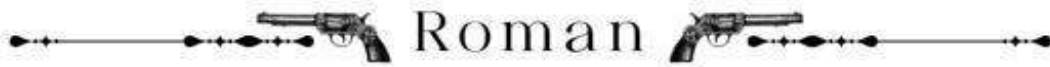
Kukolka – куколка (little doll) is a diminutive of "kukla," which means "doll".

Milaya – милая (dear, loved one) is used as an endearment in lieu of “darling or honey”

Piroshki – пирожки (hand pies) are small pastries filled with finely chopped meat, vegetables or fruit and can be baked or fried.

A note regarding Russian surnames: Most married Russian women's last name is formed by adding an "-a" at the end of their husband's surname (ex. Petrov, Petrova). Russians living abroad may adjust to local rules and both husband and wife will have the same ending on their driver's license and other documents to avoid confusion (Roman Petrov and Nina Petrov). However, the wife would be still addressed as Nina Petrova by Russians, no matter what country they lived in.

Prologue



Beep. Beep.

Strong hospital smell. Looks like I lived.

I try opening my eyes. It doesn't work. The anesthesia is probably just starting to wear off. At least there is no more pain. There are hushed voices coming from my left, but they are subdued, and even though they sound familiar, I can't recognize them.

Beep. Beep.

"Can he hear us?"

"No. He's heavily sedated." *Beep.*

"Will he live?"

"Yes. Unfortunately. The wounds on his chest were not that bad. They patched him up."

"We can always try again. Pin it on the Italians again."

"Too risky. People are loyal to the *Pakhan*. Anyone suspects me, and I'll end up in a ditch." *Beep.*

"Well, there might be a silver lining. The shrapnel shattered his knee."

"So?"

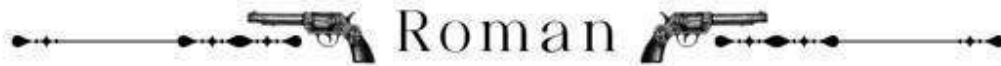
"Doctor said he won't walk again. If someone more capable comes into the picture . . . people, no matter how loyal, will hardly stand behind a *pakhan* who's in a wheelchair when presented with a better option."

"Well, I guess we did well after all."

There are two sets of steps leaving, and then a door closes.

Chapter 1

Three months later



There are never enough drugs.

I put the sheet filled with notes on the pile of papers on my desk and focus on the numbers on the laptop screen.

“Call Sergei.” I lean back in my wheelchair and look at Maxim, who is sitting on the other side of my desk. “I need him to arrange two additional shipments this month.”

“He already negotiated the quantities with Mendoza for the quarter. I’m not sure the Mexicans can double it on such short notice.”

“They will. Now, tell me what the fuck happened because I know that look well, and I know I won’t like the answer.”

“Samuel Grey embezzled three million dollars. Our money.”

I sigh and shake my head. “Who is Samuel Grey, why did he have access to our money, and how did he manage to do that?”

“Our real estate mediator. The money was meant for buying two more lots near the north warehouse. Grey thought he could borrow our money for a week for some investment which ended up being a Ponzi scheme.”

How much of an idiot a person would have to be to steal from the *Bratva*? Sometimes I’m amazed by people’s stupidity.

“Can he pay it back?” I ask.

“No.”

“Kill him. And make an example out of him.”

“I had something else in mind. People . . . people are starting to talk, Roman. We need a distraction, fast. I think Grey can provide that distraction.”

“Oh? And what have they been talking about?” I’ve known Maxim since he started working for my father two decades ago, as a foot soldier. The old *pakhan* never could determine a person’s potential. Wasting a man as capable

as Maxim by assigning him to basic fieldwork was one of many mistakes I corrected the moment I became *pakhan* twelve years ago. Right after I killed the bastard.

“You. Still being unmarried.”

That’s old news. “But that’s not all, is it? What else?” I narrow my eyes at Maxim.

He’s not looking at me, his gaze focused on something on the wall behind me. “There are rumors that you won’t be able to run the *Bratva* much longer and someone else will take your place. Someone more . . . physically able.”

“And do you share their opinion?”

“Do not insult me, Roman. You know I’ve always stood by you, and I’ll keep doing so. Even if I don’t think you’re the most capable *pakhan* the *Bratva* ever had. But you’ve been holed up here for three months. You haven’t been to any of our clubs to check on the operations like you did at least once a month before the explosion. And you haven’t been seen with a woman.”

“So the status of my sex life is a better indicator of my ability to run the *Bratva* than the fact that we doubled our profit the last two months?”

“People need the feel of stability, Roman. They still remember how your father took over the previous *pakhan*’s place and the chaos that followed. The *Bratva* lost more than fifty people to internal skirmishes, and the business was devastated. They need to know that it won’t happen again. A wife means there will be an heir who will be ready to take over your place when the time comes, without internal war or people dying.”

“I will not tie myself to some random woman for life just to pacify our ranks.”

“Let me show you something.” Maxim takes out his phone and starts scrolling. “My daughter went to school with Samuel’s daughter. They weren’t close friends or anything, but they hung out together often, and I remember her showing me the videos she took. I asked her to send me one of those last night when I heard what Samuel Grey did.”

“What would videos of teenagers have to do with my ability to lead the *Bratva*?”

“Well, she’s not a teenager anymore. Nina Grey finished art studies at The Art Institute here in Chicago in two years instead of four, and she’s

currently the most sought-after young artist in the country. Her paintings sell for four figures each.”

“So what, we’ll hire her to paint us a family portrait?” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “You are barely fifty. Are you going senile prematurely?”

“We aren’t hiring her to paint us a portrait. We will be blackmailing her. Her father’s life for her services.”

“To do what?”

“To marry you, Roman. Well, temporarily at least.”

I stare at my second in command for a few seconds and then burst out laughing. “You are out of your mind.”

“Am I?” He crosses his hands and leans back. “And what does the therapist say? About your leg.”

“He expects me to be able to regain up to eighty percent of its use.” “What does that mean?”

“It means crutches in the worst-case scenario. A cane in the best.”

“That’s good. How much time are we talking about? A month?”

I look him right in the eyes and grind my teeth. “At least six more months of physical therapy.”

“Shit, Roman.” He reaches with his hand and squeezes his temples. “We can’t wait that long. We need something now, or we’ll have riots.”

I look out the window and sigh. Maxim is usually always right. “You’re saying it’s either me having two functioning legs or a wife? I won’t be walking any time soon, Maxim.”

“Well, in that case, we’re getting you a wife until you do.”

“That’s ridiculous. I can’t blackmail a woman I don’t know into pretending to be my wife for six months, especially one who has no connection to our world. She’ll probably be scared shitless. No one will buy that.”

“Watch this,” Maxim says and thrusts his phone into my hand.

The video is grainy, probably because it was taken years ago, but the lighting is good and I can see the inside of a room with several teenagers sitting in a semicircle, their backs to the camera. The only person whose face is visible is a dark-haired girl sitting cross-legged before the audience. The camera zooms in, bringing her unusual features into focus. Someone in her family must be of Asian descent because there is a slight tilt to her eyes, which makes them appear cat-like. I wonder what she looks like now.

“Can you do Mrs. Nolan?” someone from the semicircle asks. “When she talks about her cats?”

“Again?” The young Nina Grey groans. “How about someone new? Maybe a politician?”

There is a collective sound of displeasure and several teens shout, *“Mrs. Nolan!”* The young Nina shakes her head then smiles and closes her eyes. When she opens them a few seconds later and starts talking, I find myself pulling the phone closer, completely in awe.

She’s speaking, but I don’t pay attention to the actual words. I’m completely absorbed in watching the mimicry on her face, the way her right eye trembles slightly when she speaks, how she accentuates the words. All of a sudden, it’s like she’s a completely different person.

“How old is she in this video?” I ask without removing my eyes from the screen.

“Fourteen. Amazing, isn’t she?”

In the video, someone shouts another name and points to a girl sitting at the end of the semicircle. Nina Grey laughs, closes her eyes in concentration, and then starts a new act. Again, she takes on a completely new persona, her posture, the way her hands move while she talks. The girl on the side watches her, then laughs and covers her face with her hand. Nina replicates the motion to the detail, even the way the girl’s shoulders rise a little while she laughs. I don’t think I ever witnessed something like that.

I look up to find Maxim smiling in satisfaction. “As you can see, there shouldn’t be any problems with her pretending to be anything you need her to be.”

“You are serious about this?” I still find this idea of his completely idiotic.

“Desperate times require desperate measures, Roman. We need to shut down the rumors, and we need to do it now.”

“In that case, the wife it is.” I slam the laptop closed. “Shit!”



Nina



I put my bag on the recliner and turn around in the living room. It's been months since I've been here, but it looks like nothing has changed. The same white curtains and carpet, white and beige furniture, empty white walls. So much white—it looks sterile. I always despised it. No wonder that the first significant amount of money I earned, I used it to rent an apartment and get away from this bleakness.

“I'm home!” I shout.

A few seconds later there is a sound of clicking heels coming my way. My mom exits the kitchen and rushes toward me, her hands on her hips. Zara Grey is the complete opposite of me—tall and blonde, with full makeup on, and in a perfectly pressed dress. A white silky one. I want to groan.

“You are three hours late, I told you—” she stops in mid-sentence. “Dear God, what have you done with yourself?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“The metal thing on your nose.”

“It is called a piercing, Mom.”

“People get diseases through those, Nina. When your father sees you, he'll have a heart attack.”

“I'm twenty-four. I can do whatever I please with my body. And I've had it for years, I just remove it when I come here to avoid you pestering me. I forgot today.” “And why are you wearing all black? Did someone die?” A few of my brain cells, for sure.

“I'm in a dark phase this month.” I shrug.

My mom loves the clichés. I think they make her feel more comfortable, especially around me. She still finds my choice of a career hard to process. Maybe it would be easier for her if I drew flower arrangements or baby deer. I wonder what she'd have to say about my latest piece. It's still a work in progress, but there are no flowers or deer planned.

“Why do you have to be so strange all the time?”

“Works great with guys.” I grin.

“Men love strange women.” “I'm not

so sure about that, honey.” God, she can’t even get my sarcasm.

“When Dad called, he said it was urgent. Where is he?”

“In the study. He’s been acting out of character the last few days. I think it has something to do with work, but he won’t tell me anything. It seems . . . like he’s scared of something.”

My father is in a real-estate business. Not many things to be scared of. I enter the hallway on the left and knock on the door of my father’s study, without having even the faintest idea what a drastic change my life is going to take when I get inside.

* * *

Half an hour later, I’m sitting in a recliner occupying the corner of the office and staring at my father, open-mouthed. “Is this a joke?”

“It’s not a joke.” He slumps his shoulders and passes a hand through his greying hair.

“Okay, let me get this straight. You stole money from the Russians and lost it, so now you’re asking me to marry a Russian mob boss.”

“I didn’t steal anything, Nina.” He throws his arms in the air, stands up, and starts pacing behind his desk. “I just borrowed it for a few days because I needed the funds for this deal. I never thought the guy was a fraud or that he’d take the money and vanish.”

“You took the money, and you can’t pay them back. How the fuck did you get involved with Russian mafia? What the hell were you thinking, Dad?”

“Don’t talk to me like that!” He points an accusatory finger at me. “I’m your father!”

“You are asking me to marry a criminal to save your butt, for God’s sake. I think I can talk to you any way I want, all things considered.”

“Nina . . .”

“They expect me to marry their boss? Like, for real?”

“It’s just temporarily.” He waves his hand in the air like it’s not a big deal.

“But, why? Isn’t there a line of mafia daughters somewhere wanting to marry the guy? It would be a dream come true for any of them, right? Why me?”

“They didn’t say. These people don’t explain themselves. They tell you what to do, and if you don’t do it, you’re dead.”

“You really think they’ll kill you?”

“Yes. I’m surprised they haven’t already.” He pauses his pacing and turns to face me. “If you don’t do what they ask, I’m dead.”

I take a deep breath and bury my hands in my hair, squeezing my head like it’s going to help find a solution to this fuckup. Because I am not marrying anyone, fake marriage or not. “Okay, let’s think. There must be some way to correct this. I have some savings, maybe fifty grand. I have my next exhibition in a month, and I should be able to get another twenty if I can manage to finish all fifteen pieces and they all sell. How much money can you get for the house?”

“Maybe eighty grand. Or ninety, if we sell the furniture as well. I can get ten more for the car.”

“Good. That places us at somewhere around one hundred and seventy thousand. Will that be enough? How much do you owe them?”

“Three million.”

I must have had a minor stroke because there is no way he said the words I just heard him say. “Can you please repeat that?”

“I owe them three million dollars.”

I stare at him with my mouth wide open. “Dear God, Dad.”

I bend down and place my forehead on my knees, trying to control my breathing. I’m not marriage material, no one in their right mind would offer three million dollars in exchange for six months of marriage. There must be a catch.

“He’s ninety, isn’t he?” I mumble into my knees.

“I don’t know how old their *pakhan* is, but I don’t think he’s ninety.” “Eighty then. I’m so relieved.”

I’m going to be sick.

“They said it’ll be a marriage in name only. You won’t have to . . . you know.”

“Sleep with him? Well, if he’s eighty, then he probably can’t have sex. That’s good. Eighty is good.”

“Nina, I-I am so sorry. If you don’t want to go through with this, that’s okay. I’ll figure something out.”

I straighten up and look at my father who is now sitting slumped in his chair, his hair in disarray and his eyes bloodshot. He looks so old and frail all of a sudden.

“Unless you plan to go to the police, there is nothing else to be done, is there?” I ask.

“You know I can’t go tattle on the Russian mafia to the police. They would kill us all.”

Of course they would kill us. I close my eyes and sigh. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

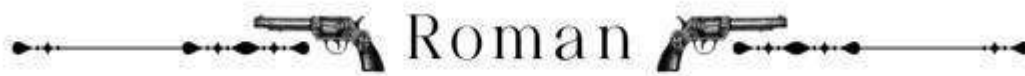
My father watches me for a few seconds, then places his hands over his face and starts crying. I want to cry as well, but there is no point.

“I suppose they will set up a meeting, or something, where we’ll discuss the details.”

“They already did. We are meeting the *Pakhan* in an hour.”

I look at my father and bury my hands in my hair. “Perfect. I’m just going to the bathroom to puke up my lunch, and I’ll meet you at the front door in five.”

Chapter 2



A girl brings my drink, places it on the table in front of me, and without looking up, turns and runs back toward the kitchen. I look around, noting the drab tablecloths and mismatching chairs. The place is a dump. It closed last month, which is exactly why I picked it for this meeting. A sound of a phone ringing pierces the silence.

“They are here,” Maxim says from his spot behind me. “She came with her father.”

“Let the girl in. The father is to stay outside.”

I take a sip of whiskey and focus my eyes on the glass door on the other side of the room. There is a knock and my man who is standing by the door opens it, letting the girl inside.

For some reason, I expected her to be taller. She is a tiny thing, not much over five feet. Her long midnight-black hair is falling in two thick braids on either side of her face, and if you overlook her breasts, she could pass as a teenager. She’s even dressed like one—torn black jeans, a black hoodie, and those black boots I’ve seen emo kids wearing.

I close my eyes for a second and shake my head. This will never work. I’m planning to tell Maxim to send her away when her head turns toward me, and the words die on my lips. There are the same features I saw on that video, but her face has lost that childlike appearance with round cheeks. Instead of a cute teen girl, an unbelievably beautiful woman stands there, watching me with something that looks very much like anger. Her eyes connect with mine and one perfect black eyebrow arches in question.

“Miss Grey,” I say and motion toward the empty chair on the other side of the table “Please, join us.”

I wait for her to cower, maybe flinch, but she doesn’t seem disturbed by the situation even a little. She approaches, keeping her gaze connected with mine all the while. She doesn’t take the chair as instructed but comes to stand right

in front of me and looks me over. I focus on her face, waiting to see her reaction when she notices the wheelchair. There isn't any.

"You are not what I expected, Mr. Petrov," she says, and I have to give it to her—the girl has balls.

"How so, Miss Grey?"

"I expected you to be eighty." She purses her lips.

Is she actually that composed and unperturbed, or is this another of her acts, I wonder? If it's an act, she's really good.

"I'm thirty-five." I take a sip from my glass. "Now that we cleared that up, let's talk business. Your father explained what's expected of you?"

"He did. And I have some questions." She takes the end of one of her braids and starts winding it around her finger. Not so relaxed as she's trying to present herself, after all. "And since we will be calling this a business transaction, I have one condition."

"A condition? You are in no position to negotiate the terms, Miss Grey, but let's hear it."

"You'll let my father go. This . . . transaction will stay between the two of us. He's out of the picture."

"I'll think about it. Now, let's hear the questions."

"Why do you need a fake wife?"

"None of your concern. And, the marriage won't be fake. Next question."

She narrows her eyes at me. "What happens after six months?"

"You will get the divorce papers and be on your merry way."

"How will we go about the wedding thing? Just go and sign the papers?"

I lean back in my chair and regard her. "We need to make some things clear, Miss Grey. I don't need a wife just on paper. If anyone suspects we're not crazy in love, and that this marriage is a sham, your father is dead. And you will be joining him."

She blinks and looks at me with confusion clearly shown on her face. "You expect us to live together for six months?"

"Of course. How else would people believe the marriage?"

It looks like something finally managed to rattle her, because she just stands there staring at me with wide eyes, saying nothing. I have a feeling that there are not many things that can leave Nina Grey speechless.

“There will be a party on Saturday,” I continue. “You will attend with your father. We’ll meet and become besotted with each other. I’ll take you home with me that evening, and we won’t leave my room for two days.”

“Am I expected to have sex with you?”

She says it in an even voice as if asking about the weather, but I see it in her eyes—a restrained terror. I’m pretty sure no one else would notice it because she looks so perfectly composed on the outside. But inflicting fear in people is something I do on regular basis, and I see it as clearly as day. She’s horrified.

“No,” I say, then decide to try rattling her a little. “Unless you want to, of course.”

“Thank you for the offer, Mr. Petrov, but I will have to decline.” She lets go of her braid and puts her hands in the back pockets of her jeans.

Even though I expected her to say no, for some reason, her reply stings.

“And what will we be doing for two days in your room, Mr. Petrov?”

“As far as anyone else is concerned, we will be having lots and lots of sex. In reality, you can do whatever you please.” I motion with my hand through the air. “Watch Netflix. Solve crosswords. I don’t care. I will be working the whole time anyway.”

“Lovely. And what happens after those two days of marathon sex?”

“I lose my mind over you. We marry in a few weeks. After that, you will be playing your role of a crazy-in-love wife.” I shrug. “What you do with your free time is up to you, as long as you play your part along the way.”

“And? That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Do you truly think that someone will believe in this . . . charade?”

“Well, it would be up to you, Miss Grey. Your father’s life is at stake.” “And you? Can you pull off your part?”

“Which part?”

“That of a man who is mindlessly infatuated with his wife. You don’t seem like that kind.”

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see for yourself,” I say and smile. “Do we have a deal, Miss Grey?”

I can almost see the wheels turning in her head—weighing the options, pros and cons—looking for an out. But there isn't one and we both know it. I catch the exact moment she accepts the situation— just a slight hardening around her jaw as she grinds her teeth. “We have a deal, Mr. Petrov.”

A decorative horizontal line with small diamond shapes, flanked by two roses with leaves on either side.

Nina

The evening is unusually warm, but I still feel cold all over as I step out of the restaurant. My father grabs my arm and hastily ushers me toward the car, asking me questions along the way, but I can't focus on his words. I open the passenger door and sit down. My legs are trembling. Looks like the adrenaline ran out and I'm feeling the aftereffects.

I've never been as scared as the moment I entered that restaurant, wondering if they had changed their minds and decided to kill us. Staying composed and cool in front of that shark of a man required tremendous self-control. I almost slipped a few times. But, if he thought, even for a moment, that I couldn't play his game, my father and I were as good as dead. The wheelchair didn't fool me, I knew who I was facing the moment our gazes met—a stone-cold killer.

Roman Petrov. I assumed he was some elderly guy with a beer belly and receding hairline. Why would he be blackmailing a woman into marriage otherwise? I couldn't have been more wrong.

During our conversation, I tried my best to keep my eyes fixated on his, but I still managed to steal a few glances elsewhere. The man is incredibly handsome. That was evident even in the scarce light. I couldn't pinpoint his height, but with him in a sitting position and me standing, our heads were at the same level. He surely had more than a foot on me. It's not a nice thing to say, but I was relieved he was in a wheelchair. Being near tall men is a serious problem for me, and the idea of being stuck together with one for six months sent me into a shitstorm of panic.

“Nina!” my father yells. “Are you even hearing me? What the hell happened inside? I tried to go in but the goons wouldn't let me.”

I take a deep breath and, watching the cars pass us on the driveway, start giving him the short version of the deal I made with the head of the Russian underworld. I share only the basics of the marriage agreement. The less he knows, the better.

“No word about any of this to Mom,” I say when we arrive in front of the house, “and make sure you act as if you never met Petrov on Saturday. He said if anything goes wrong, the deal is off.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means that if anyone, Mom included, suspects I’m not crazy in love with that son of a bitch, we’re dead.”