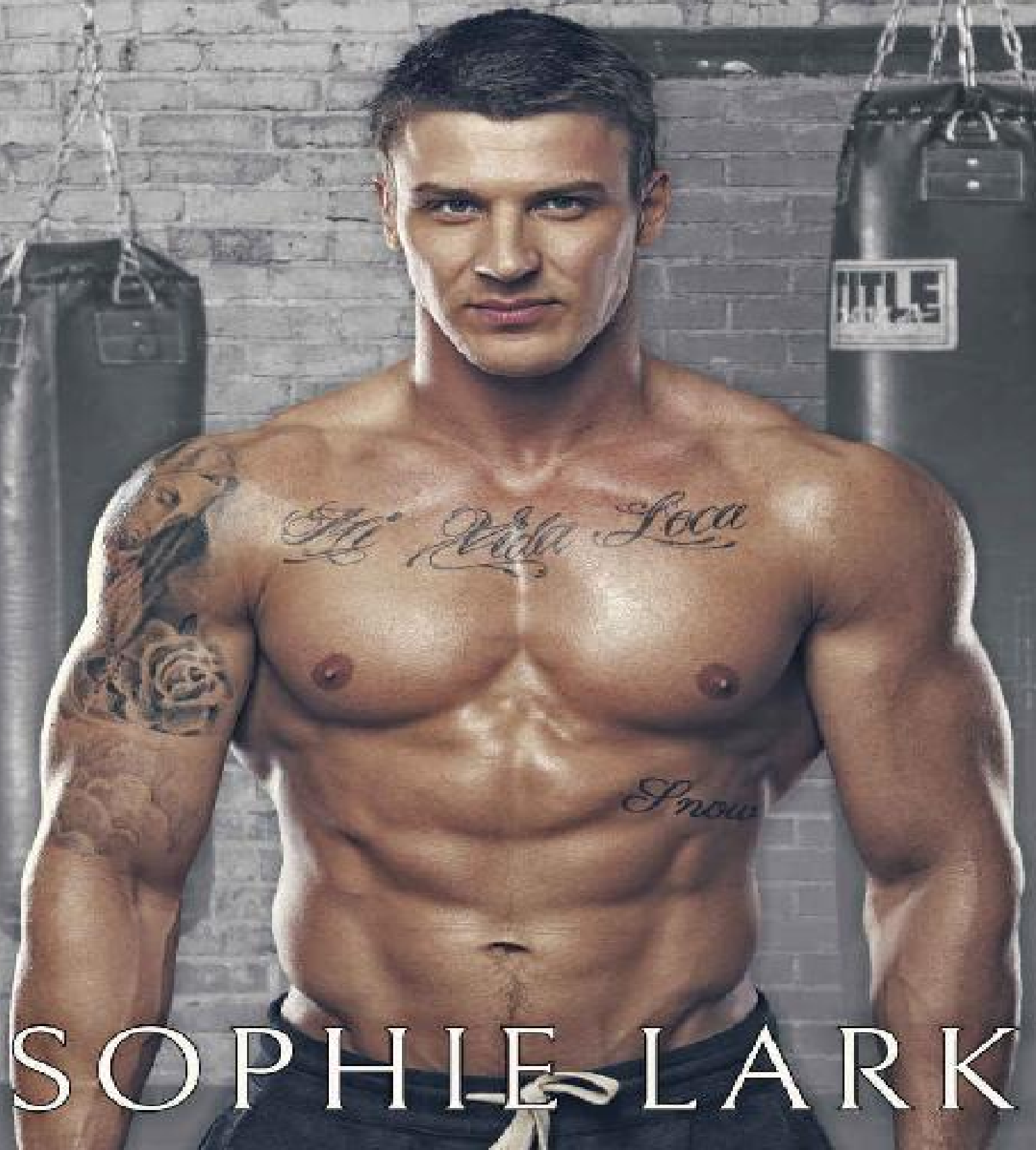


# SNOW



SOPHIE LARK

# SNOW

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A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

SOPHIE LARK



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SNOW

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

*He can have heart, he can hit harder and he can be stronger, but there's no fighter smarter than me.*

— FLOYD “MONEY” MAYWEATHER JR.

**T**hree hours before the fight, I get a text on my phone:

*10:00 p.m., Old Brewery*

KNOCKDOWN ALWAYS SENDS the location at the last minute. Not because the police would actually bother to shut down the fight, but because it adds to the sense of mystery and intrigue.

The spectators like the feeling of being part of something secret and forbidden.

Underground boxing is getting so popular in St. Petersburg that it's probably making more money than hockey. Not for the fighters, of course, but for the promoters and the Bratva bosses who run the whole thing.

I know exactly where the brewery is. I've fought there before.

It's on the edge of the Primorsky District, at the north end of the city.

I don't have a car, but Meyer will pick me up.

He's my coach and trainer. I've been working with him since I was twelve years old. He's older than Moses. Scrawny, bald, always wears these big, square, plastic-frame glasses and a pork-pie hat. His lower jaw protrudes past his top teeth, 'cause he broke it in a fight and never got it set right.

He doesn't look like much, but they used to call him Merciless Meyer. He fought legitimate, with a 48-12 record. He never had a knockout punch, but he was a strategist and tough as nails.

He's a good trainer. He's certainly merciless with me. I think he missed his calling working as a torturer for the KGB. The workouts he puts me through, they must be against the Geneva Convention.

His skin is leather, his muscles jerky. He can still throw a punch. He'll pop me one if I let my guard down in sparring.

He picks me up at 9:00 p.m. sharp, honking the horn on his old Fiat from the street outside my flat. I know he doesn't want to climb the stairs. I pick up my duffle bag and jog down.

I see Boom Boom in the car too, sitting in the backseat. He's my stablemate. We train together at Golden Gloves. He's been fighting just as long as I have, but he's not a contender. Just a solid journeyman, reliable for a middle-card fight, even on short notice.

Honestly, he's a bit of an idiot, but I like him. He's what we call a plodder—he fights slow and steady, keeping his hands up, relentlessly moving forward. He's always getting some awful haircut from his girlfriend, who's supposed to be a stylist. He's got jug ears and a tattoo of Donald Duck on his shoulder. And he gets me into trouble with his big mouth. Still, he's a friend.

"Ello!" Boom Boom says when I wrench open the car door to climb in the front seat.

Boom Boom loves all things American. He tries to talk like his favorite movies, but his English is fucking horrible.

"*Ti durak* Boom Boom, your English sucks," Meyer says.

"How would you know?" Boom Boom says.

"He fought in America for three years," I remind Boom Boom.

"And unlike you, my brain isn't made of Swiss cheese," Meyer says calmly. "So I remember a few things."

"Yeah? Did you remember the spit bucket this time?" Boom Boom teases.

Meyer forgot it at my last fight. He's been forgetting a few things lately. Boxers don't always stay sharp in their old age. The hits to the head take their toll, in the end.

I don't want to think about that happening to Meyer. He's the only family I've got. He needs to stay exactly as he is: irascible, demanding, and too stubborn to die.

"I've got everything I need in my bag," I say, quickly.

You don't need much for the underground fights. Tape to wrap up your hands. A pair of sixteen-ounce gloves. A mouth guard.

Meyer is a slow driver—not that his ancient Fiat could move any quicker even with the pedal to the floor. It takes us about ten minutes longer than it should to drive to the brewery.

The old brewery has been empty for thirty years, but not because it went out of business—St. Petersburg is still the beer-making capital of Russia. Baltika Beer just built a newer, bigger plant a few streets over. They never bothered to tear down the old one. They rent it out for parties, raves. And sometimes illegal boxing matches.

Though there hasn't been a single pint brewed on the premises for decades, the smell of stale yeast is still pungent in the air. You can see tiny flecks of hops trapped in the crevices of the broken pavement.

Two bovine-looking bouncers guard the doors. There's a line of people waiting, because security only lets in three or four people at a time, searching them for alcohol and weapons. Anatoly Krupin doesn't want any fights breaking out inside—except the ones taking place in the ring. And he wants to make sure that everybody has to buy his overpriced drinks.

It costs 1,200 rubles to get inside, 19,000 if you want floor seats. Meyer, Boom Boom, and I pay nothing, because the bouncers know I'm on the card for tonight. I've been fighting underground for two years now. My record is 32-0, with twenty-six knockouts. A few more wins, and I might actually get a shot at the heavyweight belt.

The spectators waiting in line are all eyeing me up and down. They can tell I'm a fighter. It's not exactly subtle—I've got the size, the build, and a faded bruise on my right cheekbone from my last match. They're probably trying to gauge my mood, my readiness, in case they want to make a bet.

They're not going to get anything out of me.

The other fighters call me Snow because I'm stone cold.

I don't give anything away.



Once we get inside, the brewery is already half-full. It'll be packed to the rafters by the time Knockdown starts. These underground boxing matches are becoming more and more popular.

I've noticed a difference in the crowd that shows up. It used to be just thugs and gangsters, but now I see a more upscale element mixed in. Over by the bar, I spot a semi-famous rapper next to a gaggle of tall, skinny girls in sparkly minidresses who have to be models. On the opposite side of the room, there's a couple of clean-shaven sporty types that I'm pretty sure I've seen playing for FC Zenit.

These b-level celebrities like mixing with the rougher element at the fights, because it gives them that sense of "authenticity" or "cool." It makes them feel gritty.

Since I actually grew up on the streets of St. Petersburg, I don't find anything "cool" about poverty and violence.

But what the fuck do I know.

I box because it's what I'm good at.

I suck at talking to people though. I know what I look like from the outside: big. Scary. Inhuman, even. People think I don't have any thoughts going on in my head, or any emotions. Even the other fighters call me stuff like Ice Man, Snowman, the Punisher, the Granite Hammer. Snow is what stuck in the end.

I wasn't any good at school, either. I went for a while. I'd try reading a book, and the words would jumble up in front of my eyes. I'd read the same sentence twenty times without any of it sticking in my head.

When I box, it's totally opposite. I understand everything that's happening. I even know things that are about to happen, like I can see into the future. I can read my opponent better than any book. Time gets slow, and my brain gets faster.

The only thing I know how to do is fight. So my choices are to hurt people on the street, or in the ring. I'd rather do it in the ring.

Boom Boom, Meyer, and I head back to the makeshift locker room to get ready for the fight. There are six matches on the card for tonight. I'm not the headliner, but I'm in the fight right before it.

I've been working my way up through the ranks. If I win tonight, I might get into one of the tournaments put on by Krupin. That's where the big prize money is.

When you're just starting out at Knockdown, they throw you in the ring with a brawler. Winner gets 7,000 rubles—peanuts.

But if you do well, if the crowd likes you, they bring you back for a mid-card fight. Then you start making 20,000 to 30,000 rubles. Not bad for a night's work. Enough money to last you two weeks—a month even, if you live in a shithole flat like I do.

It's the tournaments where you start to make the real money, though. The prizes are big and gaudy. A twelve-inch twenty-four-karat gold chain. A stainless-steel Rolex—real, not some shit out of China. You win a tournament, and now you're a headline fighter. Eligible for championship fights.

I sit down on the bench in the locker room, which used to be a cafeteria, packed in with a dozen other fighters, all in the process of taping up their hands, stretching, shadow-boxing, or just listening to music with their heads down, trying to psych themselves up for their match.

Everybody has their little entourage—some guys have only brought one person, a trainer or coach. Others have six or seven friends and fellow fighters massaging their shoulders, checking their gloves for rips.

Meyer ain't massaging my shoulders, I can tell you that. He's giving me rapid-fire instructions, muttered at me so nobody else can hear. Stuff we already talked about, but of course he's gonna remind me twenty more times.

“Now this guy you're fighting, he's a headhunter. He's gonna go for your face, gonna try to ring your bell early. You gotta keep your gloves up, keep your distance from him. You've got the better reach, don't let him get inside unless you want him to.”

I nod.

I'm fighting Bodybag. He's been around longer than I have. He's no superstar, but he's a solid fighter. Barrel-chested, broad in the shoulders. He's mean and he can take a punch. He works as an enforcer for Krupin.

Krupin is the one who runs Knockdown. Actually, he runs a big chunk of St. Petersburg. He's one of the big five Bratva bosses. At the top you've got Ivan Petrov, with his new bride. Then, below him, with roughly equal territory, there's Stepanov, Zolotov, Kruzenski, and Krupin. Stepanov runs the heroin trade, Zolotov the guns, Kruzenski the construction contracts, and Krupin the south side of the Admiralteysky district, where I live.

I don't pretend to know shit about the Bratva. But I don't think the Krupins are Vorskas like the rest of them. Or at least, Anatoly Krupin doesn't seem like old money. He looks like he came up on the streets, like me. Which means that every ounce of respect and power he's gotten was taken at the point of a knife or the barrel of a gun.

"Hey!" Meyer snaps. "You listening to me?"

"Yeah," I say. "Of course."

"They're about to get started. You're fifth up."

I nod my head again, though of course I already know that, too. It makes Meyer feel better to go over things again and again. Hell, it makes me feel better, too.

Boom Boom is wrapping up my hands. He's a dummy about a lot of things, but he sure knows how to tape. Tight enough to feel secure, but flexible enough that I still have natural sensation.

Meyer checks over my gloves. They're just standard sixteen-ounce gloves, nothing special about them, except that they're white. I always wear white. A lot of fighters like black or red—they think it makes them look menacing. Blood shows up better on white. Nobody likes to see their own blood on my hands.

I can hear the MC warming up the crowd. Sometimes they have acrobats or musicians performing to start. Tonight there's just a DJ, blasting "X Gon' Give It To Ya."

I can hear the crowd roaring in response to whatever the MC is saying. It's a full house, like I expected. On the way in, I saw that they had a proper ring set up. Sometimes it's just aluminum barricades around a bare floor.

"Feeling good? Feeling strong?" Meyer says to me.

I nod once more.

"He's peachy Meyer, look how cheerful he is," Boom Boom says.

"Shut it, Boom Boom, you dopey turnip," Meyer says. "I know he's good. If he was jabbering away like you do, I'd think he had brain damage."

"Eh, might be," Boom Boom says good-naturedly. "I did take some solid hits last week."

"You took more hits than a piñata," Meyer says. "I don't know how you won that fight."

"I tired him out with my face!" Boom Boom says, grinning. "I hurt his fist with my jaw. It never fails."

"It fails plenty," Meyer says, scowling.

Their bickering is strangely soothing. I don't talk much myself, but I like to hear other people doing it.

The MC calls out the first pair of fighters. I don't recognize either of them—the first fight is basically amateurs. It's a warm-up. Sometimes, for the fun of it, the organizers will pair up a couple of guys who have beef in the real world. Say, a couple of petty gangsters from rival neighborhoods. Or the ex-boyfriend and the new boyfriend of the same girl. Makes the fight more personal, more intense.

The amateur fighters don't usually have much training. They run in, arms flailing. Sometimes it only lasts a minute, 'cause somebody gets in a good hit. Other times they end up wrestling around.

Funny thing is, you fight your worst enemy in the ring and you might end up friends. Half the time they end up hugging it out afterward, or buying each other a beer at the after-party, even if they're both all battered and bleeding. Fighting creates a certain level of mutual respect.

I guess you could call it a public service. Nobody's gonna get killed in the ring, compared to some nasty brawl in the street. It's a good place to get the aggression out.

The fights are supposed to last three rounds, three minutes each. Only nine minutes in total, but it can feel like an eternity when you're inside the ring.

As usual, the warm-up match doesn't even last a full round. One of the guys gets knocked on his ass and doesn't want to get up again. In less than two minutes, the MC is calling for the second set of fighters.

Now Meyer is starting to get amped up. He always gets nervous, no matter who I'm fighting. The closer it gets, the more on edge he becomes, though he tries to hide it. He starts snapping at Boom Boom, telling him off for chewing gum too loudly in his ear.

"Spit it out!" Meyer demands.

"But I just put this stick in," Boom Boom whines. "It's my last one."

"Spit it!"

"Alright, alright."

Boom Boom wanders off in search of a trash can.

The second match is a couple of up-and-comers. The fight goes all three rounds, ending in a crowd decision. In legitimate boxing, if nobody gets knocked out, you have three judges who choose a winner based on points.

Here, the MC holds up each fighter's arm in turn. Whoever gets the loudest cheers is the winner.

It's actually pretty fair, most of the time. But I don't like to leave anything to chance. I'm aiming for a knockout every time.

The third set of fighters heads out. Meyer starts pacing.

The Rowdy Rabbi sits down beside me.

"Zdorovo, Snow," he says.

"Zdraste," I say.

"Who you fighting?"

"Bodybag," I tell him.

The Rabbi whistles. "That's a solid match-up," he says. "You're moving on up in the world."

I shrug.

"You up next?" I say.

"Yeah," the Rabbi says. "They got me fighting Five Fists."

"Ah," I grunt. "You got it, then."

"*Na huy, Snow?*" Five Fists says, from right behind me. *What the fuck, Snow?*

"Well, he does," I say, shrugging.

The Rowdy Rabbi trains at the Orthodox Boxing Club. He's about as disciplined a fighter as I've ever seen. The Orthodox Club has been in the same place since the 1920s, the heyday of Russian-Jewish boxing when legends like Barney Ross, Benny Leonard, and Ruby Goldstein dominated the sport. About the only weakness the Rabbi has is that he's on the small side even for a lightweight, and he doesn't train on Saturdays because of Shabbat.

"Good luck," I say, bumping his fist through our gloves.

The Rabbi heads out. Five Fists stomps along after him, still glaring at me.

I can hear the MC commentating from inside the locker room.

"The Rowdy Rabbi starting out right and tight. He's got that classic footwork. Oh! Right hook from Five Fists, but the Rabbi shrugs it off."

Even without the MC, I know when one of the fighters gets in a good hit, because the crowd roars its approval.

The fight goes to the third round, with the Rabbi taking Five Fists down to the canvas twenty seconds before the final bell.

Five Fists is so dazed and dopey that his coach and his brother have to carry him out. I don't get to say "I told you so" to him—not that I would, anyway.

Now I'm up. I haven't seen Bodybag yet. He's probably on the opposite side of the locker room, keeping his distance. I don't much care one way or another. I know what he looks like, and I know how he fights. I've seen him in the ring three times. Plus I've watched a couple of his fights on YouTube. He posts them himself.

He might as well have handed me a manual on how to beat him.

These are my strengths as a fighter: I'm big. I'm strong. I've got a devastating right cross, one of the hardest in the game. But most of all, I've got timing.

I look for patterns. All fighters have their little tricks, their favorite combinations that they return to again and again. Especially when the fight gets tough. You figure that out, and you know what's coming. Your opponent's safe haven becomes their undoing.

The locker room is already noisy and crowded, but when I step out into the main room, the heat and smoke and rabble are ten times as intense. The music is thudding so loud it almost drowns out everything else. The crowd is roaring, already inflamed by the previous matches.

The MC announces me and then Bodybag. I can hardly hear what he's saying. Bodybag gets a few more cheers, because he's been in the game longer, and he's got plenty of friends in the crowd, especially amongst Krupin's men.

I don't give a shit. There's nobody to prop you up inside the ring.

Bodybag climbs in first, waiting for me on the canvas.

He looks thick and truculent, his head lowered bullishly toward me. His neck is so short that his shoulders almost touch his ears. He's got a Neanderthal brow, and a confident sneer.

He's a big boy alright—probably 250 lbs, but a little soft around the middle.

Organized boxing has seventeen separate weight classes. Underground boxing has only three: lightweight, middleweight, and heavyweight. At 6'3, 240 lbs, I'm solidly heavyweight. I've never fought anything else.

I'm not soft around the middle. I'm carved out of solid ice.

The ref tells us the rules: no kicking, no biting, no shots below the belt.

We're supposed to touch gloves, but Bodybag refuses.

Bodybag's friends laugh. From my corner, Meyer yells, "Teach him some manners, Snow!"

The bell rings, and everything else fades into the background.



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**SASHA**

*I learned early on what debt means, how vulnerable it makes people.*

— ELIZABETH WARREN

**T**he train pulls into the station. I grip my suitcase tight, wanting to be first to jump down onto the platform. I know Papa will be waiting for me.

It's been almost a year since I saw my family. I had a full course load over the summer, then I was offered an internship in December that ran through Christmas and New Year's, so I didn't go home for the holidays as I'd planned.

I still speak to my little sister Mila all the time—mostly through text, since she's busy herself, studying at the St. Petersburg State University. But my mother and father haven't been calling me as much as they used to. When they do call, Mama seems agitated, and sometimes a little bit muddled, as though she's already taken her sleeping pill for the night, even when it's only four o'clock in the afternoon.

On our last call, Papa asked me how my classes were going, and then if I needed any pocket money. I told him I still had plenty from the last deposit he made to my bank account.

“Good, good,” he said, sounding relieved.

Papa's always been generous with me. Actually, he spoils all his girls—Mama, Mila, and me. Unlike a lot of Russian men, he never complained



about not having any sons. He was so proud of me when I was accepted to the best medical school in the country. He even cried a little and said how much he would miss me.

It was hard for me, moving to a new city, being away from my family for six years. I had always lived in St. Petersburg. I'm embarrassed to admit, I'd never even spent a week away from home before. Other than vacations, with all my family around me.

Medical school was much harder than my secondary school classes. Before, I had always stayed at the top of my class without much trouble. I simply had to read through my textbooks once, and I easily remembered the answers for all the tests.

Medical school involved such a mass of memorization that I thought my head would explode. Endless lists of bones and muscles, diseases and symptoms. Not to mention dozens of subjects I'd never encountered before: epidemiology, etiology, pathogenesis, pathological morphology . . . I had expected to drink from the cup of knowledge. Instead I had a firehose shoved down my throat.

I want to be a doctor because I'm fascinated by the human body, and I want to help people. And, I'll admit, I want the prestige of it. I've always been the good girl, the achiever. I like admiration. I like accolades.

I like when my parents are proud of me, and my sister looks up to me.

But at Moscow State, I had to compete against hundreds of other students who had also been the best and brightest in their classes. Not just in Russia—in India, China, and South America too. The international students were brilliant, and hard-working, too. They seemed more than happy to study for five or six hours a night, even though we already had classes from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., six days a week.

It was exhausting. Mind-numbing. Even totally defeating at times. I wanted to cry on the phone to my parents. I wanted to give up and come home.

But I could never do that.

Instead, I buckled down and worked harder than I ever had in my life. I buried myself in work. Ate it, drank it, slept it, breathed it. I took every extra tutorial and lab the school offered. I made best friends with all the cleverest students. I hardly went anywhere except the library. I never drank, and I said no to parties and dates.

In the end I graduated not quite at the top of my class, but at least in the top ten percent. Just this morning I received the results of our final interdisciplinary examination. I passed every section with flying colors.

I've got the results in my pocket right now, ready to show Papa. I know he'll be so pleased. He'll probably frame them and hang them on the wall in his restaurant.

As soon as the train doors open, I hurry down the steps onto the platform. Just as I expected, Papa is waiting there for me. He pulls me into his arms, hugging me hard.

I'm so pleased to see him that tears fill my eyes, and for a moment I can't actually see him clearly. But when he pulls back a little to kiss me on both cheeks, I'm dismayed to see that he isn't looking well.

I was always so proud of how handsome Papa was, and how beautiful Mama was too. Of course, they're getting older—Mama is forty-nine, though she won't admit it, and Papa is nearer to sixty.

Still, they hadn't changed much to my eyes. Papa is always nicely dressed in tailored suits. Wearing the same cologne he's worn for forty years, *Novaya Zarya*. His hair is gray, but he still had plenty of it, combed straight back from his brow.

I'm noticing now, however, that his hair is not so thick anymore. It has noticeably receded since the last time I saw him, particularly around the temples. I don't like to see this. It makes me think of terrible things like my parents actually getting old and dying.

His skin looks more thin and papery than it did before, especially around his eyes. Papa looks tired. His suit seems to hang off his shoulders. This is an old suit, starting to get a little shiny at the knees and elbows. I'm surprised to see him wearing it. Also his shirt-collar looks limp, not crisp and starched as usual.

I don't want to notice these things. I'm trying not to.

I just want to be happy in our reunion.

"How was the train, *nemnogo lyubvi*?" Papa asks. He always calls me "little love," and Mila "little darling." He calls our mother *moy angel*, "my angel."

"It was good, Papa! Only, it seemed to take forever. I'm excited to be home."

"Of course you are!" he says. He takes my suitcase. I almost don't want to let him carry it—it has no wheels, and it's heavy, stuffed with everything

I took away to university with me. But I know he'll be insulted if I don't let him help me.

He's huffing and puffing, trying to carry it down from the platform. I'm looking around, expecting to see Papa's silver Mercedes-Benz. Instead he stops next to a car I've never seen before, a rather ugly brown Volvo.

"What's this?" I say.

"Oh." Papa struggles to open the trunk so he can stow away my suitcase. "I got a new car."

There's nothing new about this Volvo. It must be twenty years old, at least.

I don't know what to say, so I just get in the passenger side door and try to find something to compliment. "The seats are very comfortable," I tell him.

They're soft enough, but they stink like cigar smoke. Papa doesn't smoke, because Mama detests it. I'm surprised she consents to ride around in this car. She's always been so conscious of what sort of car she's seen in. She won't ever take a common taxi. On occasions when he doesn't want to drive, she makes Papa call for a town car.

I'm so confused. Papa seems strange, not as warm and excited as I expected him to be. I haven't even mentioned my exam results yet. And, unusual for him, Papa hasn't remembered to ask.

"Are you hungry?" he says distractedly.

"I'm starving!" I say. "Can we stop at Golod?"

I haven't eaten at my family's restaurant in almost five years. There wasn't time during my last few visits. I could only come home for a few days, and even then, I had to bring schoolwork with me.

"Well . . ." Papa says hesitantly. "Your mother is anxious to see you . . ."

"Please, Papa!" I beg. "I haven't had goulash in so long."

"Alright," he relents.

He drives me over to Borovaya, the wealthy old neighborhood where our family has served the elite of St. Petersburg for three generations.

The sight of the venerable stone building fills me with pleasure. It's not plain and utilitarian like so much of the Soviet architecture. It has a beautiful facade, built in the Style Moderne, with soft, rounded corners, and lovely floral stonework over the doorway and windows.

However, when Papa holds the door for me, I'm startled to see that there's almost no one inside. It's 5:20 p.m., nearly dinner time, and yet only

two tables are full, with a single waiter in attendance.

I don't recognize the waiter—he looks young and rather unkempt, with long hair tied back in a ponytail.

“Where's Emmanuel?” I ask Papa. Emmanuel has been waiting tables at Golod for as long as I remember.

“He had to take a job at a bank,” Papa says unhappily. “His wife has diabetes, and I think his expenses were such that . . .” He trails off, hurrying over to our usual table by the window.

He pulls out my chair so I can sit down. I notice that the tablecloth has a small stain on it, and my wineglass is water-spotted. These are details that my father would never have missed, before.

I feel as if I'm being pricked over and over again by hundreds of tiny needles. None of these things I'm noticing would be so terrible on their own, but added together, I'm becoming very frightened.

The waiter comes and stands next to our table, pad and pen at the ready. Emmanuel always memorized the orders, even for a table of a dozen customers.

“Sergei, this is my daughter Sasha,” Papa says politely.

Sergei gives me a curt nod. He looks bored, impatient for us to place an order, though it's not like he has anything else to do at the moment.

“I'd like a glass of the Rostov and the goulash, please,” I say.

He writes it down with no acknowledgment.

“Nothing for me,” Papa says.

“You don't want anything?” I ask.

“No, no,” he says, shaking his head.

He runs his hand through his thinning hair, a nervous gesture I know all too well. The movement pulls up the sleeve of his suit jacket. I see he's not wearing his gold wristwatch that Mama bought him for their twenty-fifth anniversary.

“You forgot your watch, Papa,” I say.

“Oh, yes . . .” Papa says.

In that moment, I know without him saying another word that my father doesn't have the watch anymore. And that frightens me more than anything. Papa loved that watch. It was his most cherished possession.

“Papa, what's going on?” I say.

“Nothing!” he says. “What do you mean?”

“Why is it so empty in here?”

“Oh,” he says, “You know how it is. There’s so many fancy new restaurants. Young people want sushi and cheeseburgers and all sorts of crazy things. They don’t eat the traditional food so much anymore.”

“But you have so many loyal customers! People who have been coming here for thirty years . . .”

“Well,” he says, “this isn’t such a fancy neighborhood as it used to be. Wealthy people have moved to Kristovsky Ostrov and Primorsky Prospect. They don’t want to drive all the way over here just for dinner.”

That doesn’t entirely explain the decline. From my seat, I can see the wine racks that used to be full of French and Italian and Spanish wines, some of the vintages older than my father. The racks are completely empty now. Not a single bottle left.

“You’re not telling me everything.” I say to Papa.

He squirms in his seat. He’s always been terrible at lying.

“As some people moved out, other people moved in,” he says. “I have to pay new rent, new protection money . . .”

He means that he’s being squeezed by someone. Bribes and payoffs are as much a part of Russian life as borscht and vodka. My father used to pay a reasonable amount, a respectful amount, to the Bratva.

I know there’s more to this story. But the food has arrived. My goulash, at least, looks the same as it ever did. Thank god Lyosha hasn’t quit. He’s been cooking here since my father was a boy.

I take a bite, my spirits lifting at the taste of the delicious, meaty stew—our restaurant’s specialty.

The waiter forgot my wine. I don’t remind him. Once I’m done eating, I want to sneak into the kitchen to say hello to Lyosha. I want to ask him how his granddaughter is doing—I tutored her in chemistry, when I still lived here.

Because Papa is so quiet, I look around the restaurant, seeing all the familiar items that I know almost as well as those in my parents’ home. Probably better, actually, since Mama doesn’t “redecorate” here like she does at home.

My favorite is the portrait of great-grandmother on the wall, when she was young and beautiful, seated on her father’s horse with her blonde hair down to her waist like Lady Godiva.

How many times I blew a kiss to that picture when I’d drop in here after school. Saying hello to all the waiters and hostesses and line cooks who felt

as much like family as my own uncles and cousins.

Nothing feels the same. All that time in Moscow, working and studying, I thought my home here in St. Petersburg was just waiting for me. I was so looking forward to coming back to it—everything just as it had been, except I'd be a doctor instead of a kid.

Now I realize how foolish that was. While I was changing, so was everything else.

It's bitter and unexpected. And I'm afraid I haven't come to the bottom of it yet.

I finish my food and push aside my plate. Standing up, my father considerately holds up my jacket so I can slip my arms into the sleeves.

Just as I'm about to nip back to the kitchen, two men in wool overcoats push through the restaurant doors. At first, I think they're here to eat. From the look of fear on my father's face, I soon realize the truth.

I know they must be Bratva. I see the tattoos on their hands and necks. They both wear sunglasses, though it's a cloudy day. One is tall and bearded, the other middling height, slim, with a gold tooth in the front. It glints malevolently as he looks at me, parting his lips in a smile.

"*Dobriy den, Oskar,*" he says politely to my father.

"*Dobriy den,*" my father replies nervously. "Can I get you a table?"

"We're not here to eat," the gold-toothed man says.

My father tries to pull him to the side without actually touching the man's arm.

"Please," he says in an undertone. "My daughter is here with me. She's home from school, and I—"

"I can see that," the gold-toothed man interrupts. He's looking over at me again, his eyes running up and down my body, though I'm completely bundled up in boots, pants, and a wool coat, so there's nothing to see. He's not leering because he can actually see my figure—he just wants to make me uncomfortable.

It's working. I fold my arms across my chest, my cheeks flaming. I wish I didn't blush so easily, but I'm so pale I'm practically translucent. My every emotion is painted across my face.

The other man, the taller one with the beard, is less patient. He steps closer to my father and says, "You made a promise to us last week, Drozdov."

“I know, I’m sorry,” my father sputters, still trying to keep his voice down though the other men are speaking so loudly that half the restaurant could hear—if there were any customers at the tables. “I need just a little more time . . .”

“Have you ever heard the expression ‘time is money’?” the gold-toothed man says. “If you want an extension—“

I can’t keep quiet any longer. The way these men are looming over my father, threatening him, and the look of terror and humiliation on his face, is more than I can bear.

Before I can stop myself, I’m stepping forward, crying out, “Hey! Leave him alone!”

The Bratva turn toward me, the bearded man looking astonished and annoyed, the gold-toothed man smirking in amusement.

“Oh! The princess is displeased,” the gold-toothed man says.

“Sasha!” Papa hisses, his voice much sharper than it usually is when he speaks to me. “Go wait for me in the car.”

“No,” the gold-toothed man says, holding up his hand to quiet my father. “I want to hear what she has to say. What’s the problem, little princess?”

My tongue is frozen in my mouth. I know I’m only making things worse, jumping in. But I can’t stand by and do nothing while my father makes deals with these men.

“Look around you!” I say, gesturing to the nearly empty restaurant. “Do you think my father is hiding all his customers? If he could pay, he would. We’ve always had a good relationship with the bosses. We’re happy to pay a reasonable price, as we always have. But we can’t afford a king’s ransom.”

The bearded man scowls in irritation. The gold-toothed man just laughs in my face.

“You think this is about protection money?” he says.

“I . . . well . . . yes,” I say, lamely.

He steps close to me, close enough that I can feel his sour breath on my face. He’s nattily dressed, in a three-piece suit and polished shoes. His hair is slicked back with pomade. But that care in his appearance obviously doesn’t extend to his teeth.

“You’re a student?” he says to me.

“I . . . I was,” I say.

“Then perhaps you should educate yourself, before you speak,” he says. I drop my eyes, embarrassed and frightened. What is he talking about? He steps back again, addressing my father.

“We’ve been very patient, Drozdov. But our patience is at an end. You have one more week, at the price of an additional ten percent. If you come up short again, you won’t be the only one who suffers.”

He throws a significant glance in my direction.

Their threats made, the two men exit through the front door.

Across the restaurant, I see the diners at one of the only occupied tables watching us. They hurriedly motion for the waiter so they can pay their bill, though their food has barely been touched. Another two customers who probably won’t return.

Papa looks slumped and defeated. He holds the door for me so we can head out to the car.

Once we’re alone inside the old Volvo, I say, “Papa, what’s going on? What were they talking about?”

He starts the engine, refusing to look at me.

“It’s not your concern, Sasha. I have it under control,” he says.

I want so badly to believe him. I always trusted my father before.

But everything is different now.

“Papa,” I say quietly, “I’m not a child anymore. Tell me the truth.”

He takes a deep breath, his eyes still on the road. Then his face crumples.

“We’re in terrible trouble, little love. I owe so much money.”

“How much?”

“Sixty-four million rubles,” he says.

His voice is so quiet and the sum is so vast that I think I can’t possibly have heard correctly.

“Sixty-four million . . .”

He nods his head, miserably.

“How, Papa? How did this happen?”

“I don’t know!” His voice comes out in a sob. “When business first started to slow, I took lines of credit at the bank. When those filled, I went to the Bratva for a loan. I thought it was only temporary—I thought the customers would come back. But the interest was so high—the loan doubled. I tried to tell your mother that we had to be careful, that we couldn’t spend as much as before . . .”



He trails off. He doesn't want to blame Mama, but I know what she's like. She was the youngest child of the wealthy Bobrovs. She's always been able to buy whatever she liked. Her sisters married Ministers and business magnates. They have dachas in Plyos and they fly on private jets. Even when Golod was filled with customers day and night, we've never been as rich as our relatives.

Mama has often complained about our house, our cars. She's always buying new drapes and furniture. And Papa spoils her with jewelry and clothes—trying to make up for the things he can't give her.

I can well believe that when Papa tried to tell her they had to retrench, she wasn't very receptive. She might forgo a vacation to Paris, only to spend just as much on a new Birkin bag.

"We have to pay the loans off," I say to Papa. "We have to sell what we can—Mama's diamonds. The other cars. Whatever we can."

"It's already gone," Papa says. "I sold it all. We still owe sixty-four million."

Plus ten percent for another week's grace period.

My stomach is rolling.

"What about my uncles?" I ask. "Can they lend us anything?"

Papa looks guiltier than ever.

"I already borrowed from Tolya and Andrusha," he admits. "They won't give me any more."

I'm beginning to panic. Papa has dug us in so deep. How can I ever get us out?

"What about the house, the restaurant?" I say, desperately. "What if we sold it all?"

"It wouldn't cover half," Papa says. "Then where would we be? Homeless, without the business my parents built? I'd rather be dead."

If we can't pay the Bratva, we soon might be.



## SNOW

**A**s soon as the bell rings, Bodybag barrels toward me, just as I expect him to.

He uses aggression and intimidation as his weapons. He likes to put his opponent on retreat, then he uses his relentless haymakers to smash through their defenses and knock the sense out of them.

True to form, Bodybag throws three full-power punches at me, one after another.

I dance back out of his way, neatly slipping all three.

The crowd boos. They don't like when you run away. They want to see clashes.

In many ways, underground boxing is more like WWE wrestling than anything else. You have to win over the crowd. You have to be popular, or you won't get placed in the best matches, and you'll lose fights that go to a crowd decision.

A lot of fighters get baited into recklessness by the howls and jeers of the crowd.

But the truth is, the crowd will always support a champion.

Win at all costs, that's the only thing that matters.

They're booing me now, but they'll flip on a dime if I take Bodybag down to the canvas.

"Come on, *yobanaya suka!*" Bodybag taunts me. *Come on, you fucking bitch.*

I let him get closer. I take a couple shots to the ribs and the gloves, watching his rhythm. Just like he did in his last fight against the Sniper, he's

throwing two left jabs followed by a right cross.

I give him a couple hits back, but only half power. I'm playing possum—making him think that's how hard I punch. I want him confident and lazy, thinking that's all it takes to block me.

Bodybag rushes me again. I grab him in a clinch. I plan to lean my weight on him, tiring him out. But Bodybag fires back with a nasty left hook to my liver. It's an illegal hit. Either the ref doesn't see it, or he just doesn't care. He says nothing.

The hit fucking hurts. It gives me a feeling of sick breathlessness. I drop the clinch, letting Bodybag think I'm injured.

There's about ten seconds left in the first round. If Bodybag was smart, he'd back off, wait to see if I'm actually hurt.

Instead he rushes at me once more, wanting to finish me off while I'm still throbbing from the hit.

Over his left shoulder, I see Anatoly Krupin sitting in the front row. That's why Bodybag is being so reckless—he wants to impress his boss.

Krupin is watching us intently. He wants to see how his enforcer performs.

Krupin probably already knows that Bodybag isn't too creative.

As Bodybag barrels toward me, I watch for the pattern.

Left jab, left jab, then a massive right cross.

I duck under the right cross, moving forward and driving upward with the full force of my legs. I send my right fist rocketing upward in an uppercut straight to Bodybag's chin. One hundred percent power, no fucking possum now.

Bodybag's head snaps backward. He lifts right off his feet. I hit him so hard that his mouth guard flies out of his mouth. It soars over the ropes, smacking Krupin right in the chest, leaving a smear of blood across his white dress shirt. Krupin's mouth twists in disgust.

Oops.

Bodybag falls straight back, like an oak tree cut off at the stump.

Timber, motherfucker.

The crash vibrates through the whole ring.

There's an instant of silence, then the crowd roars.

I can't even hear the referee counting down. He reaches zero without Bodybag even twitching on the mat. The ref pounds his palm against the canvas, and the bell rings to signal the end of the match. The MC yells into

the microphone, “That makes twenty-seven knockouts for your undefeated champion, SNOOOOOOOW!”

I raise one fist over my head.

The crowd starts chanting, “Snow! Snow! Snow!”

I climb under the ropes, Meyer close beside me.

“Good job,” he mutters.

High praise. I’m sure he’ll also have a dozen criticisms for me, once I’m back at the gym tomorrow.

For now, I’m basking in my victory. I don’t feel euphoric, exactly. I’m just calm. All the stress and anticipation flushed away. Pure peace in its place.

I head back to the locker room. Boom Boom yammers in my ear, reenacting the match as if I didn’t just live it.

“And you know who saw, too?” Boom Boom says. “Sitting in the front row. You hit him right in the—“

“I know, I know,” I say, holding up my hand to make Boom Boom shut up.

I sink down on the wobbly locker room bench, glad to rest my legs. I can hear the music starting, introducing the headline fighters: the Serbian national anthem for Gatling, and the chorus of “Thunderstruck” for Lights Out. When I’m a headliner, I’ll have to pick a theme song.

“How’s your back?” Meyer asks me. “I saw that dirty shot.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him.

Actually, my liver is still throbbing. I can feel it pulsing with each heartbeat. Doesn’t matter, though. If I can walk, then it can’t be that bad.

“Hey, nice job,” the Rowdy Rabbi says, giving me a fist bump. A couple other fighters come over to congratulate me. I don’t see Bodybag anywhere. I’m guessing he got carried over to the medics.

The final match has started. I can hear the roars of the crowd, swelling and abating like wind in a distant storm. Should be a pretty equal match—I wouldn’t want to bet on a winner.

Meyer shuffles off to pick up my earnings. I’ll get 50,000 rubles for tonight’s fight—not a bad haul, even after Meyer takes his twenty percent cut. He only takes his money when I win, unlike most of the trainers. Lucky for him, I always win.

Boom Boom fills up my water bottle fresh, then squirts a little on my head for good measure, rubbing the sweat out of my hair with a towel. He

was supposed to be my cutman tonight, but I don't have any cuts to dress.

While he's rubbing my head with the towel, a pair of shoes appears in front of me—highly-polished oxfords, with an expensive-looking ombré effect around the toe cap.

Krupin's lieutenant, Yakov.

"Snow," he says.

I drop the towel down around my neck, glancing up at him.

"Boss wants to see you," he says.

When he speaks, I see his gold tooth winking into view between his lips. Plenty of gangsters get gold teeth for show, but I'm sure Yakov has seen enough violence to come by his legitimately. I've wanted to knock his teeth out a time or two myself.

"When?" I ask him.

"Right after this fight," he says.

I nod, pulling my duffle bag out from under the bench so I can get dressed.

"You gonna clean yourself up?" Yakov says.

"Why?" I ask him. "You got a pair of them fancy shoes you want to lend me?"

Boom Boom snickers, then shuts up when Yakov gives him a venomous glare.

"Hurry it up," Yakov says to me. "Don't keep him waiting."

As if he had to tell me that.

I pull on my joggers and then my hoodie, zipping it up to the neck. Krupin won't give two shits what I'm wearing, but he will care if I don't get my ass out there as soon as the bell sounds.

I head over to the doorway so I can watch the end of the fight. Meyer joins me, holding a wad of bills. He hands me my cut, so I can slip it in my pocket.

"Where you going?" he asks me.

"Krupin wants to see me."

Meyer raises an eyebrow. I don't know if he's curious or concerned.

"Mind your manners," he says. "And don't take Boom Boom with you."

I wasn't planning on it.

It's the end of the third round. Gatling and Lights Out are still circling each other, both looking tired out and bloodied. Gatling makes one final rush, sending out a flurry of punches in a last-ditch bid to win over the

crowd. Too little too late—when the bell sounds, the decision goes to Lights Out, by an obvious increase in volume.

The DJ starts up the music once more. The fights may be over, but the crowd isn't done drinking yet. A few girls climb onto the blood-spattered canvas so they can dance.

I spot Krupin, still sitting ringside. He's got his entourage around him, including Yakov. Two pretty girls sit on either side of him, one looking bored and the other stoned. Both girls are styled to the nines, wearing tight dresses and no coats, despite the ugly weather outside.

I approach, stopping a little short of the group, waiting for Krupin to beckon me over. He gives me a nod. I come stand in front of him, my hands shoved in my pockets. The bored-looking girl glances up at me. She sits up straighter in her chair, so her breasts push out against the tight spandex of her dress. She looks me up and down, her eyes lingering on my chest and arms. She smiles, fluttering her long, fake lashes at me. I don't smile back.

Krupin is a big man with narrow dark eyes, black hair, and a craggy face. He's a Volga Tartar. Like most people with Mongolian ancestry, he claims to be a direct descendent of Genghis Khan. In his case, I can actually believe it. He has the look of a conqueror, of a king gone to seed.

Anatoly Krupin isn't the top boss in St. Petersburg, but he might have been, if his brother Arkadi hadn't betrayed him ten years ago, shooting him in the face, and taking the lion's share of his empire while Anatoly lay in a hospital bed, doped to the gills on morphine.

I can still see the scar where the bullet exited his left cheek. It looks dark, raised, and bubbled, like a burn. His jaw looks slightly crooked, like it never set right.

Once Krupin recovered, he planted a car bomb in his brother's BMW while it was parked outside of the Trinity Cathedral. Unfortunately, it also killed Arkadi's wife and two young sons, Anatoly's own nephews. So Krupin regained his territory but lost the support of the rest of the Bratva families. He was sanctioned by the head table, shunned by many of its highest members, including Ivan Petrov, who now sits at the top of the St. Petersburg mafia.

Cut off from his previous sources of income, Krupin has focused on the underground boxing ring. It's made him a fuck-ton of money, as far as I can tell. He gets all the take from the door, plus the overpriced drinks. But the real earnings are from betting. Russians will bet on anything—horse racing,

football, hockey, even the first snowfall of the season. Nothing inflames them more than a fight.

Russian bare-knuckle boxing goes back to the 13th century. Wealthy Boyars used to put on boxing events for the same reasons rich Romans paid for gladiatorial sports—to win the love of the people.

The boxing matches took place over the holidays, often on sheets of solid ice. Keeping your footing was as crucial as the blows themselves. Children fought each other in the opening rounds, progressing to the best fighters at the end, much like the early card and headliner fights today—though Krupin doesn't use children. Not yet, anyway.

Knowing all this, I'm well aware of the importance of Knockdown to Krupin. I know how seriously he takes these fights. So I know he's brought me here for a reason, not just to congratulate me.

Krupin looks at me for a long time.

I wait for him to speak.

"You caused me a bit of trouble tonight," he says at last.

"Sorry about that," I say, looking at the smear of blood drying on the pristine placket of his shirt.

"Not the shirt," he says. "You deprived me of my enforcer. You broke Bodybag's jaw. He won't be back at work for weeks."

He may have lost a bet putting up money on Bodybag as well. Bodybag was the favorite, by a decent margin.

I give a noncommittal sort of grunt. I'm not going to apologize for winning the match.

"Where did you learn to fight?" Krupin says.

"I train with Meyer at Golden Gloves," I say.

"You come from a family of fighters?" Krupin asks.

I come from a family of druggies. My uncle took me in for a time, but after he died, I was taken to the orphanage by a neighbor. Back then, Russia had no foster care system. At eight years old, I was past the age where anyone would be interested in adopting me. I lived sometimes in the orphanage, sometimes on the streets when I got tired of being bullied by the other children and abused by the administrators.

Meyer found me in the alleyway behind Golden Gloves when I was twelve, being beaten within an inch of my life by a gang of teenagers. He made short work of the lot of them. He was still in decent fighting form then—at least, decent enough to handle a gang of untrained hooligans.

When he drove them off, he brought me inside and gave me the rest of the sandwich he'd been eating. He asked me if I wanted to learn to defend myself.

The first few training sessions, I thought I might be better off with the teenagers. Meyer was rough, demanding, completely unsympathetic. But the first time I made it through a drill correctly, and he gave me his terse compliment of "Good," I felt a flush of pride. I knew I had done well. I had found something I could succeed at.

I'm not going to tell any of that to Krupin. So I say, "No. It's just me."

"Who is your family?" Krupin persists. "What's your real name?"

"Filip Rybakov," I say. "But I like Snow."

Krupin nods. He understands. Plenty of Bratva have nicknames as well: Tick-Tock. Ice Pick. The Wizard of Odds. In the underground world, your nickname is truer than your given name. What parents call a baby means nothing. What your friends call you to describe what you've done, that's a name worth knowing.

"You got a wife? Kids?" he says.

I shake my head.

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

I never know how to respond to that. So I just shrug.

Krupin laughs. "That's good," he says. "I like peace and quiet. Maybe I'll have you take Bodybag's place while he's out."

I never looked for a position with the Bratva. There's only so far you can go, with no family name.

More than that, when you work for the mafia, they own you.

I don't want to be owned by anybody.

"I prefer boxing," I say.

Krupin scowls. He doesn't like being turned down.

"The crowd likes you," he says grudgingly.

"They like anyone who wins," I say.

He gives a short laugh like a bark.

"That's right," he says sourly. "Everybody's your best friend when you're on top. But see who sticks around when you get knocked down."

*Or when you take a bullet to the face.*

"Alright," he says, as if making a decision. "I'm starting a tournament next week. You can fight in it."

"What's the purse?" I ask.



He narrows his eyes at me, annoyed again.

“The dog wants to know how big the bone is,” he says to Yakov. Yakov gives a derisive snort.

I don’t rise to the bait. I’ve heard every kind of taunt there is inside the ring. I’m not going to lose my temper on a Bratva boss just because he calls me a dog.

“Tournament is thirty-two fighters,” he says. “You last the first round, you get 30,000 rubles. Round two, 70,000. Round three, 150,000. Round four, 400,000. Champion takes home an Escalade. Does that put some fire in your veins, Mr. Snow?”

Actually, it does.

I thought it might take me another year or two to get a shot at a purse like that. All I have to do is win five fights, and I could have what I’ve been dreaming about since I was twelve years old. A chance to get out of here, once and for all.

“Sounds good,” I say.

Krupin chuckles softly.

“I’m sure it does,” he says.

A prize like that is going to attract some heavy competition.

Meyer might not like it. But I think I’m ready.

I wait a minute longer, to see if Krupin wants anything else.

He turns away from me, muttering something in Yakov’s ear.

As I start to walk away, Krupin calls after me, “See you next week.”



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**SASHA**

*Sometimes a deal with the devil is better than no deal at all.*

— LAWRENCE HILL

**P**apa and I drive the rest of the way home in silence. I know he's too embarrassed to speak. I'm simply terrified.

We pull up to the house, which is one of many standing in a row in the quiet neighborhood of Volkovskaya. It's nothing special from the outside—just a simple stone facade, partially blocked by an overgrown Linden tree. It looks just like the houses on either side. Still, I could pick it out anywhere.

I know the way the paint has worn on the door, and how the knocker hangs a little to the left. I know how the stone steps have sunk in the middle from Mila and I jumping down them every day on our way to school.

I expect Mama to be waiting for us, but the house is dim and quiet when Papa opens the door. It smells a little musty, like the windows haven't been opened in a long time.

All the drapes are drawn. The carpets look dusty. The same rapid aging process that seemed to have affected the restaurant has hit our house even harder. The cleaners must not be coming anymore. Mama was never any good at household chores.

We find Mama in the sitting room, laying down on the sofa with a cloth over her eyes. She's lying very still. She doesn't move until Papa goes over

to the sofa and shakes her shoulder. Then she sits up, looking slightly dazed.

“Oh, Sasha!” she says. “You’re home early!”

Actually, we’re quite late, since I asked Papa to stop at Golod.

I don’t bother to correct her. I hug Mama and kiss her on both cheeks. Her skin feels powdery and dry beneath my lips.

Mama was a great beauty, the prettiest of her sisters. After the older girls married so well, everyone was surprised that she chose Papa. He had the restaurant, but his family isn’t aristocratic or connected.

Mama and Papa just loved each other so much.

Papa always says how lucky he is to have her. I know he’d do anything in the world for her, or for me and Mila. That thought used to make me so happy. Now it fills me with dismay. What has he done already, to keep us happy? Terrible things, foolish things.

Mama has her hair nicely waved as usual, and she’s wearing a pretty silk blouse and slacks. But her blue eyes look slightly unfocused. Either she’s been drinking, or she took her sleeping pill early. Or both.

“How was the train?” she says.

“Good, Mama. Very nice.”

“Your sister isn’t home yet.”

“Yes I am, Mama,” Mila says from the doorway.

Mila hurries over and hugs me hard.

We’re three peas in a pod: Mila, Mama, and me. All tall, fair, blue-eyed. I have white-blond hair like grandmother, and Mama’s hair is still a rich, autumn red. Mila’s is something in between—a soft strawberry blonde, so pretty that strangers used to come up to touch her curls when she was a child.

I badly want to talk to Mila, but I can’t with Mama and Papa standing right there. So I just say, “I missed you!”

“Me too,” Mila says, squeezing my arm.

“Do you want dinner?” Mama asks.

“You didn’t make any dinner,” Mila says sharply. “Remember, I asked you if we should make something and you said you were going to lay down first.”

“Mila,” Papa says in mild reproach.

“It’s alright,” I tell her quickly. “Papa and I stopped at Golod.”

Mila raises an eyebrow at me, communicating in the silent way of sisters. Or at least, as we've always been able to do. She's asking me if I saw how bad the restaurant has gotten.

I tighten my lips to show her that I saw that, and worse.

"Maybe just some tea, then," Mama says.

We all crowd into the small kitchen. Dishes are piled up in the sink. Crumbs cover the tabletop.

Mama putters around for a bit, messing with the kettle ineffectually, before Papa helps her sit down and Mila makes the tea.

At least great-grandmother's porcelain tea set hasn't been sold yet. It's still whole, except for a single cup I smashed as a child. Mila took the blame for that. She's always been very tender-hearted—she never told anyone it was actually me.

Mila gently clinks her cup against mine, grinning. I know she's remembering the same thing.

Mama brings out biscuits and cake from the pantry. I notice Papa isn't eating any of it. He's just sitting silent, like he did at the restaurant.

Mama finally remembers to ask about my exam results. I bring out the paper to show them all. Everyone congratulates me with real happiness and pride. For a moment, things feel like they used to.

Once we're done eating, Mila and I wash the dishes. Papa says he has to do some work in his office, and Mama says she's going to go to bed early. She kisses me on the cheek once more, leaving a smear of lipstick on my face, which I wipe off immediately, out of habit.

When Mama and Papa are gone, Mila and I finish drying the cups and saucers, placing them carefully back in the cabinet. Then we go up the stairs to Mila's room.

She lives at home while she's studying at the state university in St. Petersburg. Her room, at least, hasn't changed. Still papered with posters of foreign films, and delightfully messy—full of books, magazines, and vases of dried-up flowers from all the boys she dates. I shove a pile of clothes off her bed so I can sit down.

Mila closes the door behind us. I say, "Why didn't you tell me what a mess we were in?"

Mila sighs guiltily.

"I'm sorry!" she says. "I didn't want you to worry. You were so stressed with your classes and exams. I didn't want to put anything else on your

plate.”

“How long has this been going on?” I ask her.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Four years at least. I only realized something was truly wrong last year. The school told me my tuition hadn’t been paid. Papa got the money somehow, but it took a few weeks—long enough that my professors were threatening to drop my classes.”

Mila bites the nail on her index finger—an old habit she’s never been able to break. While the rest of her is stylish and pretty, her nails are always torn and painfully short. Especially when she’s stressed. Right now, they’re about the worst I’ve ever seen them.

“The money’s gone,” she says. “But Mama keeps spending like nothing is happening. Papa sells things and she goes and buys the same thing over again, like it was simply broken or misplaced. I got a job at a coffee shop. Pay is shit, though. It barely covers my books.”

“It’s much worse than that,” I tell her. “Papa owes money to the Brava. A lot of money.”

“What?” Mila gasps. “How much?”

I can’t even say the amount.

“A lot,” I tell her. “More than we can pay.”

Mila sits down on the bed next to me. She grabs my hand, squeezing it hard.

“What can we do?” she says.

“I still have my pearls from great-grandmother,” I say.

“You can’t sell those!”

“Mila,” I turn to look at her, “you didn’t see the men at Golod today. They were threatening Papa. They said he only has a week to pay. If we can’t come up with money, a lot of money, they’re going to hurt him. Or kill him, even.”

I don’t tell Mila that Papa wasn’t the only person the Bratva were threatening. There’s no point mentioning it to her when she’s already frightened enough.

“Which boss does he owe money to?” Mila asks.

“Anatoly Krupin,” I say.

Mila lets out her breath in a whimpering sigh.

We’re far from the world of the Russian mafia. But everyone in our neighborhood knows who Krupin is. He lives in a vast stone mansion on Andreyevskaya Ulitsa, inside twelve-foot walls topped with razor-wire. He

drives around in an armored town car that looks like a hearse. He wears a black fur coat that gives him the size and proportions of a Siberian bear. So, he's not exactly subtle.

"I suppose I could sell my diamond earrings, too," Mila says with a pained expression.

At most, our jewelry might fetch us one or two million rubles. Papa owes sixty-five million. Plus interest. It's not even close to enough.

What can we do?

I feel like a caged animal, turning around and around, only finding more bars on every side.

What could we give Krupin, besides money?

What does a criminal want, or need?

Ever so slowly, a kernel of an idea forms in my mind.

It's not a very good idea. But it's the only one I've got at the moment.

"I've got to go out for a bit," I say to Mila. "If Mama and Papa look for me, tell them I'm getting a drink with some friends."

"Where are you really going?" Mila asks. Her blue eyes look suspicious and frightened.

"Don't worry," I say, giving her hand one last squeeze. "I won't be gone long."

I hope that's true.



I SLIP DOWN THE STAIRCASE, pulling on my navy wool peacoat once more, and buttoning it up to the neck.

Mama is already in bed. Papa works quietly in his office.

I'm feeling very brave while still inside the warm, familiar space of my own home. However, as soon as I open the door and step down onto the chilly nighttime street, I immediately begin to doubt myself.

The wind is blowing hard, as if trying to push me back into the house. Dead leaves skitter down the sidewalk with an unpleasant hissing sound.

Because I'm nervous, I have an irrational feeling that everyone I pass is staring at me, that they know where I'm going. About halfway to Andreyevskaya, I almost turn around and run back home again. But I

remember the fear on my father's face. I remember that he sold his gold watch, his most prized possession.

I press forward once more.

When I reach the stone walls surrounding Krupin's house, the gates are closed and locked. I press the button on his intercom, expecting to hear a voice respond. Instead, a guard appears so suddenly that I stumble backward from the gate.

"What do you want?" the guard demands roughly.

"I . . . I need to speak to Mr. Krupin," I stammer.

The guard stares at me a minute, then lets out a laugh that's more like a scoff.

"What for?" he says.

"It's about . . . about a debt my father owes," I say.

The guard gives me a nasty smirk. I'm sure he thinks he knows how I plan to pay that debt. I can feel my face flaming again, but this time I refuse to drop my eyes.

After a moment, the guard unlocks the gate.

"After you," he says, gesturing mockingly toward the house.

I walk toward the dark house, my footsteps silent in the thick grass. The guard strides along behind me. I don't like having him right behind me, especially not with an AR slung over his shoulder and a handgun at his hip. Unfortunately, I'm in no position to complain about anything.

Once we reach the front door, I'm handed off to a different guard. He looks pretty similar to the first one—they all seem to be in their twenties or thirties, dressed in a semi-military fashion. I try not to look too closely at their faces or their tattoos. I don't want to know these men. I don't want to remember their faces.

Once I'm inside the house, I try not to gawk around like I usually would do in a place this grand. This isn't a museum—it's the home of one of the most brutal men in Russia. And probably a place where he does business, too. I don't want to witness any of that. Peeking into the hidden world of the Bratva can get you killed faster than looking into the face of Medusa.

It's hard not to stare, however. Even with most of the lights off, Krupin's house is as opulent and outrageous as the Bellagio. Or at least, how I think a posh hotel in Vegas must look, based off the movies I've seen. I've never actually been to America.

My footsteps echo across the marble floors. The darkened chandelier over my head looks as if it contains half the crystal in Russia. Paintings in ornate golden frames cover the walls—most of them nudes or other erotic subjects. The second guard sees me looking, and he says, “You like art?” with a lewd grin.

I whip my head back straight again.

“No,” I say firmly.

He laughs.

“Sit here,” he says, pointing to a padded bench that looks like it was taken from the Winter Palace.

I sit down.

I’m starting to worry that Krupin might be sleeping. I know it’s late, but I thought that’s when gangsters got their business done. Maybe I should have come in the morning.

The guard disappears. He’s obviously not worried about leaving me here all alone. He rightly assumes that I’m not about to go poking around.

I’m tense with anticipation, thinking I’m going to see Krupin any moment. But as the minutes tick past, it becomes obvious that he’s not coming down anytime soon. A half-hour passes, then a whole hour. Maybe Krupin isn’t even here. There’s no one to ask, no way to tell how long I’m supposed to sit here.

It’s getting later and later—past midnight now. Despite how anxious I am, my eyelids are starting to get heavy. I lean back against the wall, trying to rehearse what I’ll say to Krupin when I finally see him.

Thoughts turn into dreams, tangled and disjointed. I’m not sitting in this palace anymore. I’m drifting far away . . .

“Sasha Drozdov, is it?”

My head snaps up.

Krupin is standing right in front of me, surrounded by four of his men, including the guard who let me inside. I recognize one other goon—the one with the fancy suit and the gold tooth. The one who threatened Papa.

I jump to my feet, dopey and disoriented.

“Sorry!” I say. “I’m sorry, I don’t stay up late very often . . .”

Even when I’m on my feet, Krupin towers over me. I’ve seen him from a distance once or twice before, but having his eyes fixed upon me is a much more terrifying proposition. He has a large, squarish face, his brows fixed in a scowling position. His eyes are long and narrow, as black as his



fur coat. He has a large, straight, aristocratic nose, and a jaw like a bulldog. A large purple scar brands his left cheek—I'm quite sure it's a gunshot exit wound. I don't let my eyes linger there long.

"What do you want?" Krupin says shortly.

Judging from his coat, and the chill that's blown into the entryway, he must have just come inside.

"I . . . I wanted to speak to you about the debt my father owes," I tell him.

Krupin looks at me a moment longer, considering. He's evaluating me. What he sees when he looks at me, I have no idea. But it's enough that he nods.

"Upstairs," he says.

He shrugs off his coat, handing it over to one of his men.

Underneath, he's wearing a tailored pinstripe suit, no tie, with a crisp white dress shirt beneath. There's a dark smear across the chest of his shirt that looks suspiciously like blood. I don't let myself stare at that either.

Instead, I follow Krupin up the stairs to his office, keeping a respectful distance. Two of his men stay right beside him, but the other two drop back to flank me. The way these men move is jarring—they're silent and coordinated, like pack animals.

I know the Bratva are only men, but there's nothing normal in the way they move or speak. They have their own culture, their own way of doing things. I'm so far out of my element, all I can do is keep stumbling forward.

The man with the gold tooth is standing behind me. He makes a hissing sound, as if he's deliberately trying to unnerve me.

Once we're inside his office, Krupin takes a seat behind his desk. He gestures for me to take the chair opposite. It's a low leather armchair, in good condition, but probably an antique.

I sink down into it, feeling smaller than ever by comparison to Krupin. I'm sure that's intentional, to have his visitor's chair sit so much lower than his own.

I wish the guards would leave—I feel foolish enough without an audience. Two stay inside the room, standing on either side of the doorway. Thankfully, gold tooth isn't one of them.

Krupin glowers at me from across the desk, waiting for me to speak. My mouth is dry, and I've forgotten everything I planned to say.

"I know Papa owes you a lot of money—" I begin.

“What’s a lot of money?” Krupin interrupts.

“Well, uh . . .” I don’t know what a lot of money is to Krupin. From the look of it, a year’s salary to me is probably pocket change to him. “I guess a lot of money is anything you can’t afford to pay,” I say.

He nods, keeping his dark eyes fixed on me.

“True,” he says.

I take a deep breath.

Krupin isn’t a fool. He probably knows more about my family’s financial situation than I do. Lying to him isn’t going to help anything.

“We’re broke,” I say. “My father has already sold most everything he can. The restaurant is failing. We could sell that too, and the house, but it still won’t be enough.”

Krupin nods his head slowly, his eyes still fixed on me.

“So,” he says flatly. “what do you propose?”

“I’d like you to let my father keep the restaurant and the house,” I say. “And I’ll come work for you instead,”

I see a flicker of surprise in Krupin’s eyes.

“You?” he says. “What do I need a girl for?”

Thankfully, unlike the rest of his men, he doesn’t make the obvious assumption while undressing me with his eyes. Despite the art on his walls, Krupin is professional. Women are not his focus. Business is.

“I just finished medical school in Moscow,” I say. “I graduated in the top tenth percentile of my class. I did my internship in trauma and emergency medicine. I think that could be useful to you . . .”

I trail off, stopping short of stating the obvious.

Krupin is a gangster. Gangsters get shot, stabbed, beaten. You walk into the hospital with those types of injuries, and the doctors are supposed to make records. They’re even supposed to pass the information along to the police, though I doubt they’d be stupid enough to do it in Krupin’s case. Either way, I’m sure a Bratva boss has need of a discreet doctor from time to time. If not for himself, then definitely for his men.

Krupin is looking me over, considering my offer.

I try to sit as tall as possible in the deep, low chair. I try to look intelligent and capable, while feeling young and foolish.

At last, Krupin says, “As of today, your father owes me seventy-one million, five hundred thousand rubles.”

I nod, my mouth dry.

“What does a doctor make in St. Petersburg?” he says. “Let’s be generous: let’s say fifty thousand rubles per month. That means you could clear your father’s debt in . . .” he pauses momentarily, rapidly calculating the math. “One hundred and nineteen years,” he says. “And two months.”

My heart sinks like a stone.

I had hoped that a pocket doctor would have more value to the Bratva. But I realize now how naive my assumption must be. Doctors in Russia are underpaid and overworked. There must be dozens of them, hundreds even, who would gladly work for Krupin in return for even a small increase in their pay.

Krupin sees my look of dismay.

His face softens, ever so slightly.

“*Moye ditya, ne otchavaysya,*” he says. “*Don’t despair, my child. Do you know, I never married or had any children of my own.*”

I look down at my hands twisted in my lap, trying not to let tears fill my eyes.

“If I would have had a daughter,” Krupin says, “I would hope that she would offer her life for mine, as you have done.”

I’m not stupid enough to think that means he’s going to forgive the debt.

“Your father will sell the restaurant,” Krupin says. “To me. He’ll continue to run it, for me. And you will come work as my personal physician. I will pay you 30,000 rubles per month, to support your family.”

“For how long?” I say.

“Twenty years.”

It sounds like a prison sentence.

Even though this was my idea to begin with, now that the moment has come to shake hands on the bargain, I feel like I’m nailing down the lid on my own coffin.

Twenty years. Twenty years of being at Krupin’s beck and call, never moving, never traveling, never free to make my own schedule or goals, never able to marry or start a family of my own.

I’ll be forty-four before this indentured servitude is done.

And what will I see in that time?

Too many things.

I’ll witness crime, bloodshed, and the inner machinations of his empire.

In twenty years, Krupin will never let me go.

I’ll be lucky if he keeps me alive that long.

Even so, his offer is generous. More than I could have hoped for.

“Yes,” I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. “I accept. *Eta ochen'mila s Vashey starany.*” *You are very kind.*

Krupin nods his head magnanimously.

He reaches into his desk and pulls out a cellphone.

He pushes it across the polished wood toward me.

“You will keep this on you at all times,” he says, “and answer it whenever it rings.”

“*Tak, tochno,*” I say. *Yes, sir.*

I pick up the phone. It feels heavy in my hand.

This is my collar and chain. Krupin can yank it whenever he likes.

I slip the phone in my pocket, getting to my feet.

“Show her out,” Krupin says to his men.

I follow them silently out of the room.

I got more than I could have hoped for, coming here.

Yet, somehow, I'm more miserable than ever.



## SNOW

I don't usually stay long at the after parties, but tonight I'm in the mood to celebrate. I get a bottle of Nevskoe from the makeshift bar and chug it down, buying one for Boom Boom as well, since he had my corner tonight.

The music is pounding louder than ever. Plenty of pretty girls are dancing, along with a couple of tipsy fighters. Among them, I see Five Fists, the fighter that the Rowdy Rabbi knocked out. He looks more punch-drunk than inebriated.

One of the models is giving me the eye from up in the ring. She's tall and dark-haired. She looks a little awkward dancing in her high heels, like a clumsy gazelle. Still, she keeps catching my eye, biting her lip and pouting at me.

Girls always want to fuck after the fights. It turns them on, seeing the men beating the shit out of each other.

If you win, you can take your pick of the groupies. You're the alpha lion. They all want to mate with the pride male.

That model's practically in heat. I could bend her over the ropes and take her from behind in front of everyone, and she'd fucking love it.

I don't really want to, though. I've fucked the groupies enough to know what they're like. They all want to ask the same questions: Were you scared? What does it feel like to hit someone? Does your face hurt? I bet you're a jealous boyfriend. I bet you'd protect me.

That's the fantasy. Having their own personal bodyguard.

The Rabbi comes and pounds me on the shoulder. He's got his girlfriend with him now. She's pretty, with curly black hair and green eyes. She's even smaller than the Rabbi.

"This is Anastasia," he says.

I shake her hand. It's so delicate inside of mine that I barely want to squeeze it.

"I saw your fight," Anastasia says. She cocks an eyebrow. "Do you always pull your punches at the beginning?"

"No," I say. "Only when the other guy is dumb enough to fall for it. Sharp eyes, though."

"Sharp as they come," the Rabbi says proudly. "When I listen to this girl, I never go wrong."

"How would you know?" Anastasia teases him. "You never listen."

She rubs her nose against his and kisses him.

It gives me a strange feeling, watching them.

I don't think I've ever been kissed affectionately.

With lust, yes. Affection, no.

I take another swig of my beer. The liquor burns the cuts on the inside of my mouth. Boom Boom hasn't come back from the bathroom yet, so I crack open his bottle and drink that, too.

"Better not let Meyer catch you doing that," the Rabbi says. Meyer's views on over-indulging are well known. If he had his way, I'd live on boiled cod and cabbage.

The model is still staring at me from inside the ring.

I finish Boom Boom's beer in one gulp.

"See you around," I say to the Rabbi and Anastasia.

"Nice to meet you . . ." Anastasia says to my back, confused at my abruptness.

I stride over to the ring, pushing my way easily through the crowd. When I get close, I nod to the model. She slips under the ropes, awkwardly climbing down in her short skirt.

"Hey," she says.

I grab her by the arm and kiss her hard on the mouth. She tastes of cigarettes. A lot of models smoke to stay skinny. I don't like it, but it doesn't really matter.

She melts against my body, running her hands over my chest.

"*Blyat!*" she says. "You're solid steel aren't you, big boy?"

“That’s right,” I grunt.

I grab her hand and put it on my cock instead, so she can feel how hard I am through the material of my pants.

“Even better,” she purrs.

I pull her through the crowd, back to the locker room, and then out the back door into the empty concrete lot behind the brewery. They used to keep the dumpsters back here. Now it’s just bare stained brick, and the lingering smell of sour hops and trash.

I push the model up against the wall, kissing her even harder than before. She grinds her body against mine. Her short skirt is riding up, and it’s pretty clear she’s not wearing any panties underneath.

She wants to be fucked. She’s begging for it, humping my leg over my pants.

But I don’t have a condom handy, and I don’t want to kiss her any more than I already have. Her mouth tastes ashy and metallic.

So I put my hand on top of her head and push her down to her knees instead. The rough gravel and bits of broken glass are probably digging into her bare skin, but she doesn’t complain. I wouldn’t care if she did.

I take out my cock, which is indeed hard as steel in my hand. I feed it into her mouth.

My cock doesn’t care if she’s a smoker. Her lips feel warm and wet and eager around the head. I grab her by the hair and thrust deeper into her throat. She chokes and gags a little, but I keep thrusting. I pump my hips rhythmically. Her mouth makes a wet squelching sound around my cock.

When I’m ready to blow, I don’t give her any warning. I just push hard into the back of her throat and release my load. It pulses out in three quick shots. She has no choice but to swallow it down.

When I’m finished, I tuck my cock back inside my pants. The girl is a bit of a mess, lipstick smeared and mascara running down her face on one side. She stands up, still wobbly on her heels. She brushes the gravel off her knees, leaving little red spots where it dug into the skin.

Only when I see her shivering do I realize how cold it is out here. Models are like greyhounds—no body fat to keep them warm.

“You better get inside,” I say.

“Do you want my number?” the girl asks.

“No,” I say.

She doesn’t look particularly surprised.

Strangely, the fact that she expects to be used in this way makes me feel guiltier than if she told me off for being a selfish prick.

Because I feel ashamed of myself, I'm even blunter than I mean to be.

"Your makeup's smeared," I say.

I mean that she might want to use the bathroom, once she's inside.

It sounds like an insult, though.

The girl just shrugs.

"I'll probably go home now," she says.

I should offer to pay for her cab, at least. But that would only make this all the more transactional.

The pleasure of my release is already fading. I'm losing the high of the win in the ring, too. I feel like a deflated balloon, sinking down from the sky.

The emptiness makes me turn colder than ever.

*Fuck it, I tell myself. I don't owe this girl anything.*

I turn around and walk away, without another word.





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**SASHA**

**W**alking home from Krupin's house is almost worse than the journey over. For one thing, it's colder and windier than ever. I turn my collar up to try to protect my face, but it doesn't help much.

It's long past midnight now. Hardly any people remain on the street.

I take my phone out of my pocket, seeing several messages from Mila. I hadn't wanted to check it at Krupin's house, in case his men thought I was taking photos or recording or something.

*WHERE ARE YOU?*

*What's happening?*

*Is everything okay?*

WITH STIFF FINGERS, I text her back.

*ON MY WAY HOME NOW.*

I FEEL SICK AND SHOCKED. There's a strange unreality to this moment, as if I can't really be walking around St. Petersburg in the middle of the night, on

my way home from a gangster's house. If I weren't shivering so hard, I'd think I must be in bed, dreaming.

I had dreams of what I might do as a doctor—become a surgeon. The head of a department. Maybe even the chief surgeon of the whole hospital, eventually. I imagined traveling, perhaps working for Doctors Without Borders. Or else working in a country where doctors are more prestigious and respected, like in Europe or America.

I had so many options.

Now all those doors have been slammed and locked.

I can do only one thing now: whatever Krupin says.

I'm so lost in thought that I almost walk right past my own door. I look up at our house, a single light still gleaming in the right-hand window on the upper floor: Papa's office.

I sneak inside the house. Honestly, the stealth is probably pointless. Mila already knows where I went, and Mama sleeps too deeply to hear me even if I were running up and down the stairs, hollering like a banshee. The only person left to disturb is Papa. And I'm going to speak to him right now.

I hang my coat in the closet, then climb the stairs. Papa's office door is ajar. I knock softly, before stepping inside.

He looks up from his desk, which is strewn with papers and torn-open envelopes. Papa used to be so neat and tidy. He used to stamp his papers and documents with the date, then file them away. But of course, you can't file things away when you haven't yet paid the bill or answered the letter. You can only let it pile up in front of you, all the problems you can't fix.

Papa has taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves. His arms look thin and veiny, the collar of his shirt limper than ever.

"You're up late," he says to me.

"I spoke to Krupin, Papa," I say.

He's wearing his reading glasses. He blinks at me through the beveled lenses, owlish and vulnerable.

"What did he say?" Papa asks.

"You have to sign over the restaurant to him. He wants you to keep running it, though."

Papa sighs. It's a hard blow, but he knew it was coming. He nods his head, resigned.

"You don't have to pay anything else," I say.

Papa looks up, quickly. I see the spark of hope in his face, though he can hardly dare to believe it.

“So it’s just the restaurant?” he says. “That’s all he wants?”

“No.”

His shoulders slump again.

“What else?”

“I’m going to work for Krupin. For . . . a while.”

“Work for him? How?”

“As a doctor.”

I can see the struggle in my father’s face. He wants to protest.

Papa loves me. He’s always protected me. Yet he knows our position as well as I do.

It hurts him. Worse than the loss of the restaurant. But all he can say is, “Be careful, little love. These men . . . they can’t be trusted. They’ll look for your weaknesses. They’ll take advantage.”

He winces.

I’m sure that the Bratva offered their loans to my father so generously at first. That was his weakness—trust, and generosity. His desire to receive it, and his desire to bestow it on his wife and daughters, without the means to do so.

“I know, Papa. I’ll be careful,” I promise him.

There’s nothing else to say. I bid my father goodnight, then return to my own room.

Unlike Mila’s bedroom, it doesn’t look the same as it used to. I cleared out most of my things when I went away to university, and Mama made this a guest space instead. Mama has very feminine tastes, so now everything is soft and floral, with white ruffled pillows stacked four deep on the bed, botanical prints hung on the walls, and delicate little vases balanced in inconvenient places on the nightstand and shelves.

I flip on the light, not realizing that Mila has fallen asleep on my bed, waiting for me. She sits up, rubbing her eyes.

She looks like a little kid. Mila has such a pretty, innocent face. She’s only three years younger than me, but it looks more like six or seven years. My desire to protect her is stronger than ever.

“What happened?” she demands.

I’m exhausted, and I don’t want to have to keep saying out loud the awful devil’s bargain that I struck. So I try to explain as quickly as possible,

with little emotion and few details.

Still, Mila looks just as pained as Papa.

“Sasha!” she cries, her hand over her mouth. “There has to be another way! You can’t work for the Bratva.”

“I can and I have to,” I say shortly. “Now let me lay down, please. I’m very tired.”

I pull off half my clothes then flop down on the bed, kicking Mama’s ridiculous pillows out of the way. Mila lays down again too, wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

“You were very brave, going over there,” she says.

“It’s not brave when you don’t have any choice,” I reply.

“What was he like? Anatoly Krupin?”

I pause, trying to think how to describe him.

“Do you remember when we saw Julia Roberts outside the Four Seasons?” I ask Mila.

I feel her nodding.

“Even though she was wearing sunglasses and a coat, and not talking or smiling, all these people turned to look at her anyway. The bellhop, us, the other people on the street. Just the way she walked, it pulled your eye in. Krupin is like that. He’s frightening, but he has a kind of magnetism. When he’s in the room, you have to look at him.”

Mila is quiet, imagining it.

After another minute, she says, “What are we going to do about Mama?”

“Cut up all her credit cards, for one thing,” I say. “Other than that, I don’t know. Krupin is paying me a little money, but it isn’t much. We won’t be able to spend like we did. Mama won’t be happy.”

“I’m not sure she was really happy before,” Mila says softly.

My sister’s arms are warm and comforting.

It’s the only thing that allows me to fall into a troubled sleep.



## SNOW

*You must not fight too often with one enemy, or you will teach him all your art of war.*

— NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

**T**he next morning I severely regret having those beers, because Meyer is training me harder than ever.

He's got me out behind Golden Gloves, punching a stack of tires over and over again. It's cheaper than a heavy bag, especially since Meyer's old bags are prone to split open when you hit them too hard.

The tires won't split. The tread is hell on the knuckles, though. Especially when it's cold outside and the rubber is hard.

"You think you're tough shit after that fight last night," Meyer says. "Think again. You're going to be up against the big boys in this tourney. A prize like that—it's gonna pull in real boxers from all over the country. Veterans who know their stuff. You make one mistake, they'll lay you out."

"They can try," I grunt, hitting the tires rhythmically—left, right, left, right.

"Oh yeah, Mr. Tough Guy. Never been knocked out so he thinks it can't happen."

Meyer is in a sour mood today. Which means he's nervous. He thinks I'm not ready yet, not for a tournament this big.

I disagree.

I think I'm ready for a lot more.

“I told Afansi to come down today to spar with you,” Meyer says.

My annoyance must show on my face, because Meyer says, “It’s no good practicing with Boom Boom. That’s too easy for you.”

I don’t like Afansi, and I don’t trust him. He works as a low-level hustler, yet somehow, he’s always got cash, watches, and a car nicer than you’d expect. I don’t like equations that don’t add up.

Still, I can’t deny he’s a good boxer. He’s fucking fast, and since he’s just about as tall as me, he’s got a good reach.

I’m surprised he agreed to come train with me. He doesn’t strike me as a guy who does favors, not without getting something in return.

I hear the engine of his BMW roaring into the lot. His punctuality just annoys me.

He comes jogging into the club, duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He’s tall, black-haired, good-looking, but in a smarmy kind of way. He’s dressed in a shiny tracksuit and four-hundred-dollar sneakers, and I can smell his cologne from across the gym.

“Snow!” he calls cheerfully, coming over to shake hands. “Morning, Meyer,” he says, giving Meyer a nod.

Meyer nods back stiffly. He doesn’t like Afansi either, not really. He just thinks this’ll be good for me.

“That was some fight last night,” Afansi says. “You sent Bodybag to the fucking moon!”

He laughs. His laugh is high-pitched and shows a big mouthful of blinding white teeth. God, he’s annoying.

“He was due for a loss,” I say shortly.

“Seems like everybody’s due for a loss when they fight you,” Afansi says shrewdly. “I saw you talking to Krupin after. You gonna fight in his next tournament?”

“I might,” I say.

“Oh, great!” Afansi grins wider than ever. “I’m fighting in it, too! In fact, if you make it to the second round, I figure they might pair us up against each other. Similar height and weight, records about on par . . .”

I shoot a look over at Meyer.

There it is. The reason Afansi came down here. He wants to get a feel for my style, before we meet in the ring.

Meyer just shrugs. Opponent research goes two ways—Afansi can’t figure me out without me doing the same thing right back to him.

“Let’s get started then,” I say.

“Time’s a-wastin’, right, brother?” Afansi says.

Jesus Christ. I hope he shuts up when he gets his mouth guard in, at least.

I pull off my hoodie so I can wrap up my hands.

“*Yebat-kopat*, what are you feeding this guy?” Afansi says to Meyer, pretending to be terrified at the sight of me.

When he strips off his own jacket. I see he’s put on some mass himself. He’s wearing an undershirt and a gold chain, which sits on a mat of black chest hair.

“Better take that off, too,” Meyer says, nodding at the chain.

As Afansi is stripping it off, Boom Boom comes into the gym. He looks a little hurt when he sees that I’m already suiting up with somebody else.

“What’s he doing here?” he says to Meyer, loud enough that Afansi and I can hear.

“Training,” Meyer says tartly. “Same as you’re supposed to be doing. So hurry the fuck up.”

Pouting a little, Boom Boom takes off his jacket and changes his shoes, so he can start jumping rope. The steady whir of the rope circling through the air, then smacking against the floor, is strangely soothing to me. I like jumping rope. It clears the head. And you can do it inside, instead of out in the godawful Russian winter.

Afansi has finished taping up his hands, so we don our gloves and climb up into Meyer’s ring. We’re both wearing headgear to reduce the likelihood of a nasty cut or concussion before the tournament.

Typically, you keep sparring matches to a medium intensity. Hard sparring is too likely to lead to injury.

But as soon as Meyer gives us the signal, Afansi comes at me hard, giving me those lightning-fast strikes he’s famous for. That’s why they call him The Viper in the ring.

I can tell he wants to see what I’ve got—he wants a taste of the real thing.

I won’t let him goad me into it. I keep my punches half power, and I mostly stay on the defensive. Watching his attacks, looking to see how he signals his moves before he makes them.

Pretty quickly, Afansi realizes I’m not going to be provoked that easily. So he tries the opposite tactic—pulling back to see if I’ll take the offensive.

“I heard Krupin offered you a job,” Afansi says, his words a little slurred by his mouth guard.

I make a noncommittal sound.

“You gonna take him up on it?” Afansi presses.

“Dunno,” I say.

I get the feeling that one of the ways Afansi makes his money is by selling information to interested parties. So I’d rather not tell him the color of my shoelaces, if I can avoid it.

“If you do, we might be working together,” Afansi says.

He sends a whip-crack hook whistling toward my head. I barely manage to slip it.

“What do you mean?” I say.

“You know Stepanov?” Afansi asks.

“Yeah,” I say. He used to run the heroin trade out of Afghanistan, until he got three-quarters of his business stolen by some upstart gangster who tried to take over St. Petersburg. That gangster got put in the ground by Ivan Petrov, but I don’t think Stepanov’s business has recovered.

“Well,” Afansi says, “I started working for him a couple weeks back.”

“So?”

“So I think he might make a deal with Krupin. Half his business for half of Knockdown. A dual partnership. Or so I hear . . .”

He grins around his mouth guard.

Huh. It does make sense—Knockdown is getting more popular by the week. The money is rolling in. If Stepanov is short on cash, that would provide him with regular revenue.

Stepanov’s drug business isn’t worth a fraction of what it used to be. But he offers Krupin something else: a return to respectability. Stepanov is one of the oldest and most well-respected Bratva bosses in St. Petersburg. If he partners with Krupin, it will be extending the hand of friendship after Krupin’s ten-year excommunication for murdering his brother’s family.

It sounds plausible, but Afansi has misread if he thinks I give a shit about the machinations of the Bratva. He probably thinks that’s valuable information to me, because it’s all the more motivation to take the job Krupin offered.

But I don’t want to work for Krupin, or anybody else.

And I don’t want Afansi pumping me for information in return for the “favor” of telling me that.



So I tell him, bluntly, “I don’t give a fuck who partners on what. My only concern is winning the tournament.”

Afansi looks offended for a minute, then he laughs. He throws a couple playful jabs at me.

“Ah, Snow,” he says. “Never change, you surly bastard.”

When we’re done sparring, I can smell the tantalizing scent of sausages frying on Meyer’s hibachi grill.

Boom Boom is ready to take the ring with Rockstar, an up-and-comer at Golden Gloves. Boom Boom likes Rockstar, but he’s still throwing sulky glances at Afansi, like a jealous girlfriend.

Afansi sees it and he laughs.

“Poor Boom Boom,” he says. “Doesn’t present much of a challenge to you these days.”

“He does fine,” I say.

There’s more loyalty than truth in that statement, and Afansi knows it.

“Well,” he says, shrugging, “Let me know if you want to go another round before the tournament.”

He’s smiling, thinking that he got some good information out of our match.

If I achieved my objectives, he didn’t learn half as much as I did. But I guess we’ll find out if we actually do get paired up in the tournament.

“Come eat,” Meyer says to me.

He fills my plate with crispy blackened sausages, plus a couple of skewers of grilled pepper and onions.

Afansi looks like he’s about to start drooling.

“You want some, too?” Meyer says  
grudgingly.

“Absolutely,” Afansi says, making himself an even bigger plate.

By the time Boom Boom finishes sparring, there’s only a couple of sausages left, and no veggies.

Afansi has already devoured his plate. He burps, and gives Boom Boom a friendly punch on the arm while Boom Boom looks sadly at the few wilted sausages remaining.

“Well, thanks for the workout!” Afansi says cheerfully. “See you all soon.”

He strolls out of the gym, duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

Boom Boom watches him leave with a murderous expression.

“Oh, calm your tits,” Meyer says to Boom Boom. “I’ll make ya some more sausages.”



## SASHA

*The reward for work done is the opportunity to do more.*

— JONAS SALK

**T**he next morning feels strangely normal.

I come down to the kitchen and eat kasha and tvorog with Mila, until Mama stumbles into the kitchen in her marabou robe, with her hair up in rollers.

I think Mama's idol must be Myrna Loy. Even when she's lounging around the house, Mama still puts on lipstick. Her slippers have kitten heels and little puffs of fur at the toes. She's wrapped a pink floral scarf around her rollers.

"You want kasha, Mama?" Mila says.

"God, no," Mama says, wrinkling her nose at our half-eaten bowls of soggy cereal. She fills her coffee mug instead and lights a cigarette. This has been her breakfast for as long as I've known her.

While Mama is drinking her coffee, I slip out of the kitchen and find her purse in the hallway closet. I take out all her credit cards and her bankbook, too. For good measure, I also steal her ID. Mama doesn't drive, and I don't want to risk her being able to open a new line of credit somehow.

She's going to be furious when she finds out, but I can't risk her sweet-talking Papa into the same mess as before. I know she has accounts at several stores, which I assume are already maxed out. That kind of debt doesn't concern me—at least it's not going to get any of us killed.

Once I've cut up all the cards, I shower and dress in clean, simple, professional clothing. I'm ready to go.

But I find myself in an odd position. I need to be available in case Krupin calls. However, I don't know if or when he's actually going to contact me.

So I end up wandering around the house, feeling anxious and out of sorts. Having spent the last six years in constant study, I'm not used to free time.

I don't even have Mila to hang around with, because she's got her own classes to attend.

I think about calling up some old friends, but I didn't keep in touch very well while I was so enmeshed in schoolwork. Besides, they'd ask me what I'm doing now, at which hospital I plan to do my practical work, and how my family's faring. I can't answer any of those questions.

I spend a few hours prowling around the house, trying to tidy up some of the mess that's been accumulating since we ran out of money to pay the cleaning ladies. It's easy enough to pick up the books and blankets scattered around the living room, and then to dust the tabletops and the mantle. But when I try to wash the floor in the kitchen, which obviously hasn't been touched in a couple of months, I run into a roadblock.

I have no idea where a mop or broom might be. I go searching through the various closets of the house, finding nothing. Did the cleaning ladies always bring their own mops? Do we even own one?

Finding a bucket and sponge, I figure I can do the kitchen floor by hand. But what sort of soap should I use? And how do you dry the floor after?

Also, I'll have to change clothes again . . . crawling around on the floor in slacks and a blouse isn't going to work.

God, I really am spoiled. I don't know the first thing about keeping house. At university I lived in the dorms, where the only task we had to do was tidy our own rooms. I've never mopped a floor or scrubbed a toilet in my life.

While I'm fretting over my ineptitude, my mother wanders back down into the kitchen to make herself a piece of bread and butter. She slices into a fresh baguette, scattering crumbs across the countertop that I only just wiped down. She butters the bread, leaving the dirty knife next to the sink. Then she takes a large bite of bread as she leaves, dropping more crumbs on the floor.

I stare at the mess she left.

What am I doing?

I'm never going to be able to keep our house in shape all on my own.

I throw the sponge back in the bucket and stalk out of the kitchen. Climbing the stairs to my room, I haul out a stack of textbooks from my suitcase. I find my notes from my internship in trauma, and I start brushing up on intubation, blood transfusions, sutures, and stabilizing care.

I didn't come back home to be a maid. There's really only one thing I can do to help my family. I'm not any good at cleaning, anyway. But I am a good doctor. Or I will be . . . I'm sure of it.

It's strangely calming, reading notes about the aftermath of mayhem. This is where I've been most comfortable the last few years. This is where I feel at home—revising. However, I'm reminded that while I may technically be a doctor now, my practical experience is limited. In the normal course of things, I would have started a two-year probationary period at a hospital, where I'd be paid a salary, but I'd still essentially be in training.

I have some experience with real-life patients, but perhaps not as much as I lead Krupin to believe. In truth, I'm still green as grass.

Maybe he won't call for a few weeks, anyway.

After all, how much trouble can his men be getting into on a daily basis?

Barely have I comforted myself with this thought, when the cellphone Krupin gave me begins to buzz from atop the nightstand. It has a sharp, insistent sound, like a wasp trapped in a glass.

I snatch it up, afraid to let it ring for even a minute.

"Hello?" I say.

"I'm texting you an address," a strange voice says. "Come down now."

"Okay. But what do I—"

Before I can finish my question, the person on the other end of the line hangs up.

A moment later, the phone pings as a text message arrives.

IT'S TOO FAR to walk—and the person on the phone said to come right away. So I pull on my boots, grab my coat, and hurry outside. I jog over to the nearest cross-street and flag down a cab.

The driver takes me to a pawnshop at the southeast corner of Admiralteysky.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I ask him.

“You said Kosmonavtov, right?” the driver says. “That’s 712 A.” He points to the number painted above the pawnshop door.

“Alright, thanks.”

I hand him a couple of bills.

“You want me to wait?” he says. He looks a little concerned, dropping me off at a place I’ve clearly never been in this seedy neighborhood.

“No,” I tell him. “I’m good.”

Actually, my heart is racing. As I push through the swinging door, a buzzer sounds overhead, making me jump. A bored-looking girl with thick black eyeliner and her hair in bunches looks up from behind the counter.

“They’re back there,” she says, pointing past a glass case of fake watches and rings from failed engagements.

“Thank you,” I say. My voice is a squeak. The girl raises her eyebrows at me, then goes back to playing on her phone.

I weave my way through the crowded shelves of merchandise, heading in the direction indicated. I find a plain metal door, nearly hidden behind a shelf of car stereos. I notice a security camera mounted over the door, pointing directly at me. I turn the knob, letting myself into a dark hallway.

I can hear men’s voices and the sounds of somebody cursing. I follow the noise to a surprisingly large room, which looks almost like an office or call center. If so, it’s a space not currently in use—the rows of desks and computer monitors have been pushed back against the walls, leaving an empty space in the middle of the room.

Three men stand in the middle of this empty space. One is the gangster from Papa’s restaurant—the one with the gold tooth. The other two I’ve never seen before. One is portly, with a heavy silver chain and a cross pendant around his neck. The other is young, skinny, and missing half the sleeve off his leather jacket. He’s got a nasty slash down his arm, cutting diagonally from the shoulder down across the bicep, bisecting a tattoo of the double-headed eagle from the Federation coat of arms.

Blood has run all down his arm, coating his right hand like a shiny, wet glove, and then spattering down onto the floor.

One of his friends, the one with the silver chain, is just pulling over a desk chair so the wounded man can sit down.

“There you are,” gold tooth says to me. “Took you long enough.”

I stare at the three men. I can see there’s blood drying on the knuckles of the other two as well. I don’t think it’s from helping their friend.

“Come on,” gold tooth says impatiently. “Fix him up.”

“With . . . what?” I ask.

“Here,” the guy with the silver chain says. He throws me a black duffle bag. It lands at my feet with a thud. I unzip the top, finding a jumble of medical gear, as if someone ran down the shelves of a pharmacy, knocking things into the bag at random.

I find a suture kit, but nothing to clean the wound.

“There’s no antiseptic,” I say.

“Antiseptic?” silver chain says blankly.

“Yes. To clean the wound. We usually use povidone-iodine, chlorhexidine, or sodium hypochlorite.”

“Oh, right. Here,” silver chain says. He reaches inside his jacket, pulling out a flask. Unscrewing the top, he pours a liberal slug of clear liquor down his friend’s arm.

The injured man yelps. “*Zalupa konskaya!*” he shouts, trying to shove silver chain away.

“Calm down, you baby,” silver chain says unperturbed.

He holds up the flask to me in a cheers motion.

“Vodka cures all,” he says.

Well, he’s not wrong. We don’t use alcohol to disinfect, because it can damage exposed tissue. But it will minimize bacterial growth and wash debris from the wound.

I step a little closer so I can examine the gash.

I’ve given stitches before. This cut is much nastier. It’s uneven and jagged, so deep that I can see exposed muscle and even a glint of bone at the bottom. That tattoo is certainly not going to recover. Not that it was a very good tattoo to begin with.

The skinny guy is pale from the pain of the “disinfectant.” Plus he’s lost a fair bit of blood. Not enough to need a transfusion, I don’t think. But enough that he’s probably not feeling too good.

The sooner I stitch him up, the sooner the bleeding will stop.

“Where’s a sink?” I say. “I need to wash my hands.”

Gold tooth points to the adjoining room, which is a small and filthy bathroom. I scrub my hands with soap, hoping that they’ll end up cleaner than they started, even in this grimy little space.

When I return, I rip open the suture kit. I take up the curved needle and nylon thread.

“I don’t have anesthetic, either,” I warn my patient.

“Vodka works for that, too,” silver chain says. He gives the skinny guy a swig from the flask.

I pinch the edges of the wound together and start sewing.

Giving stitches really is remarkably like sewing fabric. Unfortunately, I was always a crap seamstress. I try to keep my stitches as neat and uniform as possible. It’s not easy, since the skinny guy flinches with every poke.

It takes nearly a hundred stitches to close the gash down his arm. I have to loop and knot each one to be sure the wound won’t reopen. Because it’s nylon thread, it won’t dissolve automatically like an absorbable suture.

“I’ll have to remove these in a couple of weeks,” I tell the skinny guy.

He grunts. He’s taken enough swallows from silver chain’s flask that he’s finally started to relax and not mind the stitches as much.

He looks down the length of his arm, marveling at my handiwork.

“Kinda cool,” he says. “I look like Frankenstein.”

I cut the last thread with a pair of medical scissors, then stand up.

“He’ll need antibiotics,” I tell gold tooth. “To make sure it doesn’t become infected.”

“Yeah?” gold tooth says. He grabs me around the waist and pulls me toward him. He’s been drinking too, enough that I can smell the vodka on his breath as he breathes into my face. “What do I get?” he says. “For carrying him all the way over here?”

This is exactly what I was afraid of. I offered to be Krupin’s doctor. But these men think I’m his whore.

Without thinking, I swing the scissors up, so the point of the blade jabs against gold tooth’s throat.

“You know what’s right beneath these scissors?” I ask him. “Your carotid artery. It supplies ninety percent of the blood to your brain. So, if I were to jab this blade into your neck, you’d lose consciousness in about seven seconds. You’d have one minute before you bled out—maybe three,



if your friends here did their best to apply pressure. But ultimately, you'd exsanguinate like a pig in a slaughterhouse, while experiencing several strokes along the way. If you touch me again, I'm going to do it. No warning, next time."

It's completely silent in the room.

The other two men are standing still, waiting to see what gold tooth will do.

So am I.

It's insane to be threatening this man.

I've never talked like that my life—let alone to someone who looks like he strangles puppies for fun.

But I know if I let these men think they can do whatever they want to me, there will be no end to the torment. I have to stop it dead in its tracks, immediately. Or I might as well just bend over for them right now.

I can see the anger in gold tooth's face. He laughed when I told him off at the restaurant, but he's not laughing now. His body is tense, his fingers still digging into my hip. I think he's going to grab my hand, twist the scissors out of my grip, and do god knows what to me as punishment.

Instead, he lets go of my waist and steps back.

"Relax," he says. "No need to get dramatic. You better watch that mouth though, Princess—one of these days, it's gonna get you in trouble."

*It already has.*

I'm still gripping the scissors so hard that my fingers are going numb.

The tension still hasn't dissipated. The other two men are standing ready, watching gold tooth for any signal to attack. There's no gratitude from the skinny Bratva for the fact that I just sewed up his arm—he's watching me as coldly as the others. He doesn't relax until gold tooth deliberately turns his back on me, like I'm not even worth looking at.

"You good?" gold tooth says to the skinny kid.

"Yeah," the kid says.

"Let's go then."

The three men walk out of the room without so much as a glance in my direction.

I wait a minute, to make sure they're actually gone.

Then I sink down in the office chair, my body shaking with relief.

I don't know how I'm going to survive a week of this, let alone years.

Once I'm sure they're actually gone, I pick up the duffle bag. I guess this is going to be my doctor's kit. I'll have to add to it—hopefully Krupin will give me some money for that.

Already, I'm mentally tallying the equipment I might need.

I'd like a better office, too. But I'm guessing Krupin is going to want treatment on the fly, wherever his men happen to be.

I sigh.

Hopefully I won't see much worse than stitches.

I don't even want to think what will happen if someone important dies in my arms.



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**SNOW**

**I**t's the first night of the tournament.

Krupin is going all-out for this one. He's rented a massive warehouse in Shushary, and he's going to be running four rings simultaneously in the first round.

I'll be fighting a guy named Hitman first. I don't know much about him—never seen him before. From what I hear he's older, late thirties maybe. He's been fighting MMA in the UK for the last five years. I heard he flew back to Russia last night, the prizes for this tournament drawing in all sorts from everywhere.

The fact that he hasn't been strictly boxing lately is probably a good thing. But I don't underestimate anybody. Especially someone I don't know well. He's probably learned a few things in the MMA ring that I won't see coming.

I pace back and forth in the small space of my apartment, waiting for Meyer to pick me up. It's tiny, but I don't care. I'm the only one that comes here.

I hated sharing a room with a dozen other kids at the orphanage.

The first night I lay down in my own bed, behind a locked door, was the first time in years that I felt safe. I guess to someone else this apartment wouldn't look like much—just a brick box, no art and barely any furniture. But it's mine.

I know every inch of my flat. So when I hear a strange squeaking sound, it annoys me. It's quiet, irregular. I can't figure out where it's coming from.

For a few minutes it stops, and all I can hear is the traffic outside my window and my neighbor watching TV too loud. Then it starts up again.

It could be metal creaking, or a door. It seems to be coming from the direction of the window. It could be the iron fire escape, blowing in the wind . . .

Before I can figure it out, I see Meyer's headlights pulling up in front of the building.

I grab my bag and head for the door.

Meyer is hunched over the steering wheel, trying to see through the sleet blowing across the windshield. Boom Boom is sitting in the backseat as usual. He's uncharacteristically quiet. Either he's bummed out that he wasn't invited to fight in the tournament, or he's still salty about me training with Afansi.

"Who do ya think'll win between Pretty Boy and Sandman?" Meyer asks abruptly.

He's trying to figure out who's going to make it through to the second round, because he thinks I'm likely to be paired up against one of those guys.

It warms my heart, because it means Meyer believes I'm going to make it to the second round.

"Maybe Sandman?" I say. "He's got better stamina."

"Yeah," Meyer grunts. "That's what I thought."

"How you doing back there?" I ask Boom Boom, looking at him in the rear-view mirror.

"Alright," he says glumly. "Dentist says I have to have a tooth pulled out."

"That one that got hit a month ago?"

"Yeah. He says it isn't getting any better."

"Oh."

It's one right up front, which isn't going to improve Boom Boom's goofy-looking smile.

Boom Boom isn't smiling now. He's looking out the window sadly, with his forehead pressed up against the glass like a little kid.

"Hey," I say to him. "Let's see a movie after the dentist—if you don't feel too bad."

Boom Boom sits up straight, cheered up a little.

“Yeah?” he says. “I heard at the Cinema Grand they have chairs that shake when something crazy happens on the screen.”

That sounds fucking awful.

“Sounds great,” I say.

I turn to Meyer.

“How about you, old man? You gonna come to the movies with us?”

“Three hundred rubles for popcorn,” Meyer says, shaking his head in disgust. “*Never*. Never will I pay that.”

“I’ll buy your popcorn, you cheap bastard,” I tell him.

“You!” Meyer scoffs. “How about you buy yourself a sweatshirt that doesn’t have holes in it.”

“That’s ventilation.”

Meyer scoffs again, so hard that he sounds like a cat with a hairball.

I just smile. Like it or not, the old man is coming to the movies with us.

We pull up in front of the warehouse, which is already busier than I’ve ever seen a Knockdown venue. The line of spectators stretches around the building. The lot is packed with luxury cars, as well as the usual motley assortment of juiced-up street cars and beaters driven by the boxers and the low-level gamblers that never miss a fight.

There’s nowhere for Meyer to park, so he drops Boom Boom and me in front of the warehouse, then drives down to the end of the lot.

We give our names at the door. As soon as we step inside, I smell whisky, beer, cologne, cigarettes, and sweat. It’s dark and hot. I can see the four separate rings set up in opposite corners of the warehouse, with seats all around each one.

I don’t know what this warehouse used to be—it looks like an air hanger. The ceiling is at least four stories up, with windows on all sides. The floor is bare cement. Music is already pumping, playing “Smack My Bitch Up,” by The Prodigy.

The crowd looks more upscale than I’ve ever seen it. Krupin has waiters passing around trays of champagne to his VIP guests, which seem to include dozens of Bratva bosses with their wives or mistresses. I see Stepanov, broad-shouldered and hard-faced, with a thick shock of gray-streaked hair, and a girl on his arm who looks young enough to be his daughter. Krupin and Stepanov are deep in conversation, looking up at the board where the odds for the evening’s fights have been posted.

I can see I'm favored against Hitman by a small margin. It doesn't mean much, but I'll take it.

The Bratva bosses all wear suits, their women wear sparkling dresses and heels, and piles of jewelry. The rest of the crowd is even more outrageous. Russian fashion has never been subtle. Big, loud, shiny, bright—the spectators want to be seen, that's why they're here. Underground boxing is becoming trendier than any nightclub.

In the midst of all these swagged-out gangsters and club rats, I see a girl standing on the opposite side of the room. She's peeking out from a side door, like she doesn't know how she came to be in this place. She's wearing a pale blue blouse tucked into gray trousers. Her shoes are flat and sensible, though still expensive-looking, and her white-blond hair is tied back in a french braid that hangs down to the middle of her back.

Her face is clean-scrubbed. She's wearing glasses. She has a sort of sheltered, studious look, like she belongs on the cover of a pamphlet for some fancy private school.

She glances all around the room, her eyes lingering on Krupin and Stepanov. Like me, she looks back and forth between the two of them, and then up to the betting board as she follows the gist of their conversation from a distance.

I can see the girl is intelligent, which makes me all the more confused why she's hanging around here. She doesn't belong, that's for sure. Is she somebody's girlfriend, somebody's daughter?

As if she can feel me staring, her head whips around and she locks eyes with me. I see a shiver of fright run down her slim body. I'm used to that reaction, but it still doesn't feel good. When people treat me like an ogre, it makes me want to be all the more monstrous.

I glare at her until she drops her eyes and backs into whatever room is behind that metal door.

"What are you looking at?" Boom Boom says, his voice loud to overtake the music.

"Nothing," I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets.

"Well, come on," he says. "If I don't get your hands wrapped up, Meyer's gonna be pissed."

We poke around until we find the locker room. There are two of them, to handle the massive number of fighters in the first round. Even so, it's so

crowded that I can hardly find a spare foot of bench to sit down. The Rowdy Rabbi pushes over to make room for me.

“I didn’t know you were fighting tonight,” I say.

“I was a last-minute addition,” he says, grinning. “After Chop Suey totaled his car and fucked up his neck.”

“Cheers to car accidents,” Boom Boom says.

“I could use the cash,” the Rabbi says. “Anastasia’s pregnant.”

“Congratulations,” I tell him, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Here’s hoping it looks like its mom,” Boom Boom says, shaking the Rabbi’s hand.

“Yeah, I guarantee those jug ears came from the mailman,” the Rabbi says, flicking Boom Boom on the top of said ear.

“Hey, hey,” Boom Boom protests, “I like to think my dad is somebody a bit fancier than that. A store clerk, at least.”

While he’s yakking, Boom Boom is wrapping up my hands.

By the time Meyer hustles in, puffing from his long walk across the parking lot, my hands are nicely taped.

“Shit,” the Rabbi says in admiration, “you wanna redo mine, Boom Boom?”

“Sure,” Boom Boom says amiably. “It’s my superpower.”

As he unwraps the Rabbi’s shoddy tape, he says, “You want a boy or a girl?”

“I don’t care,” the Rabbi says, grinning happily. “I’m gonna teach the kid to box either way.”

“A girl boxer!” Meyer snorts.

“Yeah,” the Rabbi laughs at Meyer. “They got iPhones and electric cars now too, man. It’s a whole new millennium.”

Meyer rolls his eyes. I know he’d usually have something rude to say about that, but the Orthodox School is pretty much the only other gym he likes, so he doesn’t want to bust the Rabbi’s balls too hard.

I can hear the show ramping up outside. They’ve got a team of pole dancers, jugglers, and a fire-breather. It’s a regular circus. Krupin’s putting on a show to impress Stepanov, to get this deal done.

“I wanna watch this!” Boom Boom says, peeking out the door.

“Go ahead,” I tell him. “I’m good.”

The Rabbi jumps up from the bench and starts bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

“You in the first round?” he asks me.

“Yeah. Are you?”

“Yup. Different ring though.”

“What are they gonna do if you and I make it through to the end?” I ask him. We’re not remotely in the same weight class.

“I don’t know!” the Rabbi says gleefully, shaking his head. “I think they’re just throwing shit at the wall, man, seeing what sticks. It’s not the Olympics out there.”

He’s so high about this baby thing, and so amped for his fight, that he doesn’t give a damn what happens. But I frown. You can’t pair up fighters with that much of a size difference.

The MC starts announcing the first round of fights. I’m in Ring Four. I already saw Krupin and Stepanov sitting down at Ring One, so they won’t be watching me.

As soon as my name is called, I pull up the hood of my white robe to block out the noise and sound, and I head out onto the floor.

The crowd whoops and cheers as each fighter comes out. The sound is like a palpable wave hitting my face. I’ve never felt energy like this before. They’re already chanting the names of their favorites. Mostly Sandman and Pretty Boy from Ring One, but as I get closer to Ring Four, I hear a few shouts of “Snow! Snow!”

I slip under the ropes. Hitman follows after me, taking the opposite corner.

He looks lean and hard, like he’s carved out of wood. His skin is deeply tanned, his face bearing the scars of more than a few fights. He’s a veteran, alright.

As we face up opposite each other, I see that he’s a southpaw. That’s not going to help the awkwardness of boxing an MMA fighter.

The bell rings and Hitman starts swinging. He’s tight, but aggressive.

I take his shots on my arms and gloves, trying to get a feel for his angles. It’s different than what I’m used to. There’s a geometry to boxing—positioning your feet and body so you can land shots on open areas, while not receiving any clean hits yourself.

Once I have a feel for it, I start throwing shots at his body. I think this fight is going to go on for a while—Hitman has stamina from the long clinches and wrestling of MMA. I want to hit him in the ribs, the abdomen. Those are shots he can shake off now, but that will pay dividends down the



road. His whole body will begin to throb and his speed will lessen. This happens more to old fighters than young, as they reignite ancient injuries.

The first round ends, and I see Hitman sit down gingerly on the opposite side of the ring. My strategy is working.

He's gotten in a few good shots himself—tricky punches I didn't see coming.

"Watch that right jab," Meyer tells me, squirting water in my mouth.

"I know," I say.

"He's a tough old bugger, isn't he?" Boom Boom says.

"Shut up, Boom Boom," Meyer snaps.

Only in boxing is a thirty-seven-year-old man considered "old."

The bell rings and I hop to my feet again.

This time, I take the offensive. I keep pounding Hitman in the body, over and over. I can tell he's tender there. He's got great technique, but he just doesn't have the power he probably did at twenty-two. Whereas my punches are like a hammer against an anvil. Over and over and over on his ribs. I hit a sharp right hook and I feel the ribs crack beneath my glove. Hitman drops to the canvas like a stone.

The ref pushes me away and starts the count.

Hitman taps the ref's arm. He's ending the fight. TKO—technical knockout.

Boom Boom whoops with delight.





## SASHA

*If you can't go back to your mother's womb, you'd better learn to be a good fighter.*

— ANCHEE MIN

**K**rupin has requested—aka demanded—that I be the medic at all his underground boxing matches.

I don't like boxing. I think it's brutal and archaic. The fact that men would deliberately expose themselves to facial-cranial trauma and repeated concussions, not to mention broken hands, wrists, ribs, and who knows what else, is more than I can understand.

Of course, I don't mention any of that to Krupin. I just arrive at the address that Yakov texts me. I've learned by now that gold tooth is actually named Yakov. Silver Chain is Alogrin. And the skinny kid I stitched up is named Bebchuk.

I see altogether too much of Yakov for my liking. He's Krupin's right-hand man and, apparently, my main point of contact with the Bratva. He hasn't tried to put his hands on me again since I held the scissors to his throat, but he obviously hasn't forgotten about it. His attitude toward me vacillates between cold irritation and outright loathing.

That's fine with me. I don't want to be liked by these men. I don't want to be of interest to them. As long as I'm useful to Krupin, I'm assuming they won't hurt me. That's the best I can hope for at this point.

When Yakov texts me the address, I see it's in the warehouse district. I'm assuming it's going to be a small and dingy place, with maybe a few dozen people inside. I'm shocked to find a blasting, bumping party going on, with hundreds of spectators in attendance.

It's not just gangsters either—there are all kinds of people here, dressed a whole lot fancier than I would have expected. I can't help peeking out from the makeshift infirmary so I can look at them all. I'm surprised to spot several people I know—businessmen who used to come into my father's restaurant.

I see Krupin talking to a tall man, about forty or forty-five, dark-haired with a dramatic streak of gray in the front. Judging from his suit, his tattoos, and the harsh expression on his face, I'm guessing he's a fellow Bratva boss.

What do gangsters talk about?

I assume it's not idle chit-chat. They're probably making plans, making deals. I can see them glancing up at a large chalkboard posted on the wall. It has names and numbers listed on it. The names are mostly nicknames: Hitman. Butterball. The Rowdy Rabbi. Probably the boxers. Beside each boxer's name is a positive or negative number. I scan down the list, not really understanding it: Hitman -124. Butterball: +347. The Rowdy Rabbi: -1110.

Is it a ranking system? Or is it something for betting?

As I'm pondering what it might mean, I get a prickling sensation at the back of my neck. I feel myself blushing, as I always do when I'm uncomfortable. I turn my head, catching sight of a boxer in a white hoodie. He's standing still, staring at me intently.

And let me tell you, a look from this guy is intense indeed. He's got light blue eyes—colder than early morning frost—that seem to cut right through me. His face is stern, rough, unsmiling. He's got heavy brows, a broad nose, broad jaw, and shoulders that probably wouldn't fit through a doorway. He's hunched and defensive, like he thinks someone might hit him any minute.

His skin is quite tan for a Russian, in sharp contrast to the blue eyes. His hair is light brown, cropped short. He's tall, powerfully built. Rather terrifying, all in all.

I don't know why he's staring at me. It makes me shiver, the way his eyes are locked on mine. I feel like I have to tear my gaze away. Once I've

broken his look, I'm free to dart back inside the infirmary, closing the door behind me.

I stay in there until the fights start. Then I peek out again, drawn to see the boxing, even though I don't like it.

I've never been to a live boxing match before, only watched them on TV. I'm shocked by how much faster and rougher it looks in person. I can hear the gloves hitting flesh and the grunts of the boxers as they're struck. The crowd is inflamed by it.

I find it hard to look away, myself.

I'm closest to the third ring, but by coming out of the infirmary, and walking a bit along the wall, I can see the fourth ring where the blue-eyed boxer is fighting.

He's dressed all in white, and he looks young and powerful, compared to his leaner, older opponent.

I'm surprised to see how lightly he moves. He's so massive, I expected him to charge the other fighter, big, meaty fists swinging wildly. It's quite the opposite—he's careful, calculated. And fast. His fists whip out, drilling into his opponent's body. He sends out a particularly brutal shot to the ribs, and I hear an audible crack even over the roar of the crowd. The other boxer drops like a rock, groaning.

It makes me sick to my stomach. I turn away once more, heading back to the infirmary. I'm sure I'm going to have patients coming in before long.

Sure enough, as the first four matches end, Krupin's men haul in the boxer with the broken ribs, as well as a guy who's split his lip open.

I examine them both. The one with the split lip just needs an icepack, but the other guy's in bad shape. I gently feel his sides with my fingertips, trying to ascertain how many ribs are fractured, and how badly. Then I listen to his lungs with my stethoscope, to make sure they haven't been punctured by an errant sliver of bone.

I bought the stethoscope, and a few other necessary tools, with Krupin's blessing. I considered getting a doctor's coat as well but decided against it because I don't want to draw any attention to myself.

If my clothes get dirty or stained, I'll just wash them.

"So? What's the verdict?" Yakov says impatiently.

"He should get a CT scan," I say.

"You see a whatever-the-fuck scanner around here?" Yakov says, pretending to look around.

I glare at him. “As far as I can tell, he’s got four fractured ribs on his right side. All we can really do for that is give him pain medication and let it heal on its own.”

“You don’t wrap him up?” Yakov says, surprised.

“No,” I say, “that’s not standard treatment anymore.” Speaking to the boxer, I add, “Once your pain is under control, you want to work on taking deeper breaths. If you breathe too shallowly, you’ll be at risk to develop pneumonia.”

He nods, his face pale with pain, and lightly sheened with sweat.

“If you feel a sharp, stabbing pain in your lungs, go to the hospital,” I tell him, quietly.

He nods, but I don’t know if he will or not. These men are too used to pain—I don’t think they take it seriously.

Another round of fights follow, with another boxer sent to see me for a concussion evaluation. I shine a light in his eyes and ask him questions: his name. The date. The current president of the country.

He doesn’t answer any of the questions right, except his own name.

I ask him if he’s gotten other concussions recently.

“I dunno,” he says. “I’ve been knocked out three times this month.”

“I’d say that qualifies. You know that each repeated concussion is cumulative in its effects . . .” I’m trying to explain the dangers of TBIs to him, but he’s craning his neck, trying to see out the door to know what’s going on in the matches that haven’t finished yet.

I sigh and tell him just to drink some water and lay down for a while.

He ignores me, heading back out into the pounding music with his posse all around him, propping him up.

There’s a short break between fights to allow everyone to visit the bars set up all around the room, or buy drinks from the pretty waitresses roaming the floor.

While I’m waiting, Yakov pokes his head in the infirmary and tells me that Krupin wants to see me.

“Me?” I squeak.

“No,” Yakov says sarcastically. “The other pretty little idiot standing right behind you.”

I haven’t spoken to Krupin in person since the night I went to his house. I’d prefer to keep my distance, honestly. But of course I have to do what he says.

I smooth back the strands of hair that have come loose from my braid, trying to make myself presentable. I rub the sleeve of my blouse where the concussed boxer stained the fabric with a droplet of blood. The blood won't come out of the silk with a little rubbing, so I leave it alone and head out onto the floor.

I spot Krupin at once, easily visible in his black fur coat. He must be roasting in that thing—the air in the warehouse, despite the cathedral ceiling, is humid with sweat and the exhalations of the packed-in spectators.

Krupin is still talking to the gangster with the streak of gray in his hair. I wonder if I should wait for them to finish their conversation. But Krupin spots me and waves me over.

“Stepanov,” he says. “This is our doctor.”

“This girl?” Stepanov says in surprise. He holds out his hand to me.

Gingerly, I give him my hand. He encloses it inside his own, which is large and rough, with gold rings on two of his fingers. I expected him to squeeze it hard. Instead, he raises my hand to his lips and kisses it. All the while, he's watching me with his dark, heavily-lidded eyes.

I can feel my cheeks glowing like a sunrise. I'd like to take my hand back, but Stepanov hasn't released it.

“How long has she been working for you?” he asks Krupin while still looking at me.

“Just a week or two,” Krupin says. “Her father is Oskar Drozdov. He used to own Golod.” Krupin smiles softly. “Until I bought it.”

“I know that place,” Stepanov says, his eyes still locked on mine. “I've eaten there before. Did you ever serve my table?”

I give a quick shake of my head. Papa never had us work as waitresses. Perhaps he should have. He always treated us like aristocratic little princesses, but the truth is, we never actually had the money or the name to mingle with the upper class. We only thought we belonged there.

“Soft hands,” Stepanov says, trailing his large thumb over the back of my hand. “Your patients are lucky.”

His intense eye contact and his lingering, appraising touch make me distinctly uncomfortable. I wish there was a way to pull away without offending him.

“It's good to have a doctor on staff,” Krupin says to Stepanov. “Get the boxers back on their feet and fighting again, as quickly as possible.”

“Oh yes,” Stepanov says softly. “I’m sure Sasha Drozdov is highly useful.”

At last he releases my hand. I drop it down to my side, resisting the urge to rub it against my slacks as if I touched something dirty.

“Very nice to meet you,” I squeak.

Krupin gives me a nod, releasing me. I hurry back to the infirmary, flushed and terrified.

I’m just a little lamb, wandering around a forest full of wolves. How can I hope to survive among these men?







## SNOW

**D**ay one of the tournament ends well for me—I advance to round two, without injury. The Rowdy Rabbi wins his fight as well and is in high spirits in the locker room afterward. His fiancée Anastasia comes running in to congratulate him. It's hard to tell on her petite frame, but I think I can see the first swelling of her belly beneath the soft gray dress she wears.

It confuses me, seeing the Rabbi sweep her up in his arms. They look so celebratory, so full of hope. Yet Anastasia is so delicate, the child in her belly even more so. How can the Rabbi stand it, putting all his happiness into such fragile packages?

I've never attached myself to anything, or anyone.

The closest thing I have to family is Meyer and Boom Boom. And half the time we want to throw each other in the Baltic Sea.

Neither of them needs me, not really.

Letting people rely on you is dangerous. You're sure to disappoint them. And they will always disappoint you.

Day one went on so long, with sixteen fights in total on four rings, that the crowd is drunker and rowdier than I've ever seen them. The betting reaches a fever pitch. I'm sure Krupin's raking in an unprecedented amount of cash. He looks like the dog that ate the dinner—fully pleased with himself. I'm sure he's doubly pleased to have Stepanov witness his triumph. If their deal isn't done already, I'm sure it will be soon.

Afansi won his match as well—much to Boom Boom's annoyance. Contrary to Afansi's expectations, when the fight sheet is posted for day

two, I see that he and I aren't paired up together. I'll be fighting Sandman like Meyer guessed, while Afansi will have to take on one of his own colleagues: the Beast.

The Beast works for Stepanov, too. He's Stepanov's top enforcer. It's Afansi's bad luck to have to face him.

I wouldn't say that I'm afraid of any other boxers, but if there's one person I don't look forward to meeting in the ring, it's the Beast. He's one of the few fighters with a significant advantage in weight over me, and not just fat, either—he's got an extra twenty or thirty pounds of real muscle.

If it were only size, I wouldn't worry. After all, even the biggest tree can be cut down with the right ax. Unfortunately, the Beast has technique, too. He's brutal, relentless, and meticulously trained by one of the top trainers in Russia.

If I want to win this tournament, I'll have to meet him eventually. I'd prefer that to happen after I've already won a few rounds, so I'm sure of taking home some cash.

For now, I need to focus on my fight with Sandman. I only had a two-day break, barely time to recover from the first match. I know Sandman fairly well, though I wish I didn't. He was a legitimate boxer in America, until he lost his license for betting on his own fights. Since then, he's been in and out of prison twice, as well as working for the Zolotov family.

He's a cheap and dirty fighter, always trying to get in hits below the belt or after the bell already rung. Unfortunately, in underground boxing, these things are ignored as often as not. The refs like to keep the fights moving as quickly as possible, and the crowd doesn't like a loss by disqualification.

The night before the fight, Boom Boom gets his tooth pulled, then we coerce Meyer into seeing a movie with us. We basically have to drag him out of his flat attached to the Golden Gloves gym. He refuses to drive, so we walk the six blocks to the cinema. I get the tickets and Boom Boom buys the popcorn. We sit Meyer between us in the dark, musty theater, so he can't escape if he decides he doesn't like the film.

We're watching Creed 2. Meyer hasn't seen any of the previous Rocky movies, or Creed 1, but it doesn't seem to matter. He catches on quick enough that Creed is facing off against the son of the man who killed his father—a grudge match passed down through the generations.

At first Meyer scoffs at some of the obvious flaws in the choreography. Times when the actors dodge a punch before it's even thrown, and

combinations that no real boxer would attempt to use.

“Where’s the jabs, huh?” Meyer demands. “They gonna throw every punch from way back in Siberia?”

However, as the film goes on, he becomes more and more enthralled. He pushes away the popcorn and leans forward, his eyes locked on the screen from behind his thick glasses.

In the final match, Meyer grunts and flinches with every hit that lands onscreen. As the champion prevails, Meyer sits back in his seat, letting out a long sigh.

Afterward, walking home, Meyer says, “The Russian would have beat the American.”

“Well, he’s an actual boxer,” I tell him. “The other guy’s just an actor.”

“Mmm,” Meyer says, “I know.”

“Also, he’s Romanian in real life—not Russian.”

“*Piz-dets, ty idiot,*” Meyer shouts. “I know who he is!”

I don’t think he does know.

“You liked it though!” Boom Boom says delightedly. “You liked the movie!”

“It was . . . fine,” Meyer says.

“That’s like . . . the nicest thing I’ve ever heard you say about a movie,” Boom Boom says, grinning.

“Well, now you ruined it,” Meyer says.

“Boom Boom ruins everything,” I say cheerfully.

“You’re no better than him,” Meyer tells me.

“I’m no better than Boom Boom?” I say, with a pained expression. “That was a low blow.”

“Yeah,” Boom Boom agrees, “that’s going too far.”

I can’t help laughing.

Boom Boom’s good nature is so strong that I’ve never seen him get offended. Except when Afansi ate his sausages.

It’s all a nice distraction before my second fight. The payout for the first win wasn’t much—with the tiered nature of the prizes, I’ve got to make it to the third or fourth round at least if I want to get my hands on the serious money. Winning the whole thing would be even better.

Meyer drives us to the second fight night, hosted at the same warehouse. The parking lot is even more packed than before. Everybody who watched the first round has been Tweeting and Instagramming and

making Facebook posts. The tournament is quickly becoming more popular than a World Cup match. Tickets have been sold and resold, with many more people waiting in line than can possibly fit inside.

“You want us to walk up with you?” I ask Meyer.

I don’t want him parking his car so far away. There are too many strangers here, too many troublemakers spoiling for a fight to make the night all the more exciting.

Meyer looks highly offended.

“The day I need you to escort me around will be a sad day indeed,” he says. “Just knock me over the head before that happens.”

“Alright,” I say. “Sorry.”

“Don’t forget who saved who,” Meyer shouts at me as I get out of the car.

I’d like to remind him that I was twelve then, and he hasn’t gotten any younger since. But there’s no point antagonizing him further.

“What’s he talking about?” Boom Boom says.

He doesn’t know how Meyer found me.

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head.

The mood in the locker room is more serious than last time. Half the fighters have been whittled away already. The remaining boxers are just as hungry as I am to make it to the bigger purses. Or at least, they think so.

Even Boom Boom seems to feel the tension. As he wraps up my hands, he says, “I don’t like Sandman.”

“I don’t like him, either,” I admit.

“If he hits you low, give him the same thing back,” Boom Boom says.

I intend to. I have no problem fighting dirty when the other guy deserves it.

As soon as Meyer joins us, he says basically the same thing. Only phrased more bluntly.

“You knock him right in the balls if he gets frisky, Snow.”

This time I’m in the second round of fighters. I have to sit and listen to the first four fights, which is quite torturous. I’d rather get out there immediately.

I put my headphones on, trying to drown out Boom Boom’s nervous chatter. Some of the other fighters start giving him shit about his missing tooth until Meyer tells them to fuck off. I turn my music up louder.

When it's my turn, I make my way out to Ring Two. It's better than Ring Four, but I'm still not on the main stage. That's fine—all things in time.

I slip under the ropes, facing Sandman across the canvas.

He's not looking so hot. He's got dark circles under his eyes and a fresh cut on his cheekbone from his last match. Meyer told me he only barely made it through that one.

Even if he looks like warmed-over shit, I'm not underestimating him. The ref checks us over. He gives Sandman a nod, sending us to our opposite corners.

The bell sounds. We circle each other warily.

There's something slightly odd in the way Sandman is moving. I'm not quite sure what it is. He's being more cautious than usual, that's for certain.

He gets in close to me, throwing a couple of jabs. Yet he doesn't seem to be trying to connect.

I hit him a couple of times. I, too, am holding back, trying to figure out what exactly feels off about his approach. I don't like niggling feelings of unease. I like to know exactly where my discomfort is coming from.

Sandman feints, slips a jab from me, then comes in hard with a right cross. He's aiming straight for my jaw, trying to get a solid hit. I bring my left glove up just in time to deflect the blow, though it still glances off my right eyebrow. The pain is instantaneous and blinding. I can feel the skin split open, hot blood pouring down into my eye.

I jump backward, blind on that side.

Sandman is chasing after me, trying to get in another hit while I'm reeling.

What the fuck was that?

I've been hit by Sandman before. He's never had that kind of power.

The sharpness, the weight of it . . .

He's throwing a hail of punches at me, so wild and aggressive that I can hardly block them. One hits my forearm and I feel another sharp burst of pain.

This isn't normal.

That motherfucker has weights in his gloves.

I'm sure of it. The glance he exchanged with the ref. The way he started out slow, then tried to knock me out with one punch, before I could notice and call foul.

I could try to signal the ref, but I don't know if that treacherous fuck would even stop the fight. If I'm not careful, I'll get myself disqualified.

It's hard to think with the throbbing pain in my skull and the vision on my left side clouded by blood.

Sandman is still attacking relentlessly, determined to press his advantage before I can figure out what to do.

He tried to knock me out with one punch?

Well let's see how he likes it.

I duck and weave, waiting for an opening.

As soon as I see it, the smallest slice of space between his pinwheeling arms, I throw the mother of haymakers right at his nose.

My fist hits square, with a delicious crunching sound.

Sandman has had his nose broken before. But probably not this bad.

Blood pours through his gloves, drenching his bare chest and pattering down on the canvas. He drops to his knees involuntarily.

The ref stops the fight. Sandman is dragged over to his corner. His team tries to staunch the bleeding, without much success. It's too much. When he stands up, it's even worse.

Grudgingly, the ref calls the match in my favor.

The crowd roars with pleasure.

In the ring next to mine, I hear a similar howl of triumph. I look over. The Beast is standing in the center of the ring, arms raised over his head. He's just knocked out Afansi. The Viper is out of the running. Guess we won't be boxing each other after all.

The Beast barely looks winded. He bounces lightly on the balls of his feet, his burly body surprisingly agile. He's smiling a little.

It's hardly a sight to enhance my flush of victory. I look away from him, to enjoy the sight of Sandman snuffling and spitting out blood instead.

Unfortunately, I'm not exactly unscathed myself. The cut above my eye is still throbbing, weeping down the side of my face.

I head over to my own corner so Meyer can take a look at it.

"What the fuck is this?" he says furiously.

"He had metal in his gloves," I tell Meyer.

"WHAT?" he roars.

He tries to pull himself over the ropes so he can confront the ref. I gently push him back again.

"Don't bother," I say. "Fight's done. I won."

“There’s still the next one, though,” Meyer says darkly.

“Sandman paid off the ref, guaranteed. We won’t have the same ref next time, or another fighter that dirty.”

“Mmm,” Meyer grunts.

His face is more wrinkled than ever from his deep scowl.

I know what he’s thinking.

He’s thinking it might not have been Sandman who made a deal with the ref. It could have been one of the Bratva with a heavy bet on Sandman. Even Krupin himself. It’s a near certainty that the bosses are betting on the fights, just like everyone else. And the Bratva is hardly known for fair play.

If that’s the case, then I might have worse coming my way next fight.

Krupin was watching the Beast’s fight, not mine. Still, he comes over to my ring just as I’m climbing out.

From his smile, it doesn’t look like he lost money on my win. Impossible to tell, though.

“That was a nice hit,” he tells me.

“Thanks,” I say.

“He got his licks in, though.” Krupin nods toward my eye.

“It’s fine,” I say.

“Go see my doctor,” Krupin says.

He points toward the metal door in the far wall.

I’d rather just have Meyer stitch me up, but I don’t want to snub Krupin for no reason. So I push my way through the crowd toward the opposite side of the room. Several people reach out to touch my arms, my shoulders, and my back as I pass. Like rubbing a statue for luck, I guess.

In a hurry to get this over with, I push the door open a little too hard.

The only person inside the infirmary is the blonde girl I saw at the first fight. She jumps up, startled by the sound of the door hitting the wall.

I know she recognizes me, the same as I do her. She freezes in place, a wash of pink tinting her pale cheeks.

“Where’s the doctor?” I ask her gruffly.

She blushes all the more.

“I’m the doctor,” she says.

She hardly seems old enough to be in college. Seeing the look of disbelief on my face, she scowls.

“Sit down,” she snaps, pointing to a padded table.

I sit down on it, the table groaning slightly beneath my weight.



The girl marches over to the sink. She washes her hands, dries them, then arranges a tray of instruments.

The way she moves is quick and capable. Maybe she is trained after all. Since I've only been to the doctor once in my life, I picture them all as old men with frizzled gray hair and bad breath, like the one I saw.

I certainly don't picture a gorgeous young woman who looks like she should be ice skating and drinking cocoa with the other privileged children of the St. Petersburg elite.

She approaches me, lifting up her slim hands to clean the cut on my face.

She has to stand quite close to do this. She's trying to be brusque and businesslike, but I can tell she's nervous, standing within reach of my large, bloodstained hands. I haven't even taken off my gloves yet. The scarlet stains look garish against the white leather.

There's blood on my shorts too, and on my bare chest and shoulders.

The girl is so neat and clean compared to me. I can smell her light floral perfume and the soap on her skin.

It makes me conscious of the fact that my own skin is glistening with sweat. My hair, too. My bloody gloves smell like iron.

I don't think she means to be gentle, yet her hands are deft and careful as she cleans the blood from my face. She is skilled, after all. I judged her wrong. I don't do that very often.

Once the cut is clean, she readies a syringe. Probably lidocaine—at least, that's what Meyer keeps on hand.

"Don't bother," I tell her.

My voice makes her jump again. She's strung so tight, like a high note. Her whole body quivers. I don't know how she found herself in this place, with a brute like me. She obviously hates it.

She draws back, fixing me with her clear blue eyes, framed by elegant glasses. She probably wears those glasses to appear more serious, more studious. To block the lustful looks of men like me.

It's a lost cause. As ridiculous as the Clark Kent disguise on Superman. Her beauty is impossible to hide. The glasses only emphasize the color and clarity of her eyes.

"You need stitches," she tells me, holding up the syringe once more.

"Go ahead," I say. "But I don't need the shot."

She sets the syringe down on the tray, folding her arms across her chest.

“You don’t have to be a tough guy,” she says. “God knows, that’s the default around here.”

“I’m not trying to impress you,” I tell her. “I don’t need it.”

That only seems to irritate her more.

“Why are you being so stubborn?” she demands.

I shrug. I don’t know if I’m stubborn or not. I probably am.

She bites her lip. For reasons I don’t understand, tears are gathering in her blue eyes.

I don’t know why my refusal is making her so mad. Maybe it’s nothing to do with me at all—maybe I’m just another person frustrating and confusing her.

I’m not a tender person. Most days I feel nothing but coldness—a gray fog that fills me up, seeping out of my lungs. If I feel anything at all, it’s just a spark of anger or disgust.

Most people in my world have learned to hide their emotions.

Not this girl. She’s not one of us. Everything she feels is broadcast in her face, her voice, her movements, even the flush of her skin.

Seeing her pain so clearly forces me to feel it myself. I feel a strange kind of sorrow. Is it pity?

I pull off my glove. I lay my bare hand lightly on top of hers.

“I’m sorry,” I say to her. “If you want to use the shot, go ahead.”

She blinks, one tear trailing down her cheek.

I don’t touch people, usually. It frightens them.

In this instance, it actually seems to relax the girl.

Her shoulders drop down from their defensive position. She takes a long breath. I feel her exhalation on my skin as she lets it out again.

“I don’t like the fights,” she says softly. “I’m afraid someone’s going to get hurt.”

I’m looking into her face. I see the delicate Cupid’s bow of her upper lip, the full lower lip still trembling slightly. Tiny teardrops bead in her dark lashes.

I’m mesmerized by this woman. What is she doing here? She’s so out of place. I’ve never seen a girl like her walk down my street, let alone plant herself in the center of this dirty, nasty underground world.

I realize I’m still resting my hand on hers. Her skin is the softest thing I’ve ever touched. I pull my hand back, leaving a smear of blood on her knuckle.

The sight of that blood of her flawless skin embarrasses me. I shouldn't have touched her. I shouldn't have marked her.

I drop my eyes, trying to get control of myself.

"Go on," I say, nodding toward the needle and thread. My voice comes out harsher than I intend.

She picks them up. Placing one hand on my forehead, she starts to sew.

I've had enough stitches by now that the sensation is all too familiar to me. Like people who come to enjoy tattoos, I almost like it.

The real reason I didn't want the shot is because I need to feel every moment of this. I need to take it as a warning.

I got hit tonight.

That can't happen again.





## SASHA

I'm embarrassed that I cried in front of the boxer. I don't know why it happened. I didn't cry when Krupin signed me into indentured servitude, or when Yakov grabbed me, or when Stepanov wouldn't stop undressing me with his eyes. I've been fending off constant advances from these gangsters who think they can grab and take anything they want.

Then Snow came in, looking meaner and tougher than any of them. He was so disdainful at first—I know he didn't believe I was a doctor. In the moment, I didn't feel like one. I felt like an inexperienced child, fumbling around with the equipment. He wouldn't let me give him the injection of anesthetic—because he didn't trust me.

I was so frustrated. I felt that he wouldn't have been stubborn if I were a man. I would have authority. He'd respect me.

None of these men respect me. They only see me as something to use.

As if to prove my own worthlessness, tears burned in my eyes.

Snow looked at me and his face softened. He stripped off his glove and put his hand over mine.

I've furiously avoided being touched by these men.

But somehow, this was different.

It was the first time anyone touched me with kindness instead of lust.

I couldn't believe his big, rough hands could be tender. I was surprised by the sympathy in his face as he looked at me.

The moment stretched on and on. I don't think either of us wanted it to end. For that instant, I didn't have to be defensive, and he didn't have to be brutal.

But then he pulled his hand away, turning cold and harsh once more.

He said to hurry up and stitch him, which I did. Then he left the infirmary without another word.

As soon as he was gone, all the strength seemed to go out of me.

I had experienced such a quick rise of emotion: annoyance, frustration, sorrow, then gratitude . . . dropping down into disappointment again. It wrung me out.

Yet there were several boxers left to see. The next one had his nose smashed to a pulp, and he was furious about it. His entourage had to hold his arms so I could examine him, because he wanted to jump up and rage around the room.

I checked the break, looking as best I could for signs of injury to the eye or brain. I couldn't do anything the right way, with the paucity of equipment. The boxer really should have gone to a proper hospital for an MRI, or an X-Ray at the very least.

"I should reset it and splint it," I told him.

"No fucking way!" he howled.

"It's been broken before," his trainer said callously. "It'll probably break again."

"The airway can be impeded if it's not set right . . ." I tried to tell them.

They didn't seem to care. I sent them away with a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory and a fistful of painkillers.

I stumbled home at 2:00 a.m., utterly exhausted, my clothes filthy and bloodstained.

No one waited up for me. I didn't expect Mila to do it—I knew she had class in the morning. I didn't expect it of Mama, either. I never expect anything from her. But I did hope that Papa would support me at least. I hoped he could be a listening ear. A source of comfort.

Instead, I think he's trying to pretend the whole thing isn't happening. He doesn't ask me what I'm doing for Krupin, where I'm going or when I'll be back. Only Mila and I talk about it in private. My parents act like nothing's changed at all, as if I'm out with friends or at an internship.

For Papa, the daily work at the restaurant is much the same as ever. Probably better, as more customers are coming in. It's all Bratva. But that's not so different than the old days—he used to serve them before, along with the businessmen and socialites.

Of course, all the profit goes to Krupin now. I don't think Papa minds—it all went to Mama before.

Mama is the one who feels the most like a victim, I think. She's been drinking more than ever since we took away her credit cards. She mopes around the house, sighing tragically.

I'm almost starting to hate her. I don't want to; it makes me feel horribly guilty. But I'm so angry at her.

Growing up, I always adored Mama. She was the prettiest of all the mothers, the sweetest. She was always kissing me and complimenting me and buying me little gifts.

All her cheerfulness has melted away under the harsh glare of reality. Her high spirits, her affection for all of us, is just spun sugar that can't stand the heat of actual adversity.

I try not to resent her. I know she was spoiled and coddled, raised to be pampered, not to struggle.

But so was I. And I'm not melting into a puddle of goo.

I'm strong, because I have to be.

In a bid to keep my spirits up, I'm actually going to be social today. I got a call from an old friend from secondary school, Galina Melnik. Her father owns a mining company.

We're going to meet up at a cafe, with a few other friends. Most have graduated from university by now, taking jobs in government or finance, or with their fathers' companies.

Of course if Krupin calls me, I'll have to rush away. But he only summons me about half the days, so my odds aren't bad of making it through our coffee date.

Galina runs over squealing as soon as she sees me. I compliment her on her new haircut, a sleek black bob. For a moment, everything seems warm and comfortable between us, as if no time has passed at all. She still laughs in the same way and tells the same kinds of jokes about the people we knew in secondary school.

As more of our old friends arrive, I feel buoyed up by the hugs and cheerfulness, and by the quick flow of news. Galina has a new puppy. Vera and Samar are engaged—though not to each other. Kolya just came back from a holiday in Spain.

I could almost forget where I've been, and what I've been doing the last few weeks. I almost believe I'm as happy and carefree as I'm pretending to

be.

I find myself coming up with easy lies to answer all their questions.

“What hospital are you working for?”

“Oh, I’m actually working for a private client. A wealthy older man.”

“Is it very boring?”

“No, it’s not boring.”

“How’s your family?”

“Good! Only tired of winter.”

“Aren’t we all!”

Almost two hours pass by as we order several rounds of lattes, croissants, and the cafe’s famous crumb cake.

Truth be told, I can’t really afford the expensive food at Buzz, not with the meager salary Krupin pays me, which all goes to support my family. Luckily Galina and the others have been buying my food, in celebration of me coming back to St. Petersburg.

Krupin’s cellphone has yet to buzz. Now and then I slip my hand in my pocket to clutch it convulsively, like a cursed artifact I long to lose but can’t live without.

I had planned to go home directly afterward. Galina convinces me that we ought to walk the shops along Sadovya Street. I can’t buy anything, but it would be fun to window shop.

“Why not!” I say.

We all get up in a bustle of coats, scarves, gloves, and last bites of pastry. We’re a boisterous bunch, full of laughter and jokes many years old. The rest of the cafe patrons are probably glad to see us leaving.

As we push out the front doors of the cafe, I walk straight into a man with the mass and solidity of a brick wall.

He puts his arm around my waist to stop me from stumbling backward. That thick, calloused hand, the arm like an iron bar, the ice-blue eyes looking down into mine . . . I recognize it all at once. It’s the boxer called Snow.

“Hello,” he says.

Staring at the pair of us, my friends have gone silent. They would have already stared at Snow, with his terrifying size and brutal face. But when he greets me, they realize that we know each other.

I can feel their curiosity, their shock.



Snow looks more alarming than ever, wearing the kind of rough canvas jacket that dock workers wear and a sweatshirt underneath with the hood up. He's got the manners and bearing of a criminal. Galina and Vera exchange glances, noticing the tattoos on his hands and the gash above his left eyebrow—the cut I stitched myself only the day before.

Snow perceives the obvious distaste of my friends as quickly as I do. He's not stupid, whatever his brutish appearance might suggest. He lets go of me as soon as he's set me on my feet. He stuffs his hands back in the pockets of his jacket, his expression surlier than ever.

He pushes through the crowd of my friends, striding off down the street.

For a moment I'm relieved. I don't know how I could possibly introduce him to my school friends. The questions that would bring up would be unanswerable.

However, I feel a twinge, watching his broad back disappearing among the crowd of afternoon shoppers.

As impossible as it seems, I thought I saw a hint of hurt on his face when I didn't reply to his greeting.

In truth, I was simply shocked to see him.

I think he thought I was embarrassed of him.

"Who was *that*?" Vera cries, wrinkling her nose.

In one of those strange twists of perspective, for a moment I see my friends as Snow must have seen us: loud, arrogant, frivolous, and spoiled. I see our designer purses and imported shoes—not the flashy stuff the gangsters buy in the shops at the mall, but the preppy Italian and Parisian brands you get abroad, traveling over spring break.

I *am* embarrassed.

But not of Snow.

"I've got to go," I say to Galina.

"What?" she says. "Where are you—"

I don't hear the rest of her sentence because I'm already running down the street, dashing off in the direction that Snow disappeared.

It's crazy running after him. It's only going to confuse my friends all the more. And I have no idea what I'll say to Snow if I actually find him.

Still, I hurry along in suede boots completely unsuited to running, growing increasingly hot and sweaty until a deep voice says, "Are you chasing me?"

Snow is leaning up against an Audi, hands still stuffed in his pockets, watching me run right by him.

I slow down, pressing my hand against a stitch on my side.

“Yes,” I puff, “I was, a bit. Is that your car?”

“No,” he says.

He doesn’t stop leaning on it.

“So?” he says.

“So what?”

“What were you chasing me for?” he says patiently.

“Well,” I pant, “you said ‘hello.’ And I didn’t say ‘hi’ back.”

Snow snorts. It’s the first time I’ve seen him smile. I wasn’t actually sure, up until this point, if he had any teeth, or if they’d all been knocked out by other boxer’s fists. I’m surprised to see that he has very nice, white, even teeth. Even more shocking, he has dimples on either side of his mouth.

“That’s a lot of trouble to say hello,” he says.

“I didn’t mean to ignore you,” I tell him. “I was just surprised to see you there.”

His smile drops away, his face darkening. He straightens up, reminding me how extraordinarily tall he is. I feel like a little mouse next to him.

“Is there some law against walking down Sadovaya?” he says.

“Well, no . . .” I stammer.

We both know that I was surprised because it’s a posh neighborhood, full of tourists and wealthy students, not people like him.

“Do you . . . live there?” I ask, hesitantly.

“No,” he admits. “I live in Kupchino.”

He waits for me to say something else stupid, like, “*That’s what I figured.*” I’m not going to do that, though.

Instead I say, “Where are you going?”

He hesitates a moment. He doesn’t seem to want to tell me, which makes me think he must be visiting a girl, or else doing something shady. At last he says, “I was going to see the Aurora.”

“The cruiser?”

“Yes,” he says defensively.

It’s so odd that I almost want to laugh, but I wouldn’t risk offending him again.

“Have you seen it before?” I ask him politely.

“A few times,” he says.

What an intriguing mystery. The Aurora is basically a floating museum. I wouldn't have pegged Snow as someone who liked to wander around museums on his afternoon off.

I'm coming to realize that I don't know this man at all. My assumptions have all been shallow and foolish.

"Could I . . . come with you?" I ask him.

Now it's his turn to look surprised.

"I suppose," he says.

It's not exactly a warm invitation, but I'm determined to go. Before I can think too much about it, I slip my arm through his, the way I do with all of my friends when we walk together. Of course, his arm feels nothing like theirs—more like solid steel than human flesh. Still, he's warm, and his grip is firm.

I quite like the way it feels.





## SNOW

*A person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn and not easily mended.*

— IAN MCEWAN

I'm not sure why I told the doctor I was going to the Aurora. I'm even less sure why I let her come along with me. As soon as I agree, she links her arm through mine like I'm a fucking gentleman, escorting her along.

She's so odd and impulsive.

Tender-hearted, too. I know she chased after me because she felt bad about snubbing me on the street.

Compassion is dangerous in our world. And it is her world now, the same as mine. She needs to close herself up, or she'll be torn apart like a fawn in the woods.

I meant to walk all the way to the permanent mooring point of the cruiser, but it's a long way. Sasha doesn't strike me as someone used to tramping all over the city.

Plus, I don't like all the people looking at us. Sasha is dressed like the innocent she is, and I look like a thug. Shoppers eye us suspiciously, like I might be taking her somewhere to mug her. Sasha doesn't seem to care about the stares, but I don't want to run into any more of her friends. I hail a cab to take us the rest of the way.

The dock where the ship moors are crowded with people. Even though it's still winter, the air carries the first hint of spring. The sun is shining, without a single cloud in a dome of sky so clear that it looks like a painted ceiling.

I buy our tickets.

"I can get my own," Sasha says quickly.

I just shake my head.

We wait in line to board the ship, walking along the rickety gangplank onto the cruiser itself. It's a long, sleek ship, with three tall smokestacks. The hull is painted dull gray, with a stripe of green along the waterline. It's so large that we can hardly feel the movement of the water once we're aboard.

I can tell that Sasha's still curious why I wanted to come here. She isn't questioning me, though. She's just waiting to see.

She follows me around a bit. Then she gets sucked into all the plaques and exhibits inside the ship. She's studying and reading and running her fingertips along anything not roped off or enclosed in glass.

I've been all over the ship before, so I let her take the lead on what she wants to see. She starts running around like a kid, poking into the captain's quarters, then trying to lift one of the massive artillery shells up on the deck. She's grinning and pointing things out to me.

Like the night before, her emotions are contagious. I start feeling excited and curious myself. I don't know why she has this effect on me. I don't mind it.

I can't help looking at Sasha more than at the displays. She's dressed differently than at the fights. There, she tries to make herself invisible, not that it works. She can't hide how beautiful she is.

Today, she looks much more relaxed.

She's wearing a long dove-gray coat with wooden buttons. Beneath that, suede boots of the same color that come up just over her knee. When she walks, I can see the tiniest sliver of bare skin between the top of the boots and the bottom of the coat. It keeps drawing my eyes when it flashes into view. Somehow, it's much more tantalizing than completely bare legs.

She's not wearing her glasses today, which makes her look even younger. Her white-blond hair is loose from its braid, spilling out around her shoulders from under a knitted cap. In the dim light inside the ship, her hair looks almost silver.

I wonder if she didn't want me to pay for her because this might seem like a date.

Have I ever taken a girl on a real date?

Usually I just fuck them after parties or fights.

Not that I don't want to fuck Sasha. Of course I do, I wanted to the minute I laid eyes on her. You can't see a girl that gorgeous without picturing what she looks like naked. Especially when she's trying so hard to conceal the kind of figure men write songs about.

But there's something about Sasha that makes me want to do more than just fuck her.

I actually want to talk to her. When usually I don't like talking to anybody.

I want to know what she's doing, working for Krupin. I want to know why she ran after me on the street. I want to know why she's a doctor at all, when she obviously comes from money. I recognized one of those kids outside the cafe—he's the son of the Minister of Culture. None of that lot will end up working in a state hospital, that's for sure.

I like watching Sasha wander around the ship. It's funny—I've spent more time studying how men move than I have women. Sasha has her own rhythm, her own timing. She's not jabbing and punching, but she does have a pattern in the way she tilts her head to the right as she reads a placard, then combs her hair with her fingers, lost in thought.

I know what she's reading without looking over her shoulder.

It's propaganda about the October Revolution. That's why the Aurora is famous—it fired the first shot signaling the attack on the Winter Palace. I don't care about that, though. There's only one reason I come back here again and again.

Eventually, we make our way to a small, dark hallway below deck, where pictures of previous crews are posted. Crews from the Russo-Japanese War, then both World Wars.

Dozens of young men, some uniformed and serious, others laughing and talking or doing their work. The pictures were taken in the calm before the storm, when the men were trained but not fighting yet. Who knows which ones survived and which were shot or drowned.

"There," I say to Sasha, pointing to a picture hung on the wall.

It's a young man, sixteen or seventeen, wearing the flat cap and the long blue coat of the Soviet naval infantry, with the red star on his sleeve. He's

smoking a cigarette, the cigarette pinched between his index finger and thumb. He squints and grins up at the camera. Though the photograph is black and white, you can still tell he has pale blue eyes and dimples on either side of his mouth.

Sasha looks between the photograph and me, her eyes wide.

“Are you a vampire?” she says.

I laugh.

“That’s my uncle.”

He’s my great-uncle, actually—my mother’s uncle.

Sasha examines his face, and mine. He wasn’t big like me, but otherwise we could be twins.

“Did you know him well?” Sasha says.

She knows that if I come all the way out here to see his picture, he must mean something to me. More than the average uncle.

“I lived with him for a while,” I tell her.

“Where were your parents?” Sasha asks.

“Wherever junkie trash goes,” I say.

I don’t actually remember what my mom and dad look like. I only have my mother’s word on who my father actually was, and her word was worth a lot less than a dime bag. So his face is a mystery to me. As for my mother, I never saw her again after my fourth birthday.

I lived with Igor for five years. When he died, the neighbors packed me off to the orphanage and ransacked his house.

Sasha looks pained. I didn’t bring her here to try to get sympathy. I hate sympathy, generally speaking.

“Is that . . . the only picture you have of him?” she asks me.

I nod.

They didn’t let us keep any personal belongings at the orphanage.

Everything my uncle owned was thrown away or sold long before I saw his house again.

Sasha glances around quickly. The ship as a whole is full of people—visitors, and the active officers who live on-site, maintaining the cruiser and running it as a museum. However, this corridor is one of the least-trafficked areas, remote and not containing any artifacts besides the photos. It’s dark and it stinks like gasoline and paint.

“We could take it,” Sasha whispers.

“What?”



“There’s nobody around. You could take the picture home. Then you wouldn’t have to come all the way out here to see it.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“I thought you were a good girl,” I say.

Sasha blushes.

“It sort of belongs to you anyway,” she says.

“Sort of,” I say.

It’s not a terrible idea. My uncle was a good man—patient. Hard-working. Not kind, exactly, but always fair. I’d like to have something of his.

On the other hand, he loved his time in the Navy. He talked about it often, especially in his last year or two. I like seeing him grinning up there with the other officers around him. If I take his photo down, there will just be an empty space.

“I think it belongs here,” I say to Sasha.

“Alright,” she says, not offended that I didn’t take her suggestion. “You’re probably right.”

Now Sasha knows more about me than most people. But I still don’t know anything about her.

As we disembark the ship, I ask her, “Are you hungry?”

She smiles.

“I could eat.”

I take her to a little restaurant close to my apartment. I can see she’s nervous, coming to this part of town. It’s a far cry from the tourist district outside the Buzz cafe. Once she tries the pelmeni though, she becomes a lot more enthusiastic.

“This is amazing!” she says.

“It’s the real deal.”

“I thought our chef Lyosha made the best pelmeni. These might be even better, though I’d never tell him that.”

“Your chef?” I assume she means a private chef at her parents’ house.

“My father owned a restaurant,” she says. “He still runs it. But it belongs to Krupin now.”

Without any prodding from me, she tells me the whole story. I’m honestly amazed when she gets to the part about her showing up at Krupin’s house, all alone and late at night. I didn’t realize she had that kind of grit in

her. I'm not surprised at all at her willingness to sacrifice herself for her family. She has a warm heart and she's loyal, that's obvious.

She loves with all of herself, not holding anything back.

What would it be like, to be loved by a woman like that?

A guy like me is never gonna know.

"Why'd you go to medical school anyway?" I ask her. "Why didn't you just marry some minister or banker, one of your friends from school or one of the rich men that come into your father's restaurant?"

"Because I don't want to!" Sasha says angrily.

"Why not?" I say. "You want romance?"

The question sounds mocking, though I don't mean it to be.

Sasha doesn't care.

"Yes, I want romance!" she says, unashamed. "I want passion and love and connection. I want ambition and goals, too. I want struggle and experience. Failure, then success. I want it all, every last drop of it. I don't want to live and die for nothing."

The people I know don't talk like this. They talk about survival, not dreams.

Sasha leans forward across the table. Her deep blue eyes look up at me, her expression so sincere that it hurts.

"You must have something too," she says. "Something you want, or even just imagine . . ."

I do have something.

I've never said it out loud, not once. Not to anybody.

*Deeds, not words.* My uncle used to say that.

Meyer has a similar motto, phrased in his own way: *Don't expect a fucking attaboy for a plan. I'll pat you on the back when you have the trophy in your hands.*

Still, I want to say it once. To hear how crazy it sounds.

"I want to go to America," I tell her. "I want to fight for the heavyweight belt in the WBC championship."

Sasha doesn't laugh. She doesn't even scoff.

"Where is it?" she says. "Where's the championship?"

"This year it's in Las Vegas," I tell her. "Sometimes it's other places."

"What's the WBC?" she asks. "Explain it all to me."

"Well, there's not just one world heavyweight title," I tell her. "There's the Russian Boxing Federation here, and then on an international scale,

you've got the World Boxing Association, the World Boxing Council, the International Boxing Federation, and the World Boxing Organization, all with their own belts. If you really wanted to call yourself the champion, you'd have to take all four titles."

"So what's special about the WBC championship?" she asks.

I shrug.

"It's classic. When I picture it, that's what I see: me fighting for the WBC belt at Madison Square Gardens, like Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier did."

She sits quietly, as if she's picturing the same thing in her mind. Weighing my chances. Is it a dream, or just a fantasy?

After a moment, she nods her head, slowly.

"I can see it," she says. "But then, why are you fighting underground?"

"I need the money," I tell her. "If I win this whole tournament with Krupin, that'll be enough cash to get me to New York. I could train there, get my licensure, start working my way up through the legitimate leagues."

Sasha nods again, biting her lip.

"I used to think I might like to go to America, too," she says. "Doctors are like celebrities there. Have you ever seen Doctor Oz?"

I shake my head.

Sasha laughs.

"Don't you ever watch TV?" she says.

"Not much," I admit. "I like movies, though."

We talk for a while about our favorite movies. Sasha tells me how her sister would take the train to Moscow to visit her during the Film Festival, and I tell her how Boom Boom and I first bonded over sports movies, since I childishly love the triumph of the underdog, and Boom Boom loves all things American.

Our plates are empty. The waiter is starting to hover, wondering if we're ever going to pay our bill.

I don't want to, because then this afternoon will be over, and I don't think it could ever happen again. The spell will break. Sasha will go back to whatever posh house she lives in, in whatever fancy neighborhood. We'll be back to how we were.

"How did you know about this place?" Sasha asks me, pushing aside her plate at last.

"I live right there."

I point to my apartment building across the street, visible through the front window of the restaurant.

“Oh,” Sasha says.

It’s an ugly building: stained brown brick, with shops on the lower level, and a jumble of tiny flats above. This whole neighborhood is ugly. Kupchino is like an island, stranded between an industrial zone, railway lines, and the ring road in the south. It’s got no underground station, barely any amenities at all. Just a lot of hideous block buildings from the 70s, and a legacy of violence and crime.

Sasha is right to avoid it. I probably shouldn’t have brought her here at all.

She’s still looking out the window, though. Peering up at my building.

“Could I . . . see it?” Sasha asks hesitantly.

With any other girl, I’d take it as an invitation. But I don’t think she’s even considering that. She’s curious about me, just as I am about her.

We’re like citizens of two different countries, able to speak the same language, but still foreign to each other.

Sasha insists on paying for the food, since I bought the tickets for the museum. I watch her count out the bills from her wallet, coming up short, then hunting for change in her purse.

“Just a moment,” she says to the waiter, red-faced. “I’m sure I have another ten.”

“Sasha,” I say gently, “please let me pay.”

I pay the whole of the bill, shoving her rubles back into her purse before she can argue.

“I won my fights, remember,” I tell her. “I’m practically rich.”

I guess from a certain perspective, I am richer than Sasha’s family. They owe Krupin a staggering sum of money. I may not have much, but at least I don’t owe anybody anything.

I’ve made a lot of stupid choices over the years, but the one thing I swore I’d never do is go into debt to the Bratva. Once they own you, you might as well kill yourself, because your life as a free man is over.

Of course, I don’t like looking at it that callously when it comes to Sasha. I don’t want her life to be over.

Sasha follows me across the street. Now she’s the one who stands out, drawing looks for her expensive coat, boots, and bag. She looks as out of place as I did on Sadovaya. I see a couple of street toughs eyeing her. While

I'm walking along beside her, they don't dare try to snatch her purse, or even catcall her.

We have to climb six flights of stairs up to my flat—there's no elevator. I'm conscious of how musty and dank the stairwell is. When I'm alone, I don't pay attention to these things. But with Sasha, I can't help but see how ugly and run-down it must look to her eyes. I unlock the door to my apartment, letting her walk inside first.

The flat is tiny and dark, its sole window looking out into the narrow alleyway. The walls are bare. I don't have books or artwork or rugs or any of the things I'm sure Sasha is used to. It probably looks like a prison cell.

She glances around, taking it in. This doesn't take long, because it's so small.

"You're so tidy," she says, turning to smile at me. "Not like my sister. Her room's like one of those *Where's Waldo* books—have you ever seen those?"

I shake my head.

"They're a big jumble of objects and people, and you're supposed to find this little man called Waldo . . . anyway, Mila's room looks like that. Like it could be hiding a whole person in it," Sasha laughs.

"You're not messy, though," I say.

"How do you know?"

I shrug.

"You're the responsible one. Always taking care of everyone else."

"That's right," Sasha says, surprised.

She sighs.

"It's tiring . . . sometimes I wish somebody else would take a turn."

Unlike Sasha, I don't have a nurturing bone in my body.

But in that moment, looking at her pale face, her large blue eyes with the smudge of dark circles under them from all her late nights working for Krupin, I think that could change. I feel a strong desire to take care of her. To protect her.

She deserves to have a champion.

Without meaning to, we've drawn closer to each other in the center of the room. My flat is just a studio—the living room and bedroom are one space, with a low divider closing off the kitchenette. My bed is only a few feet away, the covers pulled tight and turned back, as we were taught to do at the orphanage.

I can see Sasha's eyes widen as she realizes that we're all alone now. All the time we've been together today, she forgot to be frightened of me. Now she remembers how much bigger and stronger I am than her, and that she doesn't really know me at all.

I don't want to scare her.

But I'm aching to touch her.

I take one step closer.

Now I can smell that delicate perfume rising up off her skin—like lilac blossoms in the spring, when the rain falls on them. Something I've only smelled a few times, living deep in the city. You don't forget it, though.

Just like I don't think I could ever forget the soft pink color of Sasha's lips and cheeks, next to the deep blue of her eyes.

I'd like to burn more images into my brain . . .

Specifically, I want to see what she looks like under that coat . . .

Sasha's lips part. She takes a deep breath, as if she's about to dive into the ocean.

It's all the invitation I need.

I bend my head to kiss those soft, full lips.

I intend to be gentle. I really do. But the moment my lips meet hers, and my tongue slips between her lips to taste her mouth, my lust inflames ten-fold.

It's like how the first bite of food can ignite your hunger. As soon as I taste her, I want to devour her.

I grab her by the shoulders and pull her body tight against mine. I kiss her harder and deeper, forcing my tongue all the way into her mouth. I thrust my right hand into her silver-blond hair. It wraps around my fingers, fine as spider's silk.

With my left hand, I start to undo the wooden buttons of her coat.

I want to rip the clothes off of her. I would, if that coat weren't so damned expensive. Instead, I force myself to undo each button in turn.

When I come to the third one down from the neck, Sasha lays her hand over mine.

"Wait," she gasps. "I . . . I should tell you something . . ."

Her hand is tight on mine, almost trembling. She's nervous . . .

I realize the truth without Sasha even saying it.

She's a virgin. It's obvious from her timidity, from the way she touches me, then draws back her hands, then touches me again. She doesn't

know quite what to do.

She really is a good girl, like I said.

It's probably the only thing that could give me pause. This is no back-alley blowjob, not for her.

Not for me, either.

"Do you want to stop?" I ask her.

She hesitates. I see her flushed cheeks, her quick breath. She wants this as much as I do.

"No," she says. "Don't stop."

She stands on tiptoe to kiss me again.

I unbutton her coat the rest of the way and slip it down off her shoulders. Underneath, she has on a wool dress. This, too, has buttons. If I were going to be tortured for eternity, the demons of hell would wrap Sasha up in endless layers of clothing with hundreds of buttons.

The only consolation is that each one I undo reveals another inch of her creamy skin. First her throat, then her delicate breastbone, then the swells of her breasts, larger than I would have guessed. I come to the lacy cups of her bra—a dusty rose color, a little darker than her lips.

Three more buttons and I'm following down the centerline of her navel, to her bellybutton, and then to the matching lace panties that are paper-thin, but probably pricier than anything I own. How do upper-class women learn to dress themselves so perfectly, all the way down to their underwear? It's a far cry from the cheap, bright nylon thongs I usually see. If the girls are wearing underwear at all.

Everything about Sasha is perfectly groomed and classy, from her hair down to her pedicure. Everything she owns looks brand new—not a single scuff on her purse or boots. Her soap and perfume smell expensive. Her skin is flawless.

By contrast, when I strip off her dress at last and put my hands around her waist, I see how much darker and rougher my own skin is, not to mention covered in tattoos. I'm a library book that's been drawn all over, while Sasha's spine has never even been cracked.

Maybe I should be ashamed of the differences between us.

Sasha isn't. She's examining me just the same, pulling off my coat and hoodie, running her hands over my chest and arms. Her fingertips linger over my tattoos, like she's never seen one up close before. She traces their

lines, then she bends her head to my chest and trails her tongue across my skin.

That flushes away any last bit of hesitation I might have had.

I can't just stand here next to this gorgeous girl in her skimpy lingerie, her body lush and ripe for the picking, wondering whether I actually deserve to touch her or not.

Instinct takes over. I lift her up and carry her to my bed.







## SASHA

**I**t will sound impossibly naive to say that I wasn't even thinking of sex when I asked to see Snow's apartment. I was caught up in the discovery of this man, who wasn't at all who I expected the first time I laid eyes on him.

The first time I saw him, he honestly horrified me. He looked like the biggest and most brutish of all the boxers—the epitome of everything that terrified me about the Bratva's underground boxing ring.

To find him perceptive, gentle, even kind . . . it seemed impossible.

It intrigued me.

The whole day happened so quickly and impulsively that it swept me away.

Before I know it, I'm standing inside his flat, which is tiny but incredibly clean and well-organized, almost like a military barrack. Not a single dish on the counter or in the sink of the little kitchenette. The bed made with geometric precision. I might have found it cold and sterile, but I'm quickly learning with Snow that the chilly exterior is just his shell. Underneath, there's so much more to him.

This point is driven home a hundredfold when he takes me in his arms and kisses me. It's not a grabbing, fumbling kiss like the few I've had before. Those were kisses from boys.

Snow kisses me like a man. He's tasting me, exploring me. And most of all, taking possession of me. Those other boys were like shoppers in a store, poking and prodding. Snow is picking me up and taking me home.

His thick arms circle around me. They are utterly irresistible. He could break me in half if he tightened those arms a little further.

His mouth is hot and insistent. His tongue delves into my mouth. I can feel my lips warming and swelling in response. My lips and tongue become so sensitive that those few inches of skin seem to provide an acre of sensation.

He begins to unbutton my coat and I'm aching, longing for him to slip those heavy hands inside and run them down the length of my body.

Only then do I remember that what happens next has never happened to me at all, except in my imagination.

I don't know the first thing about sex.

I had boyfriends in secondary school, but they all knew what a goody-two-shoes I was. They never tried anything besides slipping a hand up my shirt, which I usually slapped away.

In university I was willing to go further, but I never had any boyfriends at all. I didn't have time to date, not with the relentless schedule of classes and exams.

If I'd pictured my first time, it wouldn't have been in a seedy apartment, in one of the worst neighborhoods in town, with a boxer still bruised and battered from his last fight. For god's sake, I don't even know his real name! It can't be Snow.

But I think his lips must have some kind of aphrodisiac on them, because I'm aroused like I've never been before in my life. It's driving me insane, how much I want this man.

Maybe it's biological—I know more about sex drives than I do about actual sex. The last remaining logical part of my brain is telling me that I only want this man because he's the biggest and strongest and most virile-looking specimen I've ever seen.

I've read the studies on sexual attraction. I know that Snow's height, his hip to waist ratio, his muscle mass and symmetry, are all silent signals to my brain. And that's not even mentioning the intangibles like how fucking fantastic he smells. I first noticed it when I stitched up his face. He was dripping with sweat from his fight, not wearing any cologne. Yet the closer I stood to him, and the more I inhaled the scent of his skin, the harder my heart hammered against my breastbone.

I know all this. However, being conscious of something is not the same as being able to resist it. I'm weak with longing for him. Whatever he wants

from me, however he wants it, I can only say yes.

He picks me up and throws me down on his bed. He finishes stripping off the tank top he wore beneath his hoodie, dropping it unceremoniously on the floor.

Jesus Christ, that body . . .

Muscle on muscle on muscle.

Two smooth, flat pecs the size of dinner plates, above a stack of abs that make me want to rub my tongue over each and every groove. His skin is smooth and lightly tanned—no hair, like most northern Russians. He's got tattoos running over his shoulders, down his arms, across his chest—too many to see what they are individually. I think I see a saint, some gothic lettering, and a bird.

His waist is so tight that his joggers almost hang off it. Beneath his bellybutton he has just a little hair, leading down below the waistband . . .

I had already seen him shirtless before, but that was in public. It's very different when he's looming over me, and I'm wearing only a lacy bra and panty set. Thank god I put on nice underwear today, and not the faded cotton set I wore yesterday.

Snow seems to like them. He's looking me up and down, the smallest hint of dimples showing on either side of his mouth.

He reaches out his big hands, grabbing hold of my suede boot. He unzips first the left boot, then the right, pulling them off my feet. Then he strips off my socks, too.

Now we're down to the level I've never gone past before. No guy has ever seen me naked. My nervousness about this almost surpasses my anxiety about the actual deed that follows.

Snow hooks his index fingers under the waistband of my panties and slides them down my legs. Now my pussy is completely bared to his view, under its tuft of golden hair.

Snow reaches around me, making me think he's going to climb on top of me. I feel his fingers deftly unhooking the clasp of my bra. He pulls that away too, leaving me completely nude.

He stands back to admire me.

Impulsively, I want to cover my breasts with my hands, but that would be ridiculous. Instead, I try to keep my breathing steady while his ice-blue eyes burn over the length of my body.

"Sasha," he says softly. "I've never seen anything half as beautiful."

I can feel myself blushing. The color flushes through my cheeks, all the way down my bare chest.

“I tasted your mouth. Now I’ll taste the rest of you,” he says.

Before I can protest, he’s scooped up my legs so my calves are over his shoulders, my heels resting against his broad back. His hands grip my hips, pulling my pussy up to his eager mouth. He parts my lower lips with his tongue, and then he starts to lick me where I’ve never even been touched before.

My god. If I were a poet, I would write a hundred sonnets on the pleasure of that moment. I’ve touched myself before, but much like tickling yourself, it’s a poor substitute for the real thing.

The warmth and wetness and softness of his tongue is nothing short of euphoric. It makes me so instantly soaked that, for a second, I’m afraid I wet myself.

He’s licking and rubbing and probing with his tongue, finding areas of sensation that I didn’t even know existed. Just like he did in the boxing ring, he tracks every squirm and wriggle of my body, finding my most vulnerable places, and hitting them again and again.

I know I should be quiet—from inside the apartment, I heard his neighbors out in the hallway. Which means they can hear me, too. But I can’t hold back the gasps and moans he’s wringing from my body.

He’s relentless, increasing his speed and pressure by the moment. I can feel what I’ve felt before, a climax rising and building inside of me. If what I did to myself was a firecracker, Snow is detonating an atomic bomb. The orgasm rips through my body, obliterating me like a knockout punch.

I lay back on the bed, panting and weak.

Snow lays on his side next to me, watching my breasts rise and fall with each breath.

“You like that, Doctor Drozdov?” he teases me.

“Yes,” I pant. “I like it.”

He reaches between my thighs once more, gently slipping one finger inside of me. I’m still so swollen and sensitive that it makes me shiver, but he can feel how wet I am, how relaxed.

“I think you’re ready for more,” he says.

I can’t believe I’m actually doing this.

Now he does strip off his joggers and his boxer shorts.

I’ve seen men naked before, in a clinical setting.

I never saw a specimen like this.

His cock is thick, heavy, hanging halfway down his inner thigh. As veiny as his forearm, with a head that looks a bit like a fist.

It's honestly terrifying.

There's no way that's going to fit inside me.

He strokes it with his hand, bringing it to full hardness.

Oh my god, it's even bigger than I thought. It juts out from his body like a battering ram. That cock is going to kill me.

He climbs on top of me. He's so heavy that I can feel the bed sinking under his weight. With one hand, he positions the head of his cock at my entrance.

"Be . . . be careful . . ." I beg him.

"Don't worry, Doctor," he whispers in my ear. "I'll take care of you."

I believe him. My racing heart slows just a little. I close my eyes and turn my face against his warm neck, breathing in his heady, masculine scent.

He starts to push inside me. At first it feels like a solid barrier down there—like it's not going to open for him at all. Then, inch by inch, he begins to slide inside of me.

I'm still nervous and clenching too tight. I try to take deep breaths so I can relax.

Snow is patient. He stops for a moment, kissing me again. His lips move over mine, then down the side of my neck. It feels so good. Without even meaning to, I arch my back and roll my hips, drawing a little more of him inside.

He keeps kissing me, twining his fingers through mine, where my hands are pressed down into the pillow on either side of my head. I can feel the callouses on his hands, his huge knuckles harder than iron.

He slides in the last few inches, so his body is slotted tight against mine, my legs wrapped around his thighs. There's no sharp pain or tearing as I'd feared, but I do feel stretched and filled to the absolute maximum. Now that he's inside, I'm scared of him moving. Seeming to sense this, Snow holds still, letting me get used to him.

Only once I've relaxed again does he slowly, very slowly, begin to thrust in and out of me. He does it shallowly, just a little at a time. It creates a sensation unlike anything I've felt before—it's a friction that's almost like

scratching the most teasing kind of itch. But it's far more pleasurable than that. It creates a warmth, an aching, in places I hardly knew existed.

Soon I'm moving along with him, clenching my thighs and grabbing onto his broad back so I can follow his rhythm. The more I move myself, the harder I squeeze around him, and the more intense the sensation becomes.

I keep going, squeezing harder and faster. I can feel another climax building, but this one is different than any I've had before. This one comes from deep inside me. It's not just centered around my clit—it radiates all around and up on the interior wall where the heavy head of Snow's cock is rubbing and rubbing against me.

The more it builds, the more desperate I am to tip over the edge. It feels so good and so intense that I feel like I might die if something were to interrupt us right now.

I think Snow feels the same way. He's driving into me harder and harder, as relentless as a locomotive. He's grunting and panting, building up to his own release.

I think the apartment building could collapse around us and we wouldn't stop.

I'm digging my fingers into his back, holding him as tight as I can. He's so big that I can't actually reach all the way around him. I can feel the muscles of his back flexing as he thrusts into me. I'm not scared of his size and strength anymore—I'm in awe of it. I'm transported by it.

I start to cum again.

Oh my god, the intimacy of that orgasm . . . it was one thing to cum with Snow down between my legs. It's quite enough to do it with his lips pressed against mine, our mouths open, our breath going in and out of each other's lungs. I'm tasting him, smelling the scent of his skin. He's inside of me, feeling the contractions of my pussy around his cock. He can feel the climax ripping through every muscle of my body as I grab hold of him with all my might.

Just as I'm starting to descend from the exquisite heights, Snow begins to cum himself. And I get to watch it all happen over again, as if the pleasure flowed out of my body into his. He lets out a long moan, stiffening and giving one last deep thrust inside of me. I feel a rush of warmth and wetness as he explodes. I'm surprised how distinctly I can feel this. And also surprised how much I like it. It's incredibly erotic, sharing this one last

thing with each other. He pumps three or four more times, getting out every drop.

Only then does he take his cock out of me, though he's still holding me tight in his arms.

We lay next to each other, still breathing like we've been sprinting down the street.

Snow's arm is wrapped around me, my cheek pressed against his upper chest. I can hear his heart beating, and the air rushing in and out of him with each breath.

For the first time since coming back to St. Petersburg, I feel safe and at peace. I know it's probably just the oxytocin flooding through my body, but I don't care. I just wish I could make this moment last forever.

However, it's cut short when my phone starts to buzz in my coat pocket, across the room where I abandoned it on the floor.

I know without looking that it's Yakov.

I wish he would just text me instead of calling. I hate talking to him.

I jump out of the bed, fishing my phone out of the crumpled pile of coat.

"Yes?" I say quickly.

"What took you so long?" Yakov says.

It was only a minute, but he likes needling me.

"I put my phone down," I say.

"Well don't put it down," he snaps back.

He's talking so loudly that Snow can hear it, even from the bed. Snow is sitting up against the pillows, watching me. I see him frown at Yakov's barking tone.

"Where do you need me to go?" I say to Yakov, forcing myself not to respond to his rudeness.

"I'll text it to you," he says. "Don't wear anything you don't want to get dirty."

I don't like the sound of that at all.

Once I've hung up the phone, I say to Snow, "I'm sorry, I've got to go."

"Was that Yakov?" Snow asks.

"Yeah."

"Does he always talk to you like that?"

"Yes," I say. I hastily add, "It's okay, though. He's an asshole, but I just ignore him."

"He doesn't bother you otherwise?" Snow says.



“Well . . .” I remember the day he grabbed me, and I had to threaten him with the scissors. “No,” I say. “Not usually.”

Snow scowls all the more, seeing me hesitate.

I don’t want Snow getting himself in trouble. He doesn’t have to protect me from Yakov, just because we hooked up once. Honestly, I don’t want him to get me in trouble, either.

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell him. “It’s nothing. I’m fine, everything is fine.”

I’m trying to get dressed again, as quickly as I can. I’m relieved to see I haven’t made too much of a mess of myself—no blood, thank god. I’m a little sore, but nothing that will stop me doing whatever awful job Yakov has in store for me.

Snow is getting out of the bed too, pulling on his boxer shorts.

“Do you want me to come with you?” he asks.

“No!” I say. “That’s not necessary. Actually . . .”

I hesitate. I don’t know quite how to say this.

“I really enjoyed . . . what happened. I enjoyed all of today, actually. But I don’t expect anything of you. Don’t think that I . . . just because I haven’t before . . . anyway, you don’t owe me anything. And I think it’s better if Yakov and Krupin and the others don’t know. Not that there’s anything to know . . .”

I can feel my face flaming red. I’m stammering like an idiot.

Snow is just watching me, calm and unembarrassed in his boxer shorts. He waits for me to finish. Then he nods.

“I agree,” he says. “It’s best if Krupin and his men don’t know. That will be safer for you.”

Snow understands. A woman has to be a fortress around a certain type of man. If they think there’s a hole in the wall, then they all want to come inside.

“And,” Snow adds, “I also enjoyed today.”

Now I’m blushing all the harder, but for a different reason.

The idea of Snow and I actually dating is impossible, for a hundred reasons. I can’t get romantically involved with anyone right now, especially not a boxer.

Hooking up with Snow was a one-time thing, a way to blow off steam under the immense pressure I’ve been experiencing.

I know that, logically.

Still, the irrational, immature side of myself, the part of me that hasn't yet fully accepted my new reality, is alive and well. And that part of me loved every minute of the day we spent together. That part of me wants more.

That part can't be satisfied, however.

I finish dressing as quickly as I can, buttoning up my gray wool coat and zipping up my boots. Yakov said not to wear anything fancy, but unfortunately, I don't have time to go home and change.

Snow has dressed as well, zipping up his hoody and slipping his keys into his pocket.

He holds open the apartment door for me.

"I'll wait for the cab with you," he says.

As we head down the hallway, I see one of his neighbors poke his head out the door, then quickly close it again.

"I hope he didn't hear us," I say. "Maybe he's used to that though. I'm sure he's seen plenty of girls come and go."

I say it teasingly, knowing that there's no way Snow is as inexperienced as I am. A guy with a body like that will never be lacking for female attention.

Snow just shakes his head.

"You're the only girl I've ever brought to my apartment," he says.

He says it so calmly and firmly that I'm sure he's telling the truth.

I have no idea what it means, though.





## SNOW

*There was no such thing as a fair fight. All vulnerabilities must be exploited.*

— CARY CAFFREY

I watch Sasha climb into the cab. She gives me a little smile and a wave as it pulls away, though I know she's dreading going to meet Yakov.

The sound of his snide voice on the phone made my blood boil.

Where the fuck does he get off, snapping at her like that.

Plus, I'm sure he's done a lot more than bark at her. There's no way that slimy fuck hasn't made a pass at a girl that pretty. Probably more than once.

Sasha doesn't belong to me, just because I slept with her once.

So, none of this should be any of my business.

But I can't stop thinking about it, hours after she's gone. I'm worried about where Yakov's taking her, and what he expects her to do.

Sasha isn't used to world of the Bratva. She wasn't raised to it. I'm sure it horrifies and disgusts her. And it's dangerous, too. More so for her than for an actual gangster. She's not Bratva. When she gets herself in trouble, no one will be there to bail her out.

None of this is my problem. I shouldn't be thinking about it. I shouldn't have spent time with her at all.

It's only asking for trouble, getting to know this girl. Developing sympathy for her.

And taking her virginity! What the fuck was I thinking?

I've never fucked a virgin before.

Sasha doesn't seem like the clingy type, but it creates a bond, whether you want it to or not.

There's another problem, too.

I really, really, really enjoyed it.

Even while I'm telling myself that I shouldn't even speak to her again if I see her at the fights, I'm simultaneously imagining what I want to do if I get her alone again. How I want to touch her and taste her in a thousand different ways . . .

Her inexperience is intriguing to me. She's barely scratched the surface of pleasurable sex. How I'd love to be the first to explore that universe with her . . .

I can't do it, though. She belongs to Krupin. And while I don't think his interest in her is sexual, she's very much his property. He won't take kindly to me meddling with his doctor.

I shouldn't have fucked her at all. If he knew, he'd probably expect payment, the same as he would for one of the whores in his brothels.

I can't get attached to Sasha. I have no control over her future or fate. That's in Krupin's hands.

Besides, I've got to focus on my fights. Each one is going to be harder than the last. With barely a break between them. The gash above my eye is far from healed, and I'll be heading into the ring again the day after tomorrow. This time I'm facing up against Black Eye.

Black Eye Bulari got his nickname because he gets the shit beat out of him every fight, but he doesn't go down. He's lost half his teeth and has a wicked case of cauliflower ear on the right side. Every time I see him, he's sporting a new scar or his trademark black eye. Yet he has a solid 20-6 record. He's a blood and guts warrior.

I'm not sure how our fight will go. Out of all the contenders, he's watched me box more than anyone, except maybe the Rabbi. So he's familiar with my style. He trained with Meyer himself, a couple years back. Plus, there's something demoralizing about a boxer who just won't go down. You either have to pound them into bloody submission, worrying that you're going to kill them this time, or you risk having them pop back up and knock you out when you least expect it, when you think they're beat.

Black Eye's done it more than once, to other idiots.

I try to buckle down and train. I get up early the next morning, arriving at the gym while Meyer's still in his bathrobe. He's not impressed. He can tell I'm distracted.

I'm worrying about the job that Yakov called Sasha to do. Why did he say she was going to get dirty? I wish I could text her, just to make sure she got back alright.

"Hey!" Meyer shouts, giving me a sharp smack on the side of the head with the pad he's holding. "Pay attention, *tupoy*. If I was Black Eye, I woulda rung your fucking bell."

"Black Eye's not as quick as Merciless Meyer," I tease him.

"Oh, fuck your flattery," Meyer snorts. "I know I'm old and slow. And you've got your head in the clouds. What's your problem? You stay up too late?"

I shake my head, hitting the pads over and over while Meyer holds them out in different combinations. I'm trying to stay locked in, trying not to think about anything but anticipating his next move.

But before I know it, I'm remembering the silvery glow of Sasha's hair in the dim light of the ship, the mischievous glint in her blue eyes when she said, "There's no one around. You could just take the picture home . . ."

I didn't take the picture. I took her home, instead. Then I unwrapped her like a Christmas present, revealing her beautiful, creamy skin, her soft, full breasts, her slim waist, and her tight little pussy that had never been touched before I dove my tongue inside of it . . .

SMACK!

Meyer hits me again, even harder this time.

"What the fuck is going on with you?" he growls.

"I need a drink," I say, stripping off my gloves.

I grab my water bottle and chug it down, pouring the last remaining inch of water over my burning face.

I'm going to get slaughtered in the ring if I can't pull it together.

"You better tell me what's going on," Meyer says furiously. "You been drinking? Smoking *sornyak*?"

"No," I say, shaking my head.

"What is it then?"

There's no way in hell I'm telling Meyer that some girl turned my head. Especially not a girl who works for Krupin.

"Just tired," I tell him. "It's a lot of fights in a row."

He's still staring at me suspiciously.

"Let's go again," I say. "I'm ready now."

I pull my gloves on once more, trying to drive every thought of Sasha from my mind.



THAT NIGHT while I'm lying in bed, absolutely not thinking about her, I hear that plaintive crying sound again. It's coming from outside my window. At first, I think it's just the wind, because it's a cold night. The brief springtime warmth has broken, returning to the late winter chill that's been dragging on so long.

I'm tossing and turning in bed, my sheets twisted and knotted around my body. I'm supposed to be sleeping, but I keep getting hard, remembering what I did with Sasha in this bed.

Even jerking off doesn't help. I stroke my cock, remembering the ridiculously silky texture of her skin, the way her hair smelled clean and elegant, like something far too exquisite for a brute like me to touch. My cock is rock hard, but it doesn't want my hand. It wants to be buried inside of her again. I want to hear her gasps of pleasure, as I take control of her body, showing her how it ought to be used . . .

I can't get over the edge.

I lay there hot and annoyed, aching for something I can't have.

I get up to fill a glass of water at the sink, gulping it down. When I shuffle back to the bed, I hear that squeaking sound, louder than ever.

Because I'm hot, and because I want to know what the hell that is, I unlock my window and lift the shutter up.

The frigid wind blows in. It actually feels good against my bare chest.

I look out on the fire escape, to see if the noise is just the rusty bolts creaking.

Instead, I find a skinny little cat curled up against the brick wall.

It's not a kitten, I don't think, even though it's so small—it's just a runt, scrawny and undernourished. It's pale gray in color, with stripes only on its face and tail.

I should close the window and leave it out there. I don't want a pet, especially not some ragged stray. If I wanted an animal, I'd get a dog.

But before I can do anything, the little cat raises its head and mews at me.

It's a pathetic sound.

Loud, too.

If I leave it out here, it'll cry all night, keeping me awake.

I could take it inside, then bring it to a shelter tomorrow. It might get adopted—Russians love cats, especially Slavs. If not, euthanasia is better than freezing. Either way, it's not my business.

I scoop up the little cat and bring it in the apartment. I open a tin of tuna and pour a little water in a bowl. The cat attacks the food, eating so quickly I'm afraid it's going to be sick. I watch it for a minute, amused by its enthusiasm. Then I go back to the bed.

About ten minutes later, I feel a bump as the cat jumps up onto the bed. It prowls around my feet for a minute, on top of the blankets, then it settles down between my ankles.

I ought to push it down to the floor—it's probably filthy. But I gotta admit, its warmth and weight are comforting. It starts to purr, steady and quiet.

It's not afraid of me at all. It must be used to people. Maybe it even had an owner, though apparently not one that bothered to give it a collar or tags.

Maybe they'll come find it if I take it to the shelter tomorrow.

For now, the purring is soothing. The shot of cold air from outside has cooled me down at last. The cat and I are both ready to go to sleep.



THE MOMENT I'm back in the warehouse for night three of the tournament, I'm looking around for Sasha. I told myself I wasn't even going to talk to her. Yet I'm craning my neck, trying to catch sight of that white-blonde hair.

"Looking for Black Eye?" Boom Boom asks. "He's over there."

He points to the bar, where Black Eye is swilling down a whiskey on the rocks, looking like he doesn't have a care in the world.

"Oh yeah," I say.

I don't give a fuck about Black Eye. I haven't given one thought to him, or my upcoming match.

I want to see Sasha. Just for a minute.



I'm not going to do anything. I just want a look at her face, to see if she's really as pretty as the picture I have in my mind.

Infuriatingly, she's nowhere to be found. I see Krupin standing next to Yakov. Stepanov is on his other side, along with his entourage of men. This includes the Beast, who looks bored, and Afansi, who stands on the outskirts of the group, still sporting his bruises from his defeat in the ring. I'm sure Stepanov wasn't too pleased with his performance. Afansi's lucky he's not fired.

Krupin has ordered a bottle of top-shelf liquor for the group—obviously still wooing Stepanov. Stepanov must be getting off on making Krupin squirm. That's probably why he hasn't closed the deal yet.

Sasha isn't with them. She must be inside the infirmary, preparing for the fighters about to be sent her way.

I'm almost willing to take another cut to the face, just so I can visit her.

I don't know what the fuck is happening to me. When did I ever care this much about seeing anybody?

She's just a girl.

Just a beautiful, brave, warm-hearted girl, who lights me up like a spark on dry tinder . . .

The warehouse has been rearranged. With only eight boxers left, fighting in four matches, we're down to a single ring set in the middle of the floor. Krupin has arranged VIP tables along one side of the ring, the largest occupied by Stepanov and himself, along with all their men. The rest of the seating is on stadium-style benches, rising up on the other three sides. This has allowed Krupin to pack in more people than ever. He's got at least twenty waitresses running around, passing up trays of drinks to the spectators at the highest levels of the bleachers.

As the start time approaches, the spectators start stomping the bleachers in unison, chanting for the fights to begin. Krupin has hired a sword-swallower and two gymnasts to keep them entertained, but the crowd barely tolerates the gymnasts. They boo the sword-swallower right off the stage.

I head inside the locker room.

I see the Rabbi wrapping his hands. He looks nervous.

"Who are you fighting?" I ask him hesitantly.

I don't like that the Rabbi is still in this. Almost all the competitors remaining are heavyweights. He shouldn't have been invited to participate to begin with. Krupin probably only asked him because he's such a crowd

favorite. He must have thought the Rabbi would be knocked out after a round or two.

Now the Rabbi's sure to be paired up with someone grossly outside his weight class.

Sure enough, he tells me he's up against Butterball. Butterball is a fighter known for his bulging waistline as much as his skills in the ring. He started as a middleweight, but his love of junk food has kicked him up rung after rung until now he's one of the bigger heavyweights. He still wins though, despite the reduction in his speed. His mass gives him a heavier punch and more padding to absorb body blows.

Honestly, I don't know how the Rabbi is going to get close enough to land a shot on his head, not with that belly in the way.

"Maybe you should just get out of this thing," I say to the Rabbi. I don't want to insult him, but he has to know it's madness fighting so far outside his class.

"It's a big purse tonight," the Rabbi says. "I think I can take Butterball. I'm gonna harry him, like a pit bull on a bear. Gonna spin him around until he's so dizzy, he falls right over."

"It takes more than one dog to bring down a bear," I say.

The Rabbi tightens his lips, shrugging stubbornly.

"I've got a baby coming," he says flatly. "I need the money."

I don't bother him anymore. He's obviously made up his mind.

The Rabbi is the first one up. I stand in the doorway of the locker room so I can see what happens.

The Rabbi squares up against Butterball, looking ridiculously small and lean in comparison to Butterball's mass. The bell sounds and the Rabbi starts dancing around him. Butterball sends a couple punches in his direction, but they're too slow, much too slow. The Rabbi ducks and slips each one easily.

At first the crowd is jeering at him, telling him to quit dancing and get in there. But the more Butterball swings and misses, the more the spectators start laughing and cheering the Rabbi on. He's not just ducking—he's presenting himself as an open target, dropping his gloves and standing still for Butterball to hit, then jerking aside at the last second, Butterball's ham-sized fists swinging past his nose with a millimeter to spare.

It's giving me a heart attack how close Butterball is getting. Any one of those punches could send the Rabbi flying. But through the force of his own

confidence, which is growing by the second, or through pure luck and skill, the Rabbi evades each blow.

Butterball is getting angrier by the second. His shots are wilder.

Now the Rabbi starts taking his own shots. As Butterball swings and misses, the Rabbi leaps in and gives him a shot to the jaw. Another swing and miss, and two more quick jabs to the face.

It's insane. I've never seen anything like it.

Once, Butterball swings so close that the Rabbi actually falls over backward, but he rolls back over his own shoulder, leaping to his feet again, and giving Butterball a hard shot to the ribs.

It goes on for three rounds. The Rabbi never musters quite enough power or a clean enough shot to knock him out, but Butterball is bruised and bloodied, and absolutely enraged. The Rabbi hasn't been hit once. It's an obvious decision in his favor, the crowd's deafening cheers confirming it.

The Rabbi advances to the fourth round.

He's bouncing and grinning as he hops nimbly down from the ring.

I can't help but feel proud of him. I've never seen a fight like it.

At the same time, his hubris scares me. Most fighters aren't as slow as Butterball. It was a once in a lifetime fight, something you could never replicate again.

The second pair of fighters take to the ring.

I've got to get ready, I'm up next.

I don't watch this fight—instead, I let Boom Boom rub out a knot in my traps while I listen to Khalid on my headphones.

Boom Boom's looking glum, even after the spectacle of the Rabbi's victory, which is the kind of thing Boom Boom would usually go nuts about.

I pull my earbuds out and say, "Hey, what's up with you?"

"Leila dumped me," he says.

It takes me a minute to remember that Leila is the hairstylist girlfriend.

"Oh," I say. "What for?"

"I think it might be the tooth," Boom Boom says gloomily.

It takes every ounce of my self-control not to laugh. Boom Boom really does look about eight years old with his jug ears and missing front tooth, especially when he's pouting like this.

On the other hand, I can tell he's really beat up about it. And I'm unusually sympathetic to romantic torment at the moment.

"Her loss," I tell him. "Anyway, she was pretty shit at cutting hair."

"That's true," Boom Boom says, perking up a little. "Maybe I'll just buzz my head now."

I'm not sure that would be an improvement. But if it makes him happy .

..

"Yeah," I say. "Go for it."

After the second fight, there's a short intermission. I can't help going to the doorway again, to see if Sasha's around.

Instead, I see Krupin handing over a hefty stack of bills to Stepanov. Stepanov grins, pocketing the money, and making some taunting comment to Krupin that makes him flush red in the face.

Krupin retorts, and I see them both look up toward the chalkboard, checking the odds for the next fight. I'm favored against Black Eye by +430. Krupin and Stepanov discuss for a minute. Looks like they're agreeing on another bet.

Interesting. It could be that Krupin is just humoring Stepanov, but I don't think so. He looks too flushed, too agitated. He's got the expression of a genuine gambler who just lost a hefty stack—meaning, he's on tilt.

I don't know if Krupin bet on me or not, and I don't care. I'm winning this fight. I'm taking home the 150,000-ruble prize.

I'm about to turn back into the locker room when I catch sight of what I've been searching for all night: Sasha's blonde braid moving through the crowd.

She approaches Krupin with a wary but resigned expression, as if she's just been summoned.

All I can pay attention to is how utterly gorgeous she looks, even in the plain black sweater and slacks she's wearing. I know she meant to blend in, but the black clothing only highlights her creamy skin and silvery hair. The sweater may cover every inch of her body from neck to wrist, but it can't conceal the luscious figure beneath.

I'm not the only one noticing. Stepanov is devouring her with his eyes. He touches her arm as he says something to her, his face close to hers.

The sight of his meaty hand on her arm sparks something in me. A feeling of rage.

I try to smother it down. It means nothing to me if someone touches Sasha. She doesn't belong to me.

But I want her to.

I ought to slap myself just for thinking that. I should turn away and get ready for my fight.

I can't tear my eyes off Sasha. Or Stepanov.

I can tell he wants her. Lust is written all over his face.

And I can see just as clearly that Sasha wants nothing more than to get away from him. But she has to stand there, nodding and stiffly smiling at whatever he's saying.

It's driving me mad.

By the time Krupin finally dismisses her, I'm engulfed in fury.

When the MC calls my name for my match, I practically sprint out to the ring. I tear off my robe, hardly hearing the ref's instructions.

The bell rings and I advance on Black Eye like an avenging god.

I hit him again and again and again.

True to his name, he won't go down. He keeps coming back for more.

I batter him mercilessly. I'm colder and crueller than I've ever been before.

I don't see Black Eye at all. I see Stepanov's face—his leering eyes and groping hands. His haughty smirk. I want to smash it all to bits with my fists.

My feet are slipping in blood, and still I keep going.

At last Black Eye falls to the canvas, knocked out cold for only the second time in his career.

I raise my fist in victory.

Looking out at the crowd, I see Sasha's horrified face staring back at me.





## SASHA

I come to the third night of the tournament in a fog of disgust.

I've been sick for three days.

The night Yakov called me, I had to meet him at a warehouse. When he saw what I was wearing, the pretty wool coat and the suede boots, he scoffed.

"Is that your work clothes, Princess?"

I flushed, worried that he'd smell the scent of sex on me, too.

Luckily, he didn't seem to notice that.

Instead, he led me inside what seemed to be some sort of loading bay. There I saw the body of a man lying on the ground. He'd been shot in the head and chest, several times each. I ran over to him and checked for a pulse, even though it was obvious he was dead.

"You're not here to save him," Yakov sneered. "You're here to cut him up."

"W—what?" I stammered.

"We have to get rid of the meat," Yakov said slowly, as if talking to an idiot. "You're the butcher."

My stomach rolled over.

"I can't do that," I said.

"You *will* do it," Yakov informed me.

"I can't!" I shook my head, backing away from the body. "I'm a doctor, not a . . . an undertaker!"

Yakov laughed.

“You’re not embalming him,” he said. “You need to pull the teeth, cut off the fingers, then dismember the rest. Cut off any tattoos as well. This one can’t be identified.”

I just kept shaking my head in horror. I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t do any of that.

I looked down at the body again, trying not to focus on the bullet hole over the right eye.

I didn’t recognize the man—from the look of his suit, his gold watch and rings, and his tattoos, I assumed he was Bratva. But I couldn’t tell from which family, or even if he was one of Krupin’s men.

He was just a normal-looking man, average height and build, dark hair, tanned skin, a bit of stubble on his face. Undeniably solid and human. Not a carcass I could just hack into.

“I can’t do it,” I said again.

Yakov narrowed his eyes at me. He was dressed as nattily as ever—tight blue suit, highly-polished, tan oxfords. Definitely nothing he’d want to get blood on. Which was probably why he’d called me to do the job. Plus, the fact that he hates me.

“I’m not telling you again, you dense bitch,” he said. “Get to work, or I’ll call Krupin right now and tell him his pet doctor isn’t worth keeping on a leash anymore.” His eyes were cold and filled with loathing. “You know what happens to pets no one wants?” he said. “They get put down.” He spat on the floor to punctuate his point.

He threw a new duffle bag at me, heavier than the one that became my doctor’s kit. It clanked as it hit the warehouse floor.

“Get to work,” he said.

And I did it. God help me, but I did it, exactly as Yakov instructed. It was brutal and disgusting, and it made me want to vomit the whole time. Still, I did it all.

When I finished, all my pretty clothes were soaked in blood and hair and bits of bone.

Yakov told me to burn the man’s suit in a barrel. I burned my coat along with it. When I got home, I stripped off my dress and boots, even my underwear, put it all in a trash bag, and threw it down the garbage chute.

Then I sat in a hot shower until the water ran cold.

Yakov didn’t call me at all the following two days. If he had, I don’t think I could have answered.



I came to the fight night just as I was supposed to, however.

The howling crowd and the scent of blood in the air don't help my state of mind.

I patch up the first two rounds of fighters, still feeling dazed.

Then Yakov pokes his head into the infirmary.

"Boss wants to see you," he says.

Just the sight of him makes my stomach roll over all over again.

I silently follow him out to Krupin's table.

I can see Stepanov sitting next to Krupin, as usual. He stands up when I approach. I hate the way he looks at me. He's worse than Yakov. At least with Yakov, I don't have to pretend to like him.

"The pretty doctor," Stepanov says, looking me up and down.

"*Dobryy vecher*," I say politely.

"Krupin and I were just making a little bet," he says to me. "Who do you favor, in the third fight?"

I glance up at the board. My heart does a little flip when I see Snow's name, paired up with somebody named Black Eye.

"I . . . I don't know," I say. "I don't know anything about boxing."

"Come now," Stepanov lays his hand on my arm. His hand is warm enough, but his gaze is predatory. I long to shake him off. "You're an expert on the human body," he says, his voice low and suggestive. "Surely you can compare one man to another."

"I say . . . Snow, then," I tell him.

I can't tell if Krupin is giving me a sharp look. I don't know if my voice sounds normal, or if I'm blushing.

"He is the favorite," Stepanov agrees. "You like a sure thing, don't you Miss Doctor?"

I don't know how he manages to make every statement sound like sexual innuendo, but I hate it. I'm longing to get away from him.

"How do you like that wager?" Stepanov says to Krupin. "You want the underdog?"

"Double or nothing," Krupin shoots back. "Black Eye can't be knocked out."

"Anybody can be knocked out," Stepanov scoffs.

"Not him," Krupin says stubbornly. "If Snow knocks him out, I'll give you another 500k."

Jesus Christ. They're betting more than a year's salary. For a serf like me, at least.

Krupin dismisses me at last, but I don't go back to the infirmary. Instead, I linger at the edge of the bleachers, waiting for Snow's fight.

I want to see him, just for a moment. In the sick fog of the last few days, the only bright spots were my memories of our afternoon together, exploring the Aurora, talking for almost two hours at the restaurant, and then our tryst afterward at his apartment . . .

Snow comes out of the locker room looking like the angel of death. He's dressed all in white, as always. But his face is far from stoic. He looks absolutely livid—an ice-cold anger that frankly terrifies me. As Snow strips off his robe, even his opponent looks scared.

The bell rings. Snow unleashes a fury of blows that is calculated, relentless, and absolutely ruthless.

I'm shocked by him. I can't believe this automaton is the man I let strip off my clothes and touch me as I'd never been touched before.

His hands were so tender and skillful then. Now they're weapons, two clubs that he wields mercilessly to decimate his opponent.

Time and time again he knocks Black Eye down. The hits are so brutal that I don't think the other man can possibly get up. But Black Eye staggers to his feet, only to be pummeled down again.

The crowd is loving it, cheering at the sight of the blood streaking the canvas. They're insatiable; they howl for more.

The sight of all that bright red blood is sickening to me. It makes me remember how my hands were soaked in it, when I had to dismember the body for Yakov. I remember the feeling of the flesh in my hands, how I had to saw at it . . .

My stomach rolls over again, and I have to press my hand hard against my mouth to keep from vomiting.

I should leave, but I feel frozen in place, my eyes locked on Snow.

Again and again and again he hits Black Eye.

Finally, he lands a blow that smashes him to the ground, and Black Eye doesn't get up again.

The ref counts down, and the fight is over.

Snow raises his arms, cold triumph on his face.

His pale blue eyes lock on mine.

Only then does the facade crack. Snow's face softens, and I'm looking at an actual human again.

Somehow that's even worse, knowing that he was under there the whole time.

I turn away from him and run back to the infirmary.

I only get about five minutes to compose myself before they bring in Black Eye, whose face is so swollen and battered that I can't even tell what he looked like originally.

He's still knocked out cold. Two of Krupin's men throw him down on my table, his head lolling back.

For a second, I think he's dead, and I think I'm going to have to dispose of his body like I did the other one. Panic flares up inside of me, so much that I can hardly check his pulse with the shaking of my hands.

But he isn't dead. He comes around when I snap a packet of ammonium carbonate under his nose.

Actually, remarkably, he's not in terrible shape. He's dazed, and I have to stitch up a couple of cuts on his face, but there's nothing unrecoverable. With all the swelling, I can't tell if his nose is broken—his trainer tells me it's been broken several times before, so it never looks too good.

"You must have a skull made of iron," I tell Black Eye.

"He fell out a three-story window when he was a toddler," his trainer says. "So yeah, he's pretty much indestructible."

I'm starting to calm down a little in my relief that Black Eye is alright.

I probably overreacted, watching the fight. I know how passionate Snow is about winning. What did I expect him to do, sing Black Eye a lullaby?

Right as my blood pressure is starting to come down, Yakov strolls into the infirmary to elevate it all over again. He thrusts a garment bag into my arms.

"What's this?" I say.

"Put it on after the fights," he says. "You're coming to dinner with us."

"Me? Why?"

"Because I fucking said so," Yakov snarls. "You need to learn to follow orders, Princess. I'm not your friend."

*You're goddamn right you're not.*

I lay the garment bag over the back of a chair, dreading unzipping it. I'm always exhausted after the fights. I just want to go home. And I can

only imagine what's inside.





## SNOW

*Jealousy in romance is like salt in food.*

— MAYA ANGELOU

**B**ack in the locker room, I feel an immediate surge of guilt. I didn't have to go so hard on Black Eye. I could have won by decision—I didn't have to knock him out.

I've never felt guilty after a fight before. But I've also never let my emotions get the best of me. I'm usually totally in control.

Even Boom Boom is looking at me weird.

"You okay?" Meyer says to me.

"Yeah," I grunt. "Of course."

I keep seeing Sasha's face looking out at me from the crowd, pale and shocked. I introduced her to the better side of myself. But now I've let her see the monster. That's a part of me too, one that I usually keep tightly controlled.

She's disgusted by it, that was plain to see.

I don't blame her.

She's probably patching up Black Eye right now, dealing with the aftermath of my frenzy.

"Hey." Yakov pokes his head into the locker room. "Krupin wants you to come out with us. After the fights."

My anger flares up all over again at the sight of him, with his prissy brilliantined hair and his shiny shoes and his smug strut. That fucking bully.

Thinks he's tough shit, picking on a girl.

He doesn't even wait around to see if I'll agree. He assumes I'll be there.

Unfortunately, he's right. I can't afford to piss Krupin off. Not when I'm so close to winning this whole tournament.

The last fight wraps up, with the Beast soundly defeating Thunderdome.

That means that there're four fighters left in the tournament: me, Big Stacks, the Rabbi, and the Beast.

I've only got to win two more matches to take home the top prizes, 400,000 rubles and an Escalade.

I'm guessing I'll be paired up against The Rowdy Rabbi in the next round. He and I are the lowest-ranked fighters remaining.

Now, as much as I respect the Rabbi, I know I can beat him. I'm not a lumbering oaf like Butterball. His Br'er Rabbit tricks aren't going to work against me.

I don't like the idea of having to hit him, since he's way outside my weight class. It doesn't seem fair, and I know he'll be disappointed. He wants the money as badly as I do.

Maybe I can split the purse with him, no matter which way it goes. I don't mind donating to his new life with Anastasia and the baby.

If I beat the Rabbi and advance to the final round, I'll either be up against Stacks or the Beast. I'm guessing it'll be the Beast. He's never been beaten in the ring yet.

Can I beat him?

The honest answer is, I don't know.

I've always been confident before. But I've never faced an opponent like him.

No point worrying about it now, however.

Right now, I've got to get cleaned up to go out with Krupin.

I wash off as best I can in the sink and pull on a fresh shirt from my duffle bag. Meyer is watching me, scowling from behind his thick glasses.

"What's Krupin want?" he says.

"I dunno."

"You watch yourself," he warns me. "It's getting close to the end now. You know these Bratva don't fight fair."

He means that the tournament isn't clean. Even legitimate boxing is rife with corruption. Underground rings vastly more so.

“Bratva don’t,” I tell him. “But I do.”

Meyer just grunts.

Once I’ve cleaned up, I join Krupin at his table. Krupin is looking sour and annoyed. He barely glances at me as he introduces me to Stepanov, who I’ve seen from a distance many times, but never actually met before. Stepanov shakes my hand, grinning.

“You made me some money tonight,” he says.

“Oh yeah?”

Krupin must have bet on Black Eye. That’s why he looks so pissed. It was a stupid bet. It confirms my suspicion that gambling is Krupin’s Achilles heel. Much like how a dealer should never get high on his own supply, you should never bet on your own game. The weight of the wager disrupts the mind, corrupts your decision-making.

“I have a feeling you’re going all the way to the end,” Stepanov says.

“I hope so.”

“You’ll be up against my man, then. You know Borya?”

Stepanov gestures toward the Beast, who’s just finished getting cleaned up himself. Unlike me, he brought a proper suit to the fight, one tailored to fit his massive frame. Dressed all in black, he looks like an undertaker. His head is buzzed, and I can see that his tattoos extend up his neck, all the way onto his scalp.

He’s got a broad, square head, and a brutal, thuggish face. I know better than anyone not to judge based on appearances. Just because you look mean, doesn’t mean you’re actually cruel at heart. But in this case, I think the book might match the cover.

I don’t judge a guy off his face, but I do judge his tattoos. The Beast has the marks of a thief, an enforcer, and a murderer. And that’s just what I can see above the collar of his suit.

I give him a nod of recognition—we’ve never met in the ring, but I’ve seen him around at various fights. He nods back slowly, his dark eyes boring into mine. It’s not often I have to look up at anybody. I’m guessing the Beast has never experienced it at all.

Stepanov is watching us, smiling gleefully. It’s obvious he invited me out tonight because he wants to see us tee off before the actual fight. I don’t think Krupin had any hand in it—he’s annoyed I beat Black Eye, and from what I know about his history, he holds his grudges for a long time.



I just want to get this over with. I'm hoping we'll leave for the restaurant soon. Actually, I'm not sure what we're waiting for—until I see Sasha walking toward us.

She's dressed in a flame-red gown of such a sheer and clinging material that her every curve is outlined as if she's been dipped in red paint. It's cut low in the front and slit high up the leg, revealing even more of her smooth, creamy skin. Her blonde hair is pinned back at the sides, hanging down to the middle of her back, still wavy from its braid. She's put on a little makeup, which is more than she needs to become the most stunning woman in the room.

Heads turn as she walks. Certainly, the eyes of every man at our table are fixated on her—none more than Stepanov's.

"There she is," he purrs.

He holds out his hand, taking Sasha's and pulling her toward him. He rests his other hand on her waist, his thumb sliding across the thin material of the dress.

"Turn around for us," he says.

Sasha's cheeks are as red as her dress. She looks extremely uncomfortable. I'm sure she didn't select this outfit, though whoever did is a goddamned genius. This dress should be enshrined in a museum, alongside the Mona Lisa and the crown jewels of England.

I can fully appreciate the spectacle of Sasha's beauty, while simultaneously hating Stepanov for forcing her to display it in this way.

Sasha turns around in a circle, her face burning with humiliation.

Stepanov only smiles more. He enjoys her embarrassment as much as her loveliness.

Some men can only feel their power by inflicting it on others.

I've seen Stepanov with any number of beautiful young women clinging to his arm. But he wants the woman who doesn't want him.

The problem is that I want her, too.

We pile into three SUVs to drive to the restaurant. Sasha is in Stepanov's car. Yakov rides with Krupin. The Beast and I are in the third car, with several of Stepanov's other men, including Afansi. I'm preoccupied, thinking of Sasha riding alone with Stepanov. Wondering if he's trying to touch her right now.

The Beast sits sideways in his seat, staring at me.

"What?" I say at last.

“You’re undefeated,” he says.

“Yeah. So?”

“So am I.”

“I know.”

“So. One of us will have a new experience,” he says.

His words send a shiver running down my spine.

It’s true that I’ve never felt what it’s like to be losing in the ring. To try desperately to defend yourself, while failing over and over again.

In facing opponents, I’ve always known ahead of time what their weakness might be. I had a strategy.

The Beast has no weakness that I’ve seen. Not yet, at least.

“Where did you train?” I ask him.

“I trained with my father,” he says. “He won silver at the Sydney Olympics. He was intent that I should win gold. He used to beat me in the ring, over and over. Until I grew stronger and he grew older. Then one day I beat him. I beat him to death.”

He says this with no emotion at all.

I don’t know if he’s lying. He’s certainly trying to intimate me.

Maybe it’s true, all the same. He wouldn’t be the first Bratva to succeed to his father’s place in that way. The ties of blood and loyalty are always in conflict with the drive for dominance.

He’s watching me to see my reaction. I think the Beast wants to know what lies beneath my surface. If I’m a fighter, or a killer.

I’m not a killer.

Does that mean I’m doomed to lose against him?

Is one inherently superior to the other?

The Beast obviously thinks so. He smiles with satisfaction, looking at me.

My eyes are drawn back out the window, to the car driving at the head of our cavalcade. Sasha is in there. What’s she saying to Stepanov? What’s he saying to her?

I’m burning with jealousy that Stepanov gets to talk to her, gets to sit next to her. Gets to look at her in that sexy fucking dress.

The cars pull to a stop at last. I’m surprised to see that we’re out front of Golod. That’s Sasha’s father’s restaurant. Or it used to be, anyway.

The host holds open the doors for us. We file inside.

I look around curiously. I've never been in here before. Sasha told me that she used to come almost daily as a child. She said that the dishes are the original blue and white ceramics her grandparents had made in the village of Gzhel. Her ancestor's portraits hang on the walls.

I see one oil painting of a beautiful young woman on a gray horse. She has a long sheaf of white-blond hair that I know all too well. Sasha's great-grandmother.

A timid-looking man with wire-rimmed glasses approaches us. He greets Krupin respectfully, and Stepanov as well. Then he sees Sasha, and his expression turns to shock. This must be Oskar Drozdov, Sasha's father. The sight of his daughter dressed like a high-end escort, in the company of these gangsters, is highly displeasurable to him. But he swallows down his misery, leading Krupin's party to the largest table in the restaurant.

Sasha looks almost as uncomfortable as her father. She takes a seat next to Stepanov, sitting stiff and straight in her chair. I end up almost directly across from them. I've got the Beast on one side of me, silently watching everything I do. And Yakov on the other, burning with his own resentment.

I don't have the time or the inclination to parse out what Yakov's annoyed about. As far as I can tell, he doesn't like that Sasha and I have been invited to dinner. He doesn't like me here because we've never gotten along, and he's a jealous little bitch in general—he doesn't want anyone gaining favor with Krupin except himself. He's got no worries there. Krupin is still salty about losing his bet. He hasn't said two words to me.

I think Yakov is mad about Sasha simply because they loathe each other.

These are only guesses. It's hard to get inside the mind of a cockroach.

I'm much more fixated on Sasha and Stepanov. He's slung his arm around the back of her chair so his hand rests on her bare shoulder. With every minute that passes, his hand is inching lower and lower down onto her breast. First his fingers graze the top swell of her breast, above the material of the dress. Then they begin to dip lower, so his middle finger is sliding under the fabric. By the time the waiter pours our wine, Stepanov is blatantly groping Sasha, in front of the waiter and everyone else at the table.

Yakov is watching with a smirk on his face. I can barely keep myself from leaping out of my chair.

Sasha sits forward abruptly, under the guise of picking up her glass of wine. She gulps it down, her hand trembling slightly.

We all place our orders. I order the halibut, because it's simple and I know that the food is going to taste like cotton in my mouth. I can't stop staring at Stepanov. He's laughing and chatting, perfectly at his ease, his handsome face indolent and satisfied. He doesn't care how uncomfortable he's making Sasha. He actively enjoys it.

Krupin is snapping his fingers for another refill on his wine. He's drinking too much too fast, still brooding over his lost bet.

Yakov is sucking up to Stepanov, laughing at all his jokes, asking him his opinion of the fights.

"What did you think of Lights Out and Big Stacks?" Yakov asks. "The crowd always sees the winner, don't they?"

That fight went to decision, and the crowd voted for Big Stacks. But it was Lights Out who scored more hits, by ten percent or more.

"Lights Out took it," I say.

My irritation makes me say aloud what I only meant to think in my head.

Yakov scoffs at me, but Stepanov agrees.

"Lights Out was the superior technical fighter," he says. "Stacks just put on a better show."

Yakov shoots me a venomous look.

I ignore him. I'm distracted by Stepanov, who's now sliding his hand up Sasha's thigh.

My own hand clenches convulsively around my steak knife. I want to jump across the table and plant it in Stepanov's chest.

Yakov sees me gripping the knife. He frowns.

I force myself to let go of it. I stand up, pushing back my chair.

"Excuse me," I say. "I need a smoke."

I don't smoke at all. It's just an excuse to get away from the table, because I can't control myself another minute.

Instead of going outside, I head to the bathroom to splash water on my face.

When I come out again, Sasha is waiting in the hall.

Silently, she grabs my hand and pulls me into the storeroom. She closes and locks the door behind us. Then she grabs me and kisses me ferociously. I lift her up and kiss her back twice as hard.

I know what she's doing. She's taking control of her sexual agency. She wants to fuck the man she wants to fuck, and it isn't Stepanov.

I also know that what we're doing is pure insanity. With every second that passes, Stepanov or Krupin may become suspicious, and send one of their men looking for us. If they find us in here, we'll probably end the night with our throats slit, tossed over the railing of the Trinity bridge.

But right now, I'm willing to take that chance, if it means touching Sasha again.

I can taste the sweet remains of the wine in her mouth. Her soft lips are ravenous against mine. She's clinging to me with all her strength, her arms around my neck and her legs wrapped around my waist. She's as hungry for me as I am for her.

I wonder if she's been craving me just as badly the last few days. Replaying our afternoon together over and over in her mind. That's what I've done, a thousand times or more.

My cock is ready to explode, just from the feeling of her in my arms once more. It aches and throbs, longing to be buried inside of her.

I want to rip this dress off her body, but I'm not stupid enough to do that.

Instead, I pull the skirt up around her waist, careful not to tear the delicate material. I pull her panties to the side. Then I release my cock from my shorts and thrust it up into her.

Even though I haven't had time to prepare her at all, she's warm and wet and ready for me. Her body is as desperate as mine. Perhaps over the last three days she soaked her panties again and again, thinking about me, at the same moments that I was gripping my throbbing cock, helpless against the thought of her.

Now I'm exactly where I longed to be, deep inside of her. I'm kissing and fucking her with wild abandon, inside this tiny closet of dry goods. We're surrounded by bags of sugar and flour, packets of spices and pallets of rice. The smell of the food does nothing to overwhelm the intoxicating scent of Sasha herself—her soap, her skin, her perfume, and her wet, eager pussy.

As much as I fixated on the feeling of her, it's nothing compared to the real thing. I feel like I'm dying and going to heaven, over and over with every thrust.

We're both racing as fast as we can toward climax. There's no holding back, no time to stop and savor it. Sasha beats me there by a fraction of a second. She starts to cry out. Remembering how loud she was in my

apartment, I clamp my hand over her mouth. She moans against my fingers, as her pussy clenches tight around me. I fuck her harder still, because this woman belongs to me, and me alone. I'll never give her to Stepanov, or anyone else.

I was her first, and I'll be her last.

I explode inside of her, filling her pussy with my cum. I'm marking her as mine. If Stepanov tries to touch her again, it will be with my seed already inside her.

The orgasm goes on and on. I've built up so much over the last three days that I've never had a release like this.

When I finally finish, I set Sasha down gently. I kiss her once more, because I'm already craving her lips all over again.

"You better go out first," she gasps. "I'm going to the bathroom to clean up."

That's all we have time to say to each other. I hurry back to the table, taking the long way round so it looks like I was out smoking. Still, Yakov glances at me suspiciously as I sit down. He probably knows I don't smoke. And he doesn't smell it on my hoodie.

Sasha comes back about five minutes later. She's tidied her hair and reapplied her lipstick.

"What took you so long?" Stepanov asks. He sounds teasing, not incredulous.

"I . . . I'm not feeling very well," Sasha says.

"Have some more wine," Stepanov says, pushing another glass toward her.

Sasha drinks, obediently. When she sits back, Stepanov puts his arm around her shoulders once more.

The waiter arrives with his heavy tray of dishes. He hands them around—goulash for Krupin and Stepanov, prime rib for Yakov and the Beast. Halibut for me. Chicken for Sasha. Scallops for Afansi, way down at the end of the table.

Stepanov takes his arm back so he can eat. When he removes his hand from Sasha's shoulder, I see that it's lightly dusted with flour. Sasha sees it, too. Her face blanches.

"What is it?" Stepanov says.

"I . . . I'm very sick," Sasha says. "May I borrow your napkin?"

Stepanov hands it to her, hopefully wiping the flour from his hand. Sasha grabs the napkin, pressing it to her mouth. She runs back to the bathroom. I assume she's going to get the rest of the flour off her skin. Also, this may be her best excuse to avoid Stepanov taking her home.

Stepanov eats his goulash, heedless of the last bit of flour on his hand. He's had several glasses of wine himself by this point.

I can see Oskar Drozdov watching our table from across the room. It must feel like a hellish examination, every time Krupin comes here to eat. Oskar doesn't look like a strong man. Actually, he looks like a stiff wind would blow him over. That's why he's given his daughter to these jackals.

After a minute, Oskar disappears in the direction of the bathrooms, probably going to check on Sasha.

When he returns, he approaches the table nervously.

"If you don't mind, gentlemen," he says, "I've sent Sasha home in a cab. She's quite ill."

"I hope it's not the food," Yakov says rudely.

"No, no, nothing like that," Oskar hastily assures him. "She hasn't been well the last few days."

Yakov smirks.

Anger bubbles up in me again. I still haven't asked Sasha what Yakov made her do.

"It's fine," Krupin says, dismissing Oskar.

Stepanov frowns, however.

"She's a skittish little thing, your doctor, isn't she?" he says to Krupin.

"She's very innocent," Krupin says.

"How innocent?" Stepanov says, smiling lecherously.

Krupin shrugs. "Completely, I would guess."

"That's so rare in this day and age," Stepanov says. "I find it . . . highly attractive."

"It's quite valuable, too," Krupin says pointedly.

They're discussing the worth of Sasha's virginity, which they're not aware I've already stolen.

"What was her debt to you?" Stepanov asks.

"Seventy-one million, give or take," Krupin says casually.

"Perhaps she should be part of our negotiations," Stepanov says.

My flesh goes cold. Stepanov wants to buy Sasha, along with half of Knockdown. He wants her to be part of the deal.

Krupin shrugs.

“She’s proven useful,” he says. “It won’t be cheap.”

“I’m not a cheap man,” Stepanov says, raising his glass.

I want to kill all of them.

They’re throwing Sasha into their bargain like she’s just another kilometer of territory, or a kilo of cocaine. She means nothing to them beyond a stack of bills.

But she means everything to me.

I know it’s madness. We’ve only just met. But I’ve made a career out of studying people. I know who she is. I know her bravery, her loyalty, her intelligence, her compassion.

I won’t allow her to be a bargaining chip.

“What’s your problem?” Yakov hisses in my ear.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, quietly.

“You’re up to something,” Yakov mutters so only I can hear. “Are you trying to get a place with Krupin? He already offered you a job once. He’s not going to do it again.”

“I already have a job,” I say.

“What is it, then? Why’re you so tense?”

I stare at him coldly.

“It’s your cologne,” I say. “It fucking reeks.”

Yakov’s face goes purple with anger. I’m sure his cologne is expensive as hell. He’s the biggest dandy I’ve seen in my life. He took the adage “dress for success” way too seriously, while forgetting the part about not being a horse’s ass.

Before he can say anything back, Krupin interrupts us.

“I want a cigar,” he says. “Snow, come join me.”

Yakov starts to stand as well, but Krupin motions for him to remain seated.

I don’t know why Krupin’s trying to get me alone. He could have easily smoked at the table without Oskar saying a word about it. But he brings me outside. Whatever he wants to say, it can’t be good.

Standing out on the street, Krupin lights his cigar without offering me one. He takes a couple of puffs, then lets out one long exhale. He’s wearing that black fur coat that makes him look bigger than he actually is. It’s coarse fur with a rich, oil smell—Siberian bear, probably.

He looks over at me, his dark eyes glittering.



“You’ve been nothing but trouble for me so far, Snow,” he says. “It’s time for you to do me a favor. You’re going to take a dive in the next fight. In the second round, you go down. You understand?”

I stare at him. I’ve never taken a dive in my life.

He takes another pull of his cigar, then stumps it out roughly against the brick wall.

“You go down in the second round. And you don’t get up again.”

Without waiting for me to answer, he heads back inside the restaurant.





## SASHA

**T**hat night when my father gets home, he can't look me in the eye. I've already washed off the makeup and changed back into my normal clothes, but I know he's never going to forget the image of me on the arm of a Bratva boss.

Part of me is deeply ashamed.

The other part of me is furious at him.

How dare he be embarrassed for me, when he's the one who put me in this position to begin with. I never would have spoken two words to Krupin or Stepanov, if not for my parents' irresponsibility.

So I hold my chin high, and I keep my voice calm when I say, "I hope everything went well with dinner, Papa."

"Well enough," he says, still not looking at me.

I'm sitting in the kitchen, eating a little plate of cheese and rye bread. I never finished my food at the restaurant, and I'm hungry. I'm also trying to ameliorate the effects of the wine I drank on an empty stomach.

The rest of the house is quiet.

"Where's Mama and Mila?" I ask.

I've been so busy the last few weeks that I've hardly laid eyes on them.

Papa leans against the cupboards, taking off his glasses and pressing his index finger and thumb into the inner corners of his eyes.

"Mila is studying at the library. She has an exam tomorrow," he says. "Your mother has gone to Yaroslavl to stay with her sister."

That's strange. Usually Mama invites us, if she's going to see Auntie Agata.

“How long is she staying for?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Papa says.

I put down my piece of bread and cheese.

“What do you mean?” I ask him. “Why don’t you know when she’s coming back?”

Papa sighs. He looks older than ever, and very tired.

“I don’t know *if* she’s coming back,” he says.

“Why?” I say stupidly.

Papa puts his glasses back on his face. The reflective glass makes it hard to tell, but I think his eyes are wet behind the lenses.

“She said she felt trapped here. The house is getting so dingy and run down, she’s embarrassed to bring anyone over. She can’t go shopping or to the spa like she used to, with her friends. She said her sister takes better care of her than I do . . .”

Papa trails off.

I stare at him dumbly.

Then I get up from the table. I walk right past him. I climb the stairs to my parents’ room, then open my mother’s closet.

I see that all her favorite clothes, purses, and shoes are gone. She’s left a few older items—the heavy plaid coat she said looked like a sofa. The alligator boots that pinched her feet. But all the things she liked best have disappeared.

I run over to her drawers. I know Papa had to sell some of her jewelry, but that’s not what I’m looking for. I’m looking for the abalone comb she got from great-grandmother. It’s not worth much, monetarily. But it means everything to Mama. She wouldn’t take it anywhere for a visit. She’d only take it if she were moving for good.

The comb sits in a lacquered box in her top drawer. That box is gone. And so is the comb.

Mama left us. She really left us.

And she didn’t even say goodbye.

Papa has followed me upstairs. He stands in the doorway, looking at the gutted room.

I can’t believe she left us, right when we were at our lowest and most vulnerable.

She made this mess, and then she walked away from it like it had nothing to do with her.

I hear the front door opening, footsteps in the entryway, and for a confused moment I think it must be Mama. She realized she made a mistake, and she came home again.

I sprint down the stairs, expecting to see Mama standing there, looking contrite. I won't even be mad at her. I know how impulsive she is—I'll just hug her and help her carry her bags up the stairs.

But when I reach the entryway, I see Mila instead, setting down her heavy backpack full of books.

"Hey!" she says, smiling. "You're not working tonight?"

Her smile fades when she sees the look on my face.

"What is it?" Mila asks.

"Mama's gone," I tell her. "She went to stay with Aunt Agata. Papa says she isn't coming back."

Mila doesn't believe it, until she goes up to Mama's room and sees the same things with her own eyes.

Papa hasn't followed us in this time. He's gone into his study and shut the door.

"Should we go talk to him?" Mila says in a low tone.

"I don't know," I say. "I don't know what to do."

"Should we call her and tell her to come back?" Mila demands.

Mila always wants to take action. She's not one to sit and mope.

"What's the point?" I say. "If she doesn't want to be here, we can't make her come home."

"She's spoiled," Mila says bitterly. "She always has been."

I knew that. But I still believed she loved us . . .

Mila goes back down to the kitchen, rummaging in the fridge for food. I sit down in front of my bread and cheese, though it doesn't taste as good as it did before.

Mila squints at me.

"Are you wearing lipstick?" she says. "That's not like you."

"Krupin made me come out to dinner," I say. "With him and this other Bratva boss. Do you know Urvan Stepanov?"

Mila shakes her head.

"He's a creep," I say.

I shudder, remembering the feeling of his hand sliding down the front of my dress. Fondling my breast while Yakov leered at me from across the table.

And right in front of Snow, too. I could see how it enraged him. His blue eyes looked like pure propane flame. I could see the tension in the muscles of his shoulders and arms, as if he were holding himself perfectly still so he didn't jump out of his seat.

Paradoxically, Snow's anger was the only thing keeping me sane.

While all the other men at the table acted like it was the most natural thing in the world for Stepanov to put his hands all over me, only Snow was furious on my behalf.

Instead of feeling like a victim, I felt angry too. Stepanov was trying to force himself on me, not caring what I wanted for myself.

Well, I wanted Snow. His were the only hands I wanted on my body.

When he got up for a smoke, I excused myself a minute later. I found him, pulled him into the storage room. And then in an act of pure defiance, I took what I actually wanted, from the only man who could give it to me . . .

It was insane. But the danger only made it all the more heady.

Those five minutes were the most intense, erotic moments of my life.

I can feel my face burning, just remembering it.

The way I gave myself to him, and the way he took me, in revolt against all the would-be powerful and dominating men at that table . . .

Right under their noses, we defied them.

"What on earth are you thinking about?" Mila demands. "Your face is lit up like a Christmas tree."

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head.

"You're lying," Mila says. "Tell me what's going on. You look like you've got a secret. You're not just giving check-ups to gangsters . . ."

"Well . . ." I hesitate. I don't want to tell Mila anything that could put her in danger. But she's my best friend. And I need to hear from a friend if I've completely lost my mind.

"There's this boxer . . ." I say.

"I knew it!" Mila cries.

"Shh!" I hush her before Papa hears. "I stitched him up after a fight . . ."

"What's his name?"

"Snow."

Mila wrinkles her nose.

"They all have nicknames. Trust me, it suits him."

"What does he look like?"

“Tall. Broad. Cold, at first. Actually, the first time I saw him, he terrified me. He has this dark expression, like he’s never felt anything but rage. He’s got blue eyes like . . . like . . .” I search for a way to describe them. “They’re like the moon in winter. Or sea glass. Or a glacier. The lightest, clearest blue imaginable. They’d be beautiful, except the rest of him isn’t beautiful at all, it’s rough and brutal and masculine in the extreme.”

Mila is definitely staring at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Once I started talking to him, I realized that he is blunt and coarse . . . but he’s not only that. He’s ambitious and perceptive, and even sometimes kind, though I don’t think he knows that he is.”

I shake my head. It’s so hard to describe him. It’s so hard to explain how I feel when I’m around him. I feel like I’ve discovered something that no one else can see. And I feel like he finds the same things in me—characteristics I didn’t even know I had. He perceives them, and he brings them out of me.

“You don’t want to date a boxer, though, do you?” Mila asks. “He’s probably a criminal like the rest of them . . .”

“He’s not like the rest of them!” I say sharply.

“Sorry,” Mila says, holding up her hands. “I haven’t met him. I just thought . . .”

She thought I’d marry someone like the boys we went to school with. The ones whose parents used to socialize with our parents . . . until Mama and Papa lost all their money.

I used to live in the world of the wealthy and privileged.

But it’s funny—I never fell in love with any of those boys. Even after years of knowing them, I never felt a connection like the one that developed between Snow and me in a matter of days.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say to Mila. “Nothing can happen between us. I work for Krupin. He owns the next twenty years of my life.”

*Nothing can happen between us.*

*But it did.*

I almost start blushing again, wondering if I should tell Mila. She’s not a virgin. She used to tease me about waiting so long. *Just get it over with*, she told me.

Well, I did. And now I think I’m addicted. I keep thinking about it, obsessing over it, craving it. Is it normal to be so attracted to someone that

you'd risk anything, even your own life, for five minutes in their arms?

"It won't be twenty years," Mila says, putting her hand over mine. "Once I graduate, I can get a job too. I can start paying down the debt . . ."

I shake my head hard.

"Absolutely not," I tell her. "You're not getting dragged into this. You're going to have a normal life. A *great* life."

Mila doesn't say anything, but she presses her lips together stubbornly. I know my sister. I know she's not just going to stand by and watch me suffer.

The thought only depresses me. I can't bear to see Mila be buried along with the rest of us.

God, how are we ever going to get out of this?







## SNOW

**I**t's only a few hours before the fourth fight, and I still don't know what I'm going to do about Krupin's request. Or demand, I should say. That's what it really is. He expects me to take a dive. And I probably should do it.

But I don't want to.

I've never lost a fight yet.

And more than that, I never fought rigged.

I don't have a lot in this world. I've got no house, no watches, no cars—just a small amount of savings hidden behind a brick in my wall. I've got no family and no famous name.

The one thing I have is my word. I have never lied or cheated anyone. And I never took a dive in a fight.

It's pride, plain and simple.

Integrity is a luxury in my world. People sell it cheap, but once you lose it, you can hardly get it back for any price.

Look at Krupin. He was betrayed by his brother. He wanted revenge. But he broke the code when he killed his own nephews. He's been scrambling for ten years since, trying to prove that he's trustworthy, that he's done his penance and should be welcomed back into the fold. He's got to grovel in front of Stepanov, and maybe even offer him Sasha wrapped up in a bow, just for the privilege of handing over half his business, so Stepanov will endorse him.

That's the cost to try to buy your name back.

I'm pacing the floor, trying to decide what to do. Okalina watches me silently from her favorite perch on the divider between the bedroom and the kitchenette.

As soon as I sit down on the bed, she leaps down, pads over to me, and jumps up on my lap.

I think she's getting fatter already. At least, she's not painfully thin anymore. Her soot-gray fur is becoming sleeker, too. I run my hand down her back, carefully because I still feel a little awkward, never having owned an animal before.

I kept telling myself I would take her to the shelter. I said it every morning for three days. Then I admitted that I didn't really want to. It was nice, hearing her run to the door when I came home at night.

Other than her crying on the fire escape, she's the quietest creature imaginable. She doesn't make a sound, beyond the occasional purr. I like her silence. It matches my own. Plus, I don't have mice getting into my cabinets anymore.

Okalina's weight is comforting, but I still don't know what to do.

Meyer sounds his horn from outside my window.

I snatch up my duffle bag and set Okalina gently down on my pillow before I leave the apartment, locking the door behind me.

In the car, Boom Boom says, somewhat awed, "Four hundred K is a serious purse. You're gonna be rich, Snow!"

"Minus twenty percent," Meyer reminds him.

"What do you need eighty thousand rubles for?" Boom Boom laughs, "You gonna buy a new hat? That one's older than Lenin's corpse."

"I could get a new speed bag," Meyer says dryly. "Some idiot ripped the last one off its hook."

"That was already broken!" Boom Boom says. "Come on—you know I don't punch that hard."

"What if I don't win?" I say.

Meyer and Boom Boom shut up immediately, staring at me.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Meyer says.

"Krupin wants me to take a dive in the second round," I tell them.

"And why in the *fuck* would you want to do that?" Meyer says.

"He said to do him a favor."

"That's not a favor," Meyer snorts. "That's a firstborn child."

“He’d owe you one for sure,” Boom Boom says, his eyes round. “Bratva always pay their debts.”

“I don’t want him to owe me one,” I say. “I want to win the tournament.”

“So do it, then,” Meyer says.

I glance over at him. He looks keen and stern, hunched over the wheel.

“Krupin will be pissed,” I say.

“Yeah, probably,” Meyer replies.

Boom Boom lets out a low whistle.

“How pissed d’ya think?” he says nervously.

I just shrug.

I don’t know what Krupin will do if I defy him.

But I guess I’ll find out.



I SHOW up at the warehouse, still figuring I’ll be paired against the Rabbi. But when I see the beting board, I realize I’m fighting Stacks. Which means the Rabbi is up against the Beast.

“What did they do that for?” Boom Boom says.

I shake my head. I have no idea.

Now that we’re down to four fighters, it’s just the Rabbi and me in the west locker room, Stacks and the Beast on the opposite side.

The Rabbi looks pale and quiet. He’s wrapping and unwrapping his hands, trying to get them just right.

“Hey,” I say. “You see the board?”

The Rabbi nods.

“Listen,” I say, “you should just forfeit. He’s way outside your weight class, nobody will think worse of you.”

The Rabbi scowls. He gets to his feet, bouncing lightly on his toes. His slight frame is only more apparent from this position: 5’8, 150 lbs. max.

“I took down Butterball just fine,” he says.

It’s not my place to argue with him. It’s poor form to psych somebody out before a fight. But I like the Rabbi, and I respect him. Too much to stay quiet.

“The Beast ain’t Butterball,” I tell him, bluntly. “The Beast is a fucking animal. I went out with him the other night, and I—“

“I know what he is,” the Rabbi interrupts me. “I’ll knock him out, and I hate to say it, but I’ll knock you out too, Snow, if I face you in the last match. I’m winning this tournament, the whole thing. I got a shot and I’m taking it.”

His expression is composed, utterly decided. Nothing I say is going to change his mind.

“Alright,” I say. “Good luck, Rabbi.”

“Good luck, brother.”

He holds out his fist. I hit it with mine.

We drift apart to opposite sides of the room, to get our heads clear before our fights.

“Hey,” a soft voice calls.

I look up. Sasha is standing in the doorway.

I pull her into the adjoining room before anyone can see her. The only thing in here is an ice machine, so the cornermen can fill bags with crushed ice to cool the boxers between rounds.

“What are you doing here?” I say in a low voice.

“I wanted to wish you luck,” Sasha says.

Behind the slim frames of her glasses, her blue eyes look worried.

She’s wearing her sensible doctor clothes again. I can never decide which Sasha I like best—the posh little rich girl, the sexy siren in the red dress, or the clever professional. I like them all. More than I can say.

Just the sight of her raises my spirits. I’m not worrying about Krupin, or the upcoming fight. I’m thinking that she snuck out of the infirmary to see me because she cares about me. She wants me to win.

I grab her arm, pulling her close to me.

“If you really want to wish me luck,” I growl, “you’ll give me more than a smile.”

“I’m not smiling at you,” she says, trying to hold back her grin.

“Yes, you are,” I say.

I crush her mouth against mine.

The moment our lips touch, I feel a surge of energy like a jolt from a car battery. It pours through my veins, down to the very tips of my fingers and toes. I feel powerful, invincible. I know I’m going to win the fight.

I let go of her, and she stumbles back a step. Her blue eyes are wider than ever.

“How do you do that to me?” she says.

“I’m going to do a lot more than that to you,” I tell her. “Meet me tonight. After the fight.”

“Where?” she says.

“Come to my apartment. It doesn’t matter how late.”

“I’ll be there,” she says.

I’m about to turn around and head back to the locker room, but she calls after me, “Wait!”

She’s holding out a little package, wrapped in brown paper.

I stare at it stupidly.

“What’s that?” I say.

“It’s nothing,” she says, flushing. “Just something I saw in a shop. It made me think of you.”

I take it from her, feeling strangely off-kilter. Nobody’s given me a gift in my life. My uncle took care of me, but he wasn’t sentimental. My parents never even considered it. No gifts at the orphanage, of course.

My fingers fumble at the wrapping, trying several times before I manage to unwrap the string.

Inside is a globe, about the size of a softball. The transparent glass contains a tiny replica of New York City, with the circular arena of Madison Square Garden clearly visible between Times Square and the Empire State Building.

“Look,” Sasha says.

She takes the globe gently from my hands and turns it over. When she rights it again, thick flakes of white drift down on the city.

“Snow on Madison Square Garden,” she says, laughing softly. “It’s cheesy, I know . . .”

“It isn’t!” I say, my voice a little strangled. “It’s beautiful.”

Sasha looks up into my eyes again.

“You’re going there,” she says.

Her voice is full of certainty and hope. Hope on my behalf.

“I wish I had something to give you back,” I tell her.

“You don’t have to give me anything!” Sasha laughs.

I will, though. When I think of something good enough.

I kiss her once more before I let her go.

This kiss is longer, and more tender.

I've never been given a gift before. And I've never kissed a woman with all of my heart. When it comes to love, I'm as inexperienced as Sasha.

I don't want to let go of her.

"Remember, tonight," I say.

"I'll be there," Sasha promises.

I head back into the locker room, feeling like I'm floating.

"Where'd you go?" Boom Boom says. He's carrying my duffle bag, plus a hot pretzel he picked up along the way. Krupin is selling food as well as drinks now. It's a carnival out there.

"Nowhere," I say.

"What's that?"

He's pointing to the globe, which I've loosely wrapped in brown paper again.

"Mind your own business!" I say rudely, wrapping the package carefully in a spare shirt and stowing it inside the duffle bag.

Meyer comes in too, having had to walk farther than ever after parking the car.

"How come you're not ready?" he demands.

The Rabbi looks over at us, raising an eyebrow. He saw Sasha at the door. But he won't tell anyone.

"I'm getting ready," I say to Meyer.

"Do it faster," he snaps.

My match is first, facing off against Big Stacks.

I hadn't expected to fight him tonight. Still, I'm ready to do it. I'm buoyed up by the sight of Sasha. I feel untouchable.

Big Stacks is better known for his outlandish outfits than his win record, but he's no slouch in the ring. He's made it this far in the tournament for a reason.

Of course, you could argue that he wouldn't have won the last match if he weren't such a crowd favorite. As Stepanov and I discussed at dinner, the actual point count put Lights Out ahead.

That's part of the game in underground boxing. You've either got to win big enough to make it obvious, or you have to make it fun for the crowd, so you get them on your side.

I head out first, head down in my white robe, "Lose Yourself" blaring from the speakers hung around the ring.

I've gathered a fair number of fans of my own by this point. I can hear them chanting "SNOW! SNOW! SNOW! SNOW!" as I make the long walk up to the ring.

Glancing to my right, I can see Krupin seated at the biggest table, Stepanov right beside him. Krupin's arms are folded across his chest. He taps two fingers against his left bicep, reminding me to go down in the second round.

I don't give him any sign of acknowledgment. I just shove my mouth guard between my teeth and strip off my robe, handing it to Boom Boom.

Meyer rubs Vaseline over my face, especially on the still-healing cut over my left eye.

He squints at me through his thick glasses.

"Knock him out, Snow," he says.

My song cuts out, and "Eye of the Tiger" starts blaring instead.

The crowd roars with glee.

Big Stacks has convinced someone to set off firecrackers around the locker room door, so he bursts out in a whirl of sparks and smoke, a long gold cloak swirling behind him. He's wearing gold-lame gloves, and black shorts with a golden eagle across his crotch. His boxing shoes are way taller than regulation height, with golden wings painted on the side. He's got his hair braided in cornrows, and I swear he sprayed glitter in it.

The crowd goes insane at the sight of him. He's grinning and blowing kisses, jogging up to the ring.

I'm not paying any attention to him. I'm looking toward the infirmary, to see if Sasha is peeking out. I can just see her slim figure standing in the doorway.

I have to tear my eyes away from her. I face off against Big Stacks. He gives me a low, mocking bow.

As soon as the bell rings, however, he comes at me hard. Just because Big Stacks dresses like a circus, doesn't mean he's a clown. He's fast and he's fucking sneaky too.

He starts off with a little shoeshine—a combo of flashy punches that look impressive, but don't do any damage. But then he hits me with some nasty body shots that mostly come at the belt or right beneath it.

One almost hits me in the groin. I shove him off, angrily grunting, "Watch it!"

Big Stacks just grins around his mouth guard, dancing away.



He charges me again, punching fast and reckless, not being too careful to protect his head.

It occurs to me that Krupin probably told him I'm going down in the second round. That's why he isn't worried—he thinks he has this thing in the bag.

I give him a hard shot to the face to show him otherwise. His head snaps back, wiping the smile right off his face.

Now he brings his gloves up properly, eyeing me warily.

We circle around each other as Stacks reevaluates.

He comes in again, managing to land a glancing blow off my forehead. But I hit him twice in the gut, hard enough that he staggers backward.

The bell rings, signaling the end of the round. We retreat to our respective corners.

Meyer puts a cool towel around my shoulders.

"You got this, kid," he says. "He's all flash and no fire."

Round two, I feel Krupin's eyes boring into me. I know he's watching my every move, waiting for me to fall.

Big Stacks has returned with renewed optimism. He thinks I'm going down, too. He's throwing haymakers at me, trying to land a solid punch so I can fall convincingly.

I swat them all away. He's not hitting me, and I'm not going down.

Instead I go to work on Stacks. I tag him again and again, in the face and the body. He's starting to get mad, thinking I'm just making myself look good before the dive.

One minute passes. Then two. As the last seconds of the round tick away, I can feel Krupin's rage, though I'm not looking over at him. I know he's counting down in his head, counting down to my betrayal.

The bell rings, and round two is over. I turn away from Big Stacks, ready to head back to my corner.

In sheer desperation, Big Stacks hits me with a monster suck punch from the side. It gets me right in the temple, bringing me down to my knee.

The crowd howls its displeasure. The chorus of boos is like a waterfall crashing down on Big Stacks' head.

The ref glances over at Krupin. Krupin nods, telling the ref to continue the fight. But the foul was too blatant. The crowd won't stop booing. They get louder and louder, stomping their feet against the bleachers and chanting "THROW HIM OUT! THROW HIM OUT!"

The ref has to disqualify Big Stacks, handing me the win. I raise my fist over my head, but there's little triumph in it. I can see Krupin's face, black with rage.





## SASHA

*Lots of humans take a refuge for friendship with animals, because the brutality of human is more dangerous than animal.*

— KAMARAN IHSAN SALIH

**T**he bell rings. Right as Snow turns away, the boxer in the gold shorts throws a wild punch at his face, hitting Snow in the left temple. Snow stumbles, landing on one knee, obviously dazed. He didn't have his gloves up. He wasn't prepared for the hit at all.

I don't know much about boxing, but I'm pretty sure that's not allowed.

Without meaning to, I start booing along with the rest of the crowd.

Some people throw empty plastic beer cups toward the ring, others stamp the metal risers of the bleachers, chanting "FOUL! FOUL! FOUL!"

The ref is conversing with a couple other men at the side of the ring.

Snow has gotten to his feet again, bouncing on his toes, shaking out his arms, trying to recover from the hit in case he has to fight again.

Luckily, the ref makes a motion with his arms, and the MC yells into the microphone, "Big Stacks is disqualified for a late hit!"

Now the crowd cheers. I jump and whoop along with everyone else.

Snow is going to the final round of the tournament.

The only question is who he'll be fighting?

Because neither Snow nor Big Stacks is injured badly enough to come see me, I'm free to watch the second match. However, I don't like the look of it at all.

First, they call out one of Stepanov's enforcers—the tattooed brute who came to dinner with us. The man they call the Beast.

As he lumbers out of the locker room, the crowd beats their fists against their legs, grunting like gorillas. It's an ugly sound.

The Beast jogs out in a plain gray sweatshirt and shorts, his hair freshly buzzed. There's no need for him to wear a gold cape like Big Stacks, because his body speaks for itself. He strips off the sweatshirt, revealing size and bulk that makes even Snow look human by comparison.

Every inch of him is covered in tattoos, from his shaved scalp all the way down his meaty back, disappearing into his shorts, and then running down the length of his legs.

These tattoos aren't images like Snow's—or at least, most aren't. They're patterns and lines in heavy black ink, creating a jarring, almost mesmerizing effect on the vast canvas of his skin.

If the Beast was just a monster of muscle, I wouldn't be frightened. But his eyes are sharp as he looks around the ring, surveying the canvas, the ropes, and the crowd beyond. I think he might be clever, too. Which is much more dangerous.

Since I haven't been following the bracket closely, I don't know who he'll be paired up against.

I'm shocked when I see one of the smallest fighters emerging from the locker room.

He's the one they call The Rowdy Rabbi. Only the same height as myself, lean, ropey with muscle, but with none of the mass of the Beast. He has dark curly hair, and a serious, determined gaze.

He walks toward the ring with every appearance of confidence.

I, on the other hand, am shocked and horrified.

The Rabbi slips under the ropes, taking his position across from the Beast. The difference in their size is all the more apparent as they face each other.

It's ridiculous. It can't be allowed.

I keep waiting for someone to object, but the crowd is utterly silent. It's the quietest I've ever heard them. You could hear a cough or a shuffle, if anyone were making even those small sounds.

Even the ref looks uncomfortable as he gives the boxers their instructions.

The Rabbi raises his gloves, his mouth a thin line of determination.

The Beast has no expression at all. His eyes have gone blank, like a shark about to attack.

The bell sounds and the Beast attacks.

The Rabbi tries to duck and evade. I can see that he's fast, probably the quickest fighter I've seen yet. But there's no way to avoid the reach of the Beast. His arms are too long, he takes up too much of the ring. There's not enough space for the Rabbi to run.

The Beast hits him two, three, four times.

These are just jabs, not the full-power punches I've seen these boxers unleash. But the Rabbi is already bleeding from the nose and lip.

He manages to avoid the next rush. He even hits the Beast twice in the ribs. Unfortunately, the Rabbi's shots seem to have no effect on the Beast. Or if they do, it's only to annoy him.

The Beast hits the Rabbi again, hard enough that the Rabbi lands on his bottom and goes skidding backward on the canvas. He jumps up, but he's slower now, blood running from his split lip down the front of his bare chest.

The Beast advances, and the Rabbi only barely manages to keep out of his grip. The Beast backs him up against the ropes, raining a hail of blows against the Rabbi's arms, which form a weakening barricade in front of his head.

The Beast draws back his fist again. He's stopped by the bell signaling the end of the round.

The Rabbi stumbles back to his corner, dazed. The Beast walks slowly and steadily, not injured in the slightest.

I can hear the murmuring of the crowd. While some are still cheering the Beast on, not everyone likes the mismatched nature of the fight.

I see the Rabbi's coach arguing with him. I'm guessing he wants to end the fight. The Rabbi keeps shaking his head, stubbornly.

The moments of reprieve pass by too quickly. The Rabbi has to face off against the Beast again.

I don't want to watch anymore. I should go back inside the infirmary and close the door. I'll see the Rabbi soon enough, when they bring him to me to be stitched up.

Yet I'm frozen in place, watching this awful spectacle unfold.

The Beast is relentless, hitting the Rabbi again and again and again. I put my hands up over my eyes, peeking between the cracks in my fingers. I

don't want to watch, but I can't look away.

Some people in the crowd are shouting to end the fight, but others are still cheering, yelling, "Finish him off!"

The Rabbi is up against the ropes. He's dropping his hands, not even protecting himself anymore.

Once his gloves drop, the Beast pulls back his fist and unleashes a punch doubly as powerful as any that came before. It's a blow intended to finish the match completely.

His fist plows into the Rabbi's left eye. The Rabbi's head snaps back and twists around. With his body trapped against the ropes, his shoulders can't turn with his neck. His eyes roll back and his head lolls.

The Beast steps away, letting the Rabbi's body fall flat on the canvas. The Rabbi's head strikes the mat, with no responding jerk of his body.

There's a stillness to his form that goes beyond unconsciousness.

I know what I'm seeing, but I don't want to believe it.

Half the crowd is still cheering and chanting the Beast's name.

I hate them for it.

The Beast holds his arms up above his head, turning slowly in a circle to accept their adulation.

I'm running toward the ring.

So are several other people.

The Rabbi's trainer gets there first. He turns the Rabbi over, which makes the Rabbi's head flop to the side once more.

A girl is climbing up into the ring as well. She's small and slim like the Rabbi, but with a round little belly beneath her dress. It's hard for her to climb up on the platform. Doggedly she hauls herself up, so she can run to Rabbi with no care for the blood staining the skirt of her dress. She's crying and yelling, "Adam! Adam!"

I'm the last to arrive.

I kneel beside the Rabbi. I place my index and middle finger against the side of his neck, though I already know what I'll find. His wide-open eyes make plain what I already guessed.

The Rabbi is dead.

The Beast broke his neck.







## SNOW

**W**hen the Rabbi's entourage realizes that he's dead, a riot erupts. His trainer, his cutman, his cousin, and several men who look to be brothers of Anastasia all start shouting at the Beast and his team, and Krupin as well. The trainer gets too close to Krupin. Yakov shoves him back, so hard that he stumbles. The biggest of Anastasia's brothers charges at the Beast, while several other fighters from the Orthodox Club try to hold him back.

In seconds, the conflict dissolves into a frenzied brawl.

I jump up into the ring, seizing the pregnant Anastasia. I drag her away from the Rabbi's body, shoving her into Boom Boom's arms instead. I shout, "Get her out of here!"

Anastasia is fighting, trying to get back to the Rabbi. Trying to be as careful as he can despite her flailing arms, Boom Boom carries her toward the closest exit.

I jump down myself, looking wildly around for Sasha.

Shots ring out.

Women start screaming, and there's a mad rush as the crowd tries to exit the warehouse en masse. It's utter chaos—people shoving and trampling each other, VIP tables turned over, and beer bottles shattering. One of the bleachers collapses, with dozens of people still trying to climb down the risers. Many more are crushed underneath.

I catch sight of Sasha, crouched down at the base of the ring, trying not to be swept away in the rush of panicked spectators.

I shove my way toward her, against the flow of people. I grab Sasha and I throw her over my shoulder, so she's above the crowd. Then I barrel through them, not caring who I crush.

The spectators are jammed up against the front doors, a human bottleneck of far too many people packed into a space never designed for this.

The Rabbi's friends are still brawling with Krupin and Stepanov's men—I see several bodies on the floor, but I don't know who was shot, or if those are people trampled by the crowd.

There's no way out at the front. I head toward the back of the building, trusting that there must be another exit. I can't see Boom Boom and Anastasia, or Meyer. I hope they got out quickly or found another way.

I can feel Sasha's racing heart, thudding against my shoulder. She's holding tight to my neck, but she's not sobbing or screaming. She trusts me to get her out of here.

I thread my way through the jumble of abandoned equipment at the back of the warehouse, finally finding a steel door set in the wall. It's locked, but I break the rusted bolt with one kick. The door swings open, letting us out.

The night air is cold and fresh. It feels like water in the desert, after the panicked heat of the warehouse. I drink it in, jogging across the pavement with Sasha still slung over my shoulder.

I don't set her down until we're three blocks away at least, too far to hear shrieks and shouts anymore.

When I put her down, I see that Sasha is shaking with fright and cold. She left her coat in the infirmary.

I strip off my hoodie and wrap it around her. Then I wrap my arms around her, too.

"Are you alright?" I ask her.

Her eyes are full of tears as she looks up at me.

"He died!" she cries. "The Beast killed him!"

"I know," I say.

I'm filled with sick rage, remembering the last blow. The Beast had already beaten the Rabbi, easily. There was no reason for it.

"Did you know him?" Sasha asks.

"Yes," I say. "He was my friend."

She blinks, tears running down both cheeks.

“I’m so sorry,” she says.

I nod. I start to say something—maybe to tell her that he knew it was a risk, that all boxers take that risk on some level when they step into the ring. But I can’t speak around the swelling in my throat.

I think of Anastasia. I think of the Rabbi’s child that he’ll never get to meet.

“Why did he do it?” Sasha asks.

She means, why did the Rabbi try to fight the Beast.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe he thought he could win. Maybe he only hoped.”

Hope can be a dangerous thing.

“Are you going to fight the Beast?” she asks quietly.

“Yes,” I say. “If the tournament’s still on.”

Sasha turns away from me. But not before I see the fear in her face.

“I don’t think he’s human,” she says.

“He’s human,” I assure her. “For better or for worse.”

I draw her back under my arm, because she’s still shivering. We walk side by side, trying to get back to a part of the city where we can find a cab.

When we’ve found a ride, I tell the driver to take Sasha home. But she says, “No, go to Kupchino, please.”

I’m surprised, but relieved. I badly want her company still.

Once I’ve let her into my apartment, I ask her if she wants a shower.

Sasha looks down at her clothing, realizing that her blouse is stained with the Rabbi’s blood. Her lips tremble and I think she’s going to cry again, but she gets control of herself.

“Yes,” she says. “Can I borrow some clothes, too?”

She undresses where she stands, stripping off the blouse and pants that were dirtied in the stampede, and stained by spilled drinks, too.

I feel awful about the Rabbi. But I can’t help letting my eyes linger on Sasha’s luscious figure as it’s unveiled once more. Her full breasts hang down in the cups of her bra while she bends to slip off her trousers, then settle into place again when she stands upright once more.

I want her worse than ever. In fact, I need her. How can you live thirty years without someone, and then in the space of a week they become more vital to you than food, or water, or even air?

She sees me watching her. Looking me in the eye, she reaches around behind herself to unclasp her bra. She pulls the straps down off her arms,

dropping it to the floor. She pulls down her panties as well, stepping out of them to stand nude before me.

I've never seen a body quite like hers. Her curves are insanely proportioned—they draw men's eyes everywhere she goes, no matter how she tries to cover up. In an era of skinny girls, she looks like a 1950s bombshell.

Naked, it's almost too much to bear.

Her breasts are heavy, full, and unutterably soft, with dusky pink nipples. Her waist nips in at the sides, flaring out again to beautifully full hips and a gorgeous round ass.

With her long silvery hair loose around her shoulders, she looks like a painting of Aphrodite: the picture of health, beauty, and fertility.

That's how my body responds to her.

My cock instantly stiffens inside my shorts, begging, aching, *demanding* to find its way inside of her again. I feel driven to fuck her, over and over and over again. My body wants that, and nothing else. No other goal seems half as important.

I swear I can smell the musky sweetness of her pussy from across the room. I remember exactly how good she tasted, how I wanted to lick her up like melted ice cream for hours on end.

I want it again now.

But she's turning toward the bathroom.

I follow her in, showing her how to turn on the shower. It makes a shuddering sound before finally providing a fitful spray of water. It takes even longer for that water to actually run warm.

Finally, the tiny bathroom begins to fill with steam. As she steps under the spray, Sasha grabs my hand and says, "Come on."

She doesn't have to ask me twice. I strip off my clothes, eager to join her.

I barely fit in the shower myself, let alone with another person. But it's good—I want to be pressed close against her, the water streaming down over our naked bodies.

Sasha tilts up her chin and stands on tiptoe to kiss me. Her lips are already warm and swollen from the hot shower.

Her hands are warm, too. She slides them over my chest, down my sides. She finds my cock, which is rigidly pressed against her belly.

I groan as her warm, wet hand encircles it. She strokes it gently, and I put my much larger hand over hers and squeeze hard, because I'm aching so badly, I can barely stand it.

Sasha gets down on her knees in front of me.

"You don't have to do that," I tell her.

She looks up at me with her beautiful blue eyes.

"I want to make you feel better," she says.

God, I want that too. So, so badly.

"Have you ever sucked a cock before?" I ask her.

I'm curious. I'm sure a thousand men have imagined her doing it to them.

Sasha shakes her head. Her cheeks are flushed from the hot steam, little droplets beading in her eyelashes. Her lips look dark pink and fuller than ever.

"Will you teach me?" she asks.

"Open your mouth," I say.

She opens her mouth just a little. I slide the head of my cock around her full, swollen lips. Those soft lips feel phenomenal against the sensitive head.

"Put out your tongue," I tell her.

Sasha extends her little pink tongue. I rest the head of my cock on top of it, rubbing her tongue against the underside in the little divot where the shaft meets the head.

I moan. Clear fluid leaks out of the head, onto Sasha's tongue. She pulls her tongue back into her mouth, swallowing, so she can taste it.

"Do you like it?" I ask her.

She nods, blushing all the more.

She opens her mouth again, wider this time. I slide a little more of my cock inside, careful not to gag her. It's good to do this in the shower the first time, because my cock is already wet and well-lubricated. It slides easily in and out of her mouth.

As she gets used to it, I start to thrust a little deeper into her mouth. Sasha grips my thighs with her hands, even sliding her hands up to my ass.

It feels phenomenal, like nothing I've experienced before. Half the girls who blew me before were sloppy drunk, and the other half treated it like a job, working their mouths like pistons to try to get me off as quickly as possible.

Sasha is doing this for my pleasure, but also out of curiosity and interest. She's experimenting with different speeds and pressures, sucking and bobbing. She's flicking her tongue under my cock and sucking on the head. She's looking up at my face, trying to see what feels the best for me.

I love seeing her innocent blue eyes staring up at me, while her gorgeous, full lips are wrapped around my cock. It's the most erotic sight imaginable.

I've never hooked up in the shower before, either. The heat and moisture are incredibly useful. They heighten each sensation, as well as highlighting the signs of arousal in Sasha's face and body. Her pale skin is suffused with a rosy glow. Her mouth is wet and eager. Her eyes are locked onto mine.

I'm trying to keep my pace slow and gentle, but I'm so aroused that it's hard to control myself. I take her head between my hands and thrust deeper still. I go too far, and she chokes, pulling back and gagging a little.

"Sorry," I say.

"Don't be sorry," Sasha says. "Is that what feels good? Going deeper?"

"Yes," I say.

"Keep going, then," she says.

She takes my cock in her mouth once more. I thrust in and out of her lips. I can feel a massive climax building, one that I'm afraid is going to be overwhelming for her.

"I'm gonna cum," I warn her.

She only increases her speed, doing her best to take my cock as deeply into her mouth as she can, which is still only about halfway, but feels fucking fantastic all the same.

The climax happens without warning. It bursts out of me, a rushing torrent of pleasure that I could no more stop than I could singlehandedly hold back the Sayano dam.

It's so enervating that my legs go weak. I have to grab hold of the shower rod so I don't fall over.

Sasha is doing her best to keep sucking, but she's definitely choking now, as what I've unleashed overfills her mouth and spills out on the shower floor.

"Sorry," she says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

I pull her to her feet, wrapping her up in my arms once more, beneath the beating shower spray.

“Are you crazy?” I say. “That was the best blow job of my life.”

She laughs. “You’re just being nice.”

“I’m not nice,” I tell her seriously. “I’m honest.”

“Good,” she says. “I like that better,”

I kiss her gently, tasting myself on her lips. She shivers, her mouth more sensitive than ever now.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “I actually do feel better.”

I’m more sorry for the Rabbi than I can say. But it’s impossible to think of anything but Sasha when I’m holding her in my arms.

I’ve never felt like this before.

It frightens me, to care so much about someone.

She’s so much smaller than me, so much more fragile. She’s strong and brave and intelligent, but that doesn’t mean that someone like Krupin or Stepanov couldn’t take her from me with one bullet.

They don’t think she belongs to me at all. They think she belongs to them.

They’re wrong.

I wrap Sasha up in a towel and carry her to my bed. Then I unwrap her once more so I can feast my eyes on her fresh, clean flesh. I love how she smells like my soap and my shampoo now. The scents are slightly altered on her skin—they become lighter and more feminine when mixed with her natural chemistry.

My cock is already growing hard again beneath the towel wrapped round my waist. The oral sex was incredible, but my dick wants to be buried inside Sasha. It won’t settle for anything less.

I part her legs, revealing her pretty little pussy with its tuft of golden-blond hair.

I run my tongue up the length of her slit, teasing her clit with the tip of my tongue until she squirms with pleasure and squeezes her thighs around my head.

I don’t like how the shower has washed away some of her natural taste, but I do like how remarkably wet she is already. I plunge a finger inside of her. It slides in and out easily, making her moan. She obviously enjoyed getting down on her knees to suck my cock.

“You naughty little thing,” I growl. “You enjoyed doing that, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Sasha admits. “I like how it felt in my mouth. And I like the noises you make.”

“Not half as many as you’re going to make,” I say, diving down between her legs again.

I lick her pussy until she’s right on the edge of orgasm. Just when she’s beginning to moan and squirm and clench on my finger, I thrust my cock inside of her instead.

Sasha screams out loud as I pound into her. I ride her hard and fast, forcing out a climax that’s much more powerful than what I could provide with my tongue.

When she’s done, I flip her over so I can fuck her from behind. I haven’t gotten near enough of a view of this gorgeous, full, milky-white ass. Its two round globes seem to swallow up my cock, Sasha’s waist looking impossibly small by comparison.

Her ass is so pale and flawless that I can’t resist giving it a sharp smack with the palm of my hand. It leaves a vivid red print in the shape of my fingers.

Sasha squeals. The sound makes me want to smack her again. I leave several more handprints on her beautiful bottom, until both cheeks are glowing red.

I thought it might be hard for me to cum again, but actually I’m having the opposite problem. Sasha’s blend of innocence and naughtiness is intoxicating. I want to give her every carnal pleasure under the sun, anything she’s dreamed or never even imagined.

On top of that, her nubile body is the headiest of aphrodisiacs. The look and feel, the taste and smell of her, all combine to create the most powerful compulsion to fuck that I’ve ever experienced. I can already feel my balls boiling, aching to unload inside of her again.

First, I want to make her cum one more time.

So, I roll over on my back and pull her on top of me.

I can tell she’s less comfortable without me in charge. She doesn’t know how to move on top of me. She gets that pink blush in her cheeks that I’m coming to love more than anything in the world.

There’s never been a more beautiful sight than this woman riding me. I reach up to cup her ripe, full breasts. She leans over so they fill my hands, moaning at my touch. I caress them softly at first, then a little harder, seeing



which she likes better. She rides me faster the rougher I am with her, so I pinch her nipples, making her gasp and buck her hips.

I grab her around the waist, my hands going almost all the way around her. I pull her down tight against me, grinding her pelvis against mine so her clit rubs hard against my belly and my cock is buried all the way inside of her.

She's moving naturally now, doing what feels best to her, without any consideration for how she looks, or whether she's doing it "right." This is the most beautiful thing of all, the look of her face when she's lost in wild abandon, her silvery hair streaming down around her shoulders, her breasts bouncing, her white teeth buried in that full bottom lip.

She throws back her head, screaming out loud as she cums for the second time. I don't have to hold back anymore, and it's a good fucking thing, because I can already feel my balls contracting in response. I give one last upward thrust, letting go.

Then I experience the longest, slowest, deepest orgasm of my life.

I keep my eyes open the whole time, because I don't want to miss a second of looking at Sasha.

She's still in the throes of her own climax, floating off in outer space, eyes closed, head thrown back.

But then, as if she can feel me looking at her, her blue eyes open and look down into mine. She leans forward again, even farther this time, so our faces are only inches apart, and her hair is like a curtain around us.

I never, never, never want this moment to end.

I don't want to let go of her. I don't want her to leave. I don't want her to be anywhere that isn't with me.

I've never felt this before, but I know exactly what it is.

"I love you."

Right while I'm thinking it, I say it out loud. I let the words cross the bridge of air between us.

I see the shock in her eyes.

But also, belief.

Because she knows I'm not kind. I'm only honest.

I kiss her again, so she doesn't feel like she has to say anything back. We kiss for so long that eventually we fall asleep, still wrapped in each other's arms.





## SASHA

I feel a little thud on my back, as if a pillow fell on me.

It wakes me up.

I'm still wrapped tight in Snow's arms, in his apartment.

It's pitch black and very quiet. I know it must be late—maybe two o'clock in the morning. I hope Mila's not worried about me. She knows I get home late from work, but I'm afraid she still waits up for me, or at least keeps an ear out.

I feel something soft brush past my face, and I realize it's Snow's little cat that woke me up. She's jumped up on the bed, and she's prowling around on top of us.

Snow's eyes are open, too. Very softly he says, "What is it, Okalina?"

There's a scratching sound at the door.

Snow sits bolt upright, looking toward the entrance.

Because his apartment is so dark, I can see a strip of light from the hallway leaking under the door. Dark shapes move across the light—feet, standing right outside.

Another scratch in the keyhole.

Someone is picking the lock.

I've barely had this thought before Snow leaps out of bed, snatching up a pile of clothes off the floor. He throws a sweatshirt and shorts at me, pulls the same on himself, and quietly opens his window, all before I've even had time to step into the shorts.

"Hurry, Sasha," he whispers.

My hands are shaking so hard I can't zip up the sweater. Snow zips it for me, then helps me climb out the window onto a rickety iron fire escape. He slides the window sash down again, as quietly as he can, considering how old and rigid the wood has become.

The little cat has followed us outside.

"Let her stay out," Snow whispers to me. "I don't want them to hurt her."

"Who is it?" I whisper back.

He just shakes his head and takes my hand, pulling me down the fire escape.

I don't have any shoes or socks. I see Snow carrying my shoes, along with the rest of my clothes and my purse. He's grabbed those instead of his own things. At first, I think he's being chivalrous, but then I realize he doesn't want whoever's coming to see my clothes in his apartment. That means he's worried that it's Krupin's men. Or Stepanov's.

The fire escape creaks and moans beneath our weight. Snow looks up repeatedly, afraid that the men will have broken into his apartment by now, and maybe come looking out the window.

He makes me wait on the second floor while he checks to make sure there's no one down in the alley. Then he helps me down the last few steps, puts my shoes on my feet, and takes my hand as we sprint down the alley.

We don't stop running until we're several blocks away. My heart is galloping along in my chest, not slowing at all, even when we stop and lean against the wall of a dark, boarded-up bakery.

Snow is still barefoot, his chest likewise exposed to the chilly night air, since he hasn't bothered to zip up his hoody. He looks like Tarzan—powerful and half-wild.

"Who was that?" I ask him again.

"I don't know for sure," Snow says, "but I'm guessing it's Yakov."

"Why?"

Did they find out about Snow and me? Is Krupin that angry?

"Krupin wanted me to throw the fight tonight," Snow says. "I didn't do it, obviously."

I don't understand.

"He wanted you to lose?"

"Yes. So he could bet against me."

I feel stupid at how naive I still am. I didn't know any of this was going on.

"And now he's mad at you?" I ask.

Snow shrugs.

"Just a guess."

"So you don't think this is about you and me?" I ask him.

Snow throws a quick glance in my direction.

"I don't think so," he says. "But if you want to call it off . . ."

"I don't," I assure him.

I know it's dangerous dating Snow right under Krupin's nose. I don't care. I'm not losing the only thing in the world making me happy right now.

When Snow said that he loved me, I felt a pure bolt of joy like nothing I've ever known before. I didn't say anything back to him because I was so surprised. But the more I think about it, the more I think I might feel the same.

I've never known a man like this. Even while I'm enmeshed in the most terrifying circumstances of my life, he makes me feel protected. I believe that he'll keep me safe, that he won't let anything awful happen to me.

More than that, I feel seen by him. I think that he and I are similar in that people only notice one thing about us. For Snow it's his size and strength. For me, it's the fact that I look like a spoiled little princess. And maybe I was, before. But not anymore.

When Snow and I look at each other, we see what lies beneath. The dreams, ambitions, and imaginings. He's not my opposite at all—I think we have more in common than anyone I've known before.

"I'll take you ho—" Snow begins to say, interrupted by his phone buzzing in his pocket. He pulls it out, wary at getting a text message in the middle of the night.

I glance at the message on the screen:

*GTE out thy re cming*

"WHO'S THAT?" I ask him.

"Meyer. My trainer."

Snow is frowning.

“What’s wrong?”

“He goes to bed early. And he doesn’t text.”

Snow scowls, thinking.

“I’ll take you home. Then I’ll go over there,” he says, deciding.

“No,” I say. “I want to come with you.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

Stubbornly, I cross my arms.

“I’m coming,” I tell him.

We have to walk quite a ways before we find a cab. The streets are nearly empty at this time of night. Several of the taxis that pass have already turned off their top lights, headed home and not picking up any more fares. At last I see one that’s still active. I hail it down.

Snow stands back, partly hidden by a parked car, so his bare feet aren’t apparent until I’m already getting in. The cab driver looks back at Snow with an alarmed expression, but I quickly say, “It’s just a short ride. Ulitsa Salova, please.”

I haven’t seen Snow’s gym before. It’s small and dingy looking from the outside, the painted sign on the window with its two yellow boxing gloves so faded and chipped that I only know it says “Golden Gloves” because Snow told me before.

“Does Meyer live here?” I say.

Snow nods.

“He has an apartment in the back of the gym.”

Snow ignores the front door, going around to the alley where there’s a secondary entrance that I assume leads right into Meyer’s apartment.

As we pick our way around the scattered bags of trash in the alleyway, Snow being particularly careful of broken glass because of his bare feet, he says, “This is where Meyer found me.”

Snow told me about his uncle’s death, and the orphanage that followed. But he hasn’t told me much about what happened afterward. I guessed that Meyer became something of a father to him, from Snow’s obvious affection for the cantankerous old man.

The door to the alleyway stands open, left ajar by whoever came here before us.

Snow holds up his hand, silently telling me to wait while he looks inside. I ignore him, following him into the small apartment. It’s extremely

tidy, just like Snow's place. I'm guessing it's Meyer who instilled Snow's sense of discipline—perhaps the naval uncle, too. He's been raised by men, without ever knowing a woman's love.

Meyer's apartment is even more spartan than Snow's. Yet the covers on the bed are rumpled, as if someone rose, interrupted, without a chance to make it again.

Snow gives a quick search of the kitchen, bathroom, and closet, which only takes a minute. Finding nothing, we walk through into the main gym.

Here I see the battered old ring where the boxers spar, as well as several heavy bags and speed bags, heavily patched. There's a rusted squat rack with plates of various sizes, and a wall of jump ropes. It smells of iron, sweat, sawdust, and oil. So masculine that I wonder if a woman has even set foot in here before.

I see some mats in the corner, and what I at first take to be a pile of rags. When Snow runs over, I realize that the slumped shape is his trainer.

"Sasha!" Snow shouts, though I'm right behind him. "Help him, please!"

His voice is anguished.

He rolls Meyer over. The old man is badly beaten. His face is swollen and bloody, his shattered glasses laying a few feet away. It looks like someone stomped on them deliberately. His arm lays at an awful angle, and his skin is gray.

"Call an ambulance," I tell Snow.

While he dials, I feel for a pulse on Meyer's wrinkled wrist, on the arm that doesn't seem to be broken.

It's horribly reminiscent of a few hours earlier when I checked the Rabbi, already knowing he was dead. Meyer must be seventy at least. I don't see how a man of his age could survive this.

"The ambulance is coming," Snow tells me. "Is he . . ."

I wait, my fingertips seeking the slightest movement beneath the skin.

I think I feel a pulse. Faint and erratic, but there.

"He's not dead," I say.

Quickly, I elevate Meyer's feet to send a little more blood to his head, and I gently chafe the uninjured hand to help restore circulation to the cold fingers.

While I'm doing this, Snow goes into the little office next to Meyer's apartment and returns with a laptop. He opens it up, scrolling for



something.

“What is it?” I say.

“There’s cameras,” Snow grunts, pointing to the corners of the room. “Meyer records our sparring matches, so he can show them to us afterward. But the cameras run all the time.”

Snow finds the feed he’s looking for, from an hour earlier.

The footage is black and white. But it’s clear enough to see what happened, and there’s sound, too.

Yakov and two of Krupin’s other men, Algorin and Bebchuck, broke into Meyer’s apartment. They hauled him out of bed and dragged him into the gym where they had more space.

“Where’s Snow?” Yakov demanded.

“How should I know?” Meyer croaked.

“You know where he lives. What’s the address?”

Meyer just shook his head, stubbornly.

“Tell us, old man. Or we’ll burn this place to the ground,” Bebchick said.

“With you inside,” Yakov snarled.

“You’re pretty tough, three of you against one old man,” Meyer said.

“You think you’d do better with the right odds?” Yakov laughed.

He unbuttoned his suit jacket, taking it off and handing it to Algorin to hold. Then he rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

“I heard you were hot shit back in the day, old man,” Yakov says. “Some kinda champion. But look at you now. Just another broken-down loser, training the next crop of losers.”

“That may be,” Meyer said calmly, “but you wouldn’t even make the cut, boy.”

Even on the black and white footage, I can see how Yakov’s face darkened.

He raised his fists and advanced on Meyer.

The old man put his hands up too, but as withered and hunched as he’s become, it was no contest at all. Yakov hit him again and again. Meyer’s glasses flew off his face, and Bebchuck stomped on them, making the fight even more uneven. It was obvious that Meyer could hardly see without them. Yakov’s blows fell on his face totally unprotected.

There was still some of the old quickness left. Meyer managed to block one punch and hit Yakov below the right eye, hard enough that Yakov

stumbled back. That only made him angrier. He ran at Meyer, kicking, punching, and kneeling him in the gut, until Meyer was laying on the mats. Yakov continued to kick and pummel him, using the pointed toes of his polished oxfords.

It makes me so sick that I can hardly watch, the frail old body jolting under the blows. I can feel Snow's rage like the heat of a furnace. He stares at the screen, unblinking.

Yakov didn't stop until Algorin hauled him off, saying, "Don't kill him until he gives us the address."

Yakov paused for a minute, panting with the exertion of the beating.

"Where's Snow?" he said again.

Meyer groaned, rolling on his side. He spat a little blood out on the mats.

"You're a fuckin' awful fighter," he said.

Yakov flew at him again, kicking him in the face with a blow that knocked Meyer unconscious, and could easily have killed him.

The men left shortly thereafter, not having learned anything.

Snow closes the laptop.

He's extraordinarily still. I've never seen him so enraged. It sends a chill through my body. I know Yakov deserves whatever Snow will do to him, but it terrifies me all the same.

I'm scared to speak a word.

Yakov found Snow's apartment anyway, obviously. But Meyer never gave him up. The old man refused to betray him.

I look down at Meyer's battered face. I love him for that. I'll do whatever I can to help him.

I run to Meyer's apartment and pull the blanket off his bed. I cover him up, then I run out into the street to make sure the ambulance doesn't pass us by.

It arrives a few minutes later, the EMTs taking out their portable stretcher when I tell them that Meyer can't walk.

They give Meyer oxygen. As they cover his face with the mask and the cool gas flows into his lungs, his eyes flutter open for a minute. He sees Snow looking down on him.

The EMTs strap Meyer to the stretcher, then carry him back out. Snow tries to get into the ambulance as well.

"Are you family?" one of the medics say.

“Yes!” I cry. “He’s family. Let him in.”

“Only him, then,” the other medic says to me.

“It’s alright,” I say quickly to Snow. “I’m going to the restaurant. I have to warn my father that there might be trouble.”

Snow nods.

“Be careful,” he says. “I’ll come find you, once Meyer is safe.”

I give him a swift kiss, then the medics shut the ambulance doors.

They pull away, sirens blaring.





## SNOW

**A**ll the fights I've ever had, all the hits I took, all the shit the other guys talked, none of that meant a thing to me. Even the beatings at the orphanage were doled out with a kind of bureaucratic coldness that let you know you were just a victim of the system.

But this. This is fucking personal.

I felt every blow to Meyer's body as if it were a fist right in my guts. I counted each one as they fell, and I marked their place. Everything that Yakov did, I'll return to him with interest. He'll feel that pain and fear, and then once he's experienced that same level of humiliation and helplessness, then I'll fucking kill him.

I stay close to Meyer, making sure the doctors and nurses are doing everything they can for him. After several rounds of x-rays, they inform me that his arm is broken in two places, as well as six of his ribs. His shoulder is dislocated, and his collarbone fractured. But the most dangerous thing is a rupture to his spleen. He'll have to go into surgery for that.

"It's a miracle he's alive," the doctor tells me.

"He's stubborn, that's all," I say.

"He just woke up, if you want to see him before the surgery."

I go into the bright, clean hospital room.

Meyer looks very small on the bed. His skinny body barely makes a lump under the blanket.

His skin still looks gray and drawn, but at least the beeps coming from the dozen machines to which he's been hooked are steadier than they were before.

Despite what the doctor said, his eyes are closed, and I don't want to wake him. But as I linger in the doorway, Meyer croaks out, without opening his eyes, "Don't just stand there starin' at me, boy."

I come closer to the bed.

Meyer does open his eyes now, blinking several times. His gaze looks unfocused, maybe because of all the drugs they've given him, or because he doesn't have his glasses.

"Can't see anything," he complains.

"Yeah, sorry," I say. "I couldn't bring your glasses. They were broken."

"Those fuckers," Meyer says. "I ain't made of money."

"Why didn't you just tell them my address?" I say.

"Cause fuck 'em, that's why," Meyer says.

I feel a rush of some feeling that I wouldn't have been able to identify before. It's a mix of admiration, anxiety, frustration, and warmth. It's only because Sasha recently unlocked a flood of this feeling inside of me that I recognize it. It's love. I love this old man.

And I know he loves me. He'd rather die than help Yakov find me.

"I'll get him back for this," I tell Meyer.

Meyer just scowls and shakes his head.

"Don't get distracted," he says. "You win your fight. That's all that matters."

"I don't think they're gonna finish the tournament," I say. "Not after what happened to the Rabbi. Not after that riot."

"Oh, they'll finish," Meyer says darkly. "The whole city's talking about it. Tickets will be a king's ransom to see you face off against the Beast."

The Beast.

In my anger at Yakov, I almost forgot about that fucking animal. The Rabbi deserves vengeance as much as Meyer. And I'm the only one who can provide it.

"Don't let your emotion run the fight," Meyer warns me. "Fight with the head, not the heart."

"If they hold off a couple days, you'll be there in my corner to remind me," I say.

"Maybe," Meyer replies, but I can tell from the exhaustion in his face, that won't be happening. He'll be alright, but not in time for the fight.

I've never done one without him.

He's always been the voice in my ear, reminding me not to give in to my worst impulses. Forcing me to remember everything he taught me.

"You'll still have Boom Boom there," Meyer says.

"That's worse than nothing," I say.

Meyer chuckles, then winces.

"He's a good boy," he says. "You both are . . ."

I can tell he's tired. I'm lingering for myself, not for him. I should let him sleep.

"I'll be here," I tell him. "After the surgery."

Meyer nods. He's already drifting off again.

I text Sasha, to make sure she's okay.

*I'm at the restaurant, she says. Papa says nobody came here. So I think it's alright.*

*Text me when you get home then,* I tell her.

The nurse pokes her head into the room.

"We're almost ready for him," she says. "Are you staying for the surgery?"

"Yeah," I tell her. "I'm staying."







## SASHA

*Some Warriors look fierce, but are mild. Some seem timid, but are vicious. Look beyond appearances; position yourself for the advantage.*

— DENG MING-DAO

**W**hen I get out of the cab outside Golod, I can see the lights have already been turned off, and the chairs are overturned atop the tables, ready for the floor to be swept and mopped.

However, I can see still someone moving around inside, back by the pass-through window to the kitchen. When I try the door, it's unlocked.

I slip through, smelling the lingering scents of the dozens of dinners that were served hours before.

No matter how many things have changed, at least Lyosha's cooking is still the same. I still feel that twinge of nostalgia, especially now, when the place isn't full of a bunch of gangsters. When it's just me and great-grandmother's portrait on the wall.

I head toward the back of the restaurant, where the kitchen, office, storeroom, and large walk-in refrigerator and freezer are located. I poke my head into the kitchen, seeing Lyosha still puttering around, sanitizing the countertops and readying everything for the following day's service. He lays damp dishtowels over several large bowls of bread dough, which will rise overnight, ready to be shaped into loaves and baked the following morning.

On the stove, a massive steel pot of goulash is simmering, practically large enough to take a bath inside. It will simmer twelve hours or more, until the meat, vegetables, and spices have all blended into a delicious savory stew. The rich scent is tantalizing. My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't eaten in many hours.

"Sasha!" Lyosha says in surprise. "You're up late."

He has a deep rasp from decades of smoking. He's so short that he barely comes up to my chin, with a monk's tonsure of steel-gray hair.

"I'm looking for Papa," I say.

Lyosha nods toward the office.

"He's settling the till," he says.

It's the last task of the night. I head over to the office, finding my father sitting at his desk, his glasses slipping down his nose as he manually totals the pile of receipts from the day.

"Hello, little love," he says, seeing me standing in the doorway.

He raises his eyebrows at my outfit—Snow's hoodie and shorts, so large that I'm practically swimming in them, coupled with my own Mary-Jane's, which don't match in the slightest.

"Hi, Papa."

"You're a little late for dinner," he says. "But Lyosha may still have something for you, if he hasn't packed it all up already . . ."

"That's alright," I say. "I just wanted to make sure everything was okay here."

"Yes," he says hesitantly. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Just . . . no reason. No one came by here?"

"No one unusual," he says.

"Good. That's good."

I can tell Papa wants to ask what's going on, without really wanting to know. His natural avoidance wins out. He bows his head once more, continuing to tally the bills.

"Business is good now," he tells me. "Even if it is all Bratva."

Unfortunately, all that profit goes to Krupin, not Papa.

"Have you spoken to Mama?" I ask him.

"Yes," he says, not looking up from the bills.

"What did she say?"

"She said she didn't have time to talk. She was going to the ballet with her sisters."

“Oh.”

“Did you come in through the front?” Papa asks.

“Yes.”

“Will you go lock the door for me?”

“Sure.”

I leave the office, closing the door behind me. Then I thread my way through the tables, stripped of their tablecloths, vases, and place settings. I can see the floor hasn't yet been swept. I can do that, after I lock the door.

I turn the deadbolt, securing the front door. But as I pull my hand back, someone grabs my wrist, simultaneously clamping their hand over my mouth. I try to scream. The sound is blocked, coming out as a muffled gurgle around the man's hand.

Though the arms wrapped around me aren't nearly as strong as Snow's, it's enough to keep me pinned against the stranger's body. I smell the sharp scent of cologne, and hair pomade. It's Yakov, I know it.

“There you are,” he hisses in my ear. “I just came from your boyfriend's apartment. You left something there.”

Letting go of my wrist, but keeping his hand clamped over my mouth, he pulls something out of his pocket. He dangles it in front of my face. It's my own crumpled underwear. Snow grabbed my clothes, purse, and shoes, but he couldn't find my panties.

“I wasn't sure they belonged to you,” Yakov whispers, “until I saw what you're wearing now. I'm guessing you don't have anything on under that.”

Shoving my underwear back in his pocket, he reaches down the front of my shorts. His fingers slide over my bare skin. He's right, I'm completely naked under Snow's clothes.

I scream and struggle in his arms, not wanting him to touch me. His hand is still clamped over my mouth, smothering my cries. I hate him. I hate him so much. All I can think of is the video I watched: Yakov, an hour ago, beating an old man nearly to death. The idea of those same hands groping my body makes me want to vomit.

“Hold still you little whore,” he grunts, squeezing me all the tighter. His free hand grips me by the throat, his fingers digging into my neck. It's cutting off the blood flow to my brain, making me lightheaded. I know what Yakov will do to me if I pass out.

He hisses in my ear, “Stepanov thinks you're a virgin. He's in for a nasty surprise. You've been spreading your legs for a street trash boxer.

And you act like you're too good for me? I'm Krupin's right-hand man. His top lieutenant. You should be begging to take my cock."

With a wild sweep, he knocks the chairs off the nearest table. He bends me over it, using his knee to force my legs apart.

"Beg for it," he hisses at me. "Beg me to fuck you."

I'd rather die than let Yakov inside of me. That pile of steaming garbage.

In wild revolt, I swing my right elbow backward, connecting with the side of his head. It knocks Yakov backward far enough that I can turn over and knee him in the groin.

Yakov doubles over, grunting with pain. I try to run away from him, but he's too quick. He grabs my wrist again, yanking me back toward him. He backhands me across the face, so hard that bright stars explode in front of my vision. I fall backward, hitting the back of my skull against the hard tile floor.

Yakov is on top of me in seconds, grabbing my wrists, pinning them on either side of my head.

"You fucking bitch!" he shouts, his spit flying into my face. "You're gonna learn your place if it takes all night for me to teach you."

I'm kicking and struggling, but he's stronger than me, and powered by anger and hate. My head is throbbing. The stars are gone, replaced by black butterflies, fogging my vision. I can't pass out. I can't pass out . . .

I blink my eyes hard, trying to clear my view.

Suddenly, I hear a loud clunking sound. Yakov stiffens, then tumbles sideways off me.

I expect to see Snow standing there. He must have left the hospital after all and come here to save me.

Instead, I see my father holding tight to the neck of a wine bottle. He's hit Yakov on the back of the head, not breaking the bottle, but possibly fracturing Yakov's skull.

Papa is shaking like a leaf. He looks utterly terrified at what he's done.

But he did it. For once, he did something.

I roll over and stagger to my feet. I hold out my hand for the wine bottle.

Papa hands it to me. He's staring down at Yakov in horror.

"Oh no, oh no," he says.

I look down at Yakov. He's writhing around on the ground, clutching his head. He's bleeding and sputtering, his face purple with rage.

"You fucking . . . you fucking little . . ." he howls.

I remember how Yakov looked down on Meyer, when the old man was curled up at his feet in a ball.

I raise the wine bottle over my head.

"No, Sasha!" my father shouts.

I bring the bottle down on Yakov's skull, once, twice, three times. The third time, the bottle shatters, spraying wine across the floor.

It doesn't matter. Yakov is already dead.

"Sasha," my father moans. "What have you done . . ."

"It doesn't matter Papa," I say coldly. "I know how to get rid of the body. Yakov showed me."

My father is whiter than paper. His trembling hands are pressed tight over his mouth.

"Papa," I bark at him. "Grab his feet. Help me drag him into the kitchen."

Lyosha, who is old and deaf, missed the entirety of the commotion in the dining room. Thus, he's surprised when he sees us dragging a dead gangster across the floor.

"What's this?" he says mildly.

"An uninvited guest," I say.

"That's very rude," Lyosha says. "Even at a restaurant."

It takes me several hours to dismember the body, even with the array of finely-sharpened knives and cleavers in the kitchen, and even with Lyosha's help. Papa only lasts a minute or two, before having to flee back to the dining room. To his credit, he scrubs every inch of the floor and tables, obliterating every last trace of the mess, while Lyosha and I work.

Once we've finished butchering the body, I tell Lyosha that we should dispose of it with the kitchen waste. The sun has risen, illuminating the steel countertops, which still bear the grisly evidence of our work.

"There might be a better way . . ." Lyosha says.

He looks in the direction of the meat grinder.



BY THE TIME we've gotten rid of every trace of Yakov, and cleaned the kitchen as well, it's late in the morning. I scrub my hands and arms over and over in the large, industrial sink. I use the heavy-duty boric soap and a wire brush, scrubbing till my skin is pink and raw.

Then, heading to the staff room, I strip off Snow's clothing. I'll have to get rid of it. It's too filthy to give back to him, and I can't risk anyone else seeing me wearing it.

I borrow some of the waiters' extra clothing—black slacks and a white dress shirt, with a crisp white apron over top. I've already twisted my hair up in a tight bun. This is how I might have dressed in another life. If I wasn't spoiled and the restaurant hadn't failed.

Though I've been up nearly the whole night long, I've gone past the point of tiredness. Instead, I return to the kitchen where Lyosha is starting to pull out handfuls of freshly risen dough so he can shape them into round little loaves and put them in the oven to bake.

"Can I help you?" I ask him.

"Please," he says, making space for me at the countertop.

Side by side, we oil our hands and roll and shape the soft, warm dough.

This is vastly preferable to the kind of work we've been doing all night long. I'm clearing my mind with the good, warm bread dough, forgetting the awful specter of Yakov.

I can still smell the goulash cooking. It has a sickly-sweet smell now.

Lyosha is behind on his work because of me. We have to move quickly to finish the bread, then begin the prep for lunch. Lyosha sets me chopping onions and peppers, huge bins of them, while he slices mushrooms and dices up garlic. He's much faster than me, his gnarled hands working the chef's knife in a rapid staccato beat against the cutting board.

The waiters begin to arrive for the lunch rush. No one comments that my father is wearing the same clothes as the day before, with the addition of a sport coat to cover the stains on his dress shirt. No one notices how tired and pale we all are, or the smell of fresh blood that lingers in the kitchen, below the more pungent note of bleach.

I plan to go home now that I've helped Lyosha catch up. However, before I can take off my apron, my father comes into the kitchen.

"Someone's asking for you," he says.

"Who is it?"

He leads me to the doorway and points.

I see Stepanov sitting at the table closest to the window, along with several of his men.

I swallow hard, wondering if he somehow knows what I've done.

It doesn't seem possible.

I don't think Yakov told anyone he was coming to find me. I know what he wanted to do to me—that was his own depraved desire, not Krupin's orders.

So why is Stepanov here?

I consider sneaking out the back.

It's no good. I can't hide from Stepanov forever.

Instead, I grab a basket of the fresh-baked bread and carry it to the table in my waiter's uniform.

Stepanov smiles when he sees me approaching.

I set the bread down in front of him. He looks up at me beneath his heavy brows, his dark eyes hungry as they always are.

"I like you serving me," he says.

"Papa said you wanted to speak to me," I reply, trying to keep my tone cool and professional. Still, I can feel my pulse rising out of fear that he knows something.

"Come, sit down," he says.

"I'm working today—"

"I don't give a shit if you're working," he growls, grabbing my wrist and pulling me down into the booth right next to him. "I'm not a cruel man," he says quietly, into my ear. His hot breath tickles my neck. "I plan to treat you well. But you need to learn to obey me. Did you know that you'll be mine, soon?"

I don't know what he's talking about. Has he made some kind of a deal with Krupin? Does Krupin think I'm stock he can buy and then sell again at a profit?

From Stepanov's seat, I can see all around the restaurant. I see dozens of gangsters and thugs sitting at my family's tables, eating off the beautiful plates my grandmother commissioned. They've invaded our restaurant, taken it over. They steal our profits and our labor. They've taken my freedom. And now this man beside me wants my body, too.

I hate them all.

I can see the waiters delivering the food. Dozens of the Bratva have ordered the goulash, the specialty at Golod. I watch them spoon up the rich

chunks of meat, swallowing it down like ravenous wolves.

Stepanov's waiter arrives with a tray full of plates. He hands the dishes around. Stepanov has ordered the goulash as well.

"Do you want a bite?" he asks me.

I shake my head, recoiling back from the spoon.

"No," I say. "I don't eat that."

I watch Stepanov eat it, though. I hope it fucking chokes him.

He keeps one arm possessively wrapped around my shoulders. He thinks he owns me. But only I decide who I'll give myself to.

And I've already decided on Snow.

"Would you like me to get you some more bread? Or some wine?" I say to Stepanov, struggling to sound polite. All I really want is to get away from the smothering weight of his arm.

"No," he says. "You can go. But remember," he fixes me with his dark, hooded eyes. "In one more day you belong to me. And I expect quite another level of service entirely. You can practice now, or I'll take my time in training you." He chuckles. It's an ugly sound. "I'll enjoy myself either way."

I jump up from the table and hurry back to the kitchen, where I've stowed my purse. I run out through the back door, sprinting back home toward my parents' house.

One more day?

He thinks he's taking me home after the fight.







## SNOW

**I**t takes several hours for Meyer's surgery, and several more for him to wake up afterward. During that time, Boom Boom comes to the hospital as well. He tells me that he got Anastasia home safe after the riot, but one of her brothers was shot in the leg by Krupin's men. He's actually at the same hospital right now, on a different floor. Luckily, he survived. Anastasia doesn't need to lose anyone else.

Boom Boom says the Orthodox boxers are still in a flaming fury at Krupin, though there's not much they can do about it, especially not now that Krupin's being backed up by Stepanov. That brawl may be the only justice they get, pithy as it was.

When I tell Boom Boom what Yakov did to Meyer, his good-natured face loses its smile.

"He has to pay for that," Boom Boom says.

"He will," I promise him.

I wish Yakov boxed. If I could just get him inside the ring . . .

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number:

*FINAL MATCH of the tournament is on for tonight. New location: Krasny Bor.  
10:00 pm.*

STRANGE. YAKOV usually sends the locations.

I wonder if it's some kind of trap. Krupin may still be pissed at me for not throwing the fight.

Boom Boom got the same text, though.

"Do me a favor," I say to him. "Check if that went out to everybody."

Boom Boom steps out of the room to make a couple of calls. He comes back minutes later, saying, "It went to Orthodox and the Smirnovs as well."

Alright, then.

Tonight, I meet the Beast in the ring.

In a way, I'm glad. Like so many encounters with the Bratva, what seemed like a golden opportunity has swiftly turned venomous. I want it to be over, one way or another. Before anyone else gets hurt.

Now that I have Boom Boom to help keep an eye on Meyer, I step out of the room myself so I can check in on Sasha. She answers the phone, sounding shaky and exhausted.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"N—nothing," she says. "I just got home."

I instantly know something must have gone wrong. It's past noon—almost ten hours since she went to see her father.

"I'm coming over," I tell her.

"You can't," she says, her voice shaking. "You've got to get some sleep. The fight's on for tonight, did you hear?"

"Yes."

I can't stand this, knowing that something else has happened, but not knowing what. I need to see Sasha. I need to hold her in my arms and assure myself that she's alright.

"I have to see you before the fight," I tell her.

"Alright," she agrees. "I'll meet you on Krasnoborsky Prospekt. An hour before."

When I hang up, I see that Meyer has come around once more. He's been in and out of consciousness since the surgery. He hasn't spoken yet, though.

I head back inside the room to see if he needs water, or anything else.

He looks up at me, still squinting blearily without his glasses.

"Boom Boom says fight's on for tonight," he croaks.

I shoot Boom Boom a dirty look. I wasn't planning to tell Meyer that. I don't want him to worry, when he's still in such awful shape.

Boom Boom shrugs guiltily. He can't help blurting out anything that's on his mind.

Meyer grips Boom Boom's forearm and squeezes it tight. "Have his back tonight," he says.

"I will," Boom Boom assures him. He looks over at me. "I will," he says again.

"Good," Meyer says. "Now go home, boy. Get some sleep."

I don't want to leave him. I need to check on Okalina though, let her back inside and feed her. I hope she's been alright outside.

"Call me if anything changes," I say to Boom Boom.

"Go on," Meyer says, waving me away impatiently.



I MEET Sasha at the corner of Krasnoborsky Prospekt, as she requested. I arrive almost twenty minutes early, anxious to see her.

She comes at precisely the agreed-upon time, stepping out of a cab with a heavy wool coat buttoned up to her neck, though it's not a particularly cold night. She looks pale and sick, perhaps from nerves, or from whatever happened after we separated.

I pull her into my arms at once, holding her tightly, as if it's been months since we last met instead of a matter of hours. I can feel the tension in her body, as if she's trying desperately to keep something inside of herself.

"What is it?" I ask her, loosening my grip so I can look into her face. "What happened?"

She takes a deep, trembling breath.

"I—I killed Yakov," she whispers.

Of all the things I expected her to say, I never would have guessed that.

"*What?*" I hiss, instinctively pulling her closer to the wall of the nearest building, out of sight and earshot of anyone else.

As I pull her along, the collar of her coat shifts, and I see the dark shadow of a bruise on her throat.

"What's this?" I cry, undoing the top button so I can see the milky-white skin of her neck, marred by several lurid fingerprints.

I'm so incensed that I have to stop myself from tearing open her clothes to see the rest of her body, to see what he's done to her.

"He came to the restaurant," Sasha says. "We fought. He tried to—I hit him with a wine bottle. It . . . killed him."

"Did he hurt you?" I demand. "Did he—"

"No!" Sasha says quickly. "I'm fine, Filip. I promise."

She's never called me Filip before. No one's called me that in years. The way she says it, so tender and sincere, calms my racing heart. It's the only thing that could have calmed me.

"Are you really alright?" I ask her, smoothing back a lock of her beautiful silvery hair that's escaped from her braid, tucking it behind her ear.

She takes my hand in hers and presses it against her cheek.

"I am now," she tells me.

I could look into those blue eyes forever.

But the reality of the situation intrudes.

"Are you sure he's dead?" I ask her.

"*Very* sure," she says.

"Does anyone else know?"

This is the crucial part. If Krupin finds out that she's murdered his top lieutenant, the punishment will be worse than death, and he'll go to the ends of the earth to mete it out.

"Only Papa knows," she tells me. "And our cook, Lyosha. But they won't tell a soul."

"What about the body?"

"It's gone," she says.

Her voice is so flat and final that it disturbs me. There's a dark look in her eyes, a look I've never seen before.

I pull her close again and kiss her again.

"You're incredible," I tell her. "You amaze me."

I knew she was strong, but I underestimated her still.

She's been pulled into this world, which shatters even hardened criminals, and yet nothing can break her.

How many men has Yakov killed? Dozens. And this girl put him in the ground.

I only wish I could dig him up so I could kill him again, for daring to put his hands on her. To say nothing of what he did to Meyer.

Sasha's hands are cold. I hold them between mine, trying to warm them. She still looks troubled.

"There's something else . . ." she says.

"What is it?"

"Stepanov came to the restaurant."

My stomach drops. I remember the conversation between him and Krupin, the night we all ate together. I remember what they said, after Sasha left . . .

"I think he's trying to buy me from Krupin," Sasha says.

My guilt must show on my face. Sasha takes a step back, her eyes widening.

"You knew that already," she says.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. I didn't want to scare you."

"When did you find out?" she demands.

"I heard them talking, that night at your father's restaurant. But it doesn't matter Sasha. I'm not going to let that happen!"

"How can you stop them?" she cries. "How can anyone?"

"Sasha," I pull her close once more, turning her face up to mine so she has to look at me. "Do you know that I never loved anything before I loved you? I didn't know I had a heart at all, until you made it beat. Now that heart belongs to you, and you belong to me, me and nobody else. I'll kill every last one of them before I let them take you."

She kisses me again, much longer this time. Her lips are finally beginning to warm up against mine.

"I love you too, Filip. Even if I could have my old life back, I wouldn't take it. All this was worth it, to meet you."

I can see in her eyes that she does love me as intensely as I do her. But there's sadness in her voice. She talks like this is all the time we're going to have together.

I'll have to show her otherwise.

I kiss her again and again.

Then I have to hail a cab for her, because we can't walk into the fight together.

She gives me one last kiss before we part.

"You're going to win tonight," she tells me.

"You think so?"

“I know it,” she says. She smiles sadly. “And you can believe me. Because I’m not nice, but I am honest.”

I smile back at her, not wanting to let go of her hand.

“I’ll see you soon,” I say.







## SASHA

**T**he new venue that Krupin has found last minute for this fight isn't nearly as well-prepared as before—and that's saying something, since the old place was just a converted warehouse.

This is a literal slaughterhouse.

Despite what I said to Snow, the sight of it fills me with fear. The smell of old blood is pungent in the air—like rust and rot. Hooks and chains still dangle from the ceiling inside, and the floor is worn from the thousands of hooves of doomed cattle that trod here.

It's a grim place. There are no bleachers, so the spectators will have to stand. No proper ring, either—just four metal barricades, marking out the square where Snow will have to fight.

The change in location hasn't deterred the spectators. More people than ever are waiting outside, ready to pack into the empty space, to howl like hyenas around a carcass. But who's going to fall?

There's no infirmary this time. It doesn't matter, because I'm not here as a medic. Stepanov expects me to sit next to him. He called me personally to tell me so.

Of course, there was no call from Yakov like I usually get before a fight. Though I know the reason for that silence, it unnerves me all the same. Does Krupin know he's missing yet?

I buy a drink at the makeshift bar, gulping it down to calm my nerves. How am I going to sit between Krupin and Stepanov after what I've done? I should have taken a Valium before I came. It might have helped me to lie better if they start questioning me.

I see Krupin's men arrive first, Yakov conspicuously absent. They lead Krupin to the only row of chairs set up next to the ring. He takes a seat in the middle, his men standing behind him.

It's hard to tell what Krupin's mood might be. His face is so dark and foreboding under the best of circumstances.

Stepanov arrives shortly after, looking much more cheerful. He stops to chat with several high-status gangsters on his way through the crowd. Then he greets Krupin with exaggerated shaking of hands.

Stepanov sits on one side of Krupin, with an empty chair next to him reserved for me. But there are several open chairs on the opposite side, as if they're waiting for another guest. It must be someone important, because those seats have the best view of the ring.

I can't put it off any longer. I have to join them.

With trembling legs, I walk toward the Bratva bosses.

Krupin watches as I approach, his face as stern as stone. His dark eyes glitter at me, keen but uncommunicative.

Stepanov, by contrast, grins at me, baring his straight white teeth.

"There she is," he says, his voice low and suggestive.

He gestures to the seat next to him.

I sit down, almost collapsing into it because of how weak my knees have become.

"You look excited," Stepanov says to me. "Why don't you take off your coat?"

Without waiting for my reply, he helps strip it off me, hanging it over the back of my seat.

I'm wearing a black cocktail dress underneath. I tried for something relatively plain and modest, but nothing is going to stop Stepanov from eyeing my breasts and resting his hand on my bare thigh. Oddly, he doesn't comment on the bruises on my neck that I've unsuccessfully tried to cover with concealer. I think Stepanov is all too used to women with signs of injury on their bodies.

Krupin isn't looking at me at all. He seems distracted and slightly agitated, glancing around the room. Twice, he leans back to mutter something to Algorin.

He's asking where Yakov is, I'm sure of it.

"You know my man is fighting tonight?" Stepanov says to me. "Borya. The Beast, as they call him."

I nod, my mouth too dry to speak.

“He’s never been beaten,” Stepanov says. “The things I’ve seen him do . . . a boxing match is child’s play, by comparison.”

*The things you’ve ordered him to do, more like,* I think, my stomach rolling over inside of me.

“Will we be betting again tonight?” Stepanov says to Krupin.

Krupin grunts noncommittally. He’s still looking around the room, checking each new entrant as they walk through the doors.

“He’s still sore about the last bet,” Stepanov whispers in my ear, chuckling. His breath is hot and cloying. Even though, ostensibly, he’s a handsome man, his expressions are so ugly. His glances are leering, his smiles mocking or outright cruel. His fingers dig into the soft flesh of my thigh, inching higher.

He’s quite the opposite of Snow, who looked so intimidating the first time I saw him. When Snow flashes one of his rare smiles, it transforms his whole face. Those surprising dimples come into view, and I can see the warmth he tries so hard to keep hidden.

As if my thoughts have summoned him, Snow approaches our group. Krupin scowls, bristling like a bulldog at the sight of him. If looks could kill, Snow would be dead on the spot. But he keeps walking forward, undeterred. He pauses a respectful distance away, saying politely to Krupin, “May I speak to you in private?”

For a moment I think Krupin will refuse, but abruptly he gets to his feet and walks a short distance away with Snow. They converse in mutters for what seems like forever.

I try not to watch them, though my eyes are drawn irresistibly toward Snow. It kills me to be so close to him, unable to communicate by words or even a glance.

When I tear my eyes away, I find Stepanov watching me closely.

“That’s the other fighter, isn’t it?” I say stupidly.

“That’s right,” Stepanov nods. “He has no chance.”

A stubborn flame of revolt flares in my chest. Without thinking, I say, “He’s done well so far in the tournament.”

Stepanov only laughs.

“You don’t know much about boxing,” he says in his most condescending tone. “The Beast will slaughter him.”

When Krupin returns, he has a strange look on his face. I can't guess what it means. I'm wildly curious to know what Snow said to him.

"You still want that bet?" Krupin says unexpectedly.

Stepanov grins, pleased.

"Of course," he says. "Haven't I already taken enough of your money, though?"

Stepanov laughs heartily, causing Krupin to scowl all the more and snap, "You're very confident. What do you say to double or nothing?"

Stepanov raises his eyebrows. He wasn't expecting that.

"It's your funeral," he says, shrugging.

"Oh, and one other thing," Krupin says casually.

He leans over and murmurs something in Stepanov's ear.

Stepanov turns to look at me. His appraising glance makes me feel sicker than ever.

"Alright," Stepanov says, shrugging once more. "Why not."

I have no idea what they've just agreed to. But I'm fairly certain it has something to do with me.

I feel like I've been free-falling for weeks now. Very soon I'm going to hit the bottom.

Krupin is finally smiling. He looks back toward the doorway once more.

He stiffens, as if he's finally seen the person he's been looking for.

I whip my head around, thinking it must be Yakov, though I know better than anyone how impossible that would be.

Instead, I see the most stunning couple I've ever laid eyes on. The man on the right is Ivan Petrov, the undisputed boss of St. Petersburg. He's tall, dark-haired, intense and intelligent looking. The woman on his arm is all these things and more. With her black hair, hazel eyes, and lithe figure, she's beautiful enough to be the ultimate arm-candy. But it's clear from her keen expression and the way she surveys the room that she's as much a professional as her husband. She whispers something in his ear, grinning mischievously. He laughs in return, putting his arm around her waist and pulling her close.

This must be his new American wife. I've heard wild rumors about her, especially since I started working for Krupin. Some of Krupin's more superstitious men say that she's a witch, and her unnatural powers are responsible for Petrov's seeming invincibility. Others say she's a CIA spy, infiltrating the heart of the Bratva. But nobody says any of this very loud,

because everyone knows that Petrov adores her. He'd cut out the tongue of anyone who gossiped about her.

I'm quite enjoying looking at them from afar.

It's much less comfortable when they come and take their seats right next to Krupin. I'm only a few chairs away, shrinking back behind Stepanov in the hopes of becoming invisible.

As if she senses this, Petrov's wife leans forward and looks right down the row at me, saying, "Hello. Who's this?"

"That's my private doctor," Krupin says.

"Does she have a name?" Mrs. Petrov says, smiling at me.

"Sasha," I say nervously.

I see Mrs. Petrov cast an appraising glance at Stepanov's hand, gripping my thigh. Her smile fades slightly but brightens when she looks at me once more.

"Do you like boxing, Sasha?"

I think of the way Snow moves in the ring—light as a dancer, ruthless as a panther stalking its prey.

"Yes," I say.

"Me too," Mrs. Petrov agrees, sitting back in her chair, with her husband's arm around her shoulder.

I'm relieved that's the end of our conversation. It's a little too intense having her attention fixed on me, like the sun shining down on you at noon in July.

Besides, as the last remaining minutes before the fight tick by, I can't think of anything but Snow, and the man he's about to face in the ring.

*God, please, I'll give anything to keep him safe.*





## SNOW

*Victory is always possible for the person who refuses to stop fighting.*

— NAPOLEON HILL

I approach Krupin out of pure desperation, having no idea if he'll agree to what I'm offering.

I can see Sasha looking up at me from where she's trapped under Stepanov's arm. Her blue eyes are fixed on me with the most heart-rending expression imaginable. She trusts me. She's counting on me.

I can't let her down.

"May I speak with you in private?" I say to Krupin.

He stands up and joins me a few feet away.

"I'm surprised you dare show your face here after the stunt you pulled," he says through gritted teeth.

"With all due respect, I never agreed to throw the fight," I say.

"And I never agreed not to cut your throat," he snarls.

"You could do that," I say calmly. "But it wouldn't profit you. I hope to offer a better deal."

"Did you mention that deal to Yakov?" Krupin asks.

He says it casually enough, but his dark eyes search my face, looking for the slightest sign of guilt.

He knows his lieutenant is missing, but he doesn't know where he's gone.

I'm a suspect, of course. He knows Yakov came looking for me last night. But Yakov has more enemies than he has fancy suits. The Orthodox boxers are looking for revenge, not to mention the associates of the gangster Yakov killed, and whose body Sasha was forced to dispose of. There are enough sharks in the water that Krupin can't be sure which one took a bite.

I keep my face as still as glass as I say, "I haven't seen Yakov. But when I do, I can't promise to be civil. Not after what he did to my trainer."

"That was bad form," Krupin agrees. "I had no quarrel with Meyer."

"He'll recover," I say.

"Good," Krupin nods. "What's your offer, then?"

"A win-win scenario. I want you to bet on me for the fight."

Krupin gives a scornful bark of a laugh.

"Not happening," he says bluntly. "You're a good fighter Snow, but you're outmatched here."

"Maybe so," I say. "That's why it's a win-win for you. Bet on me, double or nothing for what you already owe Stepanov. If you win, you've made a profit, and you've put yourself in a dominant position as you close your deal with Stepanov. You don't want to enter into a partnership with a cloud of failure over your head."

Krupin narrows his eyes at me. He's displeased with my tone, and how much I guessed about his business dealings.

"And what if you lose?" he says.

"If I lose, I'll pay off the debt myself. I'll come work for you, for as long as it takes."

Krupin considers. He likes the idea of putting me under his thumb, after I rejected his offer of employment.

"And what do you want in return?" he snaps.

"You let Sasha go," I say.

Now I've really surprised him. And Krupin is not a man who likes surprises. His face flushes, as he realizes what's been going on under his nose.

"What is she to you?" he growls.

"Just a friend," I lie. "Win or lose, I want you to forgive her debt. If I win, you'll be more than compensated for what she owes you. If I lose, I'll pay back every cent myself. But she walks away. Free and clear. No reprisals."



Krupin is silent for a long time. I can see that he's angry, and I'm horribly afraid that he's going to take that anger out on Sasha. He knows we have a connection now. Worse, he probably suspects that she's no longer as innocent as Stepanov believes.

On the other hand, I saw the spark of interest in his eyes when I mentioned that he could put one over on Stepanov. Krupin is a gambler at heart, and gamblers hate to lose. They don't just want to get even—they're compelled to get ahead.

"Fine," Krupin says at last.

My shoulders sag with relief.

"Either way, Sasha goes free," I repeat.

"You have my word," Krupin says.

The oath of a Bratva means something. Usually, at least.

Krupin and I part ways. I head back to the makeshift locker room with the slightest sliver of hope in my heart.

There's a way to save Sasha.

The only problem is the massive barricade standing in my way.

The moment I step foot inside, I see him.

He's got a whole entourage of people around him—his trainer, his cutman, a couple of stablemates, and several of Stepanov's goons.

I, on the other hand, only have Boom Boom, who looks distinctly uncomfortable being trapped in a room with these animals.

I wish Boom Boom wasn't wearing his peach-colored *Home Alone* sweatshirt today. It doesn't strike quite the note of intimidation I was hoping for.

The Beast turns around slowly as I enter. He fixes his eyes on me and smiles.

We're not supposed to talk before the fight. But I get the feeling he doesn't give a fuck about conventions.

He walks over to me, standing provocatively close.

"What were you talking to Krupin about?" he says.

I shrug. "What I'll do with my winnings," I say.

The Beast snorts.

"Maybe you can buy a casket," he says, "with what you won before."

I give an exaggerated sigh.

"Is that the best you've got?" I say. "Your shit-talk is amateur."

The Beast takes a step closer, so there's only an inch or two between us.

“How about this,” he says very quietly. “I know you were talking about that girl.”

The room seems to go silent, though I know that no one else can hear him. The air presses hard against my eardrums.

“Oh, yes,” the Beast says. “The little doctor. You love her, don’t you? I saw it. I saw the way you looked at her across the table. You want to save her, don’t you? That’s very . . . romantic. It’s too bad that fairytales aren’t real. This is Russia. The strong brutalize the weak. You’re weak, and so is she. I’m going to brutalize you. And then Stepanov is going to take your little doctor and—“

I lunge at him, intercepted by Boom Boom, who flings himself between us, knocking me sideways.

I throw Boom Boom off, but now the Beast is surrounded by all his friends as he laughs in my face.

The fight hasn’t even started, and I’ve already let my emotions get the best of me. Meyer would slap me if he were here.

This is what I feared. My feelings for Sasha really are making me weak and stupid. I don’t know if I could beat the Beast under the best of circumstances. And here I am, a shaking mess.

There’s no time to pull myself together. I can hear the MC warming up the crowd. The fight is about to start.

“Pathetic,” the Beast says to his crew.

“Come on,” Boom Boom says, grabbing my shoulder. “I’ve got to wrap your hands fast.”

The next few minutes seem to go by in a blur. One second, I’m sitting down and holding out my hands to Boom Boom, the next I’m walking out into the roar of the crowd.

Even though I’m first to emerge from the locker room, they’re already chanting “BEAST! BEAST! BEAST!” My head is throbbing to the rhythm of their shouts.

I walk toward the makeshift ring, which isn’t elevated. We’ll be fighting on bare floor, with metal walls around us instead of proper ropes.

When the Beast comes out of the locker room, the howl of the crowd is so loud that I can hardly breathe. The noise compresses my chest and deafens me. He raises his arms over his head and smiles, basking in the glow of his fame.

The Beast and I take our positions across from each other. The ref doesn't bother to tell us the rules. We both know them, and probably won't follow them.

The ref raises his hand between us then drops it, signaling the start of the fight. I can't hear the bell ring at all.

The Beast circles me. I expect him to rush in, but he's no fool. He's just as careful as I am, though infinitely more confident.

He's perceptive, too. He saw my feelings for Sasha sooner than anyone.

All my strengths are his. Maybe in greater measure.

He's certainly bigger and stronger than me. I've never faced a fighter of his size. I've never faced anyone I couldn't overpower.

I've never fought without Meyer, either. The loss of him in my corner is fucking with my head. If I make it through the first round, I need him to keep me focused, to remind me where I'm getting sloppy, to point out any weaknesses in my opponent's defense that I've missed.

While I'm thinking this, faster than I can see it, let alone block it, the Beast whips out a jab that pops me right in the jaw.

Fucking hell it hurts. He hits like a sledgehammer. And this was just a test punch. It's followed by several more blows in quick succession—so fast that I can barely get my hands up to block them. The last one slips through my defense, hitting me again in almost the exact same spot.

The Beast grins. He's toying with me.

I firm up my stance and mount my own offensive.

The Beast uses a defense I haven't seen him use before—the shoulder roll. He keeps his front arm low, draped across his midsection. When I throw a punch, he uses his shoulder to block it or roll along with it. It lets him counter back with either hand, since neither is used in blocking. Thus, when my right cross glances off his shoulder, he easily jabs back with his front fist, hitting me so hard in the right eye that I temporarily go blind on that side.

The Beast presses his advantage, driving me back against the metal barricades. They don't have the same give as normal ropes. I grab the Beast in a clinch, and the barricade bends backward under our combined weight. The crowd, packed tight against the barricades, shoves us back into the center of the ring. The Beast stumbles, and I use the opportunity to hit him with a hard right cross.

It stings him, I can see that. He's not invincible. But he quickly shakes it off, coming at me hard with barely a break.

He drives me back against the barricades again. This time when I put him in the clinch, he takes the opportunity to hit me with an illegal kidney punch. The pain shoots up and down my back, like an ice pick buried in the flesh. I can't help howling around my mouth guard. The Beast pulls out of the clinch, swinging a sharp right hook at my head. I duck and it glances off my skull, knocking me back.

The bell rings, marking the end of the first round.

I've only landed one clean punch. He'll win on points alone if this keeps up.

Boom Boom looks more than a little worried. He presses a bag of crushed ice against my back, where the Beast hit me in the kidney. The cold is a blessed relief.

"You're doing good," he says.

"Boom Boom," I groan, "you're a fucking awful liar."

"I know," he says. "My mom caught me every time."

I haven't allowed myself to look over at Sasha. I know where she's sitting—next to that snake Stepanov. But if I look at her, I won't be able to control myself. My need to win this fight for her is already so desperate and overpowering that it's overwhelming my mind. I can't think about anything else.

I need to be one hundred percent sharp, more than ever before in my life. I can't overpower the Beast. I can only outsmart him. It's my only hope.

All too soon, the bell rings, forcing me back into the ring.

This time, the Beast isn't cautious. He thinks he knows what I've got, and it isn't much. He pursues me relentlessly, hitting me again and again and again.

These are no half-shots that I can shrug off. His fists feel like solid steel crashing into me. He hits me with a hook to the ribs that seems to cave them in, so they lose their elasticity like sprung guitar strings. Now each breath sends a stabbing pain down my right side. He hits me so hard in the nose that blood pours back into my throat and I have to spit out a mouthful onto the bare floor, creating a slick spot that I've got to dance around, or risk my feet sliding out from under me.

Worst of all, he hits me above the left eye, re-opening the cut that had almost healed. The blood mixes with sweat and stings my eyes, obscuring my vision all the further.

It's not completely one-sided, however. I watch the Beast, looking for patterns. And sure enough, while he's a clever and inventive fighter, he's not immune to repetition. When I find a template in his movements, I exploit it to land a hit of my own.

Unfortunately, it doesn't take the Beast long to realize this. He baits me, pretending that he intends to do a jab and a left hook again, but this time, he fakes the hook, then elbows me in the face instead.

He knocks me right down to the ground. Then he does something so outrageous that for a moment he actually loses the approval of the crowd: he hits me with a rabbit punch. It's an extremely illegal and potentially lethal punch to the back of the head. They call it that because that's how hunters kill rabbits after they've been caught.

The punch slams my face down into the bare concrete.

It feels like my head explodes. My vision goes dark. The next thing I know, I hear the ref counting, "Six! Seven! Eight!"

I stagger to my feet, my head feeling as swollen and unsteady as a balloon.

If the fight had continued, the Beast would have knocked me out then and there. I'm literally saved by the bell as the second round ends.

Boom Boom is raging as I retreat to his corner.

"Fucking outrageous!" he shouts toward the Beast's entourage.

Boom Boom presses an enswell against the swollen knot on my forehead where my face hit the concrete.

If you've never known the exquisite pain of a hard metal compress applied to the most painful place on your body, then you can count yourself lucky in any other misfortune.

It's agony, pure and simple. I would cry if my eyes weren't already swelling shut.

"You've got to stop," Boom Boom says to me. "You're gonna end up like the Rabbi."

I push his hand away and turn so he's forced to look at me. I take out my mouth guard so he'll hear every word.

"Listen to me very carefully," I say. "You don't stop this fight until I'm dead."

“Snow—“ he says.

“PROMISE ME!” I grab his shirt and pull him close. “Give me your word right now.”

“I . . . I promise,” Boom Boom says.

The bell rings for the third round.

It’s an awful sound.

The Beast is already standing with his gloves up, looking barely winded. He has a small cut on one cheek, whereas I know I must be a battered, bloody mess.

He advances on me, smiling slightly.

I spit out another mouthful of blood and walk to meet him.

Usually a fight slows down as it progresses through the round, but the Beast and I are throwing punches faster and faster. He backs me up once more. However, this time he doesn’t see one of the patches of blood on the floor. His foot slips out from under him. He goes down on one knee.

With all my remaining speed and strength, I hit him hard across the jaw. His head jerks to the side, and he actually looks rattled.

In a moment he’s back on his feet.

He’s not quite as steady, though. And I think I’ve discovered a weakness.

Meyer used to make us spar out in the parking lot, no matter how icy it was outside. He said it was like the old days, when the boxers fought on frozen lakes. He said it was important to learn to keep your footing on a slick surface.

Sure enough, as I deliberately lead the Beast over the patches of my own blood, he slips again. I jump up to land a corkscrew punch, thrown overhand to the top of his eye. It’s an arching motion with a twist at the end, designed to open a cut on your opponent’s face. Sure enough, I split his right eyebrow, which begins to bleed in a highly satisfying manner.

This infuriates him. He launches his most relentless onslaught yet, hitting me over and over as he drives me back into the corner.

In a normal ring I might try a rope-a-dope to tire him out, like Muhammad Ali did against Joe Frazier during the Thrilla in Manilla. But that’s impossible against the metal barricades. The Beast drives me into the metal, then hits me so hard that I feel like I’m falling back, back, back, into black tar.

It sucks me down. I try to fight against it, but it's too hard to swim up to the surface. Distantly, I can hear the ref counting once more: "Two! Three! Four!"

Ali said that fighting Frazier was the closest he ever felt to death.

I understand now what he meant.

I would almost welcome death, because it would be preferable to the pain I'm feeling. And far better than the prospect of failing Sasha.

Sasha.

Like a flame in the dark, her face burns against the blackness behind my eyelids.

My whole life has been as cold and bleak as an arctic tundra. Sasha is spring. She's the sun shining down on me, waking up the grass and the earth inside me.

The only language I knew was violence. She makes me hear laughter, music, rainfall.

She makes me feel things I didn't even believe in.

Love. Friendship. Compassion.

"Five! Six! Seven!"

I snuffle, choking on my own blood. I really might be dying.

My life flashes before my eyes. But instead of seeing everything that happened to me before, I see a vision of my future.

Like a film strip played at exponential speed, I see everything that could happen, if only I could will it into existence.

I see Sasha walking through Times Square, looking up in wonder at the huge illuminated signs. I see us walking up the stairs to a bright, clean apartment, one that we share together. I see her coming home from work, hair pulled up in a ponytail, wearing proper scrubs, smiling as she tells me about her day. I see me bringing her flowers, kissing her, tickling her as she lays in my bed on a lazy Sunday morning. I see her dolled up in a sparkling dress, cheering me on from the crowd as I face off against an opponent in a proper ring, in a legitimate match, that's anywhere but this fucking abattoir.

I see all those things, and like the jolt of lightning to Frankenstein's monster, it reanimates my body. I jerk to my feet before the ref can finish his count.

Now I do look out into the crowd, and I see Sasha, her wide blue eyes looking up at me as tears stream down her face. She's not crying for herself.

She's crying for me, because she's scared. But she has nothing to be afraid of. I've seen the future. It will happen, just like she told me it would.

The Beast steps toward me, planning to finish me off.

He's tired, I see that now. He's trying to hide it, but I know the truth. He's fighting for himself, nobody else. And his own ego is a weak motivator.

He swings at me. I slip the punch, his fist passing by my nose. I've been favoring my left side, trying to avoid the pain in the ribs. That pain is gone now. It doesn't exist. I propel that left fist like a fucking rocket into the Beast's jaw. I hit him again and again, left, right, left, right.

I'm driving him back, into the largest pool of blood of all.

As his heel lifts for one more step back, I wait for it to come down on the blood. Then I crouch and drive upward with all my might, into an uppercut like none I've ever known.

The Beast's feet slip out from under him and he falls back. He doesn't get his hands down in time. The back of his skull crashes against solid cement. He lays still, insensible to the ref's count.

I don't even have to look at him. I know he's not getting up.

I feel like I'm standing on the deck of a ship. The floor is rolling back and forth beneath me. But I stay on my feet until the ref raises my arm in victory.







## SASHA

*There are no pleasures in a fight but some of my fights have been a pleasure to win.*

— MUHAMMAD ALI

**S**now gets more and more quiet as we check our bags, board the plane, and buckle our seatbelts.

At first, I think it's just the enormity of the move, leaving Russia for America. Neither one of us has set foot in New York City before, though I almost feel like I have from how many times I've seen its streets on movie screens.

However, as the plane starts to taxi and Snow grips my hand, I realize that he's frightened.

"Don't be nervous," I tell him. "Flying's safer than driving, statistically speaking."

"It's fucking madness, going up five thousand feet in the air," he says.

I don't have the heart to tell him it's more like thirty-thousand feet.

He closes his eyes as the plane accelerates, roaring down the runway. There's a swoop and a lift, and then we're climbing. I lift the window shade, so I can watch St. Petersburg dropping away beneath us.

When I was chained to Krupin, I longed to get away from it. But now I almost feel sad seeing the Winter Palace and the Trinity Bridge growing small beneath us.

I wish we could take all the people we love along with us. Snow asked Meyer to come, but he just laughed and said he'd live and die in the same spot, like a dandelion. He did give Snow the names of several trainers in New York who could help him book mainstream fights, as well as help him get his state licensure.

Shockingly, it was Krupin who pulled the strings for Snow to get his visa. He was in the best mood I've ever seen him, in the rush of winning his bet against Stepanov. He was likewise pleased that Papa offered to keep running the restaurant for him, though he didn't strictly have to anymore once the debt was paid. Maybe Krupin will even start paying him.

Stepanov, by contrast, looked fucking murderous at the defeat of his top enforcer. I'm not sure what he would have done, if Ivan Petrov hadn't been sitting right next to him, keeping the peace. I don't know if the deal between Stepanov and Krupin went through in the end, but I'd guess that Petrov's presence at the tournament was enough of an endorsement to ensure that Krupin is accepted back into the inner circle of the Bratva.

I don't have to worry about their power struggles anymore, thank god.

By contrast, I think the rat race of New York City will be positively relaxing.

I hope to take the U.S. medical licensing exam once Snow and I are settled in. From there, I can do a residency and start working as a proper doctor. I hear they make good money in America, and they actually get to help sick people, instead of stitching up gangsters who can't keep themselves out of trouble.

Maybe I'll still do a little of that for Snow. I'll still be his private medic, though I'm not anyone else's.

He's relaxed now that the plane has leveled out and we're moving smoothly through the air.

"That's not so bad, huh?" I say to him.

"Sure," he says, quirking an eyebrow at me. "I was never worried."

He puts up the armrest between us so I can nestle closer to him. The scent of his skin makes my heart race. I'm surprised how this feeling hasn't dampened in the slightest. Actually, I think I'm more attracted to him by the day. I keep thinking the butterflies will go away with time, but instead they hit me harder and harder, until I'm like a punch-drunk fighter you could knock over with a feather.

I wish everyone could be in love like this. I'm worried for poor Boom Boom – he's fallen head over heels for Anastasia. He's been going to visit her every day, checking in on her. Her baby is due any time now.

Snow thinks he doesn't have an ice cube's chance in hell — “He's not even circumcised, for fuck's sake!”.

I hope he's wrong. Boom Boom may not be smooth or handsome, but he's kind and loyal, and that goes a long way with women.

Still, her loss is so deep. I know she loved the Rabbi terribly.

If something happened to Snow, I don't know if I could ever move on.

Mistaking the look of concern on my face, Snow says, “Are you missing your sister?”

“Of course,” I say. “But she'll come visit us.”

Snow met Papa before, in a manner of speaking, but the day after Snow won the tournament, I introduced them formally, and Mila as well. He wasn't exactly a pretty sight, with his face so swollen and bruised. Still, I felt nothing but pride bringing him into our house.

Papa thanked him for what he did for our family. Mila was a little intimidated at first. She warmed up once Snow asked her about her classes and teachers at school. Soon she was teasing him about his taste in movies and begging him to bring his cat around next time, since she loves animals more than anything.

I will miss Mila badly. She's got her own adventures to go on, though. She'll be graduating this spring. She told me she wants to get a job at a newspaper. Not in Russia, but somewhere in Europe. Paris, maybe, since Mama made us learn French as children. I told her to stay out of trouble, and she laughed and said I had no right to tell anybody that, and she wasn't going to take my advice anyway.

The only person Snow didn't meet was Mama, because she hasn't been home once since she left for Auntie Agata's house. I think that's why Papa is clinging so hard to the restaurant, even though we don't own it anymore. It's all he has left now.

I want to be angry at Mama, but I can't. Loving someone is not for the faint of heart. It can be hard and dangerous and painful. It takes everything from you.

But what you get back . . .

It's like investing a penny to own the wealth of the world.

My happiness terrifies me.

I don't know how anyone can deserve it.

I lean my head against Snow's chest and rest my hand on his thigh. I can't help inching my fingers just a little higher, until I can feel his cock beneath his shorts, rapidly swelling under my palm.

"Behave yourself," he growls at me.

"It's such a long flight though . . ." I say.

"We're supposed to be law-abiding citizens now," he says.

I give an exaggerated sigh.

"Alright," I say. "Just know that I didn't put any panties on under this dress . . ."

With that I slip out of my seat, making my way toward the bathroom at the back of the plane.

I open the accordion door, stepping into the cramped space. Before I can close it behind me, Snow pushes his way inside and snaps the door shut.

He wraps his arm around me from behind, pinning me tight against his body. He's so huge that he barely fits in the tiny space, his shoulders nearly touching both walls.

"You better not be lying to me," he growls in my ear.

"I never lie to you," I say.

Our perpetual promise hangs in the air between us.

*I'm not nice . . . but I'm always honest.*

Snow grabs the hem of my pale blue sundress and pulls it up around my waist. Then he reaches down and grazes my pussy lips with his fingers.

"Good girl," he murmurs against my neck.

My bare bottom is pressed against the crotch of his shorts. I can feel his cock standing straight up, hard as an iron bar. It fits neatly between my cheeks. I grind against it, making him moan.

"Shh," I say. "Don't get us in trouble."

"You're already in trouble," he says.

He bends me over the sink and pulls down the front of his shorts. His cock springs free, burning hot against my skin. He plunges it inside of me, making me gasp.

That's another thing I thought I would get used to: the size of him.

Well, I haven't. It feels like he's deflowering me again every damn time.

He moistens his fingers in his mouth and reaches around in front of me to rub my clit, easing the passage of his cock. He needn't have bothered—

I'm already wet enough that his fingers slide easily over that sensitive little button, sending sparks of pleasure up and down my body.

Snow rubs me in time with his thrusts. As one speeds up, so does the other. Now it's me who has to stifle my cries as waves of pleasure build in my belly.

"Don't stop," I beg him. "Please don't stop."

He presses harder as he thrusts deep inside. His strong, warm hand and that masterful cock bring me exactly where I'm longing to go. I start to cum, clamping my own hand over my mouth to stifle the cries.

When I finish, Snow turns me around and sits me on the sink, so he can look at me while he finishes fucking me. I hook my legs around his waist, leaning back as far as I can in the cramped space.

He looks bigger than ever in here. I love the size and strength of his body. I love the way he looks at me when he's buried deep inside me. He looks like he can't believe his luck, which is exactly how I feel, too.

"Tell me you love me," he says.

"I love you!" I cry.

"Tell me you're mine forever."

"Yours and only yours."

"Now tell me how bad you want me to cum inside you."

I wrap my arms around his neck and bite the side of his neck.

"I need it, Daddy," I whisper in his ear.

With his arms locked around me, he explodes inside of me. He crushes my body against his, cumming as deep inside me as he can reach.

Then he sets me back down on the sink, his forehead still pressed against mine.

"Are you going to be this naughty in America?" he pants.

"No," I say. "I'll be much worse."

I let Snow leave first, since I can't get past him anyway. Then I pee, wash my hands, and head back to my seat.

As I sit down once more, my foot bumps against Okalina's carrier. She gives me a plaintive little mew.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I whisper down to her.

"She'll like New York," Snow says. "Lots of rats, I hear."

"Not in our apartment!" I say, playfully punching his arm. "It's a nice place."

"If pictures can be trusted."

“Pictures are what brought us here,” I say. “Pictures. Movies. Dreams.”  
“And a snow globe,” he says.  
I saw him pack it in his bag. He hardly brought anything else.  
“That’s where we’ll go first,” I tell him. “Madison Square Garden.”  
“No!” he says. “Pizza first. Then we’ll go everywhere else.”

The End



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I woke to a syringe full of poison pressed up against my neck. Now she's my prisoner, but she refuses to tell me who sent her or why. I have to learn her secrets before my enemies kill us both. But all I can think about is how her body felt trembling beneath me as I pinned her to the floor...

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## SAPPHIRE – CHAPTER 1

BYRON BLACK – LONDON

*I knew I was in love with you. Was I an idiot for thinking you were in love with me too?*

— JESU NADAL

**C**hief Superintendent Black drove his hired car up the long, private drive to the Home Secretary's house. He glanced with pleasure at the beautiful woman occupying the seat next to his. He knew he would be one of the least-important people at the party that night, but he couldn't imagine that anyone would have a more stunning date on their arm.

Though they had been together almost a year, she was still a mystery to him, this dazzling American girl who had dropped into his life. What was she thinking now, at this moment?

Lex didn't seem nervous in the slightest, though she was about to walk into a mansion full of strangers, in a setting where she couldn't possibly know all the social norms. She seemed perfectly at her ease, leaning her elbow across the frame of the open window, enjoying the evening breeze streaming inside, heedless of how it might disarrange the elegant ballerina bun atop her head.

He loved when she wore her hair up like that, showing her long, slender neck.

And where had she found that gown? Emerald green silk, one-shouldered, perfectly fit and cascading down her body, save for a slit up one

thigh. She looked as regal as an empress.

He would usually have felt uncomfortable with something so attention-grabbing. After all, the higher echelons of London society were still conservative compared to what she was probably used to back home. But he had seen her at enough parties to know that she charmed everyone she met. He didn't have to worry about her.

This evening would be a little different than usual. Black had been invited—by the commissioner himself—to a private party thrown by the Home Secretary in honor of his wife's fiftieth birthday.

Black rarely hobnobbed with the British political elite. The commissioner had invited him because Black was considered a rising star in the London police. In line for promotion to commander within a few months, and maybe eventually to the commissioner position itself.

They liked using him as a poster-boy: the *chav* who had risen through the ranks with such speed and perfection, and such excellent absorption of the rules of the game, spoken and unspoken.

Because that, of course, was the part that was actually difficult. Not solving cases—he was very good at that. The hard part was learning the right vocabulary and the right methods of pronunciation, the right way to dress and to behave, the right people to trade favors with. That was how you got ahead.

Black hated the games he had to play. Though he never let it show, he resented them. The wealthy that had been born that way. The people who didn't have to work to get to the same place to which he had to kick and claw and struggle for years.

Had Lex grown up rich or poor? It was so hard to tell. She didn't like to talk about her family or her childhood. He hoped she would be more open with him once they were married.

Assuming she said yes.

He had the ring, already bought. He'd been carrying it around in his breast pocket for a month, looking for the right moment to bring it out.

Of course, there had been plenty of moments—after a particularly enthusiastic session in bed, during a walk through the falling leaves in Hyde Park, when he'd taken her to dinner at Le Pont de la Tour.

The real reason he hadn't yet proposed was because he wasn't sure of her answer. He thought that she loved him. But he could never be certain.

Black knew that most women would consider him a catch. He was 190 cm tall, broad shouldered, blond, handsome. A decorated police officer, who had solved several prestigious cases, including saving the hostages from the bombing of the NSC building, a feat that had made him the hero of the city for a time.

Yet, Lex wasn't like most women. He'd never seen her equal for intelligence or beauty. And she had that wildness to her.

So, he kept the ring with him at all times, looking for the right opportunity, the moment when he felt sure she'd say yes.

It was a perfect ring, just what he knew she would like. White gold and diamond, antique, probably made in 1890, or close thereto, in jolly old England. She had told him that Art Nouveau was her favorite style. He made sure the slender little band would be small enough to fit her hand.

She worked in art appraisal, so he knew it had to be something special. Something she'd be proud to wear, that fit her tastes.

Of course, he couldn't afford the size of stone she really deserved, but maybe eventually. After a few more promotions.

He liked the finer things in life. He could tell she did too, from the few items she kept in her sparse apartment. Her place was near empty and always scrupulously clean, but what she had looked expensive and tasteful.

For his part, Black was enjoying driving this hired car. It was heavy and substantial. It handled smoothly. It smelled like new leather. Maybe they'd have a car like this someday, and a little house.

He kept no vehicle of his own, usually. He lived in the heart of London and drove a patrol car when required. But you couldn't pull up to the Home Secretary's house in a cab, so he'd rented something fancy for the night.

They were coming up to the place now. He'd never been in Hamstead Garden before, though of course he knew of it. It was one of the most prestigious suburbs in London. The poshest street of all was The Bishop's Avenue, where the Home Secretary's mansion took pride of place.

The house itself was a massive red brick monstrosity, rather squarish, with lots of chimneys and brightly-lit rectangular windows. It had a pretty, private drive up to the front, lined with trees, but the actual house seemed to have been built in stages, with a large four-story addition tacked on to the right side like some sort of growth.

"Not very aesthetic, is it?" Black said to Lex.

"Mmm," she said, in mild agreement.

Black saw that she wasn't looking at the house at all. She seemed to be scanning the grounds, glancing around at the gates, the guardhouse, and the valets parking the many cars for the partygoers.

It was so funny how she never seemed to be looking at quite the same things as him. There was something different in the way their minds worked.

"I heard they rushed through the purchase a few years ago to avoid the higher Stamp Duty costs," Black told her. "Probably saved them almost two million pounds. You'd think if you could afford this place, you wouldn't care about taxes, but the rich always seem to want to get a deal, don't they?"

"I guess that's why they're rich," Lex said.

She was ignoring the resentment in his voice. She didn't seem to have any resentment herself, or any political leanings.

They pulled up in front, letting the valet take the keys. Lex stepped carefully out of the car, mindful of the delicate fabric of her skirt, and the revealing slit.

Black took her arm. He loved how petite she was next to him, a full foot shorter. She was the smallest woman he'd ever dated—she probably weighed less than a hundred pounds. But she still had elegance and presence, from how she carried herself.

They strode up the broad front steps and into the grand house.

It was much lovelier inside than out. They found themselves in a lavish entryway, all glimmering marble and polished mirrors.

A receptionist checked their tickets and took their coats, before they were offered a glass of champagne and ushered into the main room of the party.

It was, for lack of a better word, a ballroom, though the Home Secretary's wife probably called it a salon or something equally pretentious. Black recognized a few of the other guests (the mayor of London and his wife, and the author that won the Booker prize the previous year, with a woman who was most definitely not his wife). They would never have recognized Black. He only knew them from television or news articles.

Because the party was already in full swing, most of the guests looked a little buzzed, if not already drunk. Black had no intention of imbibing anything other than his glass of champagne. He never allowed himself to

drop his guard in situations like this. An earl might be forgiven for getting sloshed at a party, but a common cop never would be.

Commissioner Coldwell waved at Black from across the room. He strode over to greet them. He was an older man, on the far side of sixty, but still with an imposing build, only a little gone to seed. He had a big, hawkish nose and thinning black hair.

“You found the place,” he said.

“Easy enough,” Black said. “It’s lit up like a Christmas tree.”

Coldwell chuckled. “They don’t like to be subtle, do they,” he said.

He liked to be conspiratorial when talking to Black, as if they grew up in the same neighborhood. But Black knew he was from old money himself.

“And this must be the lovely lady we’ve heard so much about,” Coldwell said, taking Lex’s hand. “Black wasn’t exaggerating.”

“He never does,” Lex said, smiling at the commissioner in her charming way. She allowed him to kiss her hand.

“Is that an American accent I hear?”

“It is,” she said patiently, as if she didn’t have to answer that question every single day.

“What brings you to our little island?” Coldwell asked.

“The weather, of course,” Lex replied.

Coldwell laughed. “Well, it can’t be the food,” he said. “Unless you like curry.”

“I do,” Lex said.

“She likes curry and rain! Won’t take much to keep this one happy, Black.”

“If only that were true,” Black said.

Coldwell slapped him on the back and continued on through the crowd.

Black turned to Lex and made a face.

“Sorry,” he said.

“What’s to be sorry about?” Lex said. “Look at this place.”

She gazed around appreciatively at the many fine paintings hung on the walls and the glamorous guests in their dress clothes. A string quartet played from the far corner of the room. Black could see an elaborate banquet table against the opposite wall, piled high with fresh fruit, confections, and exotic-looking finger foods.

“Are you hungry?” he asked Lex.

“Not yet,” she said. “Let’s dance first.”

He would have preferred not to, in front of all these people, but she pulled him to the center of the room without waiting for an answer.

He had to admit, it was easy to dance with her. She spun around so gracefully, as light on her feet as if she really were a ballerina.

He could see the men in the vicinity turning to look at her, and more than a few of the women. The rest of the guests might all be millionaires, but right now he felt like the luckiest man in the room.

The music stopped when the Home Secretary held up his glass to make a toast. Presumably, he was about to extoll the virtues of his wife, whose birthday it was. She stood next to him in a gray gown and heavy string of pearls that probably cost more than Black's flat, looking pleased at the turnout.

Black never got to hear the speech. The moment the Secretary pinged his glass, while everyone was turning to look at him, Lex seized Black's hand and pulled him through a side door, out of the ballroom.

"Where are we going?" Black whispered to her.

She was pulling him rapidly down a dark hallway, through an area of the house they were clearly not supposed to be exploring.

"Come on," she urged him, laughing softly.

"We've got to go back," Black said. "They've got tons of security around, they're not going to want us poking around—"

But he broke off, because Lex had pulled him into another room, some kind of study. It was still too dark to see. She pounced on him, kissing him wildly, pulling at his dress clothes.

All his resistance melted away. He scooped her up in his arms, sitting her on top of the desk so he could reach her mouth more easily. Her lips tasted sweet from the champagne she'd been drinking.

She was kissing him ravenously, as if she wanted to eat him alive. Of all the things he loved about her, this might be the best thing of all—the way she fucked like an animal, completely uninhibited.

She was already unbuckling his pants, reaching her hand inside to grip his cock. He was fully hard already—it only took seconds whenever she was in the room.

Her long, dark hair had come loose from its bun, all around her shoulders. He wanted to rip her dress down too, to get at her breasts, but he knew he couldn't tear the gown. They'd have to go back out to the party in a minute.



That was the last sane thought he had. She'd succeeded in getting his pants down, and she pulled him into her, wrapping her legs tight around his waist.

Sliding inside of her was like slipping into a vise greased with warm oil. It made him go out of his mind with how ridiculously, phenomenally good it felt.

He lifted her up and fucked her like that, holding her up in the air as easily as if she weighed nothing at all. She was so light, and he was so much stronger than her. It always made him feel like such a man, the way he could lift her, and carry her, and put her in any position.

He pressed her up against the nearest wall and kept thrusting madly into her. He knew she liked it like that, rough and fast.

She came hard, biting into the shoulder of his jacket to stifle the sound. He could feel the waves of her orgasm pulsing through her body, making her tremble in his arms.

He exploded only a minute after her, insanely aroused by the naughtiness of their tryst, and the danger of it. His climax was so intense that it drained the strength out of him, and he could barely keep standing, holding her up against the wall. He had to put her down carefully and lean against the desk to catch his breath.

They were both laughing and sweating slightly. They were trying to be quiet, but they had such a rush of euphoria that it was hard to be quiet, and hard to focus on tidying themselves up once more.

Black had lost his belt somewhere. He got down on his hands and knees to hunt for it under the leather armchairs. At last he found it, halfway across the room beneath a paisley settee.

He threaded it back through the loops of his trousers while Lex pinned up her hair once more. She reapplied her lipstick, using a small mirror from her clutch.

Soon they had made themselves decent to be seen, or at least they hoped so. It was too dark in the room to be certain.

"I can't believe you," Black said, as he took her hand to lead her back down the hallway to the party. "You're just incredible."

"You seemed stressed," Lex said carelessly. "I just wanted to help you relax."

When they got back to the first door they'd come through, Lex said, "Wait."

She cracked the door just a little, peeking out. Judging the coast to be clear, she pulled Black back into the ballroom.

They joined the crowd once more, Lex plucking a glass of champagne off the nearest tray as if she'd been there all along.

She was right, Black did feel surprisingly calm the rest of the evening. They talked to all kinds of boring and important people, Lex laughing and joking as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Their naughty little liaison seemed to have invigorated her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling. She looked happier and more excited than he'd ever seen before.

When the night was over, Black couldn't consider it anything but a success.

They retrieved the rented car from the valet, Lex tipping him far too generously. They headed back into the thick of the city, driving down mostly empty roads.

It was well past midnight. Black was hoping he could coax Lex to stay the night at his flat. He wanted to make love to her properly, over an hour or two, when he could touch and taste every part of her to his heart's content. Then he wanted to hold her in his arms all night long and wake up to her beautiful face in the morning.

He was just about to ask her if she'd like to come over, when their sedan was hit from the side by a delivery truck.

Black's window exploded inward, showering the interior of the car with broken glass. His face was cut in a dozen places along the right side. Their smaller vehicle spun around once, twice, before coming to a rest up against a cement divider.

"Lex!" Black cried. "Are you alright?"

She had been flung against the passenger-side door. Her window had cracked, probably from her head striking against it, but it hadn't broken. Her hair had been knocked loose from its bun once more, coming half undone. He could see blood running down the side of her face, staining the bodice of her gown. Her blue eyes looked dazed.

The driver of the delivery van cracked his door and stumbled out. He took one look at the other car, then bolted off down the street, weaving from side to side. Even in his shocked state, Black thought the man looked drunk. That was probably why he was running away. But he had abandoned his van, so Black was sure he would be able to track him down easily enough.

At the moment, he was much more concerned about Lex.

“Lex,” he said again. “Are you hurt?”

It was a stupid question. He could see the blood. But this time, Lex responded.

“No,” she said, “I’m alright. I’m fine.”

“I’ll call an ambulance,” Black said.

“No!” she said, quickly. “No need to do that. Really, I’m alright.”

“We’d better go to the hospital just to be sure,” Black said. “We’ll have to call a cab either way. The car’s not fit to drive.”

He touched her cheek softly, relieved she was alright.

He began to pick the shattered glass out of her hair. Large shards had caught there, glimmering in the dark strands.

But then he stopped.

He held up a piece of glass between his thumb and index finger. He turned it back and forth in the light from the street lamps.

It was much too regularly cut for a piece of broken glass. And the way that it sparkled and gleamed...

He was holding a diamond in his hand. A stone as large as a 5p piece. There were many more, stuck in her hair and scattered over the seat and floorboards of the car.

“Lex...” he said, his voice shaking.

She looked at him, her large blue eyes wide and bright. Her face was more beautiful than he’d ever seen it in the stark light from the street lamps, with the dark blood against the pale skin.

“I’m sorry, Byron,” she said.

She reached behind her and pulled the door handle open, slipping out the passenger side.

Black stared stupidly after her, not understanding what was happening. As he watched, Lex kicked off her high-heeled shoes, lifted the long hem of her dress, and began sprinting off down the street.

He tried to open his own door, but the metal had caved in from the impact with the van. He had to clamber over the stick shift, no easy task for a man his size.

He crawled out Lex’s door at last, dazed and stumbling. By the time he ran after her, she had already turned down one of the alleyways and disappeared.



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She has a slight obsession with hiking, bodybuilding, and live comedy shows. Her perfect day would be taking the kids to Harry Potter World, going dancing with Mr. Lark, then relaxing with a good book and a monster bag of salt and vinegar chips.

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