

# ***Last Gift***

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***To our fans – happy holidays!***

## ***Daisy***

Nick watches the cars heading down the side street of our apartment building. It's unusually busy, and I can tell it's making him tense. It's evident in the stiff set of his shoulders, and the way he ever so gently bends down the mini-blind so he can peer out on the snowy streets, unnoticed. When his hand brushes at his waist as if looking for his gun, I realize just how on edge he is.

I lick my fingers and put aside the Christmas cookie batter I'm making, and move to his side. "Nikolai," I say softly. "What is it?"

He looks over at me, beautiful eyes dark with worry. "It is nothing, Daisy."

But I know it's not nothing. Every inch of his body is telling me that it is something. So I move to his side and peer out the window, trying to see what he sees. There are cars in the street, moving slow, but it's to be expected. In the distance, there are Christmas lights covering every inch of the nearby buildings, all sparkling and pretty. I see nothing unusual, but I am not an assassin, so perhaps I am missing something. I turn to Nick. "What is it?" I repeat.

He nods at the window. "Many cars. They slow on this street. They watch something."

I blink for a moment, and then laugh. "Of course they watch something. They're slowing down to look at the Christmas lights." I point at the nearby buildings, festooned with green and red and white lighting. There's even an animatronic nativity that I passed by. It's garish, but still impressive. "I imagine it's parents taking their kids out to see the decorations."

His shoulders relax a little. "Da? Is tradition?"

I nod firmly and link my arms around his waist. "Tradition. Nothing to be worried about."

His breath exhales slowly, and his hands rub my back. "I still think like hitman."

He does. I imagine it'll take time for that to work out of his system. My Nick needs a distraction.

"Do you want to get in the car and go drive past the lights?" Nick gives me such a disgruntled look that I laugh despite myself. "That must be a no." I snuggle against him, loving the slow, possessive feel of his touch as his fingers skate down my back. "What Christmas traditions do you have?"

"I do not celebrate."

This surprises me. I pull back and look up at him, puzzled. "Not at all?"

He shrugs. "You forget my upbringing."

I do. My face immediately softens in memory. My poor Nick, brought up since childhood by the *Bratva*, raised to be a killer. Any kindness or softness he might have known before me was all an act,

something he paid someone to do for him. The *Bratva* trained him to be an assassin; they did not train him to be a normal man.

I was foolish to ask. How could I not know the answer? It's there in the way his hands have tightened around me. He realizes he is missing a vital part of a normal life, and it bothers him. It is another missing puzzle piece, and he wants to be whole for me.

I feel cruel for asking. I will distract him, instead. I am good at distracting. "I think we should get some mistletoe for our apartment."

"*Da?*" His voice is musing, almost playful, and it makes me feel achy with need. I love it when Nick is playful. "You wish to hide underneath and surprise me with kisses?"

"Parts of you with kisses," I agree breathlessly, and my fingers go to his belt. He stiffens again, but when I go down on my knees, his fingers caress my jaw with such love that I ache inside. I unbuckle his belt and pull it free, and by the time I tug down his zipper, he's erect underneath his jeans and hard at what I'm suggesting.

I slide his clothes down his thighs and his cock pushes free, firm and beautiful and inches from my face. I am learning what pleases Nick as we live together. We practice a lot, I think with a smile, and I'm getting better at driving him crazy. I don't reach immediately for his cock. Instead, my hands stroke back and forth on the thick muscles of his thighs, and I watch his cock jerk in response to my touch. There is a drop of pre-cum beading on the head, and I want to taste it.

I will, but not yet.

Nick's hands are moving over my face, my jaw, my hair, frantically touching me but not wanting to interrupt what I'm offering. I know he loves this; it's because he loves it so much that it gives me such great pleasure to do. I love pleasing Nick. I love seeing his face when my mouth is on him. This angle will make it almost impossible to watch his expression, but I will picture it instead.

Slowly, gently, I move my massaging hands up his thighs and curl them around his heavy balls. He groans as my fingers stroke them, and I feel his body twitch again. When another drop appears on the head of his cock, I lean in and lick both of them up, not wanting to lose that precious flavor.

My love makes a sound low in his throat, and it is beautiful to hear. "*Daisy*," he breathes, and follows it with a nonsensical rapid-fire comment in Russian that I can't make out. I'm taking Russian in one of my classes at school, but he's speaking too fast for me to pick it up.

I close my mouth around the head of his cock, and my hand goes to grasp the base of him. Nick can stand it no longer. His hands tangle in my hair and then he's pushing deeper into my mouth.

I loosen my jaw to welcome him, to take him as deep as I can, and moan deep in my throat when he thrusts into my mouth. He's a little rough, but I love it. I love him losing control; it's not something Nick does easily, and it's not something Nick does around everyone.

But I love it.

Then he's fucking my face, his cock thrusting into my mouth, the head pushing at the back of my throat, and I do my best to take him. He's big, though, and I'm still inexperienced, and so when I pull away, my gag reflex working, he lets me. I cough a little, and then give him a faint smile to let him know I'm okay.

Nick takes his cock in hand, wet and gleaming from my mouth, and begins to rub the head of it against my lips, watching me with intense, fascinated eyes. I part my lips, feeling the hot, soft skin brushing against my own, feeling him glide the pre-cum on my face.

Then, he pumps himself hard in hand and he's coming on my face, splashes of heat spattering on my cheeks, my mouth, my lips. I lick them, because he likes the sight, and I love the taste of Nick. So wonderful.

He groans at the sight of me, face upraised to him, covered in his come. Then, he strips off his t-shirt and begins to mop at my face. "You are too good for one such as me, *Daisy*, my love."

"I love you, *Nikolai*."

I'm rewarded by that intense satisfaction in his eyes.

I'm pretty sure I burned the cookies in the oven. I'm pretty sure I don't care, either.

Tomorrow, I decide, I will go to a gun shop and look for the perfect present for Nick. Something dangerous and beautiful, just like him.

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### ***Nikolai***

"You seem pre occupied today," a soft voice on my right says to me. It is some girl whose name I cannot remember or, more honestly, a name I do not care to learn. She's the interrupter. All she does is constantly interrupt me while I draw, while I dream. Today she has broken up my replay of last evening's decadent lovemaking.

I try not to be angry with her. Perhaps she has no Daisy in her life, no one whom adores her and she adores back. Another person would feel, I suppose, sympathy because of her lack so I try not to scowl at her. Daisy would tell me to be polite.

"I am occupied with thoughts of my beloved," I tell the interrupter. There. That is polite. I smile at myself. Daisy would be proud of me. I will tell her of this later when I pick her up from class.

Thoughts of my vehicle turn my smile into a frown. We are driving a rental because we have fierce arguments over the type of vehicle I want to buy for us, for Daisy really. I want to buy a Maybach with armored sides and bullet proof windows. Daisy screamed when she looked up the price for one on the internet. I think it is just the right price but her face was like a little thundercloud when she shook her phone at me, the one I have bought her.

She tells me she cannot drive yet because she has no license and unlike lingerie or fur coats, I cannot buy her one. She must take a test. I tell her she drives fine, but she demurs. Public transportation is fine, she says. There are buses that can take us everywhere, not to mention the train that runs from the interior of the city out to the suburbs.

Public transportation would be fine for me, but not for Daisy. There are other people who could touch her and even harm her.

It is perhaps paranoia, as she calls it, but I think it is just good sense, like leaving the house with a small revolver in my boot or Ka-Bar knife in my backpack. I have only a few tools of my former trade in our apartment—some of them are known to Daisy. Others I have failed to tell her about, such as the handgun in the closet and the one in our kitchen and the one I have taped under the front hall table. I will not leave Daisy undefended but I know she would feel uncomfortable with all the firearms. She asks, "where are all your guns, Nick?" and I tell her sadly "There is gun in nightstand and I have this small one."

This is not a lie; more like not bothering her with unnecessary details. I am in charge of protecting my sweet Daisy so that she can give me all her tender love. I smile to myself, happily lost in the dream of her once again. I pick up my pencil and begin anew.

"Your beloved," I hear the interrupter say. "That's so old fashioned but sweet.

"Yes, sweet." What would Daisy have me do? She would want me to smile at the interrupter. Daisy smiles at everyone. I try to smile at the interrupter. Is her name Patty? Dotty? Kitty? I cannot recall.

"You're very devoted, aren't you?" I finally look at the interrupter. Her dark hair is curled and lies in waves around her shoulders. She has very long eyelashes, like the legs of a spider. I think some would think she is attractive, but she looks nothing like Daisy. "What're you giving her for Christmas?" she asks.

Giving her for Christmas. The words strike a chord in me and I slowly turn toward the interrupter. "Giving for Christmas...?"

"Yeah, I mean, she's your beloved so you're getting her something, right?"

I nod. Yes, I am, I think. Gifts for Christmas. Beaming at the interrupter, I ask, "What would you like, if you could have anything?"

She blinks at me and places a hand over her chest. "God, what I wouldn't give for a guy like you to be so over the moon over me. Where'd you two meet?" Spiderlashed lady sets her face on one of her hands and moves closer to me. I'm uncomfortable by her nearness and by her strange eyelashes. I may draw these in my next work, giant long-legged wisps of black, like whiskers on the eyes.

"We meet..." I trail off and think of what Daisy would like me to say because the truth is that I spy on Daisy while researching a hit, a kill. I know Daisy would not want to me to tell the truth. "We meet in coffee house."

"Your accent is just delicious. Do you have any brothers?" Flick, flick, go the eyelashes.

"Nyet, no brothers. No siblings." I check the clock. Our time in class is almost up and I have not yet completed my project. Sighing, I begin to pack my things so I am not late to pick up Daisy. Last time I lingered overlong speaking with the professor about the darkness in my sketches and how I needed to incorporate lighter shades. By the time I arrived at Daisy's campus, there was a horde of males surrounding her. At least two or three. Daisy says she is making new friends and so I hid my dismay.

"Well, if you and your girlfriend ever want to hang out, you should call me. Want my number?"

At first I shake my head in the negative, but Daisy would like more friends...so perhaps yes? "Da, you write it down for me."

"Just give me your phone and I'll put it in."

I frown, unsure of whether I should do this, but then think of Daisy's laughing face when she was talking to the other students. I hand over my phone, the public one—not the one I use to text Daisy. That phone has private images and private texts that no one should ever see but me.

The girl smiles at me and the legs of the spider flutter up and down. Once my phone is back in my hand, I see her name is Callie. "Thank you, Callie." I hold out my hand to shake hers. She looks at it strangely and then shakes her head.

"You're an odd duck. A hot one, but odd. Good thing I like odd." She takes my hand and squeezes it tightly, holding on a little too long. "God, your hands are so big."

My hand looks normal, I think, holding it up in front of me.

She laughs. "You're so literal!"

"Thank you," I say and try to bring her attention back to the Christmas gifts. "You are a woman, Callie," I say.

She rolls her eyes. "So nice of you to notice."

Of course I notice. I notice everything. "Yes, I notice." Impatiently I continue, "You like Christmas?"

Her eyes light up. "Who doesn't?"

"What is it you like the best?" I ask. Traditions are important to Daisy. I want to start our own traditions.

"Gifts, of course," she smirks.

A few other art students have wandered over. I ask all of them. "What is best gift you receive?"

They shout out answers.

"Jewelry."

"Xbox."

"Car."

The last is from Callie. I point to her. "You get a car as a gift?"

"I wish," she shakes her head. "But I'd like one. You giving them out?"

I nod slowly. "Yes. Yes, I think I am." I clasp Callie around her shoulder, like she is a good comrade. "Thank you for your friendship."

Turning, I head for the rental car. I am excited. Very excited. I am going to buy Daisy a car for Christmas.

When I arrive at Daisy's college campus, my spirits are high and I care not that Daisy is surrounded by males—two at least. The third I am not so sure of. There are females there too. I wonder what they discuss. Perhaps gifts. I hope one of them wishes for a car so that Daisy will understand how normal this gift is. As I approach, I study the other individuals surrounding her to see what they might have that Daisy does not. Her coat is keeping her warm. I would like to buy her a fur but Daisy says that she doesn't like the thought of wearing all those dead animals.

"Nick!" Daisy hails me immediately. She draws me into the crowd and I lean down to kiss her, just a small brush of my lips against hers. Then, to be sure, everyone understands that Daisy is under my protection, I place my gloved hand around the back of her collared neck.

"All done *kotyonok*?"

She nods eagerly and waves goodbye to her friends. "You seem in a pretty good mood."

"*Da*, I run over motorist on the way here. Very satisfying."

"Nick," she exclaims, batting at my arm.

"Little hitman humor," I joke.

Suddenly she stops and turns me to face her. "You never joke." Her eyes are searching mine but she cannot see the gifts I have in mind for her, only that I love her so I stare back into the rich blue depths and think of her heavy eyelids the night before as she sucked me deep into her mouth.

"Last night," I whisper to her, "so good, *da*?"

"*Da*," she agrees.

"Tonight it is my turn." I bend down close to her ear so no one can hear the words but her.

"Tonight I will kneel between your tender thighs and I will lick you until you are screaming for mercy, but no mercy will be yours. Instead, I will torment you with my fingers and tongue and cock until you are senseless, until you feel nothing but pleasure in every nerve and fiber. There will be no centimeter of you that is not touched by me. When you arise from our bed tomorrow there will be no memory in your head but of me fucking you."

Her knees buckle and I clasp her to me. "You shouldn't say those things to me in public," she gasps, glancing around.

"No one but you and I matter in this world, Daisy," I tell her in all seriousness. "But come, let us get home so the fucking can commence."

This elicits a giggle from her. "You're so filthy and formal at the same time. I love it."

I hold open the car door of the cheap sedan. It will be one of the last days Daisy will ride in this. Climbing into the passenger seat, I hand her my public phone. "I make friend for you today."

"Is that right?" she takes the phone and flicks it open. "Is it this Callie person?"

"*Da*, she offers you her phone number so you can meet her."

She snorts and then closes the phone. Leaning her head against the seat, she says, "I'm thinking she wants to be friends with you, Nick."

"*Nyet*, she invites you to have coffee with her. I will come with so you are not alone," I offer magnanimously as if it is a big gesture for me to accompany Daisy to a coffeehouse when in truth we both know that I am desolate without her. "But she is a little strange. You should not sit close to her. Her eyelashes look like giant spider legs. It is hard to concentrate on what she is saying when those long black things are creeping close to you," I advise.

Daisy sighs. "Okay, Nick, if we decided to hang out with Callie, I'll be sure to sit back far away from her." There is a tone in her voice, one that suggests she is holding back a laugh. I take a moment to glance at her before focusing on the traffic in front of me. "What is funny then?"

This time she does laugh outright. "She's probably wearing fake eyelashes, Nick! And she was flirting with you. She wants you to call her to take her out for coffee."

"But I am with you Daisy, for always. Why would I want to have coffee with a girl with spiders on her eyes?"

She reaches over and lays her head against my arm. "I love you Nick. I love that you are completely clueless because otherwise I'd probably be tormented by jealousy."

"There will never be anyone but you." A break in traffic allows me a moment to drop a quick kiss on the top of her head. "Also, we will be home soon. I will show you what I mean."

She shivers. "I can't wait."

Me either.

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I am riveted by the sway of Daisy's hips as she walks up the stairs in front of me. They seem to be saying something. This is the first refrain of the siren's song. Follow me. Follow me.

"I am," I whisper beneath my breath. "Anyway, even unto my own death."

"What's that?" she says.

"Your hips," I tell her, for I keep nothing from my Daisy. Well, almost nothing. The car is a gift and so that will be secret until it is delivered. "They call to me. I think your body wants something from me."

"Is that right?" she murmurs. Her innocence has given way to naughtiness and it is a change that I revel in. The words she says are subtext for the want simmering beneath the surface, the desire that has been building since we climbed into the car.

"It is so, *kotyonok*." I have reached the step that she is standing on. I'm taller than Daisy, stronger, too, but she does not shrink from me. Instead, she rises on her tiptoes and places her mouth against my chin.

"What do you think my body wants?"

"I promised to show you." I lift her effortlessly into my arms although my muscles tremble when she begins to dot open-mouthed kisses along my jaw line. My knees become weak as her tongue finds the hollow of my throat. I am but putty in her soft hands. Somehow I manage to unlock the door and carry Daisy to our bedroom. It takes a super-human effort and I think I am only upright because my cock is so hard that I can barely bend over to lay Daisy on the covers.

Her eyelids are heavy again, weighted down by lust. I dispense with my clothes swiftly. I know she likes to watch but I'm too eager to be inside her. I confess my weakness.

"I cannot wait to feel the hot glove of your cunt squeezing me."

Her eyes flare at my words. Holding my heavy erection, I stroke it roughly, squeezing out drops of come and spreading it around the thick member for lubrication.

"Come here, then."

At her invitation, I fall upon her, pulling off her coat and sweater. I pause then to savor her pendulous breasts that are swaying with her effort to remove the rest of her clothes. Palming each breast with a hand, I bury my face in the valley between the pale mounds, my thumbs rubbing gently over each nipple. They are erect almost immediately.

Her sensitivity astounds me and I am tempted to simply suckle on her breasts until she grinds to completion riding my thigh. But the ache in my cock is unrelenting. Later, then, I promise myself and kiss of the tops of each breast before removing the bra that confines them.

Impatiently she makes a frustrated sound that her tights and skirt are caught at my hard thigh. Moving, I help her until we are flesh to flesh. We fall back onto the bed, my mouth on hers and my hand between her legs.

She is wet, always so wet for me. Her thighs tighten around my hand and she begins to ride me even before I've touched her.

My fingers thread through her curls that shield her lower lips and her eager little clit that pushes up and demands attention. I ignore it, though, spreading her labia apart and reveling in the juicy sounds her cunt makes as I ease two fingers inside of her and thrust quickly.

The thready sounds of her need fill the air. "Yes, Nikolai, I need you."

"I can feel it," I growl moving down her body. "I want to taste it first."

I nip at her clit and feel a corresponding tightening around the two fingers moving relentlessly inside her. Her soft flesh against my tongue makes me close my eyes in pleasure. I need the taste of her to flood my throat and coat my mouth. Using both hands, I spread her wide for me and spear my tongue inside her. She grips my head with both hands, tugging at me and pushing me away at the same time.

"God, Nick, the feeling--" her words are choked off as I attack her clit with my tongue, lightly nipping it and then sucking it into my mouth to soothe the tiny pains.

I will never get enough of her. Never. I drink at her fountain, working her with my tongue and lips and teeth and fingers until she is thrashing and crying meaninglessly above me. The fervor of her want makes me crazy with lust and I rear up on my knees and thrust inside her, one swift motion which sets her off again and I can feel the soft walls of her vagina hotly clutching at me. I grit my teeth to keep from coming at that very moment.

I have no restraint now. I am no better than an animal. Dragging her hips up, I pump into her.

"You feel amazing, always so amazing," I gasp between thrusts. Daisy looks up at me, wordless with love, and I bend down to take her mouth in mine. I rub my tongue against hers, the same profane motion I make with my cock inside of her cunt. She moans and I revel in the dual sensations of being surrounded by her wet, hot enclosures.

"Faster, Nick," she pleads with me. "Don't stop."

Her hips are now moving in that same round motion as she made when she walked up the stairs, only faster now and with less perfect rhythm. The glide of her hot cunt against my shaft feels like heaven. The pleasure of our joining is almost too much.

Her fingers dig into my thighs and as I feel the bite of the nails in my flesh I recognize how close she is to coming again. My balls tighten as I increase the pace of our mating.

"Now, come for me now." I demand. Her body rises off the bed bowed by the force of her orgasm. I shout out my release and pound into her until I feel like I am jetting my come throughout her entire body. Nothing in this world is as good as being inside her. I collapse, sweaty and spent onto her body and her arms and legs close about me holding me close.

"You are my beloved, Daisy, as I am yours. Do not ever let go."

"I won't Nick," she whispers into my ear. I do not know who clutches the other closer but I think it is me.

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### ***Daisy***

I never thought Christmas would be such a delicate situation. But then again, I never thought of myself with someone like Nick.

I stuff my hands inside my coat pockets and watch my breath blow, frozen, into the air. I'm skipping class. I should be prepping for finals, but somehow, I am here on the street, waiting at the bus stop. This is more important than classes. It's imperative that I get Christmas right for my Nick, so that we set the tone for our future together. I want to show him how good life with me can be. How sweet it is to be loved purely for who you are, not who hires you.

It's these thoughts that go through my mind as I take the bus to the rougher part of town and hop off two blocks from a gun store. I walk briskly. It's cold and icy, but it's early and there's hardly anyone on the street. I feel safe, oddly enough; my love is a hitman, and I have met the *Bratva* head on. Street thugs seem almost a foolish worry now.

I head into the gun store and smile at the man behind the counter.

He gives me a skeptical look, as if I've taken a wrong turn. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for a Christmas present for my...boyfriend." I frown at the word. There's probably a better one for what Nick is to me. He is my everything. But we're not married. We're not even engaged.

"What kind of gun?" the man asks.

I step up to the counter and peer at the weapons there. Immediately, I'm crestfallen at the sight. It's not that there's anything wrong with the handguns, pistols, and assorted weaponry in the cases.

It's that I realize it's an entirely wrong gift for my Nick.

We're trying to move away from guns and death, he and I. If I got him one, what kind of message would I be sending? *Here is what you are, and what you will always be. A killer.*

I bite my lip. This feels wrong. My Nick is so much more than this, than a man who deserves nothing more than weapons.

"Actually," I murmur. "I think I have changed my mind." I give the man a quick smile and turn and leave, heading right back for the bus.

I think about Nick as I wait for the bus, and I think about him on the way back to the part of town where we live. I'll go back to the campus shortly, so he won't suspect I've been away, but I head to our apartment first. I have an idea of what to get Nick after all.

My Nick loves art. My Nick loves me. I think of his lean, tattooed body and how gorgeous he is to me. Perhaps I will get a tattoo -- some of his beautiful, haunting sketches -- on my body. He will see it on my skin and know I am his forever.

I like this thought. I dash up the stairs to our apartment, unlock the door, and hustle to the desk set up in the corner of the spare bedroom. It is Nick's office, though he does not spend much time in here. We prefer to cuddle on the couch, and my love has gotten quite good at sketching with one hand, the other wrapped around my shoulders and holding me close while I watch movies or read a novel. I used to read nothing but romances, but the reality of Nick has ruined those silly fantasies for me; now, I read cozy mysteries about crime-solving cats.

Nick's sketchbook is carefully set on the desk, amid boxes of charcoals and pencils. I pick it up and begin to flip through the pages, as always fascinated by the inner workings of Nick's mind. The sketches are dark, and some are disturbing, but all of them have a beauty and a grace to them. I pause over one sketch of a woman that must be me, asleep in bed, the covers tangled about my body.

My heart aches with love for this man, and I bite my lip.

It's not right for a tattoo, though, and when I skim a few more pages, I find just the right picture. Clutching the book to my breast, I race back out of the apartment, time not on my side. I must make a photocopy of this and get back to school before Nick realizes I am gone.

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Days pass and Nick suspects nothing of what I plan. We have a small tree in the corner of our apartment, but there are no boxes under the tree yet. It's like neither of us wishes to be the first one to



put something there and declare the holiday, so we hold off. Instead, Nick helps me decorate the apartment with garlands, and we play Christmas music, and kiss under the mistletoe, so much mistletoe. Nick has practically filled the apartment with it.

On the twenty-fourth of the month, I tell Nick that I am going Christmas shopping for my father. It's a tiny white lie; my father is a firm Amazon shopper and ordered all of our Christmas presents weeks ago. He even got them off the porch himself, which is a big step for my father. I'm proud of him. I'm not visiting him today, though. I take the bus downtown and head to the tattoo parlor I have picked out, where I have an early appointment.

The place is empty when I walk in, a counter full of body jewelry and bottles of disinfectant in the front of the store. The walls are covered with colorful tattoo designs. Behind the counter, one sleepy-eyed man is sitting at one of the chairs. He turns at the sight of me. "You Daisy?"

I smile nervously. "That's me." I pull out the drawing I have kept in my purse for the last week. "I need this drawing tattooed over my heart."

I lay the artwork flat on the counter in front of me and smooth it out nervously.

It is a picture of a red heart, surrounded by darkness and delicately cupped between sketchy suggestions of fingers. There's a banner across the center, and where Nikolai had written my name, I have modified the drawing and put his name in the banner across the heart. It is in Cyrillic: Николай.

I love it. It is darkness and hope. It is Nick's heart in my hands, and I will put it over my heart as a double meaning - that the one that beats in my chest belongs solely to him.

The man looks at the drawing. "Nice work. Kinda dark for a pretty little thing like yourself, though. You sure you want that?"

"I do," I tell him. "Right here." And I tap my chest, right where my breastbone is. "Can you do that?"

"I can. Go ahead and take your shirt off." He heads to the back with my paper.

I'm a little shy about taking my top off in front of a stranger, but the man could care less about my naked breasts. He doesn't even look in my direction as I step inside the tattoo parlor and begin to disrobe. Before I am totally topless, he offers me a towel and tells me to use that to cover up my breasts but to leave my chest bare. Thank goodness.

The man is kind as I sit in the chair and he begins to disinfect the spot. He talks of the weather, and Christmas, and his girlfriend's children. I smile and talk with him. They are looking for an apartment downtown; I suggest to him our building, which will be ready in another month, and I will make sure Nick gives this man a discount. He seems nice.

He warns me the tattoo will hurt, but the feel of the needle on my skin is more irritating than anything else. The black lines he draws sting and drag on my skin like a pencil is jabbing me at high speed, but I don't mind; I think of Nick's face when he sees how I have stamped him on my body forever.

"So, can I ask what this writing is?"

I smile dreamily. "It's a name: Nikolai."

"Husband?"

"Boyfriend," I admit, and again, that word tastes wrong on my lips. Nick has never asked me to marry him. I know he won't, either, because I told him that I would ask him when I was ready. I like to be in control of things, and Nick gives me control.

Maybe I'm ready now. I consider this as the man swipes at my stinging skin, then bends over the tattoo some more. "How long do you think this will take?" I ask him. "I have one more place to go today."

Hours later, my chest is throbbing, I carry a bottle of disinfectant in my purse, and my new tattoo is bandaged under my sweater. My skin feels scraped raw, but the picture is vivid and dark and gorgeous and I can't stop staring at it. Even now, I want to rip off the bandages and touch Nick's name branded over my heart. I love it.

But I head to a jewelry store instead. I pick out a man's ring and a matching, dainty one for a woman. It feels weird to be the one picking out the rings, but these are simply bands. I will let Nick pick me out an engagement ring to go with the band later, if he likes.

It's simply important that I claim him for myself, for good.

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I go to the grocery store and pick up a few things on the way home, then begin to make Christmas dinner. We have a ham already cooked, and I am making mashed potatoes and a pie. We will be going to my father's and bringing food for Christmas dinner, but I can't wait for Nick to come home. I'm practically brimming with excitement. I can't wait to give him my gifts.

I already have the rings wrapped in a tiny box in my pocket. Under the tree, I have small things, like a set of art pencils and a new leather sketchbook that he will love.

And as I wait for Nick to come home, I touch my chest over and over. I took off the bandage, but the skin underneath is red and blotchy, and I'm a little dismayed that it's not perfect for its unveiling. The man at the tattoo parlor told me it would take time, but I have waited until the last minute to get my tattoo. There is no way I could have kept a tattoo secret from my Nick; he likes to kiss every inch of my skin on a daily basis.

The door opens and I rush into the living room to greet Nick, all smiles. He's unwrapping his scarf and grinning at me, looking pleased with himself.

"You're home," I exclaim, and head forward to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

"You miss your Nick?" he teases, and his cool eyes light up with genuine warmth, just for me.

"Always," I murmur, and drag his face down to mine for a passionate kiss. His tongue sweeps over my mouth possessively, and for a moment, I'm entirely distracted by him. Then, I bat at his jacket and pull away. "I have your presents."

"You do?" For a moment, he looks so boyishly pleased that I'm giddy, and I can't help the excited giggle that escapes me.

"You get them early if you're nice to me," I tease, and saunter back into the kitchen, making sure to sway my hips.

He gives a soft groan and in the next moment, he grabs me from behind and drags my body against his. "Do you tease me, Daisy?" he murmurs in my ear, and I shiver with delight as he nips at my earlobe.

"I do," I murmur. "Can I show you your gift?"

"Will I like?"

"I think so," I tell him, and turn around in his arms. I am wearing a red cardigan, the neck buttoned up to my throat, and as I smile at him, I slowly undo the buttons. His eyes light up, anticipating a strip show, but I don't correct him.

Instead, I bare the tattoo I have had painted over my heart, and wait for his reaction.

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***Nikolai***

I stare at Daisy and the red angry welts on her skin that rise around the dark outline of a heart and the letters of my name etched into her body. My bones have liquefied and I stagger to the wall and press my arm against it so that I do not fall on my face.

"Painting is a blind man's profession. He paints not what he sees, but what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen." I quote Picasso at her because I have no thoughts of my own.

Her smile wavers.

I rush to explain, my words tumbling out like a torrential rain—hard and scattered. "I dream of being owned by you. In my fantasies, you wear my mark to tell everyone not that you belong to me but that I belong to you. But it is only in my mind. Never would I dare to give voice to this..." I cast about for the right word. "This *want*."

"You once told me that your tattoos tell your story and I want mine to do the same." Her lips tremble with emotion.

I lunge at her, unable to stand here this full of love and not hold her in my arms. We sink to the ground, our arms wrapped around each other. I hold her loosely to my chest so I do not rub against her tender skin. There is a wetness on my face and at first I look up to see if there is a leak in one of the exposed pipes but I realize it is me. That I am the one leaking moisture.

Daisy brushes away the tears. "I'm hoping these are tears of joy?" Her voice holds a gentle teasing.

I try to speak but the fullness in my throat prevents any words from escaping. The gift I've purchased for Daisy seems callow compared to hers. I swallow and try again. "When I am born, it is to a woman who has no name. She is a prostitute for the *Bratva*. They take me from her and maybe she bears more sons or daughters. The *Bratva* is my family. The gun is the teat from which I draw my sustenance. I grow strong feeding off the suffering of others until one day it sickens me and I turn away, abandoning the strict principles I have been taught as a *Bratva* soldier. But in turning away from the *Bratva*, I leave the only family I know. It is fine, I tell myself, because I need no one. Until you, Daisy. When I see you and your smile, I suddenly realized my whole soul's purpose was to find you and become yours. I am clay in your hands. My life, my heart, it is all yours. That you would claim me as your own is the greatest gift you could have ever given."

Now Daisy is crying and our tears are mixing together. Our embrace is not sexual but spiritual. We are touching each other more deeply in this one moment than in all the moments we have been naked and together. "You're my heart Nick. I claim you."

I shudder at her words and she repeats them, this time more loudly and with more force. "I claim you."

She pushes me away slightly and digs into her pocket. Unfurling her hand, she presents to me a ring box. She hastily unwraps it and pulls out a pair of rings.

I am dumbfounded as she slides one onto my left hand. "I claim you," she whispers, kissing me softly, her lips dragging along mine. I try to capture them but she is too quick for me. A metal object is pressed into my palm. It is the other ring. Trembling, I lift her left hand and slide the ring onto her finger.

"I am yours then, and you are mine," I say.

Her smile lights up on the room and it is as bright as day inside our apartment. I see her beautiful soul, white and glowing, and next to it is my soul, smaller, but within her circle of light. Satisfaction burns straight through me and transforms into desire. Later, after we have confirmed our union with a physical coupling, I will give her the car keys. I know she won't protest because it is nothing compared to the gift she has given me.

I manage to stagger to my feet, still overwhelmed. Sweeping Daisy into my arms I walk purposefully toward the bedroom. Gifts, I realize, are not measured by their monetary value. I could spend and spend and spend on Daisy and never match the spirit of what she has handed me. Human life is short, a mere blue dot in the universe that appears and then disappears in the blink of an eye.

But the love of two people? It is the very essence of being.