“If you run, I will catch you. It’s what I do.”
—ALEKSANDR “THE SIBERIAN” SEVASTYAN, BRATVA ENFORCER, FORMER PRIZEFIGHTER

“Heading off to a Russian gangsterland.
With a twisted enforcer who’s hotter than the sun.
What could possibly go wrong?”
—NATALIE MARIE PORTER, GRAD STUDENT
From: NataliePorter@huskers.unl.edu
Sent: Saturday 2:51 PM
To: caseworker03@russian-ancestry-DNA.com
Subject: Don’t keep me in suspense. . . .

Dear Mr. Zironoff,

Sorry to e-mail you yet again, but I was so excited to learn of the potential DNA match you discovered last month. After six years of searching for my biological parents, I’d love to hear back from you, even if the lead didn’t pan out. I’ve tried calling, but your voice mailbox is full. I don’t have enough money to start over with a new investigator, so could you please respond?

Sincerely,
Natalie Porter

From: NataliePorter@huskers.unl.edu
Sent: Thursday 1:14 AM
To: caseworker03@russian-ancestry-DNA.com
Subject: Response needed!

Dear Mr. Zironoff,
I’m starting to get worried, so please write me back. You gave me such hope that I would soon find my mother and father. I can wire the last of my savings to you. Anything. But I need you to respond.
Sincerely,
Natalie

Sent: Thursday 1:15 AM
To: NataliePorter@huskers.unl.edu
Subject: Mail delivery failed

The following address(es) failed: caseworker03@russian-ancestry-DNA.com
Mailbox is FULL
Mommy issues. Serial cheater. Humor void. Two-pump chump.” With each guy who entered the campus bar, I ticked off my initial impression to my drunken friends.

I had an uncanny knack for sizing up males—I was a regular “manalyst.” My secret? I always went negative, and the guys, well, they always accommodated.

The girls at the table—several of my roommate’s friends and a couple of mine—looked at me like I was a fun sideshow act, their carny pal. Drinks were perpetually free.

After the week I’d had, my dinner of salt, tequila, and lime was hitting the spot.

My best friend Jessica murmured at my ear, “You better be careful, you picky prude, or else you’ll take your hymen to your grave. Like a skin tag.”

She alone knew that I’d never given it up—and why. “Low blow, Jess,” I said without any heat. Like her, it took a lot to get me ruffled, which was one of the reasons we made such great roommates.

Other than that, we were as different as we could be. Whereas
she was leggy and tan with twinkling blue eyes and cropped black hair, I was short and top-heavy, with long red hair and pale-as-a-porcelain-sink skin.

I was a workaholic studyaholic, pursuing my history PhD. After years’ worth of incompletes, Jess had finally dipped a toe into the core courses of her major—leisure studies—and decided college was “a racket” for “wretched fucks.” Though it was mid-semester, she was heading out tomorrow for a tour of the Greek Isles with her wealthy family.

Another round of tequila shooters arrived, sent by a trio of frat boys a few tables away. We raised our glasses, then dutifully licked, pounded, and sucked. The tequila, not the boys.

While other women might look at these superficially attractive guys and see potential mates or even fun one-night stands, I saw impending headaches. Other girls got hot and bothered by their lines and pickups; I just got bothered.

But I hadn’t always been that way.

“Do the frat boys, Nat!” our friend Polly cried. She was a sturdy corn-fed Nebraska girl—her family’s farm was in a small town outside Lincoln, just a few miles away from ours. Well, not ours anymore, since Mom had sold out last year.

“Too easy,” I said, having already sized up the trio. The first guy had been constantly checking sports scores on TV while his leg jogged. The second was a bleary mess whose own friends rolled their eyes at his drunkenness. The third one’s grooming and clothing were fanatically perfect, and he kept checking his appearance in the mirror behind the bar.

“From left to right, then?” I said. “Inveterate gambler, habitual drunk, and—how should I put this?—the third is ill-equipped.”

I sighed. Yep, those guys were too easy to read. Where was
the excitement? Here I was at the same Lincoln bar I always went
to, with the same crowd I always hung around. I had an early
work shift tomorrow at one restaurant, a late one at the other,
and classes to take and to teach on Monday. I’d been averaging
five hours of sleep a night for the last few weeks. What was I even
doing here?

I guessed I could sleep when I was dead.

“I’ve chosen my quarry for the evening,” beautiful Jess said.
“Ill-equipped is mine.” As per her usual, she would pick up an-
other conquest and take him back to his place—so she could
leave when finished with him. “His type,” she continued blithely,
“usually make up for any shortcomings with their mouths. True
story.”

I told her, “And you better be careful, Jessebel, or else you’ll
collect another admirer who clings like lichen.”

“I can’t help it that this is the Bermuda Triangle”—she pointed
at her crotch—“when guys venture there, they tend to stay.”

I tapped my chin. “Oh, I thought you called it that because
it’s sucked in lots of seamen.”

Between guffaws, she said, “That’s a completely fair state-
ment!”

We could laugh about it now, but I’d lived with the aftermath
of her affairs: the desperate gifts, the late-night phone calls, the
stalking.

What was the point of all the drama? Of all that angst? Dat-
ing, love, and sex were all overrated—as I’d repeatedly tried to
explain to Jess. She would get this secretive smile and say, “You’re
gonna get blindsided one day. I only hope I’m there to see it. . . .”

When the laughter died down, Polly said, “Do him,” with a
wave at the door.

“Fine.” Exhaling with boredom—earn your booze, carny—I
turned toward the entrance. And saw the baddest-looking man I’d ever encountered.

His eyes were a vivid gold, stark against his thick black hair. He wore it longish, the ends brushing his collar. He had a roman nose that had likely been broken and a razor-thin scar that sliced down across both lips. A fighter?

Yet that didn’t fit with his expensive clothing: a tailored black coat and dress shirt, dark gray slacks, black leather shoes and belt. Through Jess, I’d learned enough about fashion to recognize fine threads. His outfit probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.

When he stood at the bar and ordered a drink, I saw that he had three rings on one hand, a ring on his other thumb, and a wicked-looking tattoo peeking out from his starch-stiff collar. His style was a mix of privileged and street.

He was tall, with a lean, muscular build, and looked maybe twenty-nine or thirty, but his face was weary, as an older man’s would be. With those rough-hewn features, he was ruggedly handsome, yet not classically so.

There was an aura of ennui about him, but he also seemed hyper-alert. What the hell? My internal manalyzer whirred with confusion. *Does not compute!*

I could feel my friends staring at me, but I was at a loss. “I . . . I got nothing.” Was he a brawler or a rich playboy or both? I was also sensing top notes of *European*—along with strong under-tones of *dangerous!*

He was like a history book written in a script I’d never seen. Fascinating.

Jess pinched my side, drawing my attention to her smug grin. “You can close your mouth now, hooker.” In a patronizing tone, she said, “Welcome to my world—where first meetings are always in slo-mo and the song ‘At Last’ repeats on a loop.”
No, no, her world was angsty and overwrought. So why had my gaze darted back to the man?

“That’s one hot piece of tackle—in a cage-fighter/GQ model mash-up kind of way.” Jess wasn’t going to let this go. “Probably gets more ass than a toilet seat. But he got you to look twice, which makes him a rare and wondrous creature, this bar’s very own unicorn. Requires closer investigation, don’t you think?”

I could question him, type him, then discard all thoughts of him. I was just tipsy enough to consider it. “I should go up and introduce myself?”

She nodded. “Unless you’re a twat. Now, go forth with confidence, for you look cute-iful tonight.”

Jess’s style was SEXY GLAM! Mine? See-me-love-me, motherfleckers. Yet tonight, I was wearing a hip-hugging short suede skirt and a slinky red top—one of Jess’s fashion-forward, low-cut numbers. For once, my bra wasn’t a minimizer.

This outfit had come about because the clothes I’d normally wear—jeans and a turtleneck—were all in an overflowing laundry hamper. I’d worn the black knee-high boots Jess had bought me, to show appreciation in front of her.

I rose, smoothed my wavy hair over my shoulder, then tugged down my skirt, prompting Jess to give me a loud slap on the ass for encouragement. As I passed their table, Ill-Equipped and Habitual Drunk raised their glasses to me, which didn’t hurt my confidence.

Once I was halfway over to Badass, his eyes locked on me. His gaze grew heated, and immediately the area felt smaller, warmer. I squelched the urge to fan myself. For the first time in my life, I was a little . . . giddy.

When I sidled up to him at the bar, he turned fully to me. Up close, he was even more intimidating, even more attractive. Taller
than I’d thought.

His spellbinding eyes were the color of amber, irises ringed with black.

As I noted additional details—scarred knuckles, tattoos on his fingers under those rings, chiseled jawline clean-shaven—I perceived the heat coming off his big body. Then I got my first mind-numbing hit of his scent.

Crisp, masculine, intoxicating.

Blindsiding.

_Speak, Nat._ I had to look up to face him. “Uh, hi, I’m Natalie.” I offered him my hand to shake. He didn’t take it. _Okay_ . . . I swallowed. “Can I buy you a drink?” Was that a vodka rocks he’d ordered? He didn’t look like a 7&7 type of guy.

He canted his head, studying my face—the same way I studied men’s expressions. Still he said nothing. Maybe he didn’t speak the language. UNL had a lot of overseas students. “Drink?” I pointed to his untouched glass and mimed a shot.

His expression gave away so little, it was like I was talking to a wall.

As my cheeks flushed, I muttered, “Sooo, this went well. Good talk, buddy.” With a mortified smile, I turned around—

A callused palm closed around my elbow, his rings cool compared to his skin. The contact was so electric, I shivered.

“Wait,” he said. Had there been a subtle _v_ sound to that _w_ ?

My heart leapt—maybe he was . . . Russian. I turned around, a genuine smile on my face now. “Are you from Russia?” I added, “Zdrav-stvoi-tee.” Hello.

He still cupped my elbow. How could his hand be so hot? I stifled imaginings of him cupping other parts of me, those hands spreading heat in their wake. . . .

“You speak my language, then?”
Bingo, a Russian! “A bit,” I said with delight. I could grill him about the country, learning more about my birthplace! “I took a class or two.” Or five. My master’s had required fluency in a second language, and I’d chosen Russian.

He swept his glance around, his stance alert, as if someone might throw a punch at any second. Then he met my gaze once more. “Of all the men in this bar, you choose me to approach?” His English was very good, though heavily accented. “Are you looking for trouble?”

With a confidence I didn’t feel, I teasingly said, “Maybe I am.” I sounded breathy—I still hadn’t caught my breath since he’d first touched me. “Have I found it?”

He glanced down, seeming surprised that he was still holding my arm. He abruptly released me, growing angrier by the second. “No, little girl. You have not.” With a disgusted look, he turned away and stalked out.

I stared at the door, battling my bewilderment. What just happened? I’d seen interest in his gaze, hadn’t I?

Yet then he’d acted like a vampire who’d discovered I was a fucking sunbeam.
“What the hell, did you bite him?” “Did you insult his manhood?” “Let me smell your breath.”

I’d stayed at the bar long enough to take my ribbing, because it was deserved and because I was a good goddamned sport. In general, I tried not to take myself too seriously—I called myself “the manalyst,” after all. My life’s motto: Joke ’em if they can’t take a fuck.

A few shots later, I’d made my farewells and drunkenly set out for home, the pad I shared with Jess about five blocks away.

Tons of students were out, blowing off steam before midterms. It was a chilly fall night, with a full moon overhead. I pulled my jacket tighter. This close to harvest, the smell of ripe corn carried on the air—always a time of excitement for me since I was a farm girl at heart.

Yet another hand-holding couple passed me, and I gazed after them with a little wistfulness. Even if I had zero tolerance for men and their drama, I wouldn’t mind having someone to snuggle up with this winter.

Someone to notice that my hands were cold and to hold them
between his own.

*Don't think of the Russian, don't think of...*

Too late. I didn't exactly see myself strolling around campus all *fà la la* with a guy like that. But there'd been *something* about him—

A sudden sense that I was being watched hit me. Running a palm over my nape, I swept a glance around me. I only saw students meandering the streets, crowding into and out of various bars.

Probably just the tequila getting to me. Or stress from this week’s insane work schedule. Safety-wise, the only scary thing about this campus was its deadly dullness.

Shaking off my unease, I dug my phone out of my pocket and checked e-mail. Nothing from Zironoff. I was beginning to think I’d gotten scammed by my investigator. It wouldn’t be the first time one of them had ripped me off. Had I blown a year of tips on that DNA dickwad?

There was an e-mail from Mom, wondering why I was working so much, worrying. If she ever found out about my quest, she’d take it personally, and we didn’t need any more friction between us.

Finally home, I meandered up the walk that wound through our yard. Our place was a cute mid-century bungalow, owned by Jess’s parents. She called it the Bunghole, a perfect indication of her maturity level.

Inside, I shed my coat on the way to the kitchen. Chilled Gatorade, my secret hangover preventative, awaited me.

Hearing a sound from the front of the house, I called from the fridge, “Jess, that you?” I sounded *tanked.* “Whatcha doing back?” Maybe she’d struck out for once? We could commiserate.

No answer. I shrugged—the Bunghole emitted more banging
and moans than a porn set.

I closed the fridge. Half of the door was covered with glossy pics from Jess’s pervasive fashion magazines. My half was covered with postcards. She sent them from all the exciting locales she visited each break. Though I had an open invitation from her family and yearned to travel, I was constantly working. I’d never even been outside of the Midwest.

I’d never seen a seashore, much less the Eiffel Tower.

If I had a dollar for every time I’d gazed at these cards while promising myself, *One day...* well, I wouldn’t need to work three jobs.

After downing my Gatorade dose, I swerved to my room, knotting my hair atop my head for a bath. Minutes later, when I eased back into the steaming water, another wave of drunken disappointment settled over me.

Now that I’d crashed and burned on my first pickup, I had to wonder how guys kept hitting on women, forever risking rejection. I mused over all the men I’d turned down—had I torpedoed their mojo?

I just couldn’t figure out why that Russian had been so angry. And what the hell had been so off-putting about me? I wasn’t a beauty like Jess, but I’d had male interest ever since I’d sprouted mammaries.

Curious, I ran my palms down my legs. They were fit from standing for hours on end while waiting tables, just as my arms were lean from hefting trays.

My hands ascended to my hips. Admittedly, they were wide, but my waist was narrow. And my breasts? They were fairly big, bobbing now in the water, coral-colored nipples puckering just above the surface. My rack had been on display tonight; that Russian hadn’t given it a second glance.
But what if I hadn’t repelled him? What would those hot, rough palms of his have felt like kneading my chest? At the thought, I experienced a surge of arousal so strong it startled me. My nipples stiffened even more. When the bathwater lapped at them, my breath hitched.

I’d talked to him for less than two minutes, seen him for less than ten, and his effect on me was this strong?

To hell with it—he could spurn me all he wanted to, but he couldn’t keep me from fantasizing about him. With a mental Screw you, Russian, I reached between my legs to stroke, picturing his broad shoulders, his square jawline, his mouth. Those hooded golden eyes.

Even in the water, I could tell how slick my pussy had grown, my forefinger gliding along my lips, parting them. When I reached my clitoris, I found it swollen and supersensitive.

Sighing with need, I began to rub the bud in slow circles. My lids slid shut, and my knees fell wide against the sides of the tub. With my free hand, I petted my breasts, thumbing my nipples till they strained. . . .

I debated fetching one of my trusty vibrators from under the bed. But then I pictured the Russian kissing down my torso with that scorching expression, and realized B.O.B. could sit this one out.

Though I’d never had a guy go down on me, I could all but see the Russian’s dark head between my thighs as he began to lick. Another stroke had me undulating in the water, gasping. His lips would be firm against my weeping flesh as he hungrily tongued me. He’d want me wetter and wetter, and I’d oblige.

In this fantasy, my aching clit wasn’t throbbing against my finger, but against his greedy tongue.

As my body tensed for my orgasm, every inch of me seemed
to gather in on itself, like a star about to explode. I rubbed my palm over my taut nipples, another shot of stimulation. So close, only a couple more strokes . . . I cracked open my eyes to watch myself writhing in the throes. Corner of my vision, strangest thing . . . through the steam, I thought I saw the Russian.

In my doorway, gazing down at me with smoldering eyes.

Broad chest heaving as he gnashed his teeth.

Muscles tensed as if he was about to fall upon me.

I squinted through the haze. Surely my muddled mind was imagining this? Was I that drunk? I was right at the razor’s edge of coming, my toes already curling. As I met his mesmerizing imaginary gaze, my sneaky finger decided to give my clit one more shudder-inducing flick.

He exhaled sharply, big hands opening and closing. His expression said that he was about to seize my body and eat me up, bit by little bit.

So close . . . Then it registered that he was actually standing in the doorway of my bathroom.

The Russian had broken into my house and was spying on me, like some psycho!

I shot upright, drawing a breath to scream, but he cut me off: “Cover yourself, Natalie.” His voice was rough, his brows drawn tight. “We need to talk.” With a vile curse in Russian, he strode off.

Cover myself? Talk?

Night-stalker-serial-killers didn’t say shit like that!

I was so confounded, I couldn’t manage a scream. My mouth moved, but no words came out. I scrambled from the tub, reaching for a towel, and secured it around me. Even in the midst of this turmoil, I hissed in a breath as the terry cloth rubbed my nipples.
Casting around for a weapon, I plucked off the cover of the toilet tank, hefting it over my shoulder in a batter’s pose. From the safety of the bathroom, I called, “I don’t know what you’re doing in my house. But you need to leave now. Or I’ll call the cops!”

“I was sent here by your father,” he replied from my bedroom. I swayed, and my makeshift weapon faltered. Considering his Russian accent—and the timing—I knew he had to be talking about my biological father. Still I said, “My dad died six years ago.”

“You know that’s not the one I’m referring to.”

In a rush, I demanded, “What do you know about him? Who are you? Why did you break into my house?”

“Break in?” Scoffing sound. “Your key was under a plastic rock. For anyone to find,” he added in a chiding tone. “Your father is a very important—and wealthy—man. He’s assigned me to be your new bodyguard.”

“Bodyguard! Why would I need one?”

“Anyone in a family with a ten-figure net worth”—I gasped at that—“needs protection.”

“You’re saying he’s a . . . billionaire?” Was I getting punked? Maybe that was in rubles or something.

“Correct. His name is Pavel Kovalev. He just learned of your existence a short while ago, through the investigator you hired.”

I now knew my father’s name.

I’d initially wanted to learn about my birth parents because I possessed an overdeveloped sense of curiosity. Then it had occurred to me that I might have gotten my sense of curiosity from my parents.

After that, I’d imagined a man and a woman in their forties, mired in endless wondering about the child they’d given up
to a Russian orphanage twenty-four years ago. The thought had pushed me to take on yet another job, to keep digging relentlessly. I’d searched not just for my sake, but for theirs.

But he’d never known I existed? Then I frowned. “My investigator? Zironoff? He hasn’t returned my e-mails or calls.”

“He was made aware that we would be handling this internally going forward.”

“Oh.” *Thanks for the heads-up, dickwad.* At least I hadn’t gotten ripped off again. No, I’d . . . succeeded.

After six years of searching.

I tottered from shock—and residual tequila. I returned the tank cover to its spot before it dropped on my head like a cartoon anvil. “If you’re my bodyguard, then why were you spying on me in the bath?” I snagged my pink robe, hastily swapping it for the towel. “Huh?”

Silence. When I didn’t hear *anything*, I had a weird surge of panic that this man—a new source of answers, an alleviator of curiosity—had vanished as quickly as he’d appeared. “Are you there?”

Trying not to think of how short my silk robe was—and what he’d just caught me doing—I poked my head out of the bathroom; no sign of him. So I cautiously padded toward my room. “You didn’t answer my question. Hey, why are you in my closet?”

He emerged from the walk-in. “Where is your luggage?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I didn’t have real luggage. I’d packed for school in laundry baskets and boxes.

He raked his eyes over me in my robe, lingering on choice parts of me. Seeming to shake himself, he snagged my sizable book bag, dumping library books on the floor. *The History of Sexuality, The Boundaries of Eros, A Thorn in the Flesh.*

“What the hell, Russian!?” If he’d noticed the titles—my gen-
eral field was the history of women and gender—they didn’t faze him.

When he tossed the empty bag to me, I barely caught it. “Pack necessities only. Everything else will be provided for you.”

I gaped down at the bag then back up. “I’m not doing anything, not until you tell me where you think I’m going. And why this can’t wait until tomorrow. For all I know, you could be a human trafficker!”

“And this would be my m.o.?” He exhaled with a kind of surprised impatience, as if no one had ever argued with him before—as if he’d done this to a hundred other girls, and every one of them had started packing with a Yes, sir. “My name is Aleksandr Sevastyan. Call me Sevastyan.” Like Sebastian with a v.

“I’ve worked for your father for decades. Kovalev is keen to meet you.” He added almost to himself, “I’ve never seen him so eager.”

“How can he be sure I’m his daughter? Zironoff could’ve made a mistake.”

“Nyet.” Nyet was a harsh no; net a soft no. “You offered up your DNA. Kovalev already had his on file. There is no mistake.”

“If he’s so eager to meet me, why didn’t he come himself? Why not just call me?”

“As I said, he is a very important man in Russia, and at present, he’s caught up with work concerns that can’t be handled by anyone but himself. He trusts me implicitly.” Sevastyan moved to my bedroom window, peering out between the blind slats with the same wariness I’d noticed in the bar. “If you pack a bag and get on a plane with me, he will meet you at his estate outside Moscow in less than fourteen hours. This is your father’s wish—one I will be carrying out.”

My manalyzer might be cocked up, but my bullshit detector was still pinging clear; against all odds, I was starting to believe
this guy.

Reality began to set in. “But I’ve got shifts tomorrow.” Which I wouldn’t need if my search could end. “And my classes!” As soon as the words left my lips, I felt silly. What would this towering, tattooed Russian understand about a Husker’s advanced degree? What would he care?

Surprisingly, he said, “Your schooling is important to you. We understand this. But your father wants you in Russia now. Not next month or next week. You leave tonight.”

“Does he always get what he wants?”

“Without fail.” Sevastyan checked his expensive-looking watch. “Our flight leaves in an hour. I’ll explain more on the way to the airport.”

Airport? Flight? I’d never been on a plane. Yet I could be in Russia in less than a day. Don’t think of the postcards, don’t think . . .

Even Jess had never been to Russia!

Then I straightened. “Again, what’s the rush? And news flash—I don’t have a passport! How am I going to get into Moscow without one?”

“I’ll work that out. It’s not a problem.” Sevastyan shut off the lamp beside my bed, dimming the room.

“How can that not be a problem?” I glanced at the tattoos on his scarred fingers and had a sinking suspicion, but tried to ignore it. Nope, not possible . . .

“I understand that all of this is a lot to take in. But things are different for you now, Natalie. Some rules . . . no longer apply.”

I squared my shoulders. “Not good en—”

“Let me make this simple for you,” he interrupted. “I’m walking out of this house in five minutes. You can either walk out with me, packed and dressed, or leave in that little robe”—his piercing eyes swept over me, over my nipples pressing against the silk—
“thrown over my shoulder. Your choice.”

My lips parted. His tone and bearing left no doubt that he was dead serious about kidnapping me. This ruble-billionaire’s bodyguard was going to finish his job—period. Still, I dared another question. “Why haven’t you said anything about my mother?”

When his eyes narrowed, I again got the impression that not many people challenged this man.

“Four minutes.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “I can’t just sign on for this, Sevastyan. Not without more answers.”

“Which I promise you will get when we are under way.”

Worst case scenario: if I didn’t like what he had to say, I could run from him at the airport, straight into the arms of security guards.

Sevastyan crossed to stand in front of me. The soft light caressed his hard features. They were almost too masculine. His rugged jaw was wide, the bridge of his aquiline nose slightly askew, giving him a roguish look. But on the whole, he was devastatingly attractive, with that dangerous aura about him.

“You must trust me, pet,” he said as he reached forward to gently grasp my chin.

At his touch, that dizzying heat filled me once more. It was just the liquor at work, I assured myself, or exhaustion catching up with me. Or my unsuccessful bath time.

“You know my intent isn’t to harm you,” he murmured. “Otherwise, I could have led you from that bar earlier, taking you somewhere for us to be alone.” My breaths went shallow at that.

“Would you not have left with me?”

In—a—heartbeat.

He leaned down to say at my ear, “That’s right, Natalya. You would have followed where I led.”
“Um . . . uh . . .” I was still recovering from the sound of my name in his raspy accent when I felt his warm breaths. Oh, God, had his lips ghosted over my ear? If his scent and heat had affected me, this grazing contact made my legs weak.

He drew back, expression inscrutable. “So why don’t you stop acting like you haven’t already made up your mind to come with me.”

“P-pardon?”

“You were decided as soon as you heard the words Russia, father, and go.” His firm lips thinned, making that razor-slice scar whiten.

“That’s not necessarily true—”

“Time’s up, pet.” He bent down to loop an arm around my ass, hoisting me over his shoulder.
“PUT ME DOWN!” I screeched, wriggling over the Neanderthal’s shoulder as he strode out the front door. Cold air swept up my robe, chilling me in unfamiliar places. “You can’t do this!”

He tightened his grip on my ass. “Doing it.” His tone was casual; he wasn’t even out of breath.

Another futile round of squirming. “Please put me down. We’ll go back inside”—I’ll run away—“and then I can pack, just like you said.”

Three passersby ambled down the sidewalk, huge no-neck guys in letterman jackets. Husker football players! They stopped and gawked.

Hanging upside down, blood rushing to my head, I opened my mouth to scream for their help—then hesitated. Did I believe what Sevastyan had told me? Was I beset by an overbearing asshole of a bodyguard—or being abducted? If I screamed, the jocks would kick Sevastyan’s ass, which wouldn’t help me get to Russia—

This decision, just like the previous one, was yanked out of my hands. Sevastyan turned to face them, slowly shaking his head. Whatever look he gave them made three massive football players
As they vanished, I pounded on Sevastyan’s back in frustration, stunned to feel a holster. He was carrying a gun! I didn’t have time to register my shock before he was shoving me into the front passenger seat of a luxe Mercedes.

As soon as he shut the door, I lunged for the handle, but he’d already clicked the lock, holding it down with the remote.

At his door, he gave me a look of warning through the window. He knew he’d have to release the lock button to get in, giving me a chance to escape. The unlock game. I would time it perfectly, reflexes like lightning—

Shit! He’d opened his door, then jammed the lock button back down before I could open my side!

He slid his big body into the car. “Better luck with that next time.”

“This is kidnapping!”

“I told you my intentions. Gave you a countdown.” He started the engine and pulled away from the curb. “Understand me, Natalie, I do exactly what I say I’ll do. Always.” He smoothly executed turn after turn, as if he knew this town as well as I did. “And right now I’m telling you that I will get you safely to your father in Russia.”

“How do you think you’ll get me through airport security like this?” I waved my hands to indicate my robe. “I don’t even have my purse!”

“We’re going to a private airport. And by the time we land in Moscow, you’ll have all new clothes brought to the jet.”

New clothes? Jet? Was he serious?

His gaze landed on my legs, on my half-bared thighs. And with that one dark glance, my skin flushed. I couldn’t help recalling the way he’d looked down on me in the bath.
Like a hungry predator eyeing tender prey.
Like I was already a caught thing, his to enjoy. I shivered.
“Are you cold?” he asked. “You look . . . chilled.”
Chilled? Oh. Because my nipples were still jutting. Yes, I was cold, but my body was also suffering the aftereffects of my foiled masturbation attempt. To be so close, drawing in on myself . . .
In some ways, I felt the same now. Tense, drawn, my skin prickling with awareness each time he looked at me.
When I didn’t answer him, Sevastyan turned on the heater, and hot air blasted against my chest, over the hypersensitive tips of my breasts. I nearly yelped when I felt the seat warmer toasting the cleft of my ass. In the close confines of the car, I got another hit of his mind-numbing scent.
So much stimulation. Could he see me trembling?
Once we were on the main highway heading out of town, the car purring along at eighty miles per hour, he commanded, “Put on your seat belt.”
I didn’t like this tone at all, heard it constantly at my server jobs. “Or what?” I narrowed my eyes. “And did you really call me pet earlier?”
“When I tell you to do something, it’s in your best interest to do it, pet.” Without warning, he reached over to yank my seat belt into place, roughly grazing my breasts with his forearm, filling my head with his scent. I squirmed on the hot seat, feeling dazed by this arrogant man.
I remembered one time when I’d been written up for public intoxication after a football game; I’d been mentally yelling at myself to sober up, willing myself to recover my wits so I could talk the cop out of the expensive citation. Stop chuckling, Nat, and answer the nice officer! Not OSSIFER, dumbass! Do NOT touch his shiny, shiny badge, do not—DAMN IT, NAT!
I felt like that now: under the influence.

Sevastyan affected me in a way I couldn’t shake. I was experiencing a bewildering attraction to him, some inexplicable connection.

And no matter how bad an idea it was, I kept wanting—metaphorically—to touch his badge.

No, no, no—I needed to concentrate on getting information out of him. “Do you keep your promises, Sevastyan?”

“To you and your father alone.”

“You promised me answers.”

His hands tightened on the wheel, those sexy rings of his digging into the leather. “Once we are on the plane.”

“Why not now? I need to know more about my parents.”

He didn’t deign to respond, just monitored the rearview mirror with that wary alertness.

I remembered his earlier demeanor, checking the street through my bedroom blinds. “What’s up with this paranoia? We’re in Lincoln, Nebraska; the most dangerous thing that’s ever happened here was when this Russian asshole kidnapped an unwitting co-ed—in her robe.”

The speedometer hit triple digits.

“Are we . . . are we being followed?”

Another glance into the rearview. “Not at present.”

“Which indicates we might have been in the past—or perhaps could be in the future?” This was too bizarre. “Am I in some kind of danger?” Questions about my parents and past faded as dread about my immediate future surfaced.

With reluctance, he said, “Kidnapping for ransom is always a fear.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t buy that. What you just described sounds like a chronic problem, or a theoretical one. Yet
you broke into my house and demanded that we leave in five minutes, which sounds like an *acute* problem. So what happened between the time I saw you in the bar and the time you entered my home?”

Sidelong glance. “I think you have your father’s cunning.”

“Answer me. What happened?”

“Kovalev called and gave me the order to get you on a plane. Which means it’s as good as done.”

A sudden thought struck me. “How long have you been my bodyguard, Sevastyan?”

“Not long,” he hedged.

“How—long?”

He hiked his broad shoulders. “A little over a month.”

And I’d never known. “Have you been following me around? Watching me all this time?”

A muscle ticked in his wide jaw. “I’ve been watching *over* you.”

Then he would know me better than I could even imagine. So what would a man like him think of me?

When he turned off the highway at an obscure exit, I cried, “Wait! Where are we going? There’s no airport out this way. Not even an executive one.”

“I had to arrange an alternative departure point.”

Alternative? I’d promised myself that if I didn’t like his answers, I’d flee into the arms of a security guard. I’d gotten few answers, and now had serious doubts about running into any guards.

After a few miles, he turned onto a dirt road that bisected a cornfield. We drove and drove until a clearing appeared ahead, what looked like a crop-duster airstrip. At one end, a jet awaited, beacon lights flashing, engines radiating heat in the night air.
To take me to Russia. This was all . . . real.

Sevastyan parked near the jet, but didn’t open his door. “I understand you have questions,” he said in a milder tone. “I’ll answer any I can when we’re in the air. But you must believe me, Natalie, you won’t regret taking this step. You’ll enjoy your new life very much.”

“New life?” I sputtered. “What are you talking about? I happen to enjoy my current life.”

“Do you, pet? You sought him,” Sevastyan said. “Relentlessly. Something was driving you.”

I glanced away, unable to argue with that.

“And now you’ll never have to work again, can buy anything you like. You can travel the world, see all the places on those postcards on your refrigerator.”

My dream. “This is a lot to take in, and I don’t like making big decisions under pressure.”

“Will it suffice for you to know that Kovalev is a good man, and he wants to make up for all the years he’s missed with you?”

“If our situations were reversed, could you take this step?”

He nodded easily. “When I first started working for Kovalev’s organization, I trusted that my life would be better with him in it. I’ve never regretted my decision.” He must’ve seen I was still unconvinced. Exhaling with frustration, he ordered, “Just stay here.”

He climbed out of the car and crossed to the jet with long-legged strides. The pilot—a tall, muscular blond in a uniform—met him at the bottom of the stairs, gesturing and speaking heatedly. I caught the cadences of Russian, but couldn’t make out the words over the humming engines.

Out of habit, I surveyed the man, noting that his well-worn belt was cinched tighter than its regular notch and his shoes were meticulously polished. Recent illness? Lots of downtime? Then
I saw his hands, saw the same kinds of tattoos that marked Sevastyan’s fingers.

At that, my niggling suspicion couldn’t be stifled. I’d studied all aspects of the land of my birth enough to know about the Russkaya Mafiya—and how they favored tattoos like that.

And really, what were the odds that a billionaire over there wasn’t tied to organized crime in some way? Not to mention that Sevastyan had kidnapped me, with the intention to smuggle me—passportless—into the country.

Had I scrimped and toiled and searched, only to connect myself to a mobster?

The pilot continued to vent. My thoughts continued to race.

Then silent, menacing Sevastyan took one ominous step forward; the pilot backed down, hands raised.

A single step had cowed that big pilot. Maybe Sevastyan could’ve taken those three jocks. Because he was dangerous.

And he wanted to drag me into his world.

Follow the chain of logic, Nat. If Kovalev was mafiya, then no good could come of this hasty midnight jaunt to the motherland.

Did I believe I was in some kind of danger? Maybe. Did I trust Sevastyan to protect me? Not more than I trusted myself.

At that moment, I decided to decline the “new life” that some strange man on the other side of the world envisioned for me. If Kovalev wanted to talk to me, he could pick up the phone!

And Sevastyan? I still felt that bewildering attraction to him, that weird sense of connection. I forced myself to ignore it.

With him occupied, I cracked open my door and slipped outside. I drew my robe tight, stealing closer to the cornfield. Naturally the one night I needed to escape the mob, the moon was a bright ball in the sky. At least the field would provide cover. This close to harvest, the stalks were tall and dense, the leaves lush.
Almost there. My breaths smoked. Almost—
“Natalie,” Sevastyan bellowed, “do not run!”
I took off in a sprint, charging into the rows.
Corn leaves slapped my face, raking my hair. My bare feet kicked up loose soil.

How much of a head start had I managed? Was he already crashing behind me?

“Stop this, Natalie!”

I gave a cry. My God, he was fast! I’d felt like prey before; now I literally was. This man was running me down, bent on capturing me! I dug deeper, sprinting even faster—

One second I was fleeing at full speed, the next I was flying. He’d lunged for me, snagging me around the waist. At the last instant, he twisted and took the impact on his back, crushing stalks beneath us.

“Damn you! Let go of me!” I struggled against him. Like fighting a steel vise.

Before I could blink, he’d flipped me to my back onto a mat of leaves.

“Get off me!” I battered his chest with the bottoms of my fists. Huge and furious above me, he wedged his hips between my legs, snagging my wrists in one big hand. “Do not ever run from
me again.” The moon shone down on him, highlighting the tight lines of his face. He seemed to be grappling with his fury, drawing on some inner iron control.

“Let me go!”

Over the familiar scents of rich soil, fragrant crops, and cold night, I detected his scent: aggression and raw masculinity. His shirt had gaped open, and I could see more of his skin, with the edge of another tattoo just visible past the material.

“Sevastyan, release me. Please.”

At that word, his grip on my wrists loosened a degree. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said in a gravelly voice. “Only to protect you.” Behind that inscrutable mask, so much was going on, but I could read so little.

Under the moonlight, his prominent cheekbones shaded his lean cheeks. His collar-length black hair gleamed like a raven’s feather, the ends tripping across his jawline. Wavering almost hypnotically.

“You must remain with me,” he grated, his gaze on my lips, his brows drawn tight. He looked like he was struggling not to kiss me.

Kiss? What was happening here? Confusion began to drown out my panic; I had nothing to draw on as a reference for my predicament—because I’d never been in a situation like this.

A sexual situation I didn’t control.

I was embroiled in dangerous circumstances with a mysterious stranger, but I felt no fear. I felt . . . anticipation. And I suspected the lack of control was fueling it.

Was danger turning me on? The tension between us seemed to shift; as smoothly as a machine switching gears, my confusion morphed into hazy heat. I hadn’t known I had this in me! Who am I??
When my gaze dropped, I spied the shadowy bulge in his pants. He wasn’t indifferent to me! He might’ve disdained me in the bar, but he couldn’t disguise his erection straining to be freed.

At the sight of it, arousal muddled my thoughts like a fog rolling into my mind. I’d heard the expression *stupid with lust*. I was getting there.

“Sevastyan?” That feeling of connection surged within me. Desire, need, and something more. “What do you want from me?”

No answer. All I could hear was our breaths.

In this position, he could unzip his fly and be inside me in a heartbeat’s time, covering me on the ground. Like animals in the dirt.

Him. Inside me. Here.

The mere thought made my body vibrate with a need so strong, I suspected I might allow him to do anything he wanted to me. My staggering level of arousal began to unnerve me more than this entire situation. I had no control with him, needed to get away!

I shook my head hard. “You let me go *now.*” I squirmed in his grip, digging my bare heels into the ground to propel myself back. Managed maybe a foot.

He looked at me like I was insane to defy him. So why wasn’t I terrified of him? No, I was *furious*—at him, at my out-of-control body. Another heel-digging lunge back.

With his free hand, he gripped my waist and yanked me back against him, forcing my thighs wider.

His gaze descended, his eyes going wide before narrowing intently.

I felt cold air between my legs, just as I saw that my robe had come open at the belted waist. Everything below was exposed.
My pale skin glowed in the moonlight, the trimmed thatch of red curls stark in comparison.

I was too stunned to react, pinned by his gaze. His lids grew heavy, his nostrils flaring. His broad chest seemed to struggle for breath. I was naked from the waist down but had no way to cover myself. I twisted my arms to free my wrists—until I saw that look of his.

Dark, hungry, molten. Dangerous. As before, I felt like his captured prey, his to enjoy.

My fury dwindled. When my body decided to soften beneath his, he gave a curt nod, as if I’d pleased him, and his free hand landed on my bare hip. Skin to skin. He groaned at the contact; I shivered from the electric heat of his rough palm. Hadn’t I imagined those hands kneading me everywhere?

Shaking, I watched as he straightened his ringed thumb from my hip until it reached my mons. He brushed the tip of his finger along the edge of my curls. It was so slow and unexpected, so tender, I couldn’t bite back a moan.

He touched me as if with . . . reverence.

I no longer saw signs of that iron control; instead he looked lost.

Like I probably looked in that moment.

His cock pulsed in his pants, drawing my attention. At the sight of that long, heavy length, my pussy clenched for it. I murmured, “Sevastyan?” as my hips rolled. “What are you doing to me?” He’d somehow spellbound me, making me feel empty and desperate.

For the second time tonight, I was heading toward an orgasm.

Still riveted to my sex, he grated words in Russian, something about how he couldn’t be expected to deny himself in the face of
this. How *no one* should expect him to.

I’d never been more confused in my life. “Are you . . . are you going to kiss me?”

With his accent thicker than I’d heard it, he rasped, “Would you want a man like me to take your mouth?” His thumb ring glinted when he gave another slow stroke.

Good question. I answered myself when words spilled from my lips: “Try it and see.”

“You think I’d stop with a kiss?”

“You assume I’d want you to?”

My reply seemed to wake him from a daze. As if burned, he jerked his hands away, his expression transforming from lost to disgusted. Again, he told me, “Cover yourself.” Now he was as furious as I’d been before, but I had no idea what I’d done.

I swatted the ends of my robe down as he levered himself to his feet.

When he seized my hand, yanking me up, sanity resumed—as if the Natalie I’d known all my life had decided to rejoin us.

What kind of madness had just possessed me? I clutched my robe with a shaking hand. I’d just let this man touch me, this *stranger*, and had been rolling my hips for more.

If he’d made a move to fuck me on the ground, I thought . . .

I thought I might have let him.

Fist clenched around my upper arm, he dragged me along. “If you run from me again, I will catch you. It’s what I do.” He locked his gaze on mine. “And then I’ll spread you facedown over my knees and whip your plump ass until you know better.”

I stumbled at that, but he hauled me back up. Striding on, he scowled down at my bouncing breasts.

Braless in silk. Nothing left to the imagination. “I won’t run if you don’t force my hand! I don’t want to go with you. I know
what you are. You’re maﬁya. Which means my father is too.” Deny it, deny it. Laugh in my face.

Sevastyan set his jaw, dragging me along faster.

No denial. My father, this man, that pilot were all maﬁya.

“You can’t force me to go to him—ow!” Sudden sharp pain dug into my bare feet; I’d stepped on a strand of briars.

Without even slowing his stride, Sevastyan swooped me up as if I were weightless.

I had no choice but to wrap my arms around his neck. “Just wait—I don’t want to get caught up in anything like that!” My mouth was inches from his throat, from his bobbing Adam’s apple. His heat seeped into me, and I could feel his heartbeat; though he was no longer running, it sped up sharply when I murmured, “Sevastyan, please.”

“You’re already caught up,” he said, the words like a sentencing.

We emerged from the field. Desperate, I whispered, “Pozhaluista, net.” Please, no.

“Natalya,” he rasped, “I won’t let you go. I can’t. Resign yourself.”

As we neared the plane, the pilot raised his brows at me. I could only imagine what he was thinking. I was in Sevastyan’s arms, my hair a tangle, my nipples protruding.

When the blond gave a smirking leer, Sevastyan grated in Russian, “You leer at his daughter? I should give him your eyes for that.”

The pilot swallowed; I gaped. With crystal clarity, I understood that Sevastyan was capable of such brutality.

Then he was carrying me up the steps. Shit, shit, shit! Oh, God, this was happening!

The pilot followed us up, pressing a button to close the outer
door. By the time he’d closeted himself in the cockpit, the door had sealed closed with a hiss.

Trapped.
As Sevastyan deposited me into one of several seats, I grappled for words, but stunned disbelief and a roiling anger rendered me mute. He’d forced me onto this plane against my will. Was kidnapping me.

I wanted to say, “You’re not going to get away with this,” or even “You’re going to pay for this.” But I suspected both would be lies.

“We leave directly,” he told me, his voice inflectionless. “Put on your seat belt.”

Despite how pissed I was, I wouldn’t argue with him this time. In my mind, private jet was just another way of saying baby plane. And hadn’t this crop-duster-esque runway seemed short? I knew sub-nothing about flying, but surely that wasn’t normal?

As I strapped myself in with shaking hands, I surveyed the luxurious interior. There were twelve seats, along with a plush sofa, a big-screen TV, a stocked media console, and an extended dining table. Polished wood accented all the amenities.

Nothing but the best for the mob.

Sevastyan didn’t sit. He peered out the windows, still vigilant.
I wondered what he would look like relaxed. “I’m in immediate danger, aren’t I?”

Gazing out into the night, he gave me an unconcerned shrug. As good as a yes. Before I could ask more, the engines grew louder. I clenched the armrests of my seat, nails sinking into the buttery soft leather. When we started easing forward, I found myself telling Sevastyan, “I’ve never flown before.”

Our speed increased so rapidly, I was thrown back into the seat. The jet thundered down the runway. Outside the window, the cornfield zoomed by. Even Sevastyan took a seat on the sofa across from me.

“I’ve been on a train.”

He spread an arm over the back of the sofa. “It’s just like that.”

“Was that a joke?”

Face grim, he said, “Unlikely, pet.”

“You really need to stop calling me th—”

The nose of the plane was rising! I squeezed my eyes shut. But taking off was surprisingly smooth. When the pressure eased and I realized we were in the air, I cracked open my eyes and popped my ears. Gradually, I released my death grip.

Several things competed for my attention. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to watch the fading lights of Lincoln, the full moon glimmering off the right-side wing, or Sevastyan trying to relax.

My mysterious companion won out. He stretched his long legs in front of him, then rolled his head on his neck. At some point, he’d refastened the buttons of his shirt. Clearly, whatever temporary insanity had occurred in the field had passed.

When we leveled off, the lights of the cabin dimmed, reminding me that I was sequestered with a larger-than-life type of man—one who had pinned me to the ground and felt me up
only minutes ago.

Just as I opened my mouth to ask him what that was all about, he said, “As promised, I’ll answer your questions. But you need to wash yourself first.”

I followed his pointed gaze with my fingers, found a leaf in my hair. I peered down at my dirty legs and bare feet. I didn’t embarrass easily, but now my cheeks flushed with heat.

“There are showers in both of the suites.”

Chin raised, I unfastened my seat belt, rose with an indifferent air, then started toward the back. Over my shoulder, I said, “When I return, prepare for an interrogation.”

In a dry tone, he replied, “I’m not going anywhere, Natalie.”

Fifteen minutes later, I emerged into the main cabin—clean, sober, and dressed in one of Sevastyan’s button-down shirts.

After a shower in a large marble enclosure stocked with high-end toiletries, I’d padded back to the suite’s bed and stared down at my abused robe. The back had looked like modern art, in a pallet of greens, yellows, and blacks. And it had reeked of corn, a treacly sweet smell. No way I could wear it again.

I’d surveyed the suite, lighting on an expensive piece of luggage. Sevastyan’s. He’d helped himself to kidnapping me, so I’d felt justified borrowing a shirt. Slipping on the starched button-down, I’d shivered, enveloped by his crisp scent, covered from my neck to almost my knees.

With nothing between my skin and the material, I hadn’t even been surprised when arousal swept over me again; in the shower my skin had been hypersensitive.

Now Sevastyan raked his gaze over me, head to toe, giving me
an *are-you-fucking-kidding-me?* look.

I frowned in turn. Everything was covered. “I’m just borrowing it until I get my promised new clothes, okay?” When I sat at the opposite end of the sofa, he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Tension headache?”

Without looking at me, he answered, “You could say that.”

“I can’t imagine the pressure you must be feeling,” I said in all truthfulness. “Do you do this kidnapping stuff a lot?”

Scowl from the Russian.

“It’s a fair question, considering that you and my father are involved in organized crime.”

Without missing a beat, he asked, “Why do you persist in thinking that?”

“Your tattoos. The pilot’s. I’ve researched your country enough to know about the Russkaya Mafiya and their love of ink. Plus, that would be the absolute worst outcome to my years-long quest.” I tapped my chin, musing, “And yet totally in keeping with my fortunes over the last few weeks—”

“A worse outcome than never knowing Kovalev?” Sevastyan asked, irritation scoring his tone. “You speak about things you don’t yet understand, little girl. But you will. . . .”
“Things I don’t understand? Like crime?”

Stony gaze.

“Oh, God, he is mafiya.” I grew queasy at the idea. Why had I ever hired that investigator? My biological father was a thug. “What have you gotten me into?”

“You sought him,” Sevastyan repeated.

“You’re not really a bodyguard, are you? You’re probably his, what? His professional hit man? His enforcer?” I gave a nervous laugh. “That’s why you have those scars on your knuckles—from beating people senseless, right? And exactly what business is Kovalev ‘caught up’ in?” My hysteria building, I said, “A turf war against a rival gang?” Yes, it took a lot to ruffle me, but once I lost my cool, I tended to go big.

Sevastyan didn’t answer, so . . . ding, ding, ding. A turf war. And I was on my way there.

He finally said, “Are you done?”

“Tell—me.”

“Your father is part of the Bratva, the brotherhood. It’s like a criminal aristocracy. He’s vor v zakone, the head of our organiza-
tion, answering to no one.”

The blatant pride in Sevastyan’s tone made my queasiness increase. “So I’m a freaking mafiya princess, then? That’s the real reason I’m in danger, isn’t it?”

“Your father is embattled. Adversaries would love to see him fall. And there is another vor who might hurt you in order to hurt Kovalev. Or use you to coerce him.”

“Again, that sounds like a chronic problem.”

Sevastyan studied my face, as if debating how much to tell me. “After I left the bar, I found out that two very dangerous men flew from Moscow hours ago, heading to America—sent by Kovalev’s bitterest enemy. There’s a good chance they were coming here.”

Fuck. This little mafiya princess was in trouble. “You’re taking me straight to the source of the conflict! Turn this jet around, and let me disappear! I could go out west, get lost.”

He glanced over at me, must’ve sensed I was about to freak. “I was sent here to keep you safe. If you do as I say, then you’ll have nothing to fear. And there was another reason we felt it imperative that you leave tonight. When you return to Russia, those men will follow you—instead of questioning your loved ones.”

“They would hurt Mom? Jess?” Alarm for them razored through me.

“Without hesitation. Unless we signal that you’ve left Lincoln—which we will do in Moscow.”

“I have to warn them! Just in case.” Would Sevastyan let me call?

“There’s a phone in the cabinet beside you.”

“How much can I tell them?”

“That depends on how much you trust them not to tell others. You have five minutes.”
Remembering the last time he'd said that, I didn’t waste time arguing. With the headset clutched in my damp palm, I rang my mom. What could I tell her? Things were already tense between us.

Those last few years with Dad’s illness had been tough on her, on us both, and after his death, we’d drifted apart. Then, this past summer, she’d remarried, moving upstate with her new guy. But I was happy for her. She and her hubby had an RV. Apparently, RVing was a lifestyle choice. They went to “roundups” with other RVers.

I got her answering machine. Luckily, she was on the road for a week. I left a message, trying to sound casual. “Hi, Mom, just calling to check in. Have fun at the . . . roundup,” I said, feeling like a rube in front of Sevastyan. “Love you.”

Jess answered on the fourth ring, snapping with impatience: “Having my box eaten right now; this better be good—”

“Jess! I’ve only got a couple of minutes to talk.”

“Nat, is that you?”

“Yeah, and I need you to listen to me. You can’t go home tonight.”

“Why can’t I go back to the Bunghole . . .”? Jess trailed off, then gasped. “Oh, my God! Did you hook up with that DUDE FROM THE BAR? The unicorn!”

Sevastyan quirked a brow. Of course he’d heard.

“In a manner of speaking.” Yes, I was presently wearing nothing but his shirt—with my body still thrumming from his touch—but not by choice!

Making her voice syrupy, Jess crooned, “Awww, our little Nat’s gonna lose her skin tag tonight.”

My eyes went wide, darting to Sevastyan. “Shut it, Jess! Look, here’s the deal—that guy was sent here to take me to Russia be-
cause my biological father is some kind of mafiya criminal-lord type.”

“Huh.” Completely unfazed, she said, “Actually, that explains a lot about you.” Then, to her boy toy, she said, “I don’t remember telling you to stop.”

“Will you pay attention? I’m on a jet heading to Moscow—”

“Get the fuck out!”

“—and some rival goons might go by the house. Can you stay away until after your trip?”

“You mean I’ll be forced to buy all new clothes and luggage for Greece? My parents will believe this excuse as much as all my others.” Growing serious, she said, “Are you safe?”

I gazed at Sevastyan’s face, searching. “If I don’t call you in a week . . .” I trailed off. Then what? Notify the embassy? What hope would they have against the Red Mafiya? “I will call you in a week.”

“Just be careful, babe,” Jess said. “Oh, and tell the unicorn that if anything happens to you, I will skull-fuck him, ’kay? How do you say ‘desecrate his motherfucking corpse’ in Russki?”

Sevastyan tapped his watch.

“Gotta go, message received—and stay safe yourself.” Hanging up, I turned to him. “It’s morning in Russia. Why don’t you give me your boss’s number, so I can explain some things to him?”

Customer service in your organization requires a complete overhaul.

“Share some of my thoughts.”

“Kovalev’s in a congress.” At my nonplussed look, Sevastyan explained, “It’s like a summit meeting for vory.”

“Don’t you think my going to Russia will just magnify this problem?”

“We have men there, safeguards in place. Your father’s compound is a fortress.”
A mafiya compound? I could just see it: some gray and dingy Soviet-era monolith. Inside, the décor would be a riot of gaudy knickknacks, selected on the basis not of taste, but of price. And Kovalev . . . I pictured a hulking brute in a tracksuit, wearing so many thick gold chains that his neck looked like a ring toss. He probably kept white tigers and had a diamond-encrusted toilet.

Ugh. I frowned at Sevastyan. “Forcing me back there wasn’t always the plan?”

He shook his head.

“So if those bad guys hadn’t headed to the States, would you have kept spying on me from afar?”

“I would have remained in place—protecting you—until your father could travel here to meet you.”

“If you were my sole bodyguard, when did you sleep?”

“While you were in class or at work. When I knew you’d be around others for a while.” That meant he’d gotten even fewer hours than I had. He cocked his head. “I can sleep when I’m dead, no?”

Exactly what I’d thought. “This is a lot for Kovalev to put on your shoulders.” I couldn’t imagine a task like that—having another person’s life in my hands.

“I would do anything he asked me.”

“Is devotion like that common in your . . . organization?”

“He’s been a father to me since I was young. I owe him my life,” Sevastyan said in a tone that told me he would not be unpacking that comment.

“Then in a way, you’re like my much, much older brother.”

Another scowl from the Russian. He didn’t like that remark at all. “I’m only seven or so years older than you are.”

I waved that information away. “And my mother . . . ?”

“I must let Kovalev explain that. It’s not my story to tell.”
“At least tell me if she’s alive.”
I might’ve seen a flicker of pity in Sevastyan’s eyes. I assumed the worst, grief hitting me like a swift stab to my heart. All these years of wondering . . . Now it seemed that I’d never meet her, never speak to her.

Stemming tears, I asked, “Do I have any siblings?”
“None.”

“Grandparents?” Mom and Dad had been older when they’d adopted me, and my grandparents had passed away over my childhood.

He shook his head. “Only your father and a distant cousin you’ll meet.” He rose, then crossed to a marble counter in the middle of the sitting area. With the push of a button, a panel retracted to reveal a stocked wet bar with a full range of bar and stemware. He poured two drinks into cut-crystal glasses. A vodka rocks for himself—and a chilled Sprite for me?

“No warm milk?” I accepted the glass and drank, surly because it tasted so good.

Returning to his seat, he ran a finger around the edge of his glass, but he hadn’t taken a sip. Just as his drink at the bar had been untouched. “I don’t have your preferred tequila.”

“Preferred? I drink whatever folks buy me. I’ve been on a budget.”

Had my comment amused him? “The last budget you’ll ever have, I assure you.”

Because he expected me to spend the family blood money. Reminded of my situation, I said, “I’m having a hard time believing two strange men would really hurt me.”

“They target relatives. When Kovalev started out in the Bratva, their code prohibited members from having a family, from having anything they cared about other than the brotherhood—because
family is a weakness that enemies can use against you.”

As I tried to imagine such a brutal world, Sevastyan continued, “That’s why Kovalev sent your mother away. He didn’t know she was pregnant. Not until you started this search.”

“You said my DNA matched his. But why would his have been available?”

“There were others before you, claiming to be fathered by him. Initially, I came to Nebraska to discover if this was some type of scam.” Gazing into his glass, Sevastyan said, “Kovalev never wanted it to be true before you.”

“Why not?”

Sevastyan faced me again. “The others were deceitful gold diggers, cold-blooded and seemingly committed to unemployment. You held down three jobs, all while finishing your master’s degree with honors. You even learned to speak Russian. You wanted to find him, but you didn’t need to. At least, not financially.” Had Sevastyan sounded . . . admireing?

The thought warmed me. Until I remembered that my DNA tied me to a mobster. “There could have been a mistake in the match. A clerical error or something.”

Sevastyan raised his glass to his lips, only to lower it without taking a drink. “Your resemblance to his mother is uncanny.”

I looked like my grandmother. I found myself softening, but not enough to soothe my misgivings. “So what does my father do? In a criminal sense. Run girls? Guns and drugs?”

Sevastyan gave me a look as if my question was the height of ridiculousness. “The bulk of his business is related to real estate and construction. But he also mediates disputes between gangs, and he sells protection to business owners. He does a brisk trade blackmailing politicians. No girls, no guns, no drugs. That’s part of why we’re having this conflict—because he doesn’t want that
in his territory.

“Because it would bring down his real estate values?”

Sevastyan looked like he was grappling for patience with me. “Because it would bring down the quality of life for the people he protects.”

That was surprising. “Okay, so maybe he’s not a diabolical, moustache-twirling villain. But I still don’t want to get mixed up in this. I just want to finish my doctorate, to have a career.”

With my history degree. Though I didn’t necessarily want to be a professor or writer. Had I continued with my PhD because it’d been the path of least resistance?

“Do you think your father wanted to uproot you from your life? Blame Zironoff for this. If not for him, you’d be asleep in your bed right now.”

“My investigator? What did he do?”

Again Sevastyan’s drink almost made it to his mouth, but he set it down. “The greedy little prick demanded money from Kovalev to keep secret his discovery. But we found out he’d already told our enemies about your existence, offering your whereabouts for a price. He willfully put you at risk.”

I swallowed. “Did you hurt Zironoff?”

Eyes gone cold, Sevastyan said, “He took your trust—and your hard-earned money—then used your blood to blackmail a vor. He jeopardized the life that I’ve sworn to protect. Tell me, Natalie, should he not have been punished for the damage he’d done—and prevented from doing more?”

I could read the writing on the wall. Sevastyan had ganked Zironoff. A true mob enforcer. A professional killer.

Leveling his gaze at me, he said, “Understand me, girl, I will eliminate any threat to you, pitilessly.”

I wondered how many other men Sevastyan had killed. I
wondered why I still couldn’t manage to be afraid of this man. Instead, I found myself feeling . . . protected.

“Zironoff set you up to be murdered, but still you won’t understand.” He exhaled a weary breath. “I can’t wait to hear your moral American outrage.”

I tried to drum some up. But Zironoff had gone to a group of lethal thugs, planning to profit off my dream of finding my relatives. He’d leaked the confidential information I’d entrusted to him, knowing I might be killed.


Sevastyan’s gaze flickered over my face. Observant, watchful. Then one corner of his sexy lips curled.

My heart thudded at his half smile. If he ever truly smiled, I’d probably have a coronary. Quelling the urge to fan myself, I asked, “So, do you have a mob name? Like Alex the Butcher or Al the Shark or something?”

“I’m from Siberia; they call me the Siberian. End of story.”

“Simple yet elegant, goes with everything. Were you born into the ‘the life’ or did you steer your major?”

Flinty gaze.

“Okay, so what’s Kovalev’s mob name?”

“Older vor call him the Clockmaker.”

“Because he cleans clocks? With his fists?”

“Your father has a wry sense of humor as well. You have much in common with him.”

“Really?” I tilted my head. “You’ve learned a lot about me, huh?”

“I know everything about you, academically, financially, socially. I know that you had stability growing up and a caring couple to raise you, which relieved Kovalev’s mind greatly. I know
that you’re driven and clever. Probably too much for your own good.”

I recalled that feeling I’d had of being watched earlier tonight. “You followed me home from the bar.” Mere hours ago.

“I did.”

“Have you been in my house before tonight?” Had he found the collection of vibrators under my bed, or noted that half of my Internet bookmarks were for porn?

“Of course. I was thorough.” His demeanor was so matter-of-fact, even as he sat here admitting that he’d violated my privacy on the regular.

My entire life had been laid bare to this man. Between gritted teeth, I said, “Any highlights you discovered that you’d like to share?”

“Don’t worry—not every detail will make it back to Kovalev.” Smirk. “Such as the arsenal you keep under your mattress.”

Arsenal? Dying here. “Or what I caught you doing to yourself in your bath.”

Now that I wasn’t in fear for my life, embarrassment scalded me. Sevastyan had caught me diddling the da, spelunking, dialing the pink telephone. “Why did you open the door to my bathroom in the first place?”

“I heard a sound.” He raised an eyebrow. “A whimper. I thought the worst.”

“You seem to have a talent for keeping me at a disadvantage. Maybe when we get to Moscow, I can investigate your apartment? Look under your bed? How about I watch while you masturbate?”

At that, tension shot through him as if he’d been gut-punched. “Guard your tongue, pet.” His fingers were wrapped so tightly around his glass, I thought the crystal would shatter.

“Or you’ll do what? Throw me down in a cornfield and feel
me up?”

He clenched his jaw, as if battling for control of himself. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

Stop arguing with him, Nat. Go—to—bed. Was I so intrigued/ aroused by this guy that I’d do anything with him, even fight? “If you hadn’t run—” “Oh, don’t you dare put that back on me!” “A half-naked redhead was spread beneath me, rolling her hips in welcome. I don’t have ice in my veins.”

I arched a brow. “Don’t you?” “Not in that area of my life,” he amended. “Even though you’re far from my type, I was affected.” He used his right forefinger to twist the thumb ring on that same hand. I’d noticed he’d done that before when he’d seemed uncomfortable. A tell? That could come in handy. “Any man would’ve been, so don’t read more into it than that.”

“Far from your type.” How could that comment wound me? “You’re not exactly mine either, Siberian.” Probably not the best idea to taunt the assassin. I rose. “You seem determined to humiliate me and pick a fight with me. I’m not interested in either.” I turned away and marched down the aisle. “Wake me up when we get there.”

He called after me, “The only thing I told Kovalev about your personal life is that you have no current lover to leave behind. I won’t mention how eager you were to remedy that situation tonight.”

I stiffened, turning at the door of one of the suites. “Why were you so angry at the bar?”

He finally drank that vodka down, which gave me chills for some reason. “I didn’t like seeing the daughter of a great man throwing herself at me, trolling for trouble.”
“Throwing myself? Are you insane? I introduced myself and offered to buy you a drink.” My ire kept mounting. “And I really hope you’re not going to try to slut-shame me—because I will go off like a bottle rocket!” It was times like this when my virginity embarrassed me.

He stood, then stalked up to me. With his every step closer, my breaths shallowed. What would he do? I had no idea—excitement warred with uneasiness.

He towered over me, toe-to-toe, and I craned my head up to meet his heavy-lidded gaze. Whenever he was angry, his eyes appeared hard and glinting, like cold amber. Otherwise, they were molten gold, like now. . . .

“Of all the men in the bar, you picked me for a reason, little girl.” His voice had gotten huskier, his accent rougher; I responded to it as if he’d touched me. “And it wasn’t to talk about classes.”

Inner shake. “I picked you because you were a mystery. I can read men with ease, but not you. That made me curious.”

He rested his hand on the wall above my head, surrounding me with his heat. “When a woman singles me out”—he leaned down to murmur at my ear—“it’s because she wants to get fucked. She looks at the scars and tattoos and knows she’ll get fucked hard.”

I gasped, melting for him.

“Is that what you wanted of me, Natalya?” His warm breaths traced over my ear, hardening my nipples even more. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, squeezing my thighs together.

“Th-that’s not why I approached you.” That might have been why I’d approached him.

“Little liar. You think I can’t tell when a woman wants me buried deep inside her?” He eased back to study my face. “And
when you didn’t get what you wanted, you settled for a nice . . . hot . . . bath.”

I swallowed, beginning to pant.

Voice hoarse, he said, “Were you thinking about me when you touched yourself?”

Between breaths, I said, “I’m not telling you that.”

“You just did, pet.” He straightened, as if a trance had been broken between us. With a vile curse, he turned from me. “Just go to bed.”

I watched his broad back as he strode away to pour another vodka. With a curse of my own, I slammed the cabin door behind me.

That man was going to drive me insane before we ever reached the motherland!

In a huff, I yanked down the cover and crawled into the sumptuous bed. Then lay there staring at the ceiling, feeling out of sorts, hating that I was forced to wear that man’s clothing.

Hating that it turned me on.

Why him? Why was I so strong in every other aspect of my life and so weak with him? After so many years of holding out for Mr. Right, I would have given my virginity to Sevastyan in the dirt.

In high school, I’d never imagined I would be a twenty-four-year-old virgin, because I’d been so curious about the deed. And, damn, I’d been game.

But the drunken boys I’d fooled around with had been ham-handed and slavering, never inspiring me to go further. Sex, it had seemed, wasn’t for me. At least, not with guys like the ones I’d known.

The problem with growing up in a small town and going to a tiny school? There hadn’t been a big selection of males to choose
When I got to college, I’d felt like I’d won the lottery—star-struck by the assortment of men. My curiosity hadn’t lessened, and I’d been sure I’d lose my virginity before homecoming.

In preparation, I’d learned all about sex, through voracious reading, rooming with Jess, and my own breathless research. Oh, and my burgeoning interest in high-quality lady porn.

I’d hooked up with guy after guy, but inevitably each one would do something to prevent me from sealing the deal.

The one who’d fingered me like he was digging to China.

The one who’d prematurely ejaculated into the condom he’d been rolling on, then been too embarrassed to ever call me again.

The one who’d wanted me on top, dominating him, when I was pretty sure my tastes ran in the exact opposite direction. (Confirmed by my recent encounter in the cornfield?)

Was it too much to ask for an attractive, dominant guy with sexual skill, one who wasn’t a minute-to-win-it two-pump chump?

When I hit twenty, I’d thought, I’ve waited this long . . . I’d figured I might as well hold out until I experienced blazing, blinding lust for a man who met all my qualifications. But no man had.

Until tonight.

Sevastyan ticked all my boxes—yet he’d sneered that I wasn’t his type.

Okay, was it too much to ask for a guy who met my qualifications, who liked me—and who wasn’t an asshole?

Sighing, I gazed out one of the windows, saw the moon and the stars closer to me than they’d ever been. Because I was on a plane, heading toward a great big unknown. To my “new life.”

Damn it, I needed to get my mind off Sevastyan and think about what tomorrow might bring. Just hours ago, I’d despaired
of ever finding my biological parents. Now I was on my way to meet my father. Would he like me? Would I like him—despite his occupation?

Maybe I should look at this trip to Russia as a mini sabbatical from my life, a short time-out from my larger game. Like Jess’s vacation. Tomorrow I could call to arrange for incompletes in my classes and get a pal to cover my teaching. The server jobs had been so grueling and shitty that I wouldn’t waste a long-distance call on either.

Yes, everyone needed a break now and then.

The drone of the engines began to lull me, and the worst of my frustration started to fade. I felt like I was floating on the soft mattress, between silken sheets as light as air. Though I’d thought I was too keyed-up to sleep, I soon passed out.

And dreamed of Sevastyan.

In a sizzling reverie, he lifted me from my bath, cradling my naked, soaking body to carry me to bed. There, he followed every drop of water with his mouth before settling between my thighs. . . .

“Natalya,” he groaned right at my flesh—all hot breath and slicked tongue. “Natalya.” He raised his face, licked his sexy lips, and asked, “Are you dreaming of me?”

Huh? Dreaming? I opened my eyes—and found the Siberian staring down at me.
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