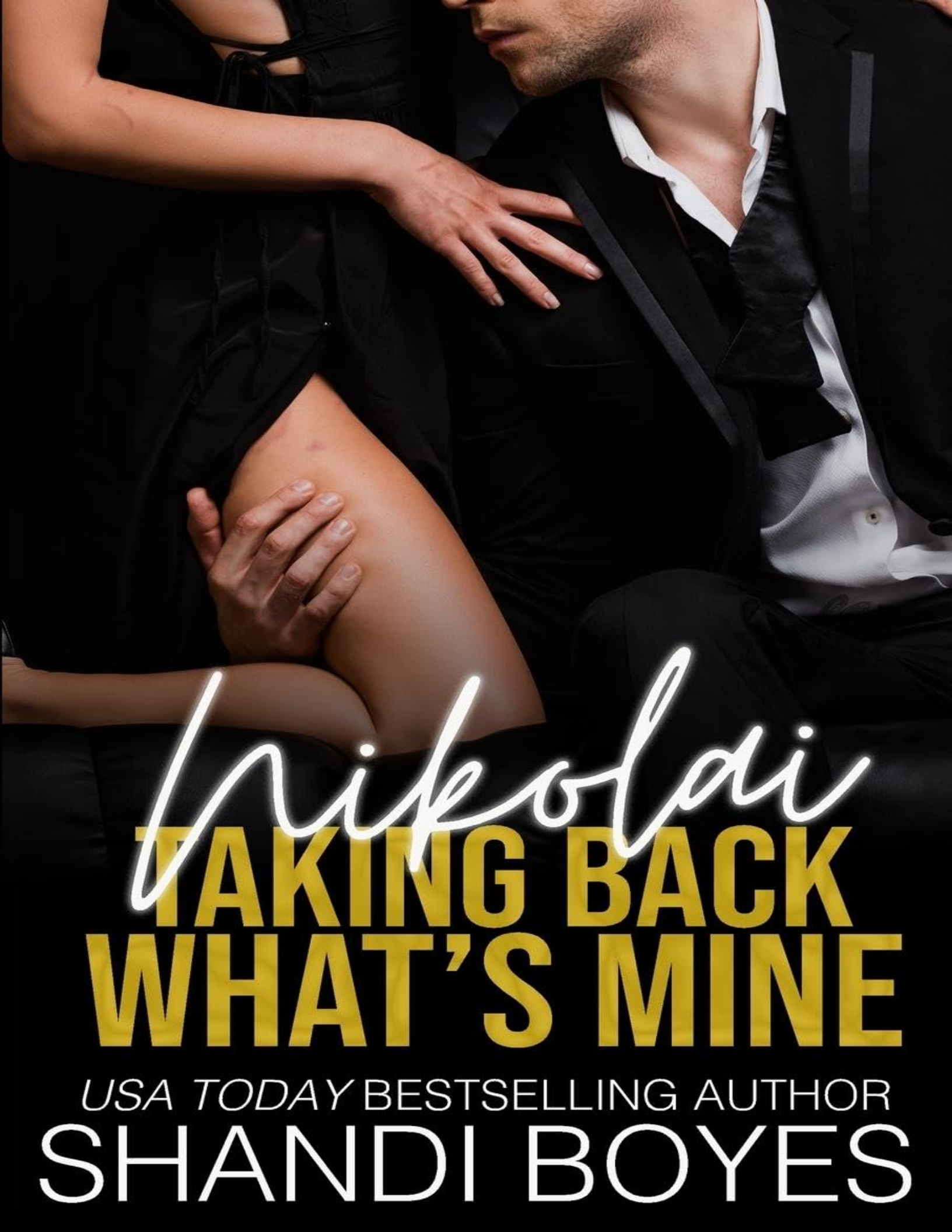




Nikolai

**TAKING BACK
WHAT'S MINE**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANDI BOYES

NIKOLAI: MINE TO PROTECT

SHANDI BOYES

Written by
Shandi Boyes

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DEDICATION

*To the people who messaged me begging and pleading for this final
instalment in Nikolai and Justine's story.
I hope I did it justice.*

Much love,

Shandi xx

ALSO BY SHANDI BOYES

When Justine walked into my life, I swore an allegiance, an oath to protect her with everything I have.
I slayed the devil and stole his crown. I now sit in his throne with my queen at my side. But what
happens when everything I've ever wanted is pulled out from beneath me?

I've risen from the ashes more than once, but this resurrection is by far the most dangerous. It
threatens to take everything I've worked for—everything I deserve. But more than anything, it wants to
destroy her: my *Ahren*.

I'll never let that happen. I killed the man who raised me to save her, and this fool is about to suffer the
same fate. I'll protect what is mine. . . even it kills me. You can hide from the devil, but he will always
find you because dead men don't tattle any tales.

Author Warning: This is book four in a series, it is not recommended as a standalone. It has violent
scenes, smoking hot moments, and a bad boy mafia man who will make you swoon.

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NIKOLAI

A BATTLE IS COMING.

I can sense it in the air, feel it quivering over my skin as my blood furiously pumps to cool my unnatural body temperature. I want to pretend my unease arises solely from Justine's brother's impending release, but my gut is warning me to remain cautious. This feels bigger than that, as if I'm about to face my deadliest battle to date.

This frustrates me more than it excites me.

Only a year ago, I would have craved a blood bath. I had nothing to lose and no fear of dying. Now I have more than my reputation at stake. I have my *Ahren* to protect, my gift for years of suffering.

Fools may say the odds are stacked against me, but I wouldn't cut off my nose to spite my face. Justine may be my only weakness, but the lengths I'll go to protect her are well known by my enemies.

I killed the man who raised me to keep her safe, and I'll do the same to any *vypardusch* stupid enough to take up the challenge Vladimir's death instigated.

If Alexei's death isn't proof of this, I'm sure I can find more convincing factors.

Alexei arrived on my home turf to kill my man and take my woman. He left with not even a legacy. His family moved on from his death as quickly as

the Popov entity recovered from Vladimir's dethroning. Both losses were scarcely registered.

Their deaths are proof that what Rico said earlier tonight is true: "Good leaders don't tell you what to do. They show you how it's done."

If I hadn't seen the glint his eyes got every time he caught his kitten's eye, I would have mistaken his comment as him forging a way back into an organization that's profited more the past year than it did the prior ten, but that wasn't what he was doing. He was commending me.

I've learned many things the past year, but accepting praise isn't one of them. More times than not during my childhood, commendations arrived with painful citations. The more ruthless you are in this industry, the greater your reputation becomes. Because Vladimir never wanted to be seen as weak by his enemies, he wasn't just the patriarch of our family, he was the governor who ruled it with an iron fist.

Although I have no intentions of following in Vladimir's footsteps, a weak leader will be quickly weeded out, meaning I must not only remain on my toes when it comes to Justine, I have to continually peer over my shoulder, keeping watch for the next challenger to bid for my throne.

My crew is the strongest it's ever been, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't remain on alert. Vladimir was pushed from his perch because he became reckless. He thought the reputation Rico and I had developed was enough to stop his reign from being challenged. He was an idiot. If anything, it should have made him warier.

He abused Rico and me for years, believing fear would stop us from demanding our share of the glory.

That was his first downfall.

I was plotting his demise years before Justine entered the picture. My desire to protect her merely sped up the process. If I had the means after my sixteenth birthday, I would have initiated my takeover bid earlier, but with patience came greater reward.

By waiting, I not only dethroned Vladimir, I took his place. I now sit on his throne with my queen by my side.

For how long, I don't know.

Justine only moved to Vegas for one reason. Although I have no doubt of my importance in her life, I'm also confident about the bond she has with her family.

She wants to go home.

The pleading looks she's given me the last three hours assure I can't be mistaken.

Unfortunately for her, a trip to Hopeton is not on our agenda in the foreseeable future. There have been no bids on my empire since Alexei's life was claimed by my knife, but fools aren't known for their smarts.

Furthermore, I can protect Justine here. I can't issue the same guarantee in Florida.

Vladimir's death barely created a ripple in Vegas, but the flow-on effect could still inflict a bitter taste in the back of my throat. I challenged the rules and won, which has only encouraged men in my previous predicament to do the same. For that reason alone, I won't approve the numerous silent requests Justine has been issuing me every hour on the hour since she discovered her brother is being released from incarceration later this week.

My enemies are aware she is my only weakness, but they're also mindful of how far I'll go to protect her. Nothing is above me when it comes to protecting her.

My urge to kill grows when the natural swing of Justine's hips seduces the men surrounding us so well they fail to notice the sheen on her cheeks that hasn't dried in over three hours. I know they're there because I counted every one she shed.

They were produced in happiness, but there'll be hell to pay for every one fallen. My *Ahren's* greatest wish was granted, but I wasn't the man who awarded it. That alone guarantees vengeance.

I didn't ruthlessly pursue Justine because my cock was cold, and she had the means to keep it warm. I hunted her—that is what men like me do. We pursue. We kill. Then we devour.

I just had no clue one taste of Justine would never be enough.

One hit had me craving another.

And another.

And another.

Before I knew it, she was my addiction—my queen.

I've seen many men in my industry fooled with promises of power and wealth, but Justine didn't need smoke and mirrors to secure my attention. She merely played the role she was destined to fulfill from the moment she entered my realm with the heart of a warrior and the face of an angel.

Growing accustomed to the envious glances she is forever subjected to, Justine returns the men's admiring stares, but her eyes are not glazed with the poisonous snake venom mine are laced with. She shows them a side of her I've always seen, that she is a gift from heaven, the reason I wake every day and rest every evening. She thinned the black veins woven around my heart just enough to keep me from fully succumbing to the darkness that enshrouded my life twelve months ago, but she kept them thick enough that no man will be game to test my devotion of her.

If Justine can't already read my every thought, my demand for Roman to travel with us will have her hearing them loud and clear. Her enticing cunt is still bare as per my request this morning when I discovered our day would be spent apart, but the wishes of my cock can't enter the equation.

Justine's safety must remain my utmost priority. She comes before anything—even my cock's insatiable need to be surrounded by her warmth.

Spotting my wordless request, I expect Justine to come out fighting like she did when I shipped her to Hopeton a year ago, to argue that not even I have the right to tell her what to do, but, shockingly, she slides into the back seat of the SUV without uttering a syllable.

The lack of panty line on her skin-tight skirt has me detesting my somewhat manic protectiveness. My cock was only surrounded by her heat a mere three hours ago, but the marathon of events we take on each day made our hard and quick fuck during our trip seem the equivalent of foreplay. I'm dying for another hit of my greatest addiction.

A growl rumbles in my chest when I slide into the SUV on Roman's tail. My battle just grew tenfold. The interior of my car smells like Justine's skin intermingled with mine. It's an intoxicating scent that has my cock bracing against the zipper in my trousers.

I still can't believe I'm wearing a monkey suit. I said months ago that I'd don a jacket and tie if it guaranteed me a taste of Justine. Our fuck on the

way to the restaurant made my effort worthwhile. If Justine weren't so deep in thought, I'd test the theory for a second time. Alas, even with our SUV surrounded by goons paid to protect her, in her head, she's already halfway to Hopeton.

Justine continues her silent stance for our thirty-minute trip to the Popov compound. Her lips don't even twitch when the housemaids fuss over her as they do every time she's in their presence. The only time she's drawn from her thoughts is when they remove her handbag and shoes from her grasp before advising her our room has been set up as specified.

That piques my interest as much as it does Justine's. While her throat works hard to swallow, her wide-with-lust eyes wander to mine. They have the same doe-eyed look they held in the seconds leading to us entering the restaurant that had members of my family and crew lying in wait to surprise me.

"How many more surprises are you hiding up your sleeve, *Ahren*?" My tone is huskier than usual, my accent more pronounced from the lust heating my blood.

Justine's eyes flare, thickening my veins even more. My *Ahren* is on the hunt, and she has her sights firmly locked on one man: me.

"More than you'll ever realize," she whispers as her fingers interlock with mine.

Smiling a sheepish grin, she guides us toward our bedroom. Although her brother's impending release had her forgetting what established tonight's celebration, her focus has returned stronger than ever.

I wouldn't have been bothered if it didn't. Men in my industry don't celebrate birthdays—not when they represent surviving another year in hell—but things are different now. Each day I have with Justine is a blessing because she doesn't strive to save me from my miserable existence, she merely removes me from it.

That's why I requested that she stop using contraception over a month ago. I want an heir, not just to take over my reign when I'm no longer capable of leading my crew, but to have someone I can love and protect as much as I do Justine.

For my entire childhood, anything I loved, Vladimir took. It didn't matter what it was: a soft toy, a friendly housemaid, or an uncle who wasn't related by blood. If I cherished it in any way, he took it from me.

In the beginning, I thought his disdain resulted from me taking more of my mother's genes than his. As the years passed, so did my stupidity.

Vladimir knew all along that I wasn't his son. He only raised me as if I were because he wanted to brainwash me into killing my real father. Although I don't have a drop of Popov blood in my veins, I did precisely that when Vladimir fell victim to my knife a little over twelve months ago.

Blood doesn't make you family. Respect and honor do. Vladimir garnered the admiration of his followers the wrong way. He forced it with fearful tactics I was too young and foolish to comprehend.

You can guarantee I won't make the same mistake.

I have the respect of thousands and the fear of millions, but none of it compares to the love and adoration I have for Justine. She taught me that you can scare a boy into obeying you, but you can't scare a man into respecting you.

I plan to install those values into our child when he or she is born. I'll show them how to lead without the sadistic, body-maiming tricks Vladimir used on me my entire life. It won't be easy—I'm a natural-born killer—but with my queen at my side guiding me, I have no doubt I'll achieve a once seemingly impossible task: I'll rule with both respect and fear.

When our trek down the deserted corridor stops at our door, my eyes lock with Justine's. "Oh, *Ahren*. . ." I could say more, but I don't need to. If the thickening in my pants doesn't expose what I'm thinking, the lust firing from my eyes is a sure-fire indication.

My childhood bedroom has been gutted. Not a single piece of its original furniture remains in place. Even though the palette is now feminine and girly, the pieces Justine has refurnished it with cause a virile, manly scent to seep from my pores. They're items from her apartment: the sofa I first claimed her on as mine, the rug I tackled her on when she tried to chicken out of our game of strip Scrabble. She even has the funky retro wicker seat we sat in when I divulged to her my plan to kill Vladimir.

We were supposed to watch a sunrise. Instead, I claimed her in a way I never knew I wanted but now crave more than anything. I made her wholly mine. There was nothing between us that morning, just as there will be nothing between us this evening—*or ever*.

Although the desire to hunt is pumping through my body hard and fast, I can't act on it. I have to settle a critical matter before I can get lost in the deadliest drug I've ever sampled.

When my hands are on Justine, she strips my insecurities as quickly as she does my anger, but I refuse to let that happen. Not until she knows the rules and how far I'll go to protect her.

"You can't go home, *Ahren*. It isn't safe." I keep my tone stern yet understanding.

Justine's unique green-blue eyes snap to mine. The apprehension in them weakens my arrogance a bit, but not enough for my campaign to lose its steam.

"Let's not do this now, okay, Nikolai? It's your birthday. Any discussions about my return home can wait a few more hours."

"No, *Ahren*." I follow her into our giant walk-in closet. "It's not my birthday for another two weeks, but even if it were today, nothing is being saved for tomorrow—because there is nothing to discuss. You're not leaving Vegas. No negotiation needed."

Justine takes on the fighting stance I fell on the knife for long before her beautiful face. I can tell from the apprehension in her eyes that she wants to delay our argument for a few more hours, but the fire in her gut is too intense to ignore.

"You didn't have any issues shipping me back to Hopeton when it suited you—"

"That's right: when it suited me." My voice is nowhere near as calm as hers; it's wilder and more strained. "Now doesn't suit me."

Her teeth grit as she struggles not to throw her hands into the air. "What about the numerous trips you've taken the past year? You've been all over the globe without me."

"Because you were here, with Roman—safe. They weren't vacations, *Ahren*. I was working."

I'll never see those trips as a chore, though. They were more a requirement than anything, a prerequisite to the pledge I made to Justine twelve months ago. I told her every man who bid on her would pay for his insolence. I've kept my word. Thirteen men have now dwindled down to two. If news of Maddox's release hadn't altered my plan of attack, the final man would have been dealt with by the end of this week.

Although I vowed to personally deal with every man on the list Rico supplied me last year, one name will forever remain: my brother, Dimitri. Without his help, I may have never located where Vladimir had taken Justine. That alone will spare him the wrath of my blade.

I had once hoped when my list was depleted, the tight reins I've had on Justine the past twelve months would slacken. Regrettably, with every curve in this industry comes a whole new set of challenges.

Before we were interrupted by Rico and Blaire checking if Justine was okay, Justine mentioned Maddox was released because the woman he was accused of murdering was arrested. If that's true, an entirely new set of rules have been brought into play, ones I'd rather die from than abide by.

Col only issued Justine a pardon from her punishment because Maddox pledged to do anything he wished. Col not only needed a woman to permanently disappear, he also needed it to appear as if she was killed by a member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Col died years ago, but if Maddox didn't fulfill his pledge, Justine is still in debt to the Petrettis. Even though Petretti blood runs in my veins, I'll never be a Petretti. They're my enemy, meaning not only is my queen on their radar, they also own her. Just the thought has the black veins around my heart resurging stronger than ever.

"Maddox may be walking out of prison in a few days, *Ahren*, but he is far from free. I don't want you anywhere near him until the shit stops hitting the fan from his release."

Justine glares at me, pretending she hates my somewhat manic protectiveness. It's a woeful waste of time. I know she fuckin' loves it. Her confidence has grown tenfold the past twelve months, and although some of her new boldness can be attributed to the role she's taken on at the Popov compound, most of it is accredited to me.

Can you imagine the relief that comes from knowing you have a man confident and brave enough to protect you? She knows I'd slit the throats of a thousand men before I'd let anyone touch her, so she has nothing to fear.

I'm not so lucky.

Why do you think Roman tracks her every move? I'm not a pedantic asshole who wants to gouge out the eyes of any man who dares look at her with interest; I'm keeping my greatest asset safe. Before Justine entered my life, I had nothing to lose. Now I have everything, and the odds are even more stacked against me.

"When things settle down, you can travel to Hopeton, but until then—"

"He's my brother, Nikolai," Justine murmurs in disbelief as her wild eyes dart between mine.

"And you are my queen!" I hiss back in Russian, my anger reaching a point it hasn't seen in over twelve months, fueled by both panic and fury. "That means I should rank more highly to you than him."

"Nikolai. . ." She stops, then breathes deeply, aware her actions are also not her own. We're two people fighting to stay together in a world determined to keep us apart.

Although Justine will never say it, I'm confident her family believes she's only in Vegas to have Maddox's conviction quashed. Now that it's been achieved, her father's already numerous requests for her to return home will double. They have no idea about the life she has created here with me. They know of me, but the industry I'm in, what Justine does for my crew, and the target our relationship placed on her back are concealed with fancy titles and legal talk. They're unaware how far into hell Justine traveled for me, much less how far I'll go to protect her.

Family or not, no one will be spared my blade if they come between us.

I stop clenching and unclenching my fists when Justine murmurs, "This isn't my family versus yours, Nikolai. It's just. . ."

"What, *Ahren*? You don't want them to know you sleep in the same bed as a liar, thief, and a murderer? That you're ashamed of the life you've created here—with me?"

Loose strands of red hair fall down her practically bare shoulders when she violently shakes her head. "That's not it at all, Nikolai. You

misinterpreted what I said.”

Not even thinking, I brush away the curl hiding the bite marks on her shoulder. Justine flinches, but not in a bad way. She loves that I love her scars, and that makes me want to love and protect her even more fiercely than I already do.

I can still recall the testosterone that pumped through my veins the first time I saw her in a spaghetti-strapped top that exposed her scars. It was fortunate my head was in game mode or nothing would have stopped me taking her on the hood of my car at the front of the compound. Her outfit was simple: a pair of white cuffed shorts with a fitted red shirt, but it was the confidence radiating out of her that sent my head into a tailspin. She was fucking ravishing, as beautiful as an *ahren—my ahren*.

“Don’t ever hide from me,” I whisper in Russian.

The anger in Justine’s eyes transforms into love. “Never, Nikolai. Just like I’d never hide you. I love you. Nothing will *ever* change that.” She wraps her arms around my waist before burrowing her head into my chest. “I talk about you all the time. My mom is dying to meet you. I just don’t want it to happen here.” She waves her arm around our room. “Even if you’re born for this business, it’s a lot to take in.”

Hearing nothing but honesty in her tone, I try to lighten the mood. “What’s wrong with our home?” My question is more facetious than angry. “You seem to have forgotten how many times you’ve screamed my name in this very room the past twelve months, *Ahren*.” Her fist lands in my stomach. Because she’s only playing, I let it slide. “Do you need a reminder of all the fun we’ve had here?”

The lust thickening my tone quickly changes our confrontation from volatile to needy. I’m not the only one noticing the change in temperature. Justine raises her eyes to mine as her teeth rake her bottom lip. Just like her gallop down the courthouse stairs earlier tonight entranced every man within a five-mile radius, I’m under her spell within seconds.

Recognizing she has me trapped, she murmurs, “I don’t need a reminder, Nikolai. I just need a little understanding.”

“*Ahren*. . .” I drawl out in warning at her attempt to revisit our conversation.

Blood pumps through my body hard and fast when she steps back to wrangle the hidden zipper in her skirt. Even knowing she’s using my attraction to her against me, I watch her with reverence. With my eagerness to fuck her earlier tonight keeping her clothed, my eyes missed scanning a body too stunning to be deemed anything less than perfect. I’m not willing to set aside my desires for a second longer.

After slipping her skirt off her milky white thighs, Justine’s attention shifts to her red bustier shirt. Since it has a built-in bra, her lush tits fall to her chest within seconds of her unknotting the red material binding it together.

Striving not to interrupt her sexy striptease, I clench my fists at my side. Thank fucking fuck I’m the only one showing restraint. Justine is just as eager to get this party started as me.

Faster than I can growl at the wetness between her legs, she dumps her bustier onto her skirt, then raises her eyes to mine. The desire to hunt and conquer smacks into me hard and fast when she stands before me as naked as the day she was born with her hands as free and relaxed as her eyes. Not an ounce of coyness has invaded her.

“Look at you, *Ahren*, with more confidence than a queen.” My voice is rough, as if I’ve just woken. I’ve been awake longer than the sun, so it’s not the cause of my groggy tone. It is my *ahren*, my gift from heaven for surviving years of atonement, lowering herself to her knees in front of me.

"Yes, because of you, Nikolai. The way you make me feel, the way you cherish me. I wouldn't be half the woman I am without you."

I almost interrupt, but she continues talking, foiling my attempt to tell her she's always been perfect. My attention merely revealed the woman hiding behind her strong, determined eyes. "And tonight I'm going to worship you just as eagerly."

Her unique-colored eyes lift to mine as her hands work on my belt. They relay her every thought: her hunger, her wish to make me feel as revered as only she can, but, unfortunately, they also expose that her earlier pleas

haven't been forgotten. They've been merely placed on the backburner while she succumbs to the heady scent of lust brewing between us.

Although I'm seconds from having my cock sucked, our conversation can't wait. "I can't protect you there, *Ahren*. I can't keep you safe."

"Yes, you can," Justine replies before lowering my pants' zipper. "Because you are the king, and I am your queen. We kneel for no one but each other."

She frees my cock from my trousers, its thick buoyancy complementing the fire in her tone. She spoke like a true queen, like a woman born to lead. She took her place at my side the instant she removed my knife from Vladimir's chest, but tonight is the first time she's sat on her throne.

After taking in a bead of precum cresting at the peak of my cock, Justine's eyes return to mine, wordlessly seeking permission to unleash her innermost desires.

"Take what you need, *Ahren*. I'll never keep anything from you." My last three words come out in a groan from her tongue skimming across my knob.

Her velvety tongue flicks the slit in my cock four times before she guides her pillowy lips down my shaft. She takes me into her mouth as far as she can without gagging before drawing me back out. While her hand works the sections of my cock missing out on her mouth, I gather her wavy locks in my fist, revealing a visual capable of bringing the strongest man to his knees.

My queen is on her knees, sucking my cock so fiercely, she's seconds away from extracting the marrow from my bones.

A lesser man may confuse her eagerness to give head as a tactic to force me to submit, but I know that isn't the sole reason she's devouring me like she can't get enough. Right now, she's responding more to the needs of her body than her heart. Furthermore, she's aware she doesn't need to get on her knees to have me granting her every wish. She merely needs to ask.

My lips part for much-needed air as my body stiffens. It isn't the delicious gag tearing from Justine's throat causing my body's response; it's realizing I'm a hypocrite. I begged for understanding when Justine discovered I was engaged to Malvina, and how do I repay her for weeks of torture and months of understanding? I fail to give her the same level of empathy.

That's fucked. I was raised on broken promises and misguided morals. I won't let the same issues stain my relationship. I've pledged time and time

again that Justine will want for nothing when she became my queen; now I must uphold my vow.

"If I agree to this, *Ahren*, there will be no holds barred. We'll take a crew with us — a full team of my best men. You won't be out of my sight for a single minute, do you understand?"

When Justine fails to respond to my question, I tighten my grip on her hair, weakening her greedy pace. Her tongue swirls around my knob as her lusty eyes lift to mine. She's so hungry for my cum, she's forgotten why she's on her knees to begin with.

"Soon, Justine. Very soon," I growl in ecstasy, the yearning in her eyes deserving of an unrestrained reply.

A deep groan vibrates my knob. Justine's not growling in agreement; she's moaning because I used her real name. She has said many times the past year that she loves her nickname, but when we're behind closed doors, she prefers for me to call her Justine.

I had hoped when the number of whores in the Popov compound dwindled from hundreds to a mere dozen, her worry I'll grow bored of her would lessen. Regrettably, no matter how many times I assure her her tight cunt is the only one my cock wants to pound, her panic hasn't receded in the slightest.

It's not all bad though. The harder she fights to keep me on the straight and narrow, the more savage my addiction becomes. Justine is my drug of choice. Nothing could make me stray away from her—not a single fucking thing.

I extract my cock from Justine's mouth with a pop when I take a step back. She groans before raising her eyes to mine. I thicken even more. Her eyes are wide with lust and nearly black from how dilated her pupils are. Little beads of sweat dot her hairline, and the smooth panels of her stomach can't hide the glistening between her legs. My *ahren* is saturated and ready to be devoured.

I've just got one matter to settle first.