



# A Love so Dark and Twisted (The Dark Love #1)

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** Charlotte Loughy is about to graduate college and is still plagued by the disappearance of her childhood best friend. The darkness left by his absence lights a fire in Charlie. Four years of college, armed with a degree in criminal justice and journalism, and she's bound and determined to make a difference in the most crime laden cities in the United States: Chicago. Not only does Charlie want to help put a stop to the rampant war on drugs and sex trafficking, but she's determined to figure out what happened to her friend.

Yuri Volkov and his family had to abandon their suburban life in the middle of the night right before his fourteenth birthday. Yuri's father wouldn't let him tell Charlotte they were leaving or where they were going. Yuri listened, even at a young age he knew it was the only way to keep her safe. He's the eldest son of Ilya, leader of the Russian Mafia, and it's not easy. Yuri is afraid for his life and the lives of his mother, father, and two younger brothers and best friend. Yuri will do anything to protect Charlie even if that means he never sees her again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 43

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

“Let’s race our bikes down Eighth!” I goad, “I know you won’t beat me this time!” Laughing we head for the infamous straightaway.

Once we arrive, he counts us down like we are in a real drag race. “Three... Two... One... GO!”

I pump the pedals as hard as I can, but he gets out ahead of me in no time and I’m struggling to catch up. I’m about to turn thirteen, but I haven’t grown an inch since the sixth grade so beating him is going to be a chore. He’s fourteen and hit a growth spurt at the start of summer so he’s now a good six inches taller than me. My short, stubby legs are putting forth at least twice the effort as his long, lean ones to keep up. My best friend laughs as he constantly looks back to make sure I’m still there, mischief and excitement twinkling in his dark eyes.

“You know Charlie, you could just give up and admit that I am always going to be faster!” He yells back at me, but there is no way I’m letting him beat me again. As sweat runs down my now sunburned forehead, I squint my eyes in concentration and pump my legs harder.

“I will beat you Yuri, just you wait!” I yell between breaths. I hear him laughing, and I love the feeling of my curls flying about in the wind. I pump my legs harder, my muscles burning as I push them to their limit.

Then, suddenly, sirens start blaring in the distance. I’m completely focused on the challenge ahead, but Yuri’s head pops up in concern and confusion. Then he starts to slow down, and that’s when I see my opening and shoot past him. I am going so fast, but it’s too late when I notice the grass in the road as I race forward.

Yuri looks up and fear fills his voice as he yells, “Charlie, watch out!”

I slide, losing control of my bike, and slamming into the hard pavement. I go down sideways, not able to put my hands out in time to break my fall and tap my head on the ground. My entire body hurts, so I don’t move. My eyes begin to tear up and I see stars. I groan in pain as Yuri rushes to my side

“Malyshka,” little one, he pants speaking in Russian, which seems to happen a lot when he is concerned or angry. He cradles my head in his lap, wiping my copper hair gently from my forehead, “Charlie, are you alright? You scared me.”

I look up into his face and just stare at my best friend. I feel the sting of tears pricking the corner of my eyes threatening to fall, but I force them back not wanting to be weak in front of him.

“Don’t cry,” he says, “I hate it when you cry.”

“I’m okay, but my head really hurts,” I say knowing the pain must be written all over my face. I look up at the sun in an attempt to keep the tears at bay. He just looks at me with concern and checks me over, gently holding my head in his lap.

“We should get you home, it’s getting late anyway and the street lights will be on soon. You don’t want to get grounded again like last time,” he says standing, grabbing my bike, and leaving his on the side of the road.

After propping my bike up, he grabs each of my hands in his and lifts me with ease, “I’ll walk you home and come back to get my bike later.”

All I can do is nod my head, which still makes me feel a little dizzy, as he starts walking me and my bike back home.

He always does a good job of making me laugh and smile when things are hard or scary, and this time is no different. The entire walk back he distracts me from the pain and dizziness with silly stories and ridiculous dad jokes.

When we get to my house, he walks me inside and calls out to my parents. He explains what happened and of course, they begin to fuss over me. I look over at him and roll my eyes because you would think by the age of nearly thirteen they would be used to the bumps and bruises I always come home with, but the goose egg on the side of my head is what's causing the most concern.

"I'm fine. Promise! Stop it," I say, swatting their hands out of my face.

"I'm going to head home," I hear Yuri say, "Call my house later and let me know how you're feeling."

I rush over and hug Yuri. "I will see you tomorrow. We can finish that race!" I giggle as I talk into his chest while he holds me tight.

"You bet! Just don't fall and cry because I beat you, again," he laughs and pulls away. Walking out the door he waves to my parents and says, "Goodnight Mr. and Mrs. Loughy. See you tomorrow, Charlie!"

I woke up the next morning, ate breakfast, and rode my bike to my best friend's house. I knocked on the door and waited. I stood on the porch for twenty minutes, but no one was answering the door. Curious, I went to the side of the house to peek in the living room window, but the house was empty. The furniture was still there, but all signs of Yuri and his family were gone.

I decided to walk around to the side of the house where the garage meets the kitchen. I peaked in the door and did something I am not very proud of. I grabbed a rock from the stone walkway and broke in. Did I tell the cops? No. Did it ruin their

investigation? I have no clue. But I needed to get inside that house.

After breaking a small window, I unlocked the door and let myself in. The house was bare. I went straight for Yuri's bedroom. Nothing. Not even the sheets on his bed were left behind! I ran to the kitchen, frantic, and was shocked to find no food in the refrigerator. I even double checked the garage. Both cars were gone. I couldn't find a note or clue left from Yuri. He would have left me something! I know it. He wouldn't leave without telling me where he was going. I had no clue if he was safe. I was panicking, so I ran all over that house looking for something, anything to tell me what the heck I just walked into.

When the police showed up to the house, I was surprised. Their neighbor must have called. I told them what I knew - which was nothing - and asked them as many questions my twelve-year-old brain could think of. I think they could tell I was worried for my friend, but they never told me anything. No one ever told me anything. I had no idea if he was alive or dead.

All I know is that Yuri and his family disappeared that night and I never saw him again...

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

CHARLIE

I wake up in a pool of sweat thanks to that last day's memory living rent free in my brain. Apparently, my subconscious doesn't want me to forget that Yuri won't be here to see me graduate, again. Classes ended a week ago and I passed all my finals, so now I finally get to walk across that stage and fulfill my dream of becoming an investigative journalist.

I've been working at the campus library to help pay for college. I worked late last night and then someone called in sick today. I guess there was no one else to cover, so at noon, I walked my overly-tired, half-dead self back to the library. I didn't get back to my dorm until five p.m. I had a quick snack and then decided to take a nap before going to graduation practice.

Rubbing my eyes, I think about graduation. It's exciting, but it's also just another important moment that he won't get to be here with me for. I looked him up last night on social media and the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, the works, hoping I would see his face. I just want to know that he is safe and alive somewhere.

Since starting my job at the library, I have also been searching public records. No such luck, just like every other time I have searched for him. I just wish he was here! I wish he could see everything I have been able to accomplish. Knowing we would have accomplished so much together is what hurts the most; he's not here and finding him is just a pipe dream at this point.

I know my parents are acting overly excited in an effort to keep me from

remembering his absence, but I don't think anything will make me forget him.

After almost breaking my jaw with a yawn, I get out of bed to get ready for the very important , very useless, commencement practice.

I was lucky enough to get a single room during my last semester. It has been super helpful as a journalism major; late-night papers and roommates who like to party don't mix. Well, I guess it's me and roommates that don't mix.

Ever since losing Yuri, it has been hard for me to build deep, close friendships. I keep it surface level; it's safer for me and anyone involved that way. My therapist says it's a coping mechanism and it works for me. Plus, right now I don't really feel like unpacking ten years worth of abandonment issues just so I can have another bestie . I had, no I have a best friend, out in the world somewhere.

I check my phone to see what time it is and curse. I'm already late thanks to my long nap and my wandering mind. Coffee is a must if I'm going to stay awake during this stupid practice, normally I would go for a nice black earl grey with lemon and honey, but being this tired calls for the big guns.

As soon as I leave my dorm building, I make my way to the café around the corner before picking up Dominic. I buy two of the largest coffees on their menu and walk toward Dom's dorm, texting him so he knows I'm on my way.

Charlotte: "Hey Dom! Meet me out front in 5. We're going to be late!"

I really don't understand why we need to practice walking in a straight line for tomorrow's official commencement ceremony. It's not like we haven't all attended a graduation ceremony before. That may be my sleep deprived brain speaking, but it's true. They're lining us up alphabetically by last name and telling us when to show up and when we can leave. I mean we are college grads. If we can't get this together, we

shouldn't have a college degree.

Walking through campus with the caffeine finally kicking in, I round the corner and see Dominic's building just as he is walking down the steps. I meet up with him and hand him one of the coffees.

"Are you excited to finally learn how to walk?" I joke as I shoulder bump him. Dominic and I met in my freshman year. He was an RA on the second floor of my dorm. We found out we had a lot of classes together, and the rest is history. He puts up with my horrible humor and I put up with his high maintenance personality. For whatever reason it works, and he doesn't push for anything more than I can give him which is an added bonus. He laughs deeply and wraps an arm around me.

"Oh, you're one to talk, C.C.!" He exclaims, going to ruffle my hair, but I'm faster and duck before he has a chance to mess up my already frizzy curls. We laugh as we walk and talk about what we will be doing after graduation. He is off to travel Europe for the summer, the lucky jerk, while I move into my very lonely, one-bedroom apartment downtown.

"I still can't believe you are going to visit your family in Italy this summer. I am so jealous!" I sigh. I would love to have the money to travel and see the world, but priorities.

"It's just so I can learn some things about the family business. I will be in Chicago working just like you before you know it."

I roll my eyes knowing full well there is no way he will have time to see me, let alone actually hang out with me once he moves. He has a great job lined up with his family's business. He'll be going to fancy society parties and hanging out with fancy people while I'm writing boring articles about fashion week or the latest diet trend and watching old movies to pass the time.



Stop being so jealous Charlotte. You're going to be a world-renowned journalist, eventually. I chastise myself for my intrusive thoughts as Dominic and I continue our walk to commencement rehearsal.

"It should be against the law to have to endure a two-hour-long, stuffy graduation practice past the age of eighteen." I joke as we walk through the North Entrance of the Lincoln Arena and are assaulted by the humidity and cacophony of voices.

We've arrived right on time and the organizer is corralling everyone to their seats. I quickly put my hair in a messy bun to stave off the heat as she drones on and on about which row starts, how to walk, and when to stop to take a picture. I cannot focus on anything she is saying because my mind keeps circling back to Yuri. Where is he? I know I'm obsessed, but I cannot stop thinking about what happened. It's been years but people don't just disappear from one night to the next. We might have been young, but he would have said goodbye to me before he left. He would have warned me. He wouldn't have abandoned me. But he did, and I still don't know why.

I'm thrust back into the present when a random girl next to me nudges my arm. It's our row's turn to walk up and practice. I go through the motions for the rest of the practice, my mind in a haze.

Two hours later, two hours that neither of us will ever get back, Dominic and I both head to our dorms. His are closer to the Lincoln Arena than mine, but it's only a twenty-minute walk. I don't know why they had to schedule practice so late in the day. It's now well past dusk.

Dominic and I part ways and he gives me a wave, "See you later C.C.! Remember not to trip tomorrow!" He teases.

"Thanks for that douchebag! See you later!" Laughing, I head back to my dorm room and put my earbuds in to distract my overactive imagination.

After walking about a block, I swear I feel someone watching me, so I do a quick scan but no one is there. I honestly feel crazy sometimes.

Calm down Charlie. No one is following you. No one is watching you.

I take a deep breath and continue my walk. I told my therapist about my paranoia, but she just says I'm projecting ... whatever that means. One hour of talking to a random woman, one-hundred and twenty dollars later, and I still felt like I am losing my mind most days.

Listening to music and writing in my journal have always helped me make it through the day, so it made sense to go into journalism for school. What other job can I do something I enjoy to keep my brain focused on more than just my missing friend? Journalism + Charlotte. It's a match made in heaven.

I was lucky enough to land a paid internship at the Chicago Times right out of school. I'll be writing puff pieces and helping a few lead reporters with their research, but it's something at least. The fact that I get to work at a newspaper - let alone the Times - right after graduation is unheard of! I plan to take any opportunity I can to prove myself as a writer. I want to move up so I can write about what is important to me.

I had this amazing English teacher in high school who told me about a reporter who traveled all over the world investigating and writing stories about missing women and kids. The reporter then ended up helping the police find many of the people who had been kidnapped and sold. As soon as I heard that, I knew that that was what I wanted to do. No one should have to spend their entire life wondering what happened to someone they love. I would know.

Yuri disappeared when I was twelve and just about to celebrate my thirteenth birthday. He was... is... he is one year older than me, but he didn't let that come between us being friends. Some of his guy friends, as we got a little older, would

make fun of him for hanging out with me, but he put them in their place right quick. His family was very nice to me every time I went to his house. He would have to translate for me because his dad and mom were from Russia and mostly spoke Russian, but he and his brothers were born in the US.

They moved to the suburbs when I was in kindergarten and we quickly became inseparable. Every time I spent time at his house, his mom would give me a big hug the moment I arrived. The last time I saw Yuri's mom was the morning of our bike race.

"Have fun Solnyshko!" She said as we sprinted out the front door.

I always loved that she called me sunshine! They treated me like a daughter. There is no way they would just leave without telling me.

To this day, I have no clue what happened to him or his family. My mom and dad wouldn't tell me anything, not that I think they knew what happened. They just kept saying I was too young . I guess they figured I would forget about him as I grew up and move on, but I wasn't going to let it go.

The fact that I still dream of that last day is totally nuts. We were kids then, and memories are fickle, but those memories keep creeping back in more and more these days. I miss him. He was my best friend; I loved him, not that he knew that, and I am going to find him! Even if finding him breaks my heart. He would do it for me, at least that is what I tell myself.

In all likelihood, if he is still alive, he probably doesn't even remember me. I mean who remembers the little girl down the street. I remember him though. Our childhood friendship shifted for me the summer he disappeared and I can't help but feel it changed for him too. The lingering hugs and the way he looked at me? Friends don't look at friends like they own their heart, but that, that is how he looked at me. He

protected me and...I know I seem crazy still stuck on a boy from grade school but until I know he is safe and alive living his best life somewhere nothing will stop me from searching. I have to believe he's alive. It's fuel for me to keep going and focus on finding him. Once I graduate on Friday, I am moving to Chicago and I'm going to find out what happened to Yuri Volkov!

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

YURI

I woke up restless and irritated. I don't usually dream because my mind is too busy awake or asleep. My brain never shuts off, so I toss and turn, never getting a full eight hours. When I'm finally able to sleep well, I dream and it's always of her. It's like the memories are haunting me for not telling her we were leaving.

I hate dreaming about her and everything that I was forced to leave behind. It's not that I don't want to dream of her at all, but it makes missing her that much harder.

Lingering for no more than a minute in bed, I get up because I'm up to my eyeballs in meetings and other stupid shit today. I stretch and hear several loud pops as my elbows and shoulders crack as I stand. No wonder I'm irritated, I slept like shit. I walk to the kitchen and make myself a cup of black coffee.

Coffee in hand, I walk over and stand in front of the large windows in my living room to take in the view. sixteen stories up, I've seen this view most of my life, but it never gets old. Being only one floor up from where my mom, Pap, and my younger brothers, Mikhail and Aleksandr, live hasn't changed the view much, it's still breathtaking.

I turn away from the cityscape and head for my black, leather armchair to sit and watch the news before I have to buckle down and get some shit done. Turning on the tv to channel three, I look around at my apartment. It's modern and industrial just the way Pap designed it and just as impersonal.

It's hard to consider this place home since it's as much a business epicenter as it is a

place to lay my head at night. I moved to my own floor as soon as I turned twenty. I was desperate for my own space and place of peace away from the chaos.

Pap's men are posted at each floor and there's a security entrance down the hallway that leads directly to the street through a service elevator. This helps us keep a low profile so my father's enemies won't discover where we live.

The news breaks into my thoughts as one of the anchor's starts reporting on a drug bust the cops made last night. I chuckle because Nico, my father's nemesis is going to be pissed which makes me smile. Ilya, my father and leader of the Russian syndicate in Chicago has been running things for the last ten years ever since we had to move back into the city. Everytime I watch the news I am reminded of how Pap tried to get us out of the life by moving us to the suburbs, but my uncle Boris, the selfish prick, had other plans.

I used to despise the fact that I was part of a criminal family; I didn't understand why we left the quiet suburban life for this chaotic, all-be-it glamorous, shit hole. Pap is about two inches taller than me but we have the same dark eyes and hair. He's always been intimidating and usually argued with me about this subject, but he must've been annoyed enough with me always asking that he finally gave in and explained.

The night we left and several months after, Pap wouldn't explain anything to me. Anytime I asked why we were back in the city, he just told me to accept it and move on. I thought he was being an ass and that I deserved to know why my life was being uprooted. He just told me to do as I was told. A few weeks after my sixteenth birthday, I got up the nerve to ask again about why we were back in the city.

I wake up and roll out of bed and stare at my light blue walls before getting ready for the day. My bedroom is just big enough to fit my bed, a dresser, and a desk. Walking over to my dresser, I pick out a pair of dark wash jeans and a black t-shirt. I'm actually excited to turn sixteen. I hate being treated like a child and maybe now that

I'm old enough to drive, Pap will give me some more freedom. I doubt it though.

Once dressed, I head to the bathroom I share with my brothers, wash my face, and brush my hair. Ma has planned a typical birthday party this afternoon. All the usual people will be there, Andrey and Maxim, my two (only) best friends, Mikhail and Aleksandr of course, plus Ma and Pap.

While brushing my teeth, I decide I'm going to try and talk to Pap again about giving me more responsibility, plus he still hasn't explained the real reason we moved back here and I want him to tell me. I'm old enough to know.

I leave the bathroom and head into the living room. Four grey walls with large windows that look out into the city, frame the brown leather furniture. Ma and Pap are sitting on the couch whispering about who knows what, but I don't see Mikhail or Alek yet. They're probably still asleep.

I go to the kitchen to grab a protein bar for breakfast and then head back into the living room. Ma and Pap stop talking as I sit in the brown, leather armchair. I turn to face my father as I open the protein bar and take a bite.

"Happy Birthday, Yuri!" Mom says in greeting.

"Thanks Ma!" I say.

"Happy Birthday," Pap says unenthusiastically.

"Thanks."

"How does it feel to be sixteen?" Ma asks.

"I don't know. I don't feel any different really," I say.

“It’s a pretty big milestone!” Ma says.

“Yea, I guess,” I say with a shrug.

“Well,” Ma says, getting up from her seat at the couch, “I am off to the store. I have a few things I still need for this afternoon.”

“Take Viktor and Jeremie with you!” Pap says authoritatively.

“Always,” Ma says with a smile and heads to grab her purse before leaving the apartment.

“Where are Mikhail and Alek?” I ask.

“They went to the gym with Daniil about an hour ago,” he says.

“Oh, okay. Can... I talk to you about something?” I ask hesitantly.

“Yea, but I only have about ten minutes until my first meeting of the day,” He says

“Okay, but I need you to be open minded and not shut me down right away,” I blurt out.

“Alright...” he says, dragging out the word.

“I want a real explanation for why we left. Why we moved back here. I’m old enough now...” I start to say, but Pap cuts me off.

“Son, we’ve talked about this. I don’t want to flesh this out with you. I don’t owe you an explanation. We moved because we needed to. That’s that!” He says starting to get up from his seat.



“No! That’s not good enough anymore,” I say, “It’s my life too, Pap! I deserve an explanation!” I argue.

“Watch your tone, son. I don’t want this to turn into an argument so early in the morning. Let’s not do this today.”

“I’m just going to keep asking. If you want me to join the family business, I need to know what happened. I won’t accept the ‘we moved because we had to’ vague response anymore.”

“Hm...” he grunts, sits back down, and rubs his jaw with his thumb and pointer finger.

“I’m old enough to hear this Pap. I want to help you run things, but how do you expect me to do that if I don’t know all the facts?” I ask.

“You make a valid point,” he starts, “Is that the real reason you want to know?”

“Of course!” I say, encouraged by his question, “I get that I’m supposed to respect you and follow your orders, but I’m not just one of your lackey’s dad, I’m your son. I don’t understand why we left our lives to become criminals. It makes no sense to me.”

“We didn’t leave the suburbs to become criminals!” He says frustrated.

“Then why did we leave?” I ask, “because if you don’t explain it, I’m left to come up with my own assumptions.”

“Alright... Fine! What do you want to know first?” He asks.

“Okay... Well, you say we didn’t come to the city to be criminals, but we are... so,

why? What changed?"

"Before you were born, your Baba was in my place. He was in charge. Our family has always lived a life of crime. We may be criminals, but we're not your average, stick-it-to-the-man criminals. We break the law to make this place safer for everyone. We have a code."

"What do you mean?" I ask. The look on my face must show my confusion and anger because he sighs and keeps talking.

"Think of us as Robin Hood stealing the rich to give to the poor. The Italians are the rich, they make this city unlivable, son. Chicago has always been a crime epicenter. The Italians make their money trading humans and selling drugs. Early on, our family made a name for ourselves by how we did our business. Baba modeled our code after the Knights of King Arthur. He was inspired."

"Okay..." I say still confused.

"Yes, we make some damn good money by selling guns and profiting off the stupidity of others who gamble away their hard earned cash, but what the Italians do is deplorable. If they ever take over, the whole city will burn."

I didn't fully understand, "But why do we have to be criminals at all? If we're trying to help the city, why not do it the lawful way?"

"Son, a man can get a lot more done if he doesn't have to worry about deciding if another man deserves to go to jail or if he should die. We cut out the middleman. The cops can't keep up with the Italians. We have always kept the city safer in our own way."

"I just don't understand how selling guns helps the city," I say with a sneer.

“Check your tone, mal'chik. Guns will always be a part of our lives, no matter where you go in this god-forsaken world people will be armed. We make sure the guns aren't in the wrong hands.”

“Sorry Pap,” I say and take a steadying breath. “So why did we leave the city in the first place if we were trying to help stop the Italians?”

“I didn't want that life for you and your mother; you were so young, and it was my job to keep you safe and hidden.”

“She always worried that you would be targeted and killed. I knew the only way to keep you safe was to move away so no one would discover you. That way, if an enemy came after me one day, they wouldn't be able to use you to get to me.”

“No one knows I'm your son?” I didn't see how that was possible.

“Your mother and I always kept you and your brothers away from prying eyes, even before we left the city. You were only six when we left, and not many people ever saw you except for my closest captains. There was no need for anyone to even know I'd had a son. And your brothers were both born after we left.”

“So, why did we come back?” I was starting to get a better picture of what Pap's life was really like and how the weight of the world seemed to rest on his shoulders.

“When I took you and your mother out of the city, I left Uncle Boris in charge. For nearly ten years, all was quiet. I thought he wanted to run things the same way Baba and I did. Little did I know he was biding his time, yes, he was running things the way Dedushka taught us to at first, but he got greedy.”

“What do you mean?” I was curious because I never truly knew Uncle Boris. He's a few years younger than Pap and has been in prison for nearly eight years.

“Your sniveling, selfish Uncle wanted to make more money. He wanted to run things differently and didn’t like that we appeared to be helping the police. The idiot thought if we got rid of the Italians faster, then we could take over their territory and business ventures. Just like that!” Pap says, snapping his fingers. As my father was talking, I could see the crease between his eyebrows deepening. He fisted his hands so tightly his knuckles turned white.

“So, Uncle Boris just wanted to take over?”

“Yes, but he was a moron about it and instead of strategically undermining the Italians, he went straight to the top. He tried to kill Nico,” He scoffs, “When he went to their restaurant, he fucked up. A stray bullet ended up hitting Nico’s son Francesco. Your mutt of an uncle killed the eldest son of the Italian syndicate.”

“That was dumb. Who went with him? How did he think he was going to take down a guy like Nico on his own?” There’s no way Uncle Boris went in alone to take on the Italians.

“Your Uncle Boris was never the sharpest knife in the drawer. He didn’t take enough time to plan. He rushed and so we had to come back. And the men who went with him were just as stupid!” Pap started to rub his temples like a headache was coming on.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

### THE SNAKE

The Volkov's demise has been a long time coming! They think they're so perfect. They run the streets like they are kings and I'm sick and tired of it.

I despise them. They've ruined everything and they must pay! It's been far too long since I've seen the blood of a Volkov stain the ground. I'm going to make them suffer for everything they've done, but first I need to find a kink in the chain. A weak link, every family has one and when I find it, they'll be sorry they ever messed with me and my family!

The moment Boris Volkov died, I knew Ilya would return. He tried to hide from me, but when no one takes you seriously, they tend to ignore you. Stupid fucks!

He thought he could hide his precious family from me, but he was wrong. The moment the idiot died, I made it my mission to find and kill every last Volkov! Ilya thought he could hide his sons, but I've been following Yuri, the oldest and heir to the Volkov dynasty, for a year and I'm getting close! One way or another, I'll take Ilya down. First, I'll torture his son, his precious heir, a bit. Make him go insane! Then, when Ilya least expects it, I'll kill Yuri and then he'll know he's not so perfect or powerful after all. One by one, I'll hunt down everyone he loves!

Following Yuri isn't as easy as I hoped. He thinks he's pretty slick, but he's just like the rest of us. He switches up his routines enough, so I don't get to see or hear about all of his plans, but I will!

He's no more important than I am, but of course he thinks he's a picture perfect and

untouchable leader. Just like his father! He underestimates me and mine just like everyone else!

After a few short months of following Yuri, I discovered the one person he cares about above all else. I need to get close to her . If I get to her, then I can get to Yuri.

I have found my in. Once I take Yuri out, that will bring Ilya to his knees! First, take out the heir apparent, then take out the current reigning king.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

YURI

Now that I'm showered, dressed, and ready, I head to the kitchen and grab an energy bar and start brewing another cup of coffee. The news was enlightening, and now I have a new plan forming to undermine the Italians. Ever since talking with my Pap on my sixteenth birthday, I've been all in on helping keep the Italian's and their ambitions at bay.

The Italians are pond scum and will do everything in their power to make our lives a living hell. So I need to keep a low profile for a while until my plan is more fleshed out. They're going to be pissed once they find out their latest drug deal went south because of us, but I don't care. They deserve all the shit they've got coming their way.

I'm pouring my coffee in a to-go cup when my phone starts buzzing in my pocket.

Grabbing it out, I see Andrey's name flash across the screen and sigh, "What is it, Andrey?" I say already annoyed.

"Yuri. We have a problem!" Andrey says, speaking quickly.

"Already?" I ask, confused.

"Yeah, Daniil got attacked during his drop last night. He's in the hospital."

"Fuck!" I growl, "How?" Daniil is one of our best runners, so for anyone to track him, let alone catch him off guard long enough to take him down is unthinkable.

“Was anyone with him?” I bark out.

“I don’t know. The boss wants to meet at the gym in twenty minutes to figure out what went wrong.”

“Do they know where he was ambushed?” I demand.

“He was right across the street from the Jewel Osco on thirty-fifth street. He must have known someone was tailing him because he was headed away from the drop point,” He rushed out clearly hearing the anger in my voice.

“I’m on my way!” I say, hanging up the phone, grabbing my coffee and protein bar and jetting out the door.

After meeting with Pap and a small group of our men, I have a pounding headache. We still aren’t sure how the jackasses tracked Daniil, but we have a plan of action. It took just over two hours, but I’m finally heading back towards campus to check up on my girl.

Heading toward her dorm, I allow myself to look at the buildings around me. Some parts of the city are very industrial, while others are full of beauty and history. I enjoy looking at it all. Walking at a steady pace, I think about when we first moved to the suburbs.

I claimed Charlie from the moment she stood up for me. Thinking of that memory always makes me smile. She was my best friend from that moment. But my feelings started to become something more; she didn't want her to know that and ruin our friendship. It broke my heart to leave all those years ago.

I didn’t want to leave her. I wanted to always be near Charlie to protect her. She was never able to see danger right in front of her and that trait hasn’t changed. Her



friendship with Dominic proves that. I swear this woman is trying to kill me with some of the choices she makes.

Rounding the corner, I see her just a few feet in front of me; she's just about to reach the quad. Damn! Every time I see her, I have to catch my breath. I keep my footsteps light and pull my cap down over my eyes a little. Just seeing her reminds me of when I turned eighteen.

Most milestones were shrouded by her absence. Pap was finally letting me take on some responsibilities for the family business, so I had access to a mustard seed's worth of my father's resources. I yearned for Charlie. At first I didn't understand why. I didn't just miss our friendship. She was the first person to accept me for who I was. She didn't judge me by how I looked or my accent. She just saw me and accepted me.

From that moment, I was doomed. She had my heart. She always will. I miss her beautiful green eyes and fiery red curls. I miss the way she would make a cute squeak whenever she would sneeze and how she would whine my name when I was better at something than her.

I wish I could look into her face right now. It's hard not to just show up at her apartment and say, Hi, I'm sorry I disappeared, but I'm here now. I don't have the luxury to be selfish. If I want to protect her, I need to stay away. It's hard being in the shadows rather than walking by her side. If I were with her now, everyone would know she was mine and no one, not even that scumbag, Dominic, would touch what's mine.

Looking at her back as we walk, I notice the sway of her hips and sigh deeply, nearly letting out a growl when she takes her hair out of that bun and shakes it. It's torture. As the crimson curls fall like curtains down her shoulders and back, I wish I could run my fingers through those curls. I wish I could place my hand around her waist,

pull her to me and, “No.” I say and shake my head. I can’t start thinking about all the things I want to do to her, with her. I need to focus.

Continuing to follow her, I wish I could have celebrated her high school graduation with her. But, since I couldn’t be there, I made sure someone from my family was present. It was shortly after her graduation that I learned where Charlie would attend college and loud alarm bells went off.

The Italian’s have their territory, and we, the Russians, have ours. Charlie managed to choose the one University the Italians have their claws in: North Eastern University.

I tried not to panic because I knew who also attended NEU. Dominic Romano. We’re the same age, but he’s an ass who only cares about making money and gaining power. It’s odd to think how similar our lives are, and yet he chose to go to college, which I thought was weird. I know he wants to take over for his father one day, so I’m not sure why he was spending his days in mind-numbing classes.

I chose not to go to college. I knew I could learn more from my father. I never enjoyed school like some of my classmates. I got decent grades, but after we moved back to the city, my father didn’t let me or my brothers go to school. We were homeschooled because Pap was intent on keeping eyes off of his sons.

From the moment we moved, Pap always made sure we understood how dangerous our lives had become. No matter how many security measures my father put into place, he was always worried. So when I turned fourteen, he paired me with one of the guys from our gym. We own an MMA fighting club and training center; Baba started it up when my father and Uncle Boris were younger. It’s changed and grown a lot since then. When I wasn’t doing schoolwork, I was at the club. My father also brought me to the firing range several times a week.

Pap always says, “Fists are good, but guns are better.”

I prefer using my fists.

After high school, I didn't need to work at some local restaurant or coffee shop, so I spent my time training at the club. By the time I turned nineteen, I was unstoppable; whether I used my fists or a gun. I knew that one day the Italians would find out who I am. My family could only use smoke and mirrors for so long, so I made sure I was ready.

Charlie rounds another corner and it's just a few more blocks until we will reach her dorm. She's so fucking gorgeous. Even in the dim of the street lights, I can see her taking casual steps. She still tries not to step on any cracks in the sidewalk if she can help it. It's hard not to think about all the events that have brought us to this point in our lives.

Me following.

Her not knowing if I'm alive or dead.

Once I was sure Charlie was safe in her dorm room, I started heading for my car. Even though I'm not on the lookout for someone who might hurt Charlie, I still check my surroundings. Pap says no one knows who I am, but I've always been skeptical. It's not easy to remain anonymous when you're the heir to the Russian Mob. I've always done as my father asks because I do want to be in charge one day and it's kind of fun running things without people knowing exactly who I am.

My anonymity has come in handy when I'm at the gym or just out doing a job because most of the brotherhood don't know I'm the boss' son. I've been able to suss out guys who aren't loyal, or who aren't doing as they're told. It makes me feel a bit like I'm tattling from time to time, but we're not dealing with children taking their friends' toys. This is life or death.

I reach my car without incident and get in enjoying the heat the moment I turn the key in the ignition. Chicago is always cold, no matter the season. They don't call it the Windy City for nothin'. Putting the car in drive, I consider going to my apartment, but then change my mind and head to the gym. I need to clear my head and sparring always helps.

I've come up with some great plans while sparring. Back when I learned that Charlie was going to attend NEU and study journalism, I started keeping a closer eye on her. It was stressing me out, so I went to the gym and Maxim and Andrey took turns sparring with me while I figured out how I could keep her safe. I knew I couldn't follow her around 24/7, but I didn't know any other way.

Maxim and Andrey are my right and left hand guys. They've been my only friends since moving back to Chicago and helped me adjust to my new life. Andrey is a year younger than me and not the smartest bulb in the box. Maxim is one year older and two sizes larger than me. He's practically a giant. Even now, they're the only ones, besides my family, who know who Charlie is and how important she is to me. It's been my father and those two knuckleheads who have helped me keep her safe all this time.

I get to the gym, park, and turn off the car. I walk to the trunk to get my gym bag and as I walk into the building, I think about the day, nearly four years ago now, that Maxim, Andrey and I planned our first 'undercover' mission.

Four years ago...

I've been at the club for a few hours, sparring and training. I'm full of sweat and my body is sore, but it's a good feeling. Training gives me a sense of control, of my feet being firmly planted on the floor, even though I'm usually on my toes in the ring.

I hear the bell above the door ring and stop hitting the speedbag.

Andrey and Maxim walk through the door and as soon as they're within hearing distance I ask, "How was the meeting with the boss this morning?" and start hitting the bag again.

Both Maxim and Andrey have a gym bag slung over their shoulder. As they approach, they drop their bags with a thud.

"Good. Good. Nothing new to report," Maxim says.

"Okay, good. I need to run some ideas by you both" I state in a no nonsense tone.

"Yeah, sure Yuri. No problem." Andrey says.

I stop hitting the speedbag again, look around the room, then suggest, "Let's go sit in the bar area. It'll be quieter," and we start heading to the back of the club that Pap decided to attack in the rear soon after we moved back. He said it would be good for the men to have a place to let off steam, and if anyone got too drunk and wanted a fight, they'd be close to the ring.

We walk toward a table at the back corner. Maxim pulls out a chair and lands on it like a meteor falling from the sky.

"Geez Max! Are you trying to break the chair?" Andrey quips.

"Oh, shut up!" Maxim growls, punching Andrey's arm hard enough to make him stagger and nearly miss his chair.

"Alright! Calm the fuck down. I need your help with something." I bark, bringing their attention back to the issue at hand. "We need to come up with an easy way to keep watch over Charlie without drawing attention. We can't follow her all over campus. You two are about as subtle as a forest fire." Andrey and Maxim look at

each other, scoff, and then look back at me.

“You know campus cops are worthless mother fuckers. They couldn’t catch a mouse in a mousetrap let alone catch on to us,” Maxim says with a deep, grumbling laugh.

“I won’t scare her. We can’t be seen on campus by her or anyone else. It would put her in more danger, and we’re trying to keep eyes off of her, not paint a bullseye on her back,” I say emphatically, reminding them what’s at stake.

“Let’s not overthink this. It’s simple. We’ll just bug her phone,” Maxim suggests nonchalantly like it’s the obvious choice.

Andrey scoffs, “Oh, right. We’ll just walk up to Charlie and say, ‘Excuse me, can I please have your phone?’” Rolling his eyes, he continues, “She’s not gonna let us touch her phone.” Andrey argues.

Maxim narrows his eyes on Andrey, “It’s not that hard to swipe someone’s phone, especially a girl like Charlie. She’s smart, but she forgets her phone all the time.” I let out a low laugh. He’s not wrong. That girl does leave her phone everywhere.

“How are we going to do it? I can’t go anywhere near her,” I remind them.

Maxim lets out a rough sigh, “It’s easy. We’ll do it during her freshman orientation.”

“Go on...” I prompt, annoyed.

“I’ll approach some other students like I’m the head of one of the clubs or something. I’ll ask for their information, then I’ll simply walk up to Charlie and ask her too. I’ll block her phone with a clipboard, grab it, and walk away. There are programs that help you monitor someone’s phone. I only need to plug her phone into mine for a few minutes and upload a program. Once it’s finished, I’ll walk back over to Charlie and

have her double check her information for any errors and set her phone back down on the table.”

I think for a minute about Maxim’s plan. It seems easy enough.

“Alright. Let’s talk with Konstantin and see what program he thinks will work. We have about a week to get this planned out.”

Lucky for us, Konstantin is a wizard when it comes to tech, so we got everything we needed within a few days of that first meeting. His program has been essential in helping me keep tabs on Charlie when neither the guys nor I could. I head into Konstantine’s office now, because I want him to look into something for me.

“Hey Kon,” I say in greeting, “You busy?” I ask putting my duffle on the floor outside his office.

“A bit. The boss has me looking into a few things. He thinks Nico has a new whorehouse just a few blocks away from the tea shop, so I’m checking it out. What’s up?”

I consider not bothering him since he’s probably knee deep in code. I sigh and shift weight from one foot to the other putting my hands in my pockets.

“I might be making a big deal out of nothing, but can you look into something for me when you have a minute?” I ask.

“Sure. Whatever you need,” he responds easily.

I take a seat at a chair across from his desk and tell him about an assumption I have. “Again, I’m not sure if there will be anything to find, but while I was out the other day, I swore I was being followed,” I tell him.

I don't know if I'm being overly sensitive because I've been keeping close tabs on Charlie lately, but Konstantine can do a quick check for cell phones that were in the area to ease my mind. He'll probably think I'm being stupid, but I'd rather be safe than sorry. If someone is catching on to who I am, I need to put a stop to it, now!

"Yeah, I can take a look into it. Just let me know where and when and I'll add it to my list," he says.

"Great!" I say getting up and heading over to the locker room to set my gym bag down and get my sparring gear on.

I'm just leaving the gym when my phone vibrates. I take it out of my pocket and see that my father is calling.

"Hey boss," I say in greeting, "What's up?"

"I need your help at the apartment. Come to the basement and bring Maxim with you," he says, "We're in room ten."

"Okay, I'm on my way." I say hanging up the phone. Then I quickly call Maxim and let him know to meet me at the apartment in ten minutes.

I arrive at the apartment in good time, sometimes traffic is kind to me and I'm thankful because I want to finish up whatever Pap has planned and check in on Charlie.

I park the car, grab my gym bag from the trunk to bring it into my apartment after we're all done, and head into the building. I take the elevator to the basement, and drop my duffle right outside the metal doors once I get off.

I walk down the dark hallway that is lined with doors and head for the one labeled



with a bright silver number ten and walk right in.

I'm met with the smell of burnt flesh, blood, and urine and I have to blink a few times to prevent my eyes from watering.

I take a few steps into the room, which is empty except for a single chair that's bolted to the floor. On the chair is a young man I don't recognize. To the left is my father and on the right is Viktor. Jeremie is at the back of the room standing next to a table with a variety of torture implements. To the left of the table is a small sink.

"Hello Son," Pap says.

"Hey boss," I say, "Viktor, Jeremie" I nod at them, "and who's this?" I ask.

"His name doesn't matter," my father explains, "he's just been telling us about his boss's new business venture."

"And what's that?" I ask, curious.

Pap looks over at Viktor, and walks to the back of the room to wash his hands.

"Nico seems to think he can open up a whorehouse anywhere he likes," Viktor explains as Maxim walks through the door behind me.

"What?" Maxim says as he reaches my side.

Viktor explains again, "Nico opened up a whorehouse near the tea shop. We're learning all the ins and outs. The boss wants to clue Liam in as soon as possible so we can shut them down."

Detective Liam Fitzpatrick is our inside man at the Chicago PD. He's a Detective

with the organized crime division and has been in our lives for as long as I can remember. I found out later that while we lived in the suburbs, Pap would call and talk to Liam's father, a retired cop, who he used to go to school with, to get updates on Uncle Boris and Nico.

Liam decided to become a cop too, so my father stayed in touch. Liam's always been happy to help since help give him information about the shit the Italians try to get away with, and he turns a blind eye when we need him to.

"Okay, what have we learned?" I ask and the man in the chair begins to groan.

Viktor grabs the man by the hair and hauls his head up, wrenching his neck hard, "Why don't you explain it for us again?" he says as more of a command than a question.

"Uh..." he groans again, trying to lift his head, "I've already told you everything I know."

The man looks to be in his mid twenties, maybe, it's hard to tell what's under all the bruises and dried blood.

Viktor lets the man's hair go and his head lolls to the side. "Basically, he opened up shop a month ago. There are ten girls between the ages of ten and eighteen," he lifts one side of his lip in disgust, "Working night and day."

"What?" I say, furious. I knew Nico was in the sale and trade of women, which is bad enough, but girls? He makes me sick!

My father walks back up and stands next to the bloodied man, "We're going to put an end to it."

“What do you need me to do?” I ask.

“I need you and Maxim to give this nice gentlemen a pair of cement shoes so Viktor and I can go meet with Liam,” he says.

“What?” The man looks up in alarm. “You... You don’t have to do that!” He shouts, “I won’t say a word!”

“Right...” Viktor says disbelief in his tone.

“Alright,” I say with a sigh, “We got this.”

“I’ll go mix up some cement,” Maxim says and heads out into the hall to get the supplies we’ll need.

Viktor and my father leave the room and the man calls after them trying to plead for his life, but they ignore him.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

### THE SNAKE

Every time I turn around, the Volkov's are fucking with my life! I've been following Yuri for years and learning his routines. I could have killed him a hundred times over, but it wouldn't be good enough. He and his family deserve to suffer!

I've spent the last few years getting close to Charlie! Now I'm waiting for the perfect moment to strike! If I can take her from him at the right time, he'll be begging me to end his sorry excuse for a life. He'll do anything I say to get her back!

I was going to take her before graduation, but Ilya is focusing on taking down Nico which keeps interfering with my plans. I have to find another way to disrupt their daily operations. I need to get them off balance enough that Yuri will start messing up! The fact that he hasn't noticed me following him is laughable.

If only I could show his father and those goons of his how vulnerable Yuri is, maybe they'd treat me with the respect I deserve! But no! No one can mess with the perfect son!

Yuri really makes it easy to follow his movements and plans. His world revolves around Charlie. Anywhere Charlie goes, Yuri is sure to follow! What an idiot!

She's got him wrapped around her little finger and she doesn't even know he's alive! He's already worried that someone is going to hurt her even though, according to him, he has kept her safe all these years. I'm going to have to step up my game so he starts to get more paranoid. I want him double guessing every move he makes!

Then, after graduation, I'll take her, break her, and then, I'll break him!

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

### CHARLIE

I woke up anxious and I don't know why. Maybe it's because Graduation is tomorrow morning. I was planning on snuggling up with my favorite fuzzy blanket in my favorite comfy sweats and watching The Bachelor, and chowing down on some popcorn and Almond Joys tonight to relax, but Dom and a few buddies from his dorm decided to host a grad party tonight, so now I have to make an appearance at that.

It took me all day to figure out what I'll be wearing tonight. I don't want to be too cold, but I don't want to bundle up like an eskimo either. It's May, so it's hot, but Chicago at night can be bitterly cold. The wind eats through my cardigans but a fleece jacket is too warm.

We'll be playing some Ultimate Frisbee and there will of course be beer kegs, so I decided on a pair of black fleece-lined leggings, a black t-shirt, paired with a dark green polo sweater and a black infinity scarf. I'm definitely going to wear a thicker pair of socks with my sneakers, because if my feet are cold, my whole body is cold.

When I texted Dom about the event earlier, I made it very clear that the only reason I would be going is because he asked me to.

After getting dressed, I make my way down campus and though I'm still a few blocks away, I can hear the music blaring a heavy base and the sound of college co-ed shenanigans. I roll my eyes and brace myself for the disaster that is about to take place tonight. I promised myself and Dom that I would stay for at least an hour to prove that I could. After that though, I am going back to my room to pack.

I walk up to some guy and grab a red-solo-cup, that I will not be drinking out of, but I will act like I am to fool everyone around me. I've never been much of a drinker. I have nothing against alcohol, it's just never been my thing. Plus all those videos about how to protect your drink from being spiked scared me shitless before I even left for college, so I figure better safe than sorry.

I start to look through the crowd for Dominic who is nowhere in sight which is weird because this was his stupid idea. I wander around and look for a familiar face and head for a table I see out of the corner of my eye that has some snacks. I wait around for a few more minutes chatting with random people, then text Dom trying to figure out where the hell he is.

Charlotte: Dom, where are you? I swear if you aren't here in five minutes, I'm leaving.

He usually responds quickly. I keep walking and mingling around the crowd so I don't look as awkward as I feel. It kind of sucks that I didn't make many friends while at college, but I was so focused on my dream that Dom is all I had time for. Plus taking time to research what happened to Yuri and his family. I make it back to the snack table right as I get a ping notification on my phone. I sigh and grab it from my back pocket.

Dominic: Sorry! Dad called, there's an emergency with some big new deal at work. Be down soon.

Charlotte: I'm only giving you another five minutes before I am going back to my dorm Dom. I don't want to be down here by myself all night.

Dominic: I'm sorry, C.C. Be down ASAP!

I roll my eyes and set a timer because I'm not kidding. I am not staying here any

longer than I have to, and heaven knows how long his dad will have him on that call. I can only imagine how long he has already been held hostage by that conversation.

The music for my timer goes off and I send Dom a quick text.

Charlotte: I'm heading back. I'm not sitting out here alone. I can't believe you right now! I'd rather be doing literally anything but sit here awkwardly waiting for you. See you tomorrow...

As soon as the text goes through, I start walking back to my dorm. I hate it when plans don't go how they're supposed to. Especially when they weren't my idea in the first place.

I walk quickly because I still have some time to cuddle on my couch and watch *The Bachelor*. I get that he is going to be working with his dad after college, but I find it odd that he couldn't come hang out tonight. It's not like he is going to be able to help much.

I mean he's just getting out of college, how much help can he really be? Maybe I'm just being petty and selfish, but with tonight being our last night before graduation, I thought we'd get to spend it together.

I reach my dorm building quickly and decide that maybe this is for the best. I'll see Dom tomorrow, he'll apologize, and all will be well again.

I'm tossing and turning in bed, sleep eluding me. Then, I startle awake to the deafening sound of my alarm going off on my phone. "Yes, Yes, I know! Now, shut up," I tell my alarm like it has a mind of its own. I swear sometimes it goes off on purpose just to make me mad. I roll over and hit snooze.

I stay in bed with my eyes closed for a few extra minutes before slowly getting out of



bed and taking a shower to get ready for graduation. I do a quick hair touch up and apply a natural layer of makeup. I don't want to go overboard. I'm just happy this day is finally here.

I grab the green dress that I have out just for this occasion because even though I will be wearing an awful graduation robe I know mom will be taking a thousand pictures and I want to look at least halfway decent in them. I am almost ready when I hear a knock on my door. As I open the door, I'm rushed by my mother who is laugh-crying and squeezing me so hard I can barely breathe!

"My baby is a college graduate!" she squeals

"Oh! Goodness mom, if you squeeze any harder you're going to collapse a lung," I laugh and hug her back.

"Are you ready for breakfast?" Mom asks, "I can't wait to see you cross that stage with your diploma!"

"I'm ready. Where's dad?" I ask looking around her just in case he planned to pop out and jump-scare me.

"He's waiting for us in the car. It was difficult to find parking, so he's sitting down there with his hazards on."

"Ok. We should go then. I don't want him to get a ticket," I say as we make our way out the door.

After breakfast, mom and dad drop me off at the Arena and I head over to the spot where we all line up. I gave my parents a quick hug before they went to park the car. Once I get to my spot, I can see them making their way inside to find their seats. There are so many people here it's insane, but the one person I wish was here, isn't. I

run my hand through my hair and smooth out my gray gown as we start making our way inside.

I look around for my parents. It takes me a few minutes to find them, but once I make it to my seat, I can see them. Mom is already crying. Scanning the crowd, I take in all the different sights and sounds. There are younger siblings fighting and a mom tossing an iPad at one child while making another kid sit on her other side. I chuckle thinking about what life might have been like if I'd had a sibling.

I continue to browse while the Master of Ceremonies welcomes everyone and introduces our “inspirational” speaker. As I look toward the middle of one section, I have to do a double take. Is that? No, it can't be. I shut my eyes tight and take a deep breath. Opening my eyes, I take a tentative look back to the section and I see a man who looks so familiar. I know I haven't seen Yuri since we were kids, but this guy could honestly be his twin. Could that actually be him?

“I swear I am losing my mind,” I say under my breath as I try to focus on the speaker, but can't help to look back where I just saw Yuri's doppelganger. Nothing. I look around a bit more hoping to lay my eyes on the stranger again but can't seem to find him. I take a deep breath to steady my now frantic heart rate and try not to swivel my head around like a chaotic toddler.

I take a moment to find my parents again. Making eye contact with my mom and giving her a small smile. They're close to where I'm sitting which means they will get a good shot of me walking across that stage. As an only child they are way more excited about this day than I am, but at least I have them here, right? I sigh and try to focus on all the speeches and not look all over the area for the stranger that is making me wonder if I saw him or just imagined the whole thing. That dream is really messing with my head. I take one last look around before giving up and just think to myself:

I really wish Yuri was here...

YURI

Sneaking into the graduation ceremony wasn't difficult. This campus needs to focus on its security. With all the crime in this city, I'm surprised they still use rent-a-cops. How are they going to fucking keep anyone safe if I can slip in? Armed with my Makarov, 9mm holstered at the small of my back, I make my way through the South Entrance of the Lincoln Arena.

Maxim and Andrey tried to talk me out of going to the ceremony, but I knew I had to see her. I kept a close eye on Charlie and Dominic yesterday. They were planning to go to some pre-graduation celebration together. I was livid when that bastard abandoned Charlie. She was stuck there, by herself with no one to protect her while he was on the fucking phone and she had to walk back to her dorm alone.

It's the second time he's done that. I wanted to wring his neck for not protecting her like I would, but I followed her instead. What kind of man lets a girl walk alone in the dark in this city? He knows how unsafe it is!

Dominic is a fucking prick. I wish I could have warned Charlie about him the moment they met, but the whole point of keeping myself hidden is to keep her safe. Dominic is an arrogant son of a bitch! When I'm physically tailing the two of them, he never appears to sense anyone following them, but I'm not terribly surprised. He thinks he is untouchable. I can't wait to prove him wrong!

The Grand March begins bringing me out of my furry and I settle into my seat. I'm not worried about Charlie finding me in the crowd because she doesn't even know I'm alive, but I won't take any chances. I decided to wear a baseball cap to better hide

my hair and face, but I wasn't about to wear all black and look like a man about to shoot up the place. I went for my usual, casual look: a pair of dark wash jeans, a black and grey striped button-up with a black undershirt, and a black sports coat. I want to blend in with the other family members here to see their graduates.

I pull the cap down to cover my eyes but leave just enough space to still see into the crowd of seated graduates. I spot her right away. I already knew where she'd be seated because I was able to sneak into the commencement organizer's office and take a picture of the seating chart. For fucks sake, this campus is lacking in good security guards.

As I wait for it to be her turn to cross the stage, I study her. She decided to wear an emerald green dress that hugs her every curve to the ceremony. Seeing her in that slip of a dress nearly sent me into a frenzy as I watched her leave and head to breakfast with her parents earlier. It's too bad the graduation gown covers up her luscious body; I love every curve.

Looking at the side of her face as she scans the crowd, I wonder what she's thinking about. Then she stares in my direction and I freeze. Lowering my head just a fraction, I wait until her eyes close before I slouch and pull my cap further over my face. I see that she's distracted when her row is called. Fuck! Did she recognize me? There's no way. It's been so long since we've seen each other. My hair and general facial structure hasn't changed, but I am not the teenage boy she once knew. She walks elegantly toward the stage and takes careful, calculated steps up to the platform.

As she glides across the stage my breath catches in my throat. She's so beautiful. I wish she knew I was here, but it's too damn dangerous. I clutch my hands into fists so tight my knuckles turn white thinking about anyone trying to hurt my Charlie.

## Page 9

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### CHARLIE

Moving into my new apartment after graduation has been a feat in itself, but I am definitely grateful my mom and dad came to help me. These old buildings have no elevators and trying to get a couch up the stairs reminds me of that one scene in Friends and I really don't want to turn into Ross screaming "Pivot!" for twenty mins just to get the furniture in the place.

My apartment is small, but spacious because it's open concept. I take in the exposed brick next to the slate gray walls and the vinyl plank flooring. It's an old building, so the apartment has a slight musty smell. Nothing some essential oils can't fix! I'm glad the owners of the building have kept the inside up to date with newer appliances and a fresh coat of paint.

"What do you think Charlie? Do you like it?" my dad asked bringing in the last box from the moving van. They were nice enough to bring up some items from our house to help me furnish this place. I didn't have a lot in my dorm room and I can't really afford new furniture right now.

"Yea! It's rustic. I think it'll look great once I get unpacked and organize everything," I say, picturing my furniture and decor in the industrial apartment.

"I saw a cool hole-in-the-wall pizza place a few blocks back," Mom said, "Wanna give it a try Charlie-bear?"

"Definitely!" I say and we make our way to the car. I am hoping to make a list of restaurants so I don't have to google something every time I want food.

We walk into the pizza place a few minutes later and the smell of cheese, dough, and grease rush into my nose. The red tile floor and bright orange walls clash, but I kind of like it. There is a giant stainless steel countertop at the back and five or six high-top tables scattered around the 700-square-foot restaurant. The walls have a few pizza signs and pictures, but are otherwise unadorned. We walk to the counter and order one personal pan ham and pineapple pizza for me and one medium meat lovers for my mom and dad. Mom and dad get water to drink and I order a Dr. Pepper.

“Hey Charlie, have you figured out what bus stop and train stations you’re going to use to get to and from work?” Mom asks, looking a little worried.

“Yea. I made a list a few days ago. If I choose to take the red line bus, I can probably get there in forty-five mins with stops. And there is even a coffee shop right by the bus station,” I reply. Thank God, because I don’t know what I would have done without a local caffeine tap. I know I have a problem but both my wallet and I are fine with it.

I love how Mom worries, but she doesn’t need to. I’m a reporter in training, of course, I’m going to look up where I live and research the best routes before I move to a new place. I have a pocket-sized red Ford Focus hatchback I call Effie, so I can drive to and from work if I need to, but there are so many one-way streets in Chicago, so I’ll probably just use the train. Plus, I swear I saw a pothole the same size as my car on the way to my apartment earlier.

While we wait for our pizzas, Mom and I make sure to enter the grocery store, which is only a few blocks from my apartment, into my maps app on my phone. They deliver which will definitely come in handy when I don’t feel like carrying a ton of bags up three flights of stairs. We also look up some local clothing stores and restaurants for me to try out in the next few weeks. I already looked up how close the building I’ll be working in is from my apartment. It isn’t too far away.

Dad asks, “Charlie, are you excited to start work on Monday?” as the waiter brings us our pizzas.

“Yea. I can’t wait to get started. I know I probably won’t be working on the type of stories I’m really interested in, but I hope they’ll see my portfolio and give me at least a chance to do some investigative journaling,” I say and then thank the waiter for refilling my Dr. Pepper.

“Let’s eat up so we can get you back to your apartment and help get you settled in before we have to head back home,” Mom says.

Mom and Dad are being so supportive and are doing their best to help me feel comfortable and safe. I love that we are a tight-knit family, but I’m also looking forward to spreading my wings. I can’t wait to get into the office and start researching. As we wrap up dinner, I think about how I want to organize my apartment and wish Yuri were here to experience all the newness with me.

I remember when he came over to help me put my glow in the dark stars and moons all over my room, a gift I had received for my eighth birthday. He helped me strategically place stars and moons in spots to create real constellations. That way whenever I had a bad dream I could pick one out and know that I was safe and he was always there for me.

He was also around during my middle school boy band phase helping me organize all the posters on my walls to make sure there weren't more Dream Street posters than Hansen posters. They had to be evenly placed through the room. I just laugh to myself at the memories, knowing he would have loved helping me today.

Once we are back at my apartment, Mom says, “Let me help you finish unboxing your bedroom so you can get a good night’s sleep. Hun, why don’t you put some dishes and kitchen supplies away.” She lovingly orders my dad around.



“All right, but I expect a raise.” Dad jokes. He is always so helpful.

I hear my phone chime with a text notification and it is none other than Dominic checking in to see how things are going.

Dominic : “Hey C.C.! How’d the move go?”

Charlotte : “As good as can be expected, I guess. There’s a lot around here.”

Dominic : “Knowing you, you’ll get lost just going to the store. Haha!”

Charlotte : “Hey, now, unnecessary call out mister!”

Dominic : “You’ll just have to share your location with me so I can rescue you when you get lost.”

Charlotte : “Wow, way to have a vote of confidence for a girl, D!”

Dominic : “Who’s to say I won't enjoy being your knight in shining armor.”

Charlotte : “More like a knight in shining, Land Rover.”

Dominic : “Don’t go hating on the ride C.C. Especially if she is expected to rescue your ass. lol”

Charlotte : “I will hate on any car that costs more than a downpayment on a house, D.”

Dominic : “I would expect nothing less. I am off to a meeting. Talk later?”

Charlotte : “Definitely, have fun!”

I have already ensured I have all the important locations pinned on my phone, I'd die without my maps, because I know I am for sure going to get lost in the windy city with its one-way streets and creepy alleyways at least once. I do not want to have to take Dominic up on a rescue mission and prove him right. I will definitely continue to add to the list as I get acclimated. After running around all day, Mom and Dad start to pack up their car.

"I'm really going to miss you guys!" I say, with a hint of a whine, giving them each a giant hug fighting back the tears.

"See-you-later Charlie. You can come home anytime. You know that," Dad says with a smile, and I think I see a glint in his eyes, but he quickly blinks any sign of tears away. We don't believe in goodbyes in my family.

Mom says, "Don't worry about us, you know how your dad drives. I promise to text or call when we get home."

I walk back inside after I can no longer see their car and take a deep breath. I'm going to use the time alone to relax and enjoy my new apartment. I may be resorting back to my comfort zone by having The Hunger Games running in the background while I organize myself, but who cares. I'm in my own home away from home now. No one is here to judge me!

I am really loving the view from my windows. Although my apartment isn't anything fancy, at least I feel safe and have a decent view. I just can't believe I did it! I really moved down here in this huge city all alone, well, I guess not completely alone. I know I can call Dominic if I really need anything, but still.

I'm glad to still be close enough to see my parents when I feel the pull of home. Everything will be fine once I get my bearings. I have the weekend to get everything together and then I start my new job at the paper. I'll mostly be working on click bait

and fluff articles. They'll probably have me go out on coffee runs and back up research for the senior writers, but everyone has to start somewhere. I'll still be working on bigger articles to submit so they can at least be considered for publication, but who knows what the higher ups are looking for at this point?

I hop on to my laptop and check my social media accounts to update my handful of friends on my new life. Then I wander the cursor to the search bar as I do every once in a while and plug in Yuri's name. I know it's weird and that he would look different now, but I just hope one day his name will pop up. I can't even imagine what a twenty-four year old Yuri would look like. Would he be tall? I hoped he would still have his golden, brown hair and I'd never forget his dark almost nightshade eyes. But as usual, nothing. I sigh, close up the computer a little more forcefully than I had intended and lay it on the end table to get ready for bed. It's been a long day and I have a lot to do this weekend.

YURI

I have never been more grateful for Charlie's relationship with her parents than I am today. Whenever they are close by I feel better about her safety. I've had my eyes on Charlie all day. I need to be close by as she moves from her campus dorm into her apartment. Maxim and Andrey have been keeping an eye on Dominic's movements for me. After they informed me he'd be out of the country for a few months, I felt like I could finally breathe deeply. Charlie would be safer with him gone.

Still, I know they have a strong friendship and even though he hasn't done anything to hurt her, you can't trust the Italians. Charlie trusts him too much. After the attack on Daniil, I've had to step up my surveillance on Charlie. I've been getting a feeling that something bad is about to happen. It's a feeling I can't shake, so I'm doing everything I can to stop that idea from materializing.

We still don't know how the Italians got close enough to Daniil. We won't let them just get away with hurting one of our guys, so we are planning a little ambush for some of their men.

Maxim and I are parked a few car lengths away from Charlie's apartment to make sure no one tries to steal any of her things or harass her. She's a strong woman and has gotten better about checking her surroundings since she decided to become an investigative journalist, but I still don't trust that she can defend herself. I prefer to be close by incase she needs me.

Charlie and her parents must have done some extensive research on this area of the city, because she actually found a decent apartment. She's still close to NEU which

isn't ideal, but at least she's not in Washington Park.

I still don't like that Charlie is going to be working at the Chicago Times; journalism can be a dangerous profession especially in this city. I don't know how I'm going to stop her from getting too curious about the crime in the city though. She is such a justice seeker which is one of the traits about her that I have never begrudged. But in the city, that curiosity could get her killed. Luckily, most first time journalists don't get to write about the big stories, so she should be safe from any danger on that front.

Since Charlie is fully moved into her apartment and her parents have headed home, I decide to assign Andrey to keep watch. I have a few errands to run for my father regarding the Italian ambush and I want to talk with Konstantin about looking into Charlie's new boss and coworkers. You can never be too careful.

I walk up to Andrey's blacked out BMW, to let him know Maxim and I are heading out. He rolls down the tinted driver's window once we get within a foot of him.

"Hey Andrey," I greet with a head nod, "We're going to go back to the gym and get some things finalized. You stay put and make sure if Charlie goes anywhere to let me know."

"Okay," He pauses and fidgets with his fingers before asking, "Are you sure we need to keep tabs on her this closely?"

"Andrey," I sigh, not believing I have to explain this to him again. He mentioned his concerns to me after Charlie's graduation, but I guess he still doesn't understand just how much danger Charlie's in by simply being near me. Sometimes I wonder if I'm the problem.

My life is not all sunshine and rainbows. If I did as my father asked all those years ago, and forgot about her, maybe she'd be safe. But I just couldn't do that and maybe

that makes me selfish. I'd rather live in a world where I have to protect Charlie against the danger that gravitates toward me like a magnet than a world where Charlie isn't in my life at all.

I try to explain as patiently as possible, "We've discussed this. Charlie's phone and the program we put into place doesn't work how it used to. I can't just leave her unprotected in the city."

"I know. But we have other things to worry about besides Charlie. The plan to get back at the Italians for what happened to Daniil should be our top priority. I should be there helping plan for that. Not babysitting your..." he pauses and squints his eyes making that annoying confused face that is often plastered onto his face. "What even is she to you, Yuri? You haven't spent any time with her in ten years."

If Andrey and I hadn't grown up together and his father wasn't a close advisor to my father, we probably wouldn't have grown to be close friends. He's just not that interesting or bright, but he's reliable and usually doesn't fight me on stuff like this.

My shoulders tense and I take another deep breath. I ball my hands and then release my fingers and start explaining again.

"Andrey, I don't have time to hash this out with you. We've talked about how special Charlie is to me. We've discussed that if the Italians find out about her and her importance to me, they will use her against me. Against us. I cannot let that happen." Why is Andrey fighting me on this? He knows the Italians would kill to have some leverage over us.

"No. You're right Yuri. I just want to make sure we don't lose sight of the Italians or our plans to halt more of their operations. They don't even know about Charlie. She's not in any real danger right now."

“Don’t you think I know how important those plans are?” I nearly shout. Grinding my teeth, I speak through tight lips, “Listen Andrey, I understand that you think my priorities aren’t straight. But what you don’t seem to get is that by protecting Charlie I am protecting all of us. Remember, she’s close to Dominic, I won’t allow her to go unprotected! He may not be a threat to her right now, but there’s no doubt in my mind that Dominic is friends with Charlie for some purpose. I just don’t know what it is yet.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I see a message from Pap. “We’ve gotta go Andrey. You stay here. If Charlie leaves her apartment, you follow her and you keep me in the loop. Got it?” Sometimes talking with Andrey is like talking to a brick wall.

Maxim and I walk away from Andrey and get in my steel-grey Audi. I never liked driving around in an all black car. It seemed too conspicuous to me. My windows are still tinted, but not enough to have the cops up my ass every five seconds and I had the rims blacked out, but I don’t need to drive around the city looking like I’m trying to hide. I prefer to hide in plain sight whenever possible.

We hop in the car and drive back to the gym to meet up with Pap and the others to finalize our plans. When we’re done, the Italians won’t know what hit them.

### CHARLIE

Monday morning comes a little too quickly for me. Lucky for me though there is no line at my new caffeine stop and the bus ride was shorter than I thought it would be. Every building in Chicago makes me feel like an ant as I walk toward the building I'll be working in. The building is gorgeous with its gothic-style architecture. I am instantly in love with the gargoyles high above the main entrance doors. I swear one of them looks like a frog. When I walk in, I am greeted by a girl named Sasha, who gives me the welcome speech and takes me to see Elmira in HR.

Elmira is a forty-something woman with long blond hair; she is wearing a flowy, flower print blouse and traditional black dress pants. I really like her shoes and am about to compliment her on them, but change my mind when I look back up at her. She seems like one of those women who does her job and doesn't do the whole small talk at work thing.

"Here is your laptop, phone, and ID," she pauses, "Don't lose your ID. It is very important! You will be charged twenty dollars if it needs to be replaced," She snarks. Okay... definitely not going to try and make small talk with that one.

I make my way to the elevators and use my ID to allow me access. I have always loved pressing elevator buttons. Something about seeing the little circle light up sends a burst of joy through me. I press the number four and listen to the elevator music.

The doors open to a huge lobby with four mahogany desks housing four beautiful receptionists telling people where to go and answering phones. I make my way, following the signs, to the newsroom. Walking through the glass double doors and



through a field of cubicles, I finally find my way to Bill, the lead journalist's office which is just a cubicle with higher walls than the rest. I feel like every bossman's name is Bill in a newsroom.

He ushers me to a chair across his U-shaped desk.

“Did you find your way up here alright?” His monotone voice is not very inviting, and he sounds like talking to me is a giant inconvenience. He is younger than I thought a “Bill” should look, maybe thirty with bright blonde hair and dull, gray eyes showing early signs of dark circles and fine lines. Poor guy.

“I found everything just fine, thanks!” I try not to sound overly enthusiastic because I can tell it will just annoy him; and honestly, I don't really feel like rolling out my customer service voice for a guy who looks like he'd walk past a dog without even having a quick urge to pet it.

“That's good,” He quickly responds. “Your desk is just around the corner, and I placed all the upcoming stories you are responsible for in the folder on your desk. As long as those stories are done by the deadline, you can work on other stories. Of course there is no guarantee that anything additional will be published, but it does give you the opportunity to branch out if you feel like doing so. There's coffee in the break room to the right of the Lobby. Just follow the signs. Do you have any questions?”

He looks at me waiting for the landslide of questions I am sure every newbie asks on their first day, but I just shake my head no as he continues to walk me to my cubicle.

“This is your work space, decorate however you want as long as it is not distracting,” He says squinting his eyes as if he's assessing whether I will be a bright neon color girl that goes all out when decorating her desk. I respond with a tight lipped smile and thank him for his time.

I walk behind my desk and take it all in for a few heartbeats. I can't believe I'm actually here!

I've been assigned a few training videos to watch for the day, so I begin to set up my laptop. Once it's good to go, I open my email, head to the website for the training, and click on the first one.

"Well let's get this party started," I sigh and get to work.

The first week in Chicago has been the longest week of my life, but I am getting my bearings. Bill assigned me a mentor to help me get the lay of the land. It's really nice to have someone to turn to when I have questions. Bill is a boar of a boss, but at least he leaves me alone. Sasha from reception is really nice. She always greets me with a smile and asks how I'm doing. I received a few encouraging messages from Dominic about him possibly coming home sooner than expected which has made me look forward to the next few weeks.

I found an amazing Chinese take out place that delivers, which was a massive gold star for the week. Since it's Friday I'm going to do what all responsible twenty-three year old adults do: get the heck out of my apartment and find somewhere to get a decent drink. With Dominic still being in Europe, that means none of my friends are currently living in the city. In fact, most of them don't even live in the state.

A handful of people from work said they were going to this restaurant and pub that used to be frequented by Al Capone back in the day. That sounded pretty cool, so I thought why not make some new city friends? As I take out my phone to schedule an Uber, my phone goes off with a message from Dominic.

Dominic : "So, how was the first week of city life?"

Charlotte : "Very uneventful, which I don't hate. Just trying to get acquainted with the

city.”

Dominic : “You doing anything tonight or this weekend other than unpacking?”

Charlotte : “A few of people from work are getting together at a pub. I am thinking of going.”

Dominic : “You better not be staying home in your apartment and watching Netflix, alone. I will fly back and drag you out if I have to.”

Charlotte : “Even with the jetlag?”

Dominic : “Especially with the jetlag. You should definitely go, C.C. You might have fun!”

Charlotte : “Fine, DAD! I will go out and make some new friends.”

Dominic : “That's my girl! I'll check in later? Have fun!”

Charlotte : “Yeah, I will tell you all about the torture tomorrow. Have a good night! Or is it Day?”

Dominic : “Goodnight, C.C.”

While I wait for the Uber driver to arrive, I go through my closet. I swear, since moving to the city I have nothing good to wear. I decided on a pair of black fitted jeans, an emerald green tank top, and some kitten heels. I go to the bathroom to touch up my makeup and put some product in my hair to keep the frizz under control. Good enough. I get the notification that my Uber is almost here, so I head downstairs.

### THE SNAKE

Who the FUCK does Yuri think he is? I want to kill him now! I can't wait any longer. He's messing up my life worse than I thought possible.

It would be so easy to slit his throat and be done with it! But no! That would be letting him and his father get off too easily. I need to find a way to stop him. My plan to kidnap Charlie didn't go as well as I'd hoped.

After one of their guys was attacked by Nico's men, they increased security. I think they might be onto me and my new partner. At first I thought taking on a partner was too risky, but this one walked into my father's office and we couldn't say no! It was almost too easy, but he knows if he double crosses us we'll make his life a living hell.

The Volkov's really don't know what's about to hit them! With my new partner firmly in place, I have a better understanding of their plans and I don't have to trudge around in the mud behind Yuri and his goons anymore!

Tonight, Charlie's coworkers are meeting at a restaurant. I think I can convince her to go. I know they will follow Charlie. It's the perfect plan! If everything goes as I hope, I'll have her tonight and then the real fun begins!

Once she's alone and Yuri is distracted, I'll make my move and the Volkov's will finally be out of my way!

### CHARLIE

The drive to the pub was uneventful. It was nice to see more of the city at night from the safety of an SUV. One nice thing about Chicago traffic is you aren't going too fast to miss the view.

An hour later, we pull up outside the pub and I can instantly smell the beer and fries, making my stomach grumble in protest. I make my way inside looking for my co-workers but don't see anyone yet. They must be working late or stuck in traffic. I grab a high top table and a menu.

I'm looking at the appetizers when the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and chills run down my spine. I shiver and look around as the feeling of being watched settles over me. Not again . I try to ignore the feeling as the waitress approaches me and I order cheese fries and a Corona with lime. She nods and smiles as she heads off to enter in my order.

I glance around the small pub keeping an eye peeled for someone I know. My eyes land on the door just as Bill and a couple of interns come in; I think their names are Olivia and Jake. I make an audible sigh of relief. Thank God someone showed up! I wave them over and the waitress begins taking their drink orders.

I scan the room, taking in all the decor. There are numerous framed photos and articles about Al Capone on the walls. They even have a Tommy gun propped up on the wall near the entrance. My favorite piece of decor is a lamp with a Fedora placed atop it like it's on Al Capone's head.

“So Charlotte, how are you liking living in the city?” Olivia asks.

“I am loving it. There is so much culture and history here!”

“Yea. I love Al Capone and everything to do with prohibition!” Jake interjects.

“Oh. I don’t know much about him. But this restaurant is pretty cool,” I say. I’ve always found small talk difficult. I don’t have many hobbies, so I find it difficult to know what to talk about. Jake and Olivia talk more about what they know of Al Capone while Bill stares into his drink. He must not be too great at small talk either.

The waitress comes back to check on us and we decide to order a pizza to share. I’ve always loved Chicago’s deep dish pizza! While we wait for our food, Jake regales us with his knowledge of Al Capone. I think he must be a closet Al Capone nerd because he starts rattling off all sorts of facts.

“Did you know Al Capone got his nickname from a fight that took place in a brothel?” Jake said enthusiastically.

“Wow!” Olivia tries to sound interested, but I can tell she’s just humoring Jake. I laugh softly at Jake’s statement and just the idea of a fight in a brothel. I picture half-naked men and shrieking women.

Olivia, Bill and I are listening to Jake tell us about the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre when I get this familiar, foreboding feeling. I look over my shoulder toward the bar then scan the dining room. When my eyes land on a man sitting at a table alone, I have to do a double take. I must seriously be going insane. Is that Yuri? I turn away and look back at my menu. No! That can't be him. Maybe all these dreams of Yuri are messing with my brain. I lift my eyes and look back toward the table with the man wearing the fedora.

I lock eyes with him and am instantly shocked and confused. I shake my head as I look away and squeeze my eyes shut. That's it, I'm going nuts! Ok Charlotte, get a grip! I look back at the table one last time and he stands abruptly and heads for the door! Yup, you are definitely losing your mind! Get it together! I rub at my temples just as more beers appear on the table.

"You okay Charlotte? You look like you've seen a ghost," Bill says looking concerned.

"Yea. I'm fine. I just need some fresh air, um, I'll be right back," I say as I rush outside and inspect the people walking along the sidewalk, just to make sure I am not hallucinating. I look up and down the street a few times but I don't see anyone. I decide to take a quick walk around the block in both directions before admitting defeat and heading back inside.

As I walk back to the table, I'm starting to think I'm actually going crazy; however, once I'm immersed in more conversation, the night starts to go by pretty quickly. We drink and talk about work. True to form, Jake starts bringing up more facts about Al Capone which segues into a weird conversation.

I'm surprised when Oliva starts talking about an odd turf war she's been seeing on the news. I guess there are two organized crime syndicates downtown.

Olivia starts off by saying, "I mean we all know the Italians have been all over Chicago for ages. This used to be Al Capone's place after all! Apparently, the Russians are trying to worm their way into Italian territory." She sounded a little too excited about the prospect of a couple of mob families going to war where we live and work.

I decide to pipe in, "That sounds like a fun story to assist one of the reporters in writing about; although, you'll definitely want to be careful. I am pretty sure mob

families don't like their business being splashed all over the paper.”

I love stories like that. The investigation. The political fallout. How the police respond and what they do to help the general public, really gets my blood boiling.

Curious, I ask, “Are you working on that story Olivia?”

“I was talking to Bryce about it and he said there was no story there, so I am back to researching this Vegan Epidemic that is apparently taking over the North Side,” She says rolling her eyes. “Like rich people don’t have enough going on? Now they need to boycott beef too!” She chuckles, then sighs again, “This is going to be the most boring research project of my career.” I can't help but laugh to myself about her plight because Bill has me writing a puff piece called Fashion or Crashin’ and I can’t help but feel the same.

“Don’t you think it’s weird that Bryce doesn’t want to pursue the story?” I ask. “Even if there’s nothing substantial... that would be a great research project just to get your feet wet as an intern.”

Olivia doesn’t respond right away, but I can tell she’s turning it over in her mind.

“If it makes you feel any better, Bill over here,” I say, patting Bill’s shoulder and giving him a half smile, “Has me on fashion crash duty. I get to go through all the images from last week’s awards ceremonies and figure out what the critics will love or hate. I need another drink just thinking about it.”

I know it’s only my first week, but I had high hopes that since my portfolio showed I had a big interest in politics and the police, that maybe I would be assigned those types of stories. But no, Bill said it will help beef up my portfolio and show some diversity in my writing if I work on some alternative pieces. In other words, no one else would do it so he passed it onto the new girl.



“Ugh! Fashion is the worst,” Olivia says with a small sympathetic smile. I can tell she feels sorry for me, but at the same time, she’s thankful it isn’t her.

The rest of the night goes by in a blur. We chat some more about our monthly assignments, but I am barely able to pay attention to my co-workers anymore.

“Hey guys, I’m going to call an Uber and head home,” I say around 11:30. I’m just proud of myself for at least leaving my apartment. I am exhausted, buzzed, and really just want to be alone with my thoughts and get a good night's sleep.

I say goodbye to my boss and coworkers and start walking to the door to wait for my Uber.

“Wait up!” I turn around and Olivia links arms with me. “Thanks for what you asked about Bryce earlier and the story about the mob.” She takes a few breaths, hesitates then continues, “It’s hard to get up the nerve to challenge the established journalists, you know?”

“Yeah. I get it. Do you think you’ll ask Bryce about it again?” I asked intrigued.

“I don’t want to make waves. I don’t think I am going to. I find the mob interesting, don’t get me wrong...”

“No. I get it. You don’t want to come across as a problem or as someone difficult.”

“Yeah,” she sighs, “Well, thanks for coming out tonight Charlotte. It was really nice to get to know you a bit.”

“I enjoyed our conversation. Good night Olivia. See you Monday!” We part ways just as my Uber arrives.

Thankfully, it doesn't take long to get back to my apartment because I am so tired my bones ache. As I get out of the Uber and walk toward my door, I shiver and the hairs on the back of my neck seem to stand up. I whirl around squinting, looking in the shadows, seeing if anyone's there, but I don't see anything. I turn back toward my building.

"Great! I move to the big city alone and now I'm getting even more paranoid," I whisper. Shaking my head, I enter the code to get into my building. I get my keys out for the second door before checking my mailbox and making my way up the three flights of stairs to my door. "Why have an elevator in a huge apartment building in the city?" I mumble sarcastically.

Once I'm inside the safety of my apartment, I throw my keys in the sea shell-shaped bowl next to the door and toss my purse on the couch. I make my way into the kitchen, pour myself a glass of water, and then plop on the couch with my laptop. I turn on the TV and navigate the app screen. I head straight to my go-to movie series, *The Hunger Games*. Of course!

Once I have the movie playing, I grab my laptop and check all my socials, scrolling through posts mindlessly, checking on my friends, and answering any messages they may have sent while I was out. Then I open my potential stories folder and flesh out some details Oliva mentioned about the two crime syndicates to look into later. I mean if they aren't going to look into it, maybe I can. It could be exhilarating to research this on the side. Plus, it'd be a good way to find an in with the local cops and detectives for future stories.

Two and a half hours later, I'm exhausted! Half asleep, I shut off the TV and inch my way to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. I wander into my bedroom and throw my clothes from the day on the floor while grabbing an oversized t-shirt. Next, I wrap myself up like a burrito in my down comforter and nuzzle into my pillow for some well-deserved sleep. I think about how weird this week has been as I

drift off to sleep.

YURI

It's been a long-ass week. Between meetings at the club planning our attack on the Italians and protecting Charlie, I'm exhausted. Luckily, Charlie's job is just as monotonous as I thought it would be, so she's not really in any danger while at work. I always make sure Andrey, Maxim, or I follow her as she goes to and from work just in case, but it's been pretty uneventful. She's still communicating with Dominic which boils my blood, but at least he's still out of the country.

We have one more day until we put our plan against the Italians in motion. Pap, Maxim, and I along with Konstantin and a few others have been working non-stop to ensure this thing goes off without a hitch. Sometimes I wonder how the Italians are successful. It's honestly a miracle they're up and running as efficiently as they are. Nico must have lost his mind when his son died. I was surprised he had Dominic out of the country rather than helping him run things here. Dominic may be a bastard, but he's a smart bastard.

Although, their ability, or lack thereof, to run a smooth operation is only good for us, so maybe I don't mind how unorganized they've become. They're just complacent, arrogant assholes who think no one can touch them. Before Francisco died, that might have been the case, but not anymore.

On Saturday, between midnight and one in the morning, Maxim and I and a few of Pap's trusted men, Viktor and Jeremie, are going to ambush Nico's men while they cut through Washington Park, like they do every damn Saturday, to drop off payment from one of their dance clubs to Nico's restaurant. They think they're so clever doing a drop when most of the city is sleeping or partying. Sure they can try and blend in

with the bar hopping crowd, but not once they get to the park. Last night we discussed the finer details.

I'll be surveilling the park with Max. I can't risk being seen otherwise I'd be taking Viktor's place. My father knows Max and I are the ones who spend the most time on the streets so we know them better than anyone. Andrey has been watching over Charlie while we located a few good places to monitor the other men without being seen. I'd rather be watching over Charlie, but this has to be done. The Italians won't get away with hurting us. I won't let them and neither will my father.

Konstantin has been trying to get a pin on who Max and I will be tailing. He finally hacked into the security footage from both Nico's restaurant and the dance club on Monday night and recognized two of the men who always drop off the payment: Dante and Lorenzo. They're runners just like Daniil. It took about twenty-four more hours of searching other security cameras, but Konstantin found out that Dante and Lorenzo were also the ones who jumped Daniil so the payback will be sweet!

It didn't take long to decide that Viktor and Jeremie would be the ones to take on Dante and Lorenzo, plus Max and I will be there just in case things go south. A small part of me hopes they fight back so I can watch the blood seep from their bodies. I want to watch the light leave their eyes for what they did to Daniil.

We've planned all that we can, so tonight I'm going to focus on Charlie and give Andrey a night off. With Konstantine still working out the finishing touches on the app that will allow us better access to Charlie's phone, Andrey, Maxim and I are taking shifts.

Maxim is at Charlie's apartment now waiting to follow her to work while I have some breakfast with my mom and brothers. We don't get to do this often enough. Mikhail is nineteen and is following nicely in my footsteps. He's almost as tall as me but he has mom's light brown hair and hazel eyes. Aleksandr is seventeen and can't

wait to be done with homeschooling. He's about 6'1" and has dark hair and eyes like Pap and me.

We're not as close as we used to be because I'm always busy with Pap and the guys plus I've been so busy looking out for Charlie that I haven't been able to pay attention to them as much as I'd like. Mom does a great job making life feel as normal as possible for us all though. We may not be peas in a pod, but we have always known that regardless of how often we spend time together, we will protect each other.

After finishing breakfast, I head out to check in with my father at the club. I also need to see if Konstantin has any updates on his app. I use the service elevator to leave the building and walk a block to get to my car.

It usually takes me thirty minutes to get to the club because people in Chicago don't know how to fucking drive. Once I park in the lot and walk into the club, I feel my shoulders loosen.

Konstantine has an office at the back of the club just to the left of the training rings. As I walk through his office door, I see his cluttered desk. No one ever tries cleaning his desk off for him because he swears he knows where everything is. I don't know how he works in this mess, but whatever he does works. If it ain't broke, don't fix it as they say. I lean on the door frame and see Konstantine hunched over his laptop and typing like a madman.

"Writing code again are we?" I ask as I walk through the doorway and take a seat in one of the two armchairs across from his desk.

"The code won't write itself you know," he says looking up at me from the corner of his eyes. "I've been working on the app. All you'll have to do is get close to Charlie's phone to download the app. I'll take it from there," he starts to explain.

I don't know how to ask him for an update about being followed, so I rub my hands along my thighs and say, "Okay. That sounds great. I'm not sure when we'll be able to get close enough to her. How close do we need to be exactly?"

While still typing on his computer, he looks up at the ceiling, tilts his head ever so slightly as if calculating it in his mind, then says, "Within a foot of her phone." Then looks back at his computer and continues typing.

"Damn, okay!" I say, impressed, "We'll have to make a plan. How soon can you have it done?"

"I'll be done in a few hours." The click, click, click of his fingers as they hit the keyboard are the only sounds for a few more seconds while I contemplate asking about my theory of being followed by someone.

"Good! I'll check in with Maxim in a bit and see what he thinks," I say, sitting further back in my chair and shifting uncomfortably.

It's then that Konstantine stops typing and looks up at me, "What's up?" he asks.

"It's nothing," I say, considering, "I just can't shake the idea that someone has been following me as I follow Charlie..." I draw my eyebrows together as the thought forms in my mind causing a headache.

Konstantine crosses his arms, leans his elbows on his desk, his head tilting downward slightly, and looks at me through hooded eyes, "Does this have to do with the cell towers you had me look into a few weeks ago?"

I've always looked up to Konstantine, and I feel a bit like a child sitting across from his desk right now. He's only a handful of years younger than my father, so ever since we moved back into the city, he's been more of an uncle figure to me and my

brothers.

I sigh, sit up straighter in my chair not allowing myself to be overwhelmed by fear, “Yes,” I finally reply, “It does.”

“I told you there was no activity around you at the time, so why are you still worried?” He asks with genuine concern.

I bring my right foot up and lean my heel on my left knee, leaning back a bit, “It’s just a gut feeling,” I say.

“Well, it’s never a bad idea to listen to your gut. But don’t let it be the sole deciding factor of your choices,” he says giving me some wise advice, “Always be vigilant, that’s what the boss says, so don’t get complacent, if you let yourself get too laser focused on this, you’ll lose your mind.”

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh. Planting both feet firmly on the floor, I use my arms to push myself up out of the chair, “Thanks Konstantine, for the app and for your advice. I’ve gotta go talk with the boss. Is he in the bar?”

“Yea. He’s back there with Viktor and Jeremie.”

“Ok. I’ll talk to you later. Thanks again, you’re the best!” I’ll feel miles better about Charlie’s safety once we have that app installed, but I still can’t seem to shake the feeling that I’m walking into a trap.

After my meeting with Konstantine and then my father, Maxim and I hopped in my car and followed Charlie on her way home from work. Andrey has the night off and I’m glad. I wasn’t looking forward to hearing his whining all night, although hopefully after our last talk, Andrey has decided to get his head out of his ass and stop acting like an idiot.



We parked about forty feet away from the entrance to her apartment and kept tabs on who entered and exited the building. I didn't want to be that guy who pulls out binoculars and spies on a girl. It's a clear night so when I look out the windshield I can actually see a few stars in the sky.

Charlie seems to be settling in for the night. I can see the lights are on in her living room, and it looks like she might be watching something on TV. If I could, I'd be up there with her right now. I'd wrap her in my arms and never let her go. I look up at the her apartment and allow myself a few minutes to daydream about what life would have been like if my Pap hadn't moved us back here.

Just then, like she can feel my stare, she opens the living room curtains and I can see directly into her living room. She looks irresistible in her jeans. They hug her curves just right and she's always looked great in green.

Maxim hits me on the arm and I glare over at him, "What the fuck man?" I say furrowing my brows and ready to punch him back.

"It looks like Charlie called an Uber..." he says.

"What?" I say a bit shocked, "How can she trust a complete stranger to drive her around the city? She has her own car." I am frustrated, but at least we'll be able to follow wherever she has decided to go.

In the time it takes the Uber to arrive, I call Konstantine so he can do some social media stalking to find out where she might be headed. Turns out she was invited to dinner by a few of her co-workers, so we make sure to plot out several routes in case we get split up by traffic.

When her Uber arrives we follow it to this cheesy Al-Capone inspired restaurant.

As Charlie gets out of the car and heads inside, Maxim says, “This is a great time to get close to Charlie and get that app installed on her phone.”

I take a few seconds to think, then call Konstantine again just to make sure it’s ready to go. After getting the go ahead from him, and a quick email with the file we need, it looks like this could work.

I turn to Maxim with anxious excitement, “Konstantine said we’re good to go, I downloaded the file onto my phone. I’ll call Andrey. We should be able to get this done quick and easy,” I say, “As long as we don’t overthink it.”

We sit in the car in contemplative silence until Andrey arrives. As soon as he does, we formulate a plan that Andrey is not too keen on, but who the fuck cares? The plan is pretty simple, so I hope it works. I walk in wearing dark jeans, a black tshirt, and an old-school fedora, black with white pin-stripes. I walk to the hostess and ask for a table for one. When she walks me to my table, I see Charlie talking with her co-workers. I try not to make eye-contact, or look at her too long. The goal is to have her recognize me, or at least think she does, so she follows me outside when I abruptly leave.

I wait a few minutes before deciding to head inside. Charlie is there all by herself, and I don’t like that. I keep to the shadows of the entryway for a few heartbeats completely hidden and take in her beauty. Before she has a chance to see me, I flag over a hostess and am seated at my own table.

Her boss and co-workers come in and by the time they’re ordering food. I hold my own menu over my face just enough to hide any identifying features. I watch her in awe as she talks casually with the people at her table. When she laughs I feel my chest tighten. Her laugh has always been soothing and it’s been too long since I’ve been close enough to hear her.

My heart skips a beat.

She must feel my eyes on her because in the blink of an eye, she's scanning the room. Her eyes land on me and for a moment I don't think she recognizes me. Then I see the confusion in the crease of her brow and the alarm as her eyes go wide as saucers. I don't move right away, I want her to see me, to be enticed enough to leave the restaurant.

She takes a few subtle glances my way and then, when she can't seem to look away I know it's time to go! I get up, not too quickly to raise an alarm for the wait staff, but enough to raise Charlie's curiosity.

I see Maxim, dressed as a busboy, make his way toward her table. We're banking on her leaving her phone at her table. I rush outside and hop in the car we positioned to be waiting for me. Andrey's in the driver's seat, and as soon as I close the door, he drives off. Once we're about fifty feet from the entrance, Andrey pulls over into a parking spot so we can wait for Maxim.

"This was too risky, Yuri. I don't know why you had to go in there," Andrey says frustrated.

I look in the rearview mirror and see Charlie just as she walks out the front door. As I slump down in my seat, just in case she can see me from this distance. I look to Andrey, "If you ever speak to me like that again Andrey, you will regret it!" I seethe. "Charlie is mine and I will do whatever I see fit to ensure she is safe! Do you understand?"

Andrey nods his head. I can tell he's furious at me because his eyes go a shade darker for a split second and his eyebrows furrow. I know he's pissed that I talked to him like a child, but if he's going to act like one, then I have no choice.

I can see Charlie as she walks around the building, searching for me. Then Maxim leaves the pub calmly and makes his way to the car.

He gets into the back seat and says, “That worked like a charm. I was able to walk up to their table and put their glasses in my bin. One guy was talking incessantly about Al-Capone for so long I didn’t even have to make up an excuse to stay by their table for the app to connect.”

“Good. Let’s open the app and make sure everything is working on our end before we leave.” I say sitting up straighter in my seat.

We spend ten minutes looking at the features of the app Konstantine designed before I feel confident enough to leave. Even though I know Andrey was right, I did put too much at risk by going inside and allowing Charlie a chance to see me, I won’t tell him that. The plan worked, and that’s all that matters.

Andrey puts the car in drive, “Let’s go. I want to get a good nap before we have to meet Viktor and Jeremie in the park.”

When we enter my condo, I walk to the kitchen. I need some coffee if I’m going to make it through tonight without fucking up the whole plan. Andrey and Maxim follow me and sit at two bar stools across from me.

“I’m really sorry for what I said back there, Yuri. I’m just pissed that you put yourself in that position,” Andrey says and leans his elbows on the counter and fists his hands lacing his fingers together. I know he’s still unhappy with my priorities, but I can’t let him get away with talking to me that way. He’s sorry and he’s my friend, but I’ll be his boss one day.

“You know Andrey, I’m really getting sick of having to explain myself to you. I don’t want you questioning my decisions. I’m looking out for the business, and all of

you, as well as Charlie. If you start undermining me, everything is going to go to shit!" I say as I wait for my coffee to brew.

"I know Yuri. I'm sorry. I really am. I just wanted to be helpful. It's always good to get another opinion right?" He's talking like a soft child and his tender apology is only making me more upset.

"Andrey, enough okay. Yes, I want other's opinions, but at the end of the day, I'm the one in charge and I've got a lot more at stake here than either of you. If I don't do my job, not only do I look like an idiot, I make my father look like a fool! If I want your opinion Andrey, I'll ask for it." The coffee pot beeps letting me know my brew is ready, so I pour myself a full mug and make my way to the living room.

Maxim and Andrey don't follow me, they just turn on their stools to face the living room couch. "I understand Yuri. It won't happen again," Andrey says as he meets my gaze.

"I'm gonna need you to keep an eye on Charlie for me tonight and tomorrow morning. Maxim and I are going to be hung up with this plan tonight. Then we'll be talking with the boss in the morning," I say, daring Andrey to fight me on this.

"You got it!" Andrey responds, his voice steady. Finally, no push back.

"Alright. Let's talk about something else. I don't want to go into tonight pissed," I say as I take gulps from my mug. Then I settle onto my couch for a short nap. It's going to be a long night and I want to be alert for this. I won't allow myself to be the reason we don't get back at the Italians.

### CHARLIE

I wake to the beep, beep, beep of someone's car alarm. Oh the joys of city living. Groaning, I try to rub the sleep from my face and get up to prepare myself for a weekend alone. After showering and throwing my copper mane into a top knot, I make my way to the kitchen to make myself the most girl breakfast imaginable. Coffee. Once I have a warm mug in my hands, I make my way to my couch, drape my fluffy throw blanket over my lap, grab my laptop, and turn on the news.

Logging into my email and socials, I do a quick scan for any messages or comments from friends. The news has been pretty boring these last few days. I hear the weather report as I type a response to a friend on Instagram. Then, I hear the high pitch introduction that usually means there's breaking news.

Naomi Patterson, the anchor for Chicago 9 News is suddenly on the screen, "Just last night there was another shooting in Washington Park". I lean in toward the television, my interest is piqued. "This is the third shooting in just over a month. Police say they have no leads at this time. We tried to get a statement from lead Detective Missy Graves, who said they have no comment at this time."

I have a not-so-out-of-the-box feeling this is the turf war Olivia was talking about. After the brief, unsatisfying report, I decide to do some research on the area where the shooting occurred while I finish watching the news. I notice a pattern of these "attacks". They appear to be two to three men against one, and the locations are all within a three mile radius of the same park. The one on the news this morning, Washington Park, plus each attack, and or murder, was twelve days after the previous. There is a rotation these guys are following. Someone must have caught it

by now. That's why they stopped for a few months in the winter!

I need to go there and investigate, maybe ask some questions. See if I am on the right track. I get ready to leave the house and make sure my bag is packed with all the essentials. Then, making sure my address was saved in my maps, I get ready to take a short drive to the south side.

It took me thirty minutes to find parking anywhere near the park. I made sure to pack some food, a notebook, and my laptop just in case. I had to walk three blocks to get to the scene, red and blue lights still flashing. Since the shooting happened just last night, police were still clearing the scene. I can see yellow crime-scene-do-not-cross tape stretched across one section of the park. I make my way toward a couple of officers and try to wave them down.

“Hey, excuse me! Officer!” One of the men finally looks my way, and I give a hesitant wave and a soft smile as he makes his way over to where I’m standing. There aren’t many people near the crime scene, which I find a bit odd. I’m not sure what I was expecting, seeing as I’ve never been to a crime scene in a big city before, but I thought there’d be more people around.

“Sorry ma’am, it's been a busy morning and this is an active crime scene! I am going to have to ask you to step back and follow the detour signs around the park.” I had a feeling this might happen. Thankfully I grabbed my press badge before leaving the apartment. I take it out of my bag and show it to the officer.

“Sorry, I just have a couple of questions. Maybe you can help me, officer...?” I say dragging the last word out hoping he takes the hint. I can see his name badge, but I choose to let him introduce himself to me.

“Keenly, Officer Keenly, and I am sorry I can’t really help you. As I said, this is an active crime scene and an ongoing investigation, and to be honest, Miss, we are just

here to make sure people don't walk in or mess with anything. The detective in charge would be better suited to answer any questions you have."

He's actually kind of cute, if you like cops, maybe six feet tall with dark, wavy chocolate brown hair styled short. The light blue t-shirt of his uniform hugs tightly against his biceps and his golden brown skin.

"I totally understand. Would you be able to point me in the detective's direction? My boss just wants at least a couple quotes for Monday's edition," I say looking up at him with pleading eyes and a bright smile hoping he will throw me a bone here. He sighs and a smile tugs the corner of his mouth.

"Okay, I will tell you, but you have to give me your name first."

I begin to beam knowing I now have an in with Officer Keenly and introduce myself, "My name is Charlotte." I let a genuine smile cross my face and reach out my hand to shake his. His smile is beautiful, bright and makes me feel at ease.

"Charlotte, well it is nice to meet you. If you follow this path around the curve you'll see a fountain. It's huge. You can't miss it. Detective Missy Graves is who you are looking for, and she should be over there."

"Missy Graves. Got it! Thank you very much Officer Keenly. I appreciate your help and hope to see you around."

I quickly pull out a notepad and jot down Officer Keenly's name and the detective's name so I won't forget. On the news this morning, the anchor mentioned Missy Graves, but I didn't think to jot her name down. Missy Graves isn't a very common name, but it sounded familiar. I start thinking about where I might have heard that name before as I make my way toward the fountain Keenly pointed out to me.



I should have known it would be a bust to try and talk to a detective at a crime scene, but I had to try. I was able to get some pictures and scope out the park. It really is a beautiful park. There are tall, luscious bur oak trees, beautifully designed fountains, and gorgeous statues smack dab in the middle of a concrete jungle.

I introduced myself to a few more local PD, but there was no sign of detective Missy Graves. It took some effort to find anything worth taking note of for this case. As I was browsing, I noticed some officers talking just as I was passing the Fountain of Time. I slowed my pace and focused on the intricate details of the fountain while listening in on their conversation.

A tall, blonde cop said, "Detective Graves didn't seem too interested." He was skinny, like a bean pole, and his hair flipped up under his cap. He sounded fairly young.

"I know! It seemed like she wanted this to be a serial killer, but as soon as she figured it was 'just more gang violence' she left," A second cop said with a touch of aggravation. He actually used finger quotes when he talked about gang violence. I notice he's tall and large, like a bear in a police uniform. Not only is he big like a bear, but he's hairy too. He has a black mustache with a long, matching beard that is streaked with a bit of grey. His voice is kind for him being so large.

"It's like she doesn't think gang violence is important," The blonde cop sighed, "This was a violent crime. Did you see the one guy's face?" the young cop said exasperated.

"Yea. I don't know much about serial killers, but I'm pretty sure they don't beat their victims to a pulp and then shoot them several times," the older cop said. "This seems too personal to me, but like I said, what do I know? I'm only a beat cop with twenty-five year's experience. Who would listen to me?" He continued, frustrated.

These men sound like they know more about what goes on in this city than any

detective would.

The young, blond cop lifted his shoulders as if to say I don't know and then asked, "Should we keep canvassing the park and see if there's anyone around who is willing to talk to us?"

The bear of a cop chuckled in a low baritone, "You know no one around here is going to fess up to seeing anything last night. They're too scared."

Both cops started walking the opposite direction from where I'm standing, so I take the time to jot down a few notes. Now I really want to find this Missy Graves and talk with her. I have more questions than answers at this point. Who doesn't care about gang violence in the city? I guess when you're a detective, you have more high profile cases to deal with. It's frustrating though. I really hoped to get some answers tonight.

It was a little after five by the time I got home, so I decided to order take out from the Chinese place down the block. Sitting on the couch with my legs crossed like a pretzel, I eat my Chinese and turn on the TV. After finishing my Kung Pao chicken topped with peanuts, vegetables, and chili peppers, I take out my laptop and start scouring the internet for Missy Graves. There's plenty of information about all the awards she's won for closing cases quickly and even rescuing a handful of women from a sex trafficking ring, but there are no images of her anywhere. How odd!

I will have to ask around about her at the office on Monday. I close my laptop and uncross my legs. After I stand up and stretch out the aches in my arms and legs, I put the leftover Kun Pao in the fridge and make my way to the bathroom to get ready for bed when I hear my phone ping with a new text notification.

Dominic: Hey CC! How goes it?

Charlie: Hey D! Long time no talk. How's Italy?

It's been a bit since I have heard about his European adventure. So I set my phone up on my bathroom counter while starting my nightly skincare routine. Waiting patiently for storytime with Dom to start.

Dominic: It's alright, I have news you're gonna love!

Scrubbing my face with my exfoliant I roll my eyes wondering what shenanigans he got up to now.

Charlie: I don't know about that, but shoot. What's the news?

Dominic: Guess who's coming home early?

I almost drop my phone while reading his news! I am both excited and concerned! Excited because I will actually have a friend in the city I can attempt to make plans with and concerned because, what if something bad happened?

Charlie: SHUT UP! Why? Did something bad happen? Not that I'm not excited to see you or anything because trust me I am.

Dominic: Would you believe me if I said it's because I miss your face.

I literally roll my eyes and face palm at that ridiculousness. Almost forgetting I applied my face mask and I really don't want that goo all over my phone.

Charlie: Haha no way! When are you going to be back.

Dominic: Kinda up in the air right now, but I will let you know as soon as I do.

Charlie: Sounds like a plan. I'm headed to bed. Have a good night and see you when you get home!

I rinse my face and tuck into bed right as I get his last text.

Dominic: Good night, CC! See you soon!

### THE SNAKE

Waking up each day knowing that Ilya and Yuri Volkov are still breathing drives me insane. They go around murdering people and then still have the audacity to act like they're better than everyone else.

I found out Yuri and his goons took out two of Nico's guys last night. How did I not know this was coming? I'm going to have to have a little chat with my new partner and see what he has to say for himself.

If I had known they'd be in the park, I could have gone to Charlie's apartment and taken her since I wasn't able to kidnap her at the restaurant like I had hoped. I was about to grab her while she was looking around the building for Yuri, but there were too many people on the street. I started formulating another plan. I need to get Charlie under my thumb quickly.

It's taking too long for justice to be served on the Volkov's. There are too many moving pieces, so I have to take out a couple first.

I have to work three steps ahead. The Volkov's might think I'm no threat because they've taken many of my pawns, but I have a knight up my sleeve! I'll take their Queen and then I'll be able to dethrone the King!

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

YURI

Last night was one of the better nights I've had in a long time. It felt good to take down Nico's men for what they did to Daniil!

It was dark in the park, but the sky was clear and the moon shone bright alongside the lamp posts making it easy to make out Dante and Lorenzo the moment they entered through the gates.

It was Jeremie's job to take down Dante. Adrenaline was rushing through my veins waiting for Jeremie to pop out of his hiding spot and go for Dante.

Viktor was ten yards away, laying in wait for Lorenzo and Maxim and I were twenty feet across the park so we could see both Viktor and Jeremie in case they needed any help.

I heard someone clear their throat, and knew it was Jeremie's signal that he was ready. Everything started happening quickly after that.

Dante went down quick, and easy, landing loud and hard like a red-oak tree being cut down. Maxim and I stayed where we were, just in case anyone else came into the park and needed to be dealt with.

Viktor popped up like a daisy and pointed his gun at Lorenzo when he started to run after his buddy went down. He didn't get very far before Viktor fired three shots and he hit his mark. Lorenzo slumped to the ground.

The only thing that could have gone better is if I could have taken one of the bastards down myself.

It was a long, thrilling, yet tiring night, so when I woke up this morning I knew I was going to need a large cup of coffee.

I roll out of bed and head into the kitchen to make a fresh pot when I hear my phone buzz on the bedside table.

I walk over and quickly pick up after seeing Maxim's caller ID.

"Max, What's up?" I say groggily.

"Yuri, Charlie is at the crime scene!" I can hear him panting heavily.

"Why do you sound like you need an inhaler? And what do you mean she's at the crime scene? What crime scene?" I ask rapid fire as I walk into the kitchen. I need that coffee ASAP.

"I was at the gym, sparring with one of the guys and Konstantine came out of his office shouting for me to call you. He was checking on the app to make sure it was working and saw her location. She's at the park."

"The park? Like, last night's park? What the fuck? Where's Andrey?" I say pouring coffee grounds into the filter.

"He's still at her apartment. He said he must have fallen asleep. He didn't realize she left."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I grind through clenched teeth, livid. I'm going to kill Andrey!

I hear the coffee pot start to brew as Maxim says, “I don’t think she’s in any danger right now. The place is crawling with police, but I wanted you to know.”

“Is Andrey still at Charlie’s apartment? That fucker better not have gone to the park!”

“No. I told him to stay put. I figured I’d call you and see what you wanted to do,” Maxim said. I’m glad he has a good head on his shoulders because right now I’m fuming.

“Good! Meet me at Charlie’s apartment in twenty minutes. We need to have a chat with Andrey!” I say hanging up just as my coffee maker beeps letting me know it’s ready. Once I have my cup of black coffee in hand, I head out the door and make my way to the car to go figure out what the hell happened. I honestly don’t know what to do with Andrey anymore. How the fuck did he fall asleep?

I arrive at Charlie’s apartment after taking a short detour and stopping for a quick breakfast sandwich, allowing myself some time to cool off so I won’t take Andrey’s head clean off his shoulders.

I pull up behind Andrey’s car and he gets out. Walking calmly over to him, I stop next to an old oak tree and I take a deep breath as I see Maxim’s car round the corner.

Before I say anything, Andrey starts rambling, “I’m really sorry Yuri. I have no idea how I fell asleep. I should have had some coffee like you did. I really don’t know how I let this happen. Charlie is fine though right?”

“Shut the fuck up, Andrey!” I growl out. I need a minute before getting into it with him. Today started out so good and then he had to go and fuck it up! “You’re very lucky that Charlie is safe. What the fuck is going on with you?” I ask.

“I’ve just been trying to focus on the plan, to undermine the Italians. I’ve been up too



many late nights watching Charlie. I was supposed to have a night off when you guys went to follow her to the pub, but you needed me that night too. What was I supposed to do? Say no? She didn't even get home until well after midnight. You got to take a nap and have coffee. I didn't!" He's honestly not wrong, but at this point he's just making excuses. We are all running on fumes, but he's the only one fucking up.

"I don't care if you're so tired you're about to keel over. If I give you a job, you better stay the fuck awake! What if someone had broken into her apartment and killed or raped her? You know this city Andrey. Wake. The. FUCK. Up! You need shit or get OFF THE POT! Charlie is MINE and she's not going anywhere. Understand?" I am screaming now. Maxim puts a heavy hand on my shoulder and pulls me back a foot so I'm not in Andrey's face anymore.

"I know you're mad, Yuri. But I'm angry too. You aren't thinking straight because of Charlie," Andrey bites back.

"Don't even start with this again Andrey!" I warn.

"No. I'm serious. The Italians don't even know who she is. She's just Dominic's friend in their eyes. Why are we wasting time on her?"

I can't take it anymore. I punch Andrey square in the jaw and he's down on the pavement before I can get in another hit. He puts his hands up and looks at me shocked.

"Don't look so surprised. You know what Charlie means to me. Go back to the gym. I don't want to see your face for a few days," I say as Andrey starts to peel himself off the sidewalk.

Once he's upright, Andrey glares daggers at me, but he doesn't say anything as he walks back to his car. Maxim and I head back to my car so we can drive back to my

condo. Pap said he was going to take over with the Italian's for now since he didn't want me anywhere near the cops, so luckily for Andrey, I wouldn't be needed at the club for a while.

It's a little after two when I get a message from Konstantin.

Konstantin : I just went through some of the data from Charlie's phone from last night and up to about an hour ago.

Yuri : Is she ok?

Konstantin : She's safe for now. She was talking to Dominic and he's coming back to the states earlier than expected.

Yuri : Ok.

I tell Maxim what Konstantin said and then realize I'm going to have to go back to the club. I need to find a way to warn Charlie about Dominic. She must abandon this dream of investigating and living in Chicago. It's just too damn dangerous.

"Let's go to the club. I'm gonna see if Konstantin has any ideas on how I can warn Charlie. You make sure Andrey stays the hell away from me."

"You got it boss!" Maxim says.

We make it back to the club in record time because I drove. When I'm angry, I see the speed limit as more of a suggestion. I wasn't worried about being pulled over this time. I have to get to the bottom of why Dominic is coming back and how this might screw up our plans.

We walk through the front entrance, Maxim goes in ahead of me to cut off any

interaction I might have to have with Andrey, and I head straight to Konstantin's office. I knock a bit harder than I meant to and hear, "Come in already, you don't have to break the door down."

"Sorry Kons, I'm a bit on edge today. Have you heard anything about Dominic's reasons for coming back?"

"Nothing yet. I imagine it has something to do with the deaths of Dante and Lorenzo though."

"Yea. That would make sense. Do we know when he's coming back yet?"

"He didn't say in his messages to Charlie and he's too smart to say it over the phone, so we're going to have to hack into the Interagency Border Inspection System (IBIS) and see if he is registered on a flight back yet. Although, if he takes a private plane, we won't know anything until he's already here."

"Fuck! Okay, we need to work with the boss on this. I'm not sure what else we can do, but we need to figure out what the Italians are up to."

"I'll talk with the boss about it and if we need you for anything, I'm sure he'll let you know."

"Thanks Kons! Hey, could you help me with something else?" I ask, thinking about a way I can warn Charlie about the danger she's getting into. She's way in over her head with going out to the crime scene and talking with the cops. If the Italians catch on to her sniffing around, it won't matter if she's friends with Dominic; they'll take her out.

"Yea. Shoot!" Konstantin says enthusiastically. He always enjoys a technological challenge.

We talk over some ideas for a while until Konstantin lands on our quickest and easiest option: an email with an untraceable IP address. I'm not sure how all that works; he tried to explain it to me, but all I kept hearing was the wah wah, wah wah wah like the Peanuts' parents from those Christmas and Thanksgiving cartoons.

He sets everything up for me within a few hours and I send out an anonymous email before heading back to the condo for some well deserved rest.

### CHARLIE

Monday mornings suck, but I have been enjoying walking to work from the bus stop rather than having to take my car. The café on the corner near the bust stop is my saving grace! I walk, sip my coffee, and enjoy my surroundings. The city may be crowded with people, filled with car horns honking, exhaust spewing from vehicles, people shouting on their phones, and construction crews tearing up the street, but I can't help but enjoy the view. Besides, if I get too irritated I just pop in my headphones and listen to an audiobook rather than the noise around me.

Once I get to the office building, I scan my badge to get into the elevator and press the number four on the wall. I have always enjoyed watching the little circle light up. As soon as the elevator doors open, I walk to my desk with an extra-extra-large coffee. It's the largest the corner café had to offer. I've been staying up late researching the crime syndicates and Missy Graves so I'm exhausted. I need to drink at least half of this before Bill decides to have some kind of conversation with me.

I power up my computer to check my inbox and see something odd. It's an email from "anonymous". Goosebumps erupt all along my arms and the hairs across the nape of my neck stand up. I take a deep breath trying not to panic or become overly paranoid. This is a new job, of course there will be emails from sources I don't recognize yet. I click on the email while internally rolling my eyes at the idea of someone emailing me as "anonymous" and start to read the weirdest and creepiest email ever.

To: [email protected]

From: Anonymous

You shouldn't be in the city Charlie, it's not safe.

Stop looking into the damn murders and just go home.

XXX

Wait. What?

I take a few seconds to reread the email and notice the writer called me Charlie. How do they know my childhood nickname? Okay, now I am a little freaked. I guess anyone could have guessed the nickname. It's not like it's that original, but it still makes my skin crawl. I decided not to say anything to Bill about the email.

I'm confused how an outside source even got my email address. I know Officer Keenly saw my press badge, but I'm a new hire, so my email wouldn't even be on our business website yet. I know I didn't hand out that information to anyone this weekend and there is no way they would know what my family calls me.

I shake off the eerie feeling and shove it to the back of my mind. I have too much crap to get done today to worry about some creep. I see the top of Bill's head as he makes his way to my desk with a stack of folders with my assignments for the week that I am sure are going to make me want to stab my eyes out. At least they will make for a good distraction until I get home and see if I can figure out who the heck is trying to mess with me.

I finally make it back to the apartment building, grab my mail, and make my way upstairs completely prepared to start my Hunger Games marathon again. I just want to hide from work for the rest of the night, but I can't shake that email. It really threw me off. No. I won't let that stupid email bother me. I'm just being paranoid. I'm

determined to relax tonight.

I go into the kitchen after dropping my keys by the door and setting my laptop bag on the counter. There's nothing like a hot cup of lavender tea to calm me down.

Once my tea is ready, I start watching The Hunger Games, but I keep thinking about the email. Curiosity really did kill the cat because I decided to google how to reverse look up emails. This is totally outside my wheelhouse. I may know how to write and use the internet for research but I am not tech savvy.

There are a few ways to look up an email from an unknown source, but I'm not finding any of them useful. Sighing, I choose to ignore it for the moment and try to focus on the movie. Watching a movie series like The Hunger Games always has me thinking about Yuri. I have always loved Katniss' close connection with Peta; their friendship always makes me wonder what mine and Yuri's friendship would have been like if he hadn't disappeared. Even if he didn't end up moving to the city like I did, I hate that I don't have the ability to reach out to him or confide in him. He'd help me figure out who sent this stupid email.

I decide to search his name online again. It's really sad how many people are missing in the world. I only research Yuri for ten minutes because it only depresses me further. I shut down my laptop, put it on the coffee table, and decide to make some popcorn and simply focus on the movie before I head to bed.

I lay in bed tossing and turning constantly thinking about that stupid email that I can't seem to shake. With a groan, I roll out of bed and sleepily make my way to the kitchen to start the kettle. A cup of hot chamomile tea with honey and lavender is calling my name. Tea always helps relax me and I know it will help me sleep. I walk toward the wall of windows to take in the cityscape at night. It really is beautiful seeing all the lights reflect off the windows.

Within five minutes the kettle is whistling and I am steeping my tea. I head back to the windows again as I get a notification on my phone. I roll my eyes as I decide to ignore it and put it face down on the coffee table. I am just going to take in the night while sipping my tea so I can relax and maybe get some rest tonight.

I woke up not fully understanding where I was. I must have fallen asleep while looking out the windows because I woke up seated on the living room floor with my back against the couch facing the window. Now I have a wicked kink in my neck from the awkward angle I was sleeping in. Great!

I get up and yawn while stretching my neck at all angles hoping to release the tension. I make my way to the bathroom when a piece of paper on the floor by my front door grabs my attention. Weird, I must have dropped it last night after grabbing my mail. I make my way toward the door, reaching down to pick up the paper. It's a pretty heavy card stock. I flip it open awkwardly still groggy from sleep and read:

I am just trying to keep you safe, Charlie! Just pack a bag and go home.

-XXX

What the hell is going on?

Okay, this isn't funny and I don't have the patience to deal with this. Am I being PUNKed? I go to my phone to call my mom and dad but it goes straight to voicemail. I briefly consider texting Dominic, but I don't want him to think I can't handle life in the city. I roll my eyes because clearly I am being stupid. Someone has to be pulling a dumb prank on me, so I throw the note away and stomp over to the bathroom to shower.

After making the water as hot as I can possibly stand, I wash the night away. Thankfully, the heat of the water and the steam in the air helps relax the tender



muscles in my neck. Sighing, I turn the water off and wrap myself in one of my extra large fluffy towels and make my way down the hall to the kitchen to start the water for my coffee.

As I walk into the living room, I see a man just casually sitting on my couch. I halt and stifle a scream not wanting to alert him to my presence. His back is to me, but he is standing board-straight and his confidence radiates off of him.

I am trying very hard not to scream and alert him to my presents. He looks familiar which sounds weird considering all I can see is the back of him. I need to do something and my nerves are getting the best of me.

I look around frantically for my phone with a death grip on the towel, because yea, I am standing in a damn towel with a stranger in my living room. He hasn't turned around to look at me. I glance toward the couch and see he has my phone in his hand. Shit! Now I can't even call the police. Awesome, I am naked with no phone or weapon in front of a burglar.

Fan-tastic!

“Who the hell are you and why are you in my apartment?” I almost yell trying to sound confident, but my voice breaks at the end and fear starts seeping into my bones.

He turns his head and strides to the side of the couch turning around completely to face me.

“Don't even bother screaming for help,” he says calmly, “You and I need to have a little chat, Charlie.” I just stare, wide eyed and brows pulled together very confused. My fingers are starting to hurt with how firmly I am holding my towel in place and my body begins to shake. His eyes are as dark as the night sky and I can barely

breathe. No way. It's...

“Yuri?” I whisper, breathing his name in utter shock and confusion. A small smile tugs at one corner of his mouth as I keep staring, my eyes wide as saucers and I am fighting back the heat of tears making its way to my eyes. The silence is deafening. I must be sleeping. This is some kind of nightmare or dream. This isn't real.

He stands next to the couch and places my phone in his pocket all while walking slowly toward me as if approaching a wild cat. I count his steps. 1...2...3...4... Until he stops a good three feet away. He dwarfs my five foot frame and all I do is stare dumbfounded, my heart beating out of my chest.

“Hello, Malyshka . It's been a long time.”

CHARLIE

“Nope.”

My fight or flight instinct kicks in and that’s all I can think to say. I don't know if it’s fear or pure adrenaline, but I spin around so fast and run to my bedroom, shutting the door behind me and locking it. I pace and try to breathe for a couple minutes before grabbing a pair of sweatpants, a sports bra and an oversized t-shirt to change into. I grab my favorite throw blanket from my bed, wrap it around my shoulders, and sit on the floor at the foot of my bed. Staring at the door, I wait.

How is he here? Where has he been? How did he get in?

I need to get a grip. I’m hyperventilating. I need to calm down before I pass out. Breath Charlie, you have to breathe. I take a few deep gulps of air. If this is Yuri, he’s my friend. He won’t hurt me. Will he? Of course not. Right?

I cannot shake the feelings of frustration, worry, or confusion. After what feels like twenty minutes of just staring at the door and panicking, a soft knock on my door pulls me out of my dissociated state. I take in a sharp breath.

“Charlie, can you please come out here so we can talk?” His voice is hollow and dark, nothing like the happy, caring boy I remember.

What happened to him? I don't know if I should be angry, scared, or relieved he is here. When I pictured seeing him again this is not how I expected it to go. I could never have imagined him breaking and entering!

How the hell did he get into my apartment? How did he even know where I live? This is insane! I am going insane. I am all about your internal monologue but this is getting ridiculous.

I start rubbing at my temples feeling a headache coming on. I have to be dreaming. This isn't real! I pinch my arm just to make sure I'm awake. He knocks gently again and I hear him sigh.

“Charlie, please?” He sounds exasperated.

He thinks he has the right to get annoyed at me? When he breaks into my apartment? After, what, ten years? Furious, I decided to get up off the floor. I am angry and hurt and I feel betrayed and he is going to feel my fury!

I yank the door open, the hinges crying at the quick, violent motion. Looking up into his dark, amused face, I grind my teeth seething with anger.

“Get the hell out of my apartment, Yuri Volkov.”

He is easily 6'3, a wall of muscle that there is no way I am fighting my way through. So I fight him with my words instead!

“You can't just break into my home and my life after all this time! Not after you abandoned me without a single word!” I burst past him, pull open the door, and thrust my hand toward the hallway. Tears burn the back of my eyes once more, but I refuse to cry for him, again .

“And you can leave my phone on the counter on your way out!” A deep crease forms between his dark brows for a second and then his face is blank. Then the corner of one side of his lips quirks up. “What did you expect? Some warm greeting after you and your family disappear? Poof! Gone! You broke my heart and now you're

breaking into my apartment after ten years of complete silence! I thought you were dead !” I shout trying not to screech.

I can feel my face turning red with fury and frustration. Especially after admitting he broke my heart. That piece of embarrassing information fell out of my mouth from pure frustration. I’m so angry at myself for letting that wall crash down so quickly. He can’t just waltz back into my life after ten years! When he left, he didn’t just abandon our friendship, he left me traumatized for the rest of my life!

I suck back the stinging tears; I will not let him see me cry, nope. He will not see my heart break, he doesn’t deserve it. I will not let him make me feel this way! Too many emotions are streaming out of me. Seeing him here, in my apartment, alive and acting like nothing happened at all is causing my voice to shake and my confidence to falter. He’s acting like this is just a normal Saturday morning.

I stammer, “Or...or in witness protection! You left me, Yuri! Left. Me.” Ten years of pent up whatever, just left my mouth, and he just stands there like a statue, staring at me. “Well, get out...” I command and point my finger toward the door. He still doesn’t move. We take a good five minutes of just staring at each other. It is so quiet I fear he can hear my heart beating. My mind is racing in the silence and I can’t take it anymore. “Listen, I’m glad you’re not dead, I think...” I start to say, trying to calm down and regain some sense of control.

“You think, Malyshka ?” He questions, as that stupid little smirk appears again, like he is amused by my reaction.

“ Don’t , call me that!” I close my eyes and take a deep breath. That nickname does weird things to my heart after all these years. Things that I am not yet ready to deal with right now while in the middle of an argument. “I am a bit shocked and emotionally overwhelmed at the moment and am still questioning whether I hate you...” or love you, but I can’t tell him that! “..or am happy you're not dead. So, if

you don't mind, kindly , leave.” I wave my whole arm toward the door this time.

He starts walking toward it. Then quicker than lighting flashing down from the sky, he shuts my door and spins toward me. In that one fluid motion, he has me pinned to the wall with one giant, warm hand over my mouth, lightly clearly just making sure I won't alert a neighbor before he gets a word in. He is standing so close to me I can feel his breath on my face, our chests brush ever so slightly as I take in a breath trying not to panic as he brings his face closer to mine. He is so close I am pretty sure he can feel how hard my heart is beating.

“We need to talk, Charlie, and I am not leaving until I explain,” He grunts in annoyance. I roll my eyes and rip his hand off my face.

“So you grew up to be a grade-A-douchebag? That's disappointing,” I say sharply, anger, and a little something else, seeping from me. I try to shove him away, but he barely moves an inch. What is he made of, iron ? And why is he so damn hot! What gave him the right to grow up to be so damn good looking! “Let me go. I no longer have any interest in your explanation so get out!” I bite out. My teeth have been clenched for so long my jaw starts to ache. I try to remove myself from the cage his arms have created around me but I can't.

“But you are interested, aren't you?” He asks, leaning even closer to me, making me look up to stare into his eyes and stealing my air. What? What is he getting at? Does he feel the tension too? Nope, of course not . He is just a guy, being a guy. I take in a measured breath tasting his breath in the air so close to me, and let out a sigh.

“I was...” I say, my fury lessening and being replaced with curiosity and heartache. “How could I not? You were my best friend Yuri, and you were gone in the blink of an eye. I was heartbroken, confused, scared, and didn't understand why my best friend was gone.” I move one of my hands to the center of his chest pressing hard enough to feel his heartbeat just to reassure myself I'm not dreaming. His chest is

solid, like a brick wall solid. Holy Hell! I internally facepalm myself! What the hell Charlie!

He watches me, looks into my eyes, and just lets me vent. "It was like you never existed, and I was left with a memory no one shared. I was alone," I confess trying really hard not to cry and just stare at my hand resting on his heart. "I dreamed of seeing you again so many times. Never did my dreams turn out like this." I finally push past him walking to the kitchen. I take a heavy breath, hands planted on the counter, "I need some coffee." I sigh, placing my pointer fingers on either side of my temple to attempt ridding myself of this headache: a headache only caffeine will cure. I turn back to face Yuri, "You want a cup?" I ask because he obviously isn't leaving anytime soon no matter how many times I ask. He doesn't answer.

I feel him behind me, his presence making me shiver, but I refuse to turn around and look at him. I take a deep breath trying to get my hormones in check. I stand on tiptoes to grab the kettle from the cupboard and place it on the stove. I can't do this right now. I start to rub my temples again to try and relieve the pressure building up in my brain while also trying not to enter a full blown panic attack.

"I can't believe how small you still are." he breathes "Determined and stubborn too." I can hear the smile in his voice which only makes me more frustrated.

I am having a hard time putting the puzzle piece that is this Yuri next to the boy I knew when I was a kid. He was so full of life and smiles. Now, I've noticed, in the few short minutes that I have been with him, he is a cold blizzard, an impenetrable brick wall; he is trying to hide something. The light in him is completely gone, which makes me sad. I was hoping if we saw each other again he would be happy, but just looking into his dark eyes I can see he isn't.

"What do you want?" I sigh and slowly turn toward him waiting for my water to boil. He is a lot closer to me than I thought and as I turn I bump my elbow into his hard

stomach. I try really hard not to apologize for touching him since he is the one who got so close to begin with.

I lean against the counter, tilt my head up toward him waiting. He's just staring at me with a look in his eyes I can't quite read and my stomach starts doing flips. Crap! Stupid hormones!

"You just got more and more beautiful as you grew, didn't you?" He whispers and brings his hand to touch my cheek, his thumb brushing softly against my skin. I gasp at the contact and try not to lean in and remind myself I am mad . M. A. D. Mad. It takes everything in me to turn back around and grab the kettle, now boiling, and start making myself a cup of pour over coffee.

"Did you want a cup of coffee, or not?" I say impatience, fear clinging to my words. The silence is once again stiff in the air as I add cream and sugar. Once it's in a very large mug, I head for the living room because he still isn't answering me.

I take a deep breath, put on my reporter hat, and say, "I may as well make myself comfortable if we are going to have story time. I am not going to listen to excuses, Yuri. I want answers, real ones ." Turning toward him, my face devoid of emotion, and my lips pressed in a thin line I say, "No BS. I am not twelve anymore. If you are going to explain, then I want the absolute truth, do you understand me?" That stupid smirk appears again as he nods his head. "Great, let me email my boss to let him know I am not coming in today."

I shoot off a quick email to Bill. I'm a little nervous to miss work because I'm so newly hired, but I just tell him I am not feeling well and won't be in the office. My head is still pounding and I've developed an aura in my peripheral vision, so it's not really a lie. I make sure to let him know I will work on some of the information he gave me yesterday from home.



I turn toward Yuri while he takes a seat on the couch. My blanket over my shoulders and coffee in hand, I wait for the story that is about to change everything.

YURI

Where do I even start? How do you tell the girl that you have known since you were seven that you knew you were going to marry her from the moment you laid eyes on her? How do you tell that same girl that your family had to leave in the middle of the night and send a cleaning crew, a fucking cleaning crew, to destroy all traces of your life because your uncle had to go and kill some Italian asshole?

How do you tell this sweet, gorgeous, girl that you were staying away to keep her out of your world, to keep her safe, but you aren't sure you're strong enough to stay away? How do you tell her you've been keeping an eye on her to make sure she stays safe? This is going to be a lot more complicated than I expected.

I wasn't going to go into her apartment. I was going to leave the note, send a car to bring her home, and she would never know. But after her unplanned trip to the crime scene and the fact that I'm here in her apartment, looking into those green eyes, I knew it wasn't enough. She had to know the truth. But how do you tell a girl that your dad is the leader of the Chicago syndicate of the Russian Mafia? That you are set to take over? I guess you just, tell her.

“When we were kids, my family had to assimilate. We needed to be a normal, blue-collar family. But we weren't that then, and we definitely aren't that now.” I begin watching her face closely for any signs that she would bolt again. I keep going, “My dad does have his own business that my brothers and I are learning how to run, but it is not your run-of-the-mill, family business, Charlie. My family... We are the leaders of the Chicago Russian Mafia syndicate. We moved to the suburbs because my uncle had a problem with shooting people he wasn't supposed to.” I say quickly and coldly

while staring at her, still cautious.

Her mouth opens slightly in shock and her big, green eyes go round. “Go on,” she encourages.

I continue without looking away so she knows and understands that I am telling her the truth. “My dad moved us out of the city to start over. To wipe the slate clean. My father explained it to me much later. He wanted me and my brothers to grow up away from the people who wanted to harm him. He wanted us to blend in. Father said it would be easier to find out who is trying to stab him in the back when they don't know where he is. He knew if people didn't know who his children were, no one could use us against him.”

She just stares and waits patiently for me to go on, concern and worry touching her delicate features.

“So, we moved to this picture perfect suburb with clean houses and big yards and lots of kids our age. The first day I saw you, you were proudly walking around with your shiny, sequin snow owl backpack telling everyone how you were in kindergarten now, which made you one of the big kids.” A small smile tugs at my lips as I remember the first time I saw her.

She began to blush, the pink spreading across her face and creeping just behind her freckles. I continue my reverie, “Big red curls fell down your back and your bright, happy, green eyes grew huge with excitement. When you smiled though, that's when I knew I had to be your friend. Anyone who smiles like that brings joy to anyone they meet and I needed some joy in my life. I knew you'd shine a light even on someone whose family is as dark as mine.”

She pursed her lips and began biting her lower lip, impatiently. If she only knew what that action does to me. I could tell she was trying her best not to ask any questions or

interrupt me, so I went on, “I still had my accent back then and a lot of the kids didn't understand me or just didn't care to try, but not you, Charlie. You overheard one of the kids on the bus telling me ‘to go back to my own country.’”

I grin and she chuckles softly. I keep talking and walking us down memory lane, “Now as an adult, I understand why they say redheads have a lot of fire.” I chuckle and take her hand in mine, “You were so mad that anyone would say something so mean. You went off on him so fast! Then, you grabbed my hand when we got off at our stop, and you told me that we were now best friends.” I smile remembering how good that statement made me feel, “You said you would protect me because that is what best friends do. For years, we rode the bus everyday together. We hung out and played every weekend. Every day I was lucky enough to see you smile at me and trust me. We explored the world, well, as much of the world as we could at that age. You were my constant, my safe haven, my everything, and you had no idea.”

“I know. I remember,” she whispers. Her eyes are big and full of unshed tears. She places her mug on the coffee table and looks at me.

“I missed you every -” she cuts me off and all but launches herself at me wrapping her small arms around my neck.

“Why can't you just let me be mad at you.” She sniffs into my neck as I wrap my arms around her curvy frame. “I want to hate you so bad right now, but then you have to soften the blow with sweet memories and phrases like, you were my safe haven .” She hits me playfully as the tears slowly glide down her face. I move my hands to either side of her cheeks. Her face fits perfectly cradled in my hands as I wipe the tears away.

“I've been trying to protect you. If they find out who you are...” Do I tell her what she is to me? She looks at me confused.

“What do you mean? Who? Why would anyone care who I am? I’m nobody -”

I stopped her there, “You’re not nobody Charlie. How could you think that?”

“I’m just a base level journalist. I have no pull with anyone. I just moved here for goodness sake!” She is still looking me right in the eyes as I caress her cheeks and her eyes flutter lightly. She really has no idea does she? I take in a big breath.

“It’s not just who you are, Charlie, but who you are to me that would be important to them.” I see the space between her brows crease and look up slightly out of the corner of her eye. She always made this face as a kid when she was trying to process something that confused her.

“Who is this ‘they’ you keep referring to? Why would they care that we were friends as kids?” She asks, still confused.

I sigh once more realizing I am going to have to spell this out for her. It's clear she has no idea the hold she has not only on my heart but my entire being.

“Charlie, you’re mine , and I am yours , always have been, and always will be. I won’t let anyone take you away from me again. Do you understand?” I can tell when the realization hits her. Her gasp is the sweetest thing I have ever heard.

In this moment, here with her in my arms, I stop hiding who I am and I let every wall down because if I can’t be myself in front of her, then how is she going to trust me? I need her to trust me so I can keep her safe.

### CHARLIE

I can feel my eyes bugging out of my head and am tempted to start ripping my hair out. What did he mean I was his ? I am still trying to wrap my head around the fact that he is even here, and now Yuri is calling me his ! I have too many thoughts running through my head right now! All this information is coming at me too fast and is making me confused, excited, and I don't even know what else. This is all insane! None of this makes any sense.

“Yuri...” I sigh, “you don't even know me anymore. It’s been ten years and I am not that little girl anymore.” I can’t help but continue looking into his eyes as I touch his face softly. I saw the moment he let all his walls down. I finally got a glimpse of the boy I knew before, but this is too much.

My brain is overloaded and I can’t think straight. All I know is I cannot stop looking at him. I’m afraid that if I look away he’ll disappear and I’m still in complete and utter shock that he is even here.

“You look pretty little to me, Malyshka .” He laughs softly and sighs. I notice a small smile touch his lips. “There is something you need to know and understand. I need you to understand.” He takes a slow, calculated breath and keeps his eyes fixed on mine. My stomach goes warm as it swarms with butterflies. This is the part where things go bad, right?

He starts explaining, “I have been keeping an eye on you, for a long time. I couldn’t handle not knowing how you were. It took some time for me to figure out how to get information on you, but I had to make sure you were safe, that you were happy. I

have been at every sporting competition, every school dance, and..." He slows down for a second, grabs my hand and looks directly into my eyes as he says, "Every graduation." I gasp.

"Wait!" It was him! "You were at both my high school and college graduations?" I nearly shout. I am in complete shock. "I saw you! At my college graduation, I saw you! Well I thought I saw you and then thought I was crazy, but I wasn't crazy." I point my index finger straight into his chest. "You were there! I feel a bit better about that, actually."

"Yes I was there." I can see him fight the smile forming on his lips from my little tirade. "I wasn't able to physically be there for your high school graduation, but I had someone there who let me know how it went and that you were safe. I have read every article you've written. I've been soaking up everything I have had to miss out on."

He says this so matter-of-fact and I can't take it. I start to shake my head and can't help the tears that begin to fall. "Please don't cry, I hate it when you cry." he says in a tense voice.

"No!" I gasp trying to keep it together and now is when I completely fall apart. "You can't lie to me like that! You can't say stuff like that to me!"

I place my hands on his chest to push him away, angry and sad, but he holds on to my face a little firmer, making sure to look me in the eyes as he says, "There is nothing in this world that could have kept me from you, Malyshka."

He sighs and looks to the ceiling, smiles, and shakes his head as if I'm the silly one here. Angling his face back toward mine, he stares at my lips for a second. I bite my bottom lip and let it go leaving my mouth slightly open. His gaze shifts his gaze back to my eyes.

Leaning even closer, I can feel his breath on my face as he says, “You had to know... you had to have seen how much you mean to me... how much you have always meant to me, even back then.”

His hands are so gentle as he cradles my face and wipes my tears. Looking into his dark eyes, I can finally see what he has been trying to tell me, what he can't seem to put into words. I've known since I was little how important he was to me. Even as we grew older, all I wanted to do was tell him everything and spend all my time with him. That summer before he was supposed to go to high school changed us. I knew it had but I wasn't sure if it was just me. This...this is him saying it wasn't just me that felt it click that summer.

He was like an older brother to me for a long time, but then something started to change. He was always there for me and I for him. I knew how I felt, but I didn't know, I couldn't even dream that he felt the same. How could I?

I am floating, tumbling, and my heart is racing right out of my chest. The butterflies in my stomach won't stop dancing, so I do the only thing I can think to break the silence. I look at his lips then back to his eyes and hear him take in a breath, like he knows what's coming. I have no idea who moved first but in an instant his mouth is on mine and my arms are around his neck.

I melt into him and feel his arms wrap around my waste and pull me onto his lap. A soft moan leaves my mouth as I straddle his lap scooting closer so our chests touch. We fit perfectly together and I have no idea how I made it this long without this.

Kissing him is like breathing in the purest air. He teases my lips with his tongue and I open for him. I can't help the rush of heat that goes through my body all the way down to my toes. It's like we are molded together; he's in my blood and I'm coursing through his veins. I can't. I won't ever let go.



How did I not know he wanted this? Wanted me? That he cared like this? I thought I was being dumb, but as we got older and grew closer, the more I liked him as more than a friend. This was not just a middle school crush. How could I have told him I loved him then? Let alone dare to dream he felt the same way!

Reluctantly, we pull away. My breaths come in short bursts and he gently rests his forehead against mine. He's breathing just as heavily and we just sit and soak in the moment for a while. Eyes closed. I imprint this memory onto my eyelids. This is not how I pictured my day when I woke up this morning.

I open my eyes when he says, "I can't lose you, Malyshka , not ever. Do you understand?" He sounds so desperate, like he is afraid I will change my mind, and now he is scaring me.

I lift my head and look into his eyes searching for what he isn't telling me. He doesn't hold my gaze but looks toward the floor dejected. I've never seen him like this.

"Why do you think you will lose me, Yuri? What are you so afraid of?" I am so emotionally charged and overwhelmed right now. My brain can't seem to keep up. I cement my hands on his chest. He has one hand resting on my hips and the other cradling the middle of my back. I can tell we are both afraid.

The second we stop touching; the moment contact fades, it feels as if this entire moment will slip away like a dream. I don't think that is something I can handle right now or ever, really.

"I need you to leave the city, Charlie." he sighs, "I can't risk them finding you or knowing about you. I don't know how much longer I can keep you hidden from them. If they find you - " I cut him off faster than a speeding car on the I-90 because I can see that internal wall starting to build back up brick by brick as he is speaking.

“Oh, no you don’t!” I grab his face, forcing him to look at me and shift my weight on his lap in an effort to get closer. I hear a soft groan leave his lips.

“Don’t you dare go hiding from me after everything you just said and did. Don’t you dare start back tracking now. What is it, Yuri? Who is it you’re afraid of?” I keep my hold on his face and remain in his lap. I don’t want him to think he can get up and leave again. Though with the significant height difference and obvious strength he has based on the shape of his biceps, all he would have to do is pick me up, stand, and drop me on the couch. I won’t let him; we need to figure this out, together.

He sighs and rubs his face clearly frustrated, then his hands drop down to my hips holding me in place on his lap. My arms rest on his shoulders, my hands cradle his neck. “You need to leave, Charlie. I am serious, you can’t be involved and I am not risking you...”

I stand so abruptly and back away from him; his eyes go wide, “No! You need to tell me what the hell is going on. I am not doing this, Yuri. You can’t tuck me away and hide me from the world, and if you thought I would go along with that, then you don’t know me at all!” I am so high on caffeine and adrenaline, my body begins to shake and tears well in my eyes.

Yuri stands and takes a step toward me. He has his hands raised, palms open toward me like I’m a scared animal ready to flee. He speaks and his voice catches on the first few words, “I can’t lose you again and if you expect me to walk away after finally having you back, not to mention getting kissed like that, you have lost your ever loving mind!”

I have completely lost control of my emotions at this point. I can feel my heart stiffening in my chest, my stomach filling with dread, but I’m stubborn. I will not back down.

“You cannot force me to leave, Yuri!” I see the shock of pain strike his face as he takes another step toward me. I don’t back away. His strong arms pull me into him and that’s when I completely break down and cry so hard I can’t breathe; Yuri just holds me closer.

“I’ll tell you Charlie, but I know you won’t like what I have to say, so please promise me you will let me finish before you say or do anything. Promise me.” I look into his face and he looks so scared, serious, and vulnerable that all I can do is nod and try to regulate my breathing.

He sighs in relief and says, “Let’s get you cleaned up. Why don’t you go to the bathroom and wash your face. I’ll put the kettle on for some tea, yes?” I nod my head and make my way down the hall to the bathroom with a glance back at him.

“You aren’t going to leave while I am in there, are you?” I sound like a child, but I don’t really care. I’m afraid that this still isn’t real. Afraid that he will disappear at any given moment and I don’t think my heart could take that. Especially after that kiss.

“I’m never leaving you again, Malyshka .” he says softly. He meets my gaze for several heartbeats before I have the courage to enter the bathroom and close the door. I look in the mirror and almost cringe at the state of my reflection. My hair is a mess and my face is all red and blotchy from crying. I grab my brush to attempt getting the knots out of my lion’s mane.

Running my hands in the cold water, I streak them through the curls hoping to calm the frizz that’s making my hair appear like a roaring flame rather than a mop of pristine curls and begin to braid my hair over my shoulder.

Now that I don’t appear to have fallen down a cliff, I quickly grab one of my washcloths and press the cold fabric to my cheeks to cool the warmth there. The

redness begins to fade and my freckles finally start making their appearance once more along the bridge of my nose and across my cheekbones. I take long steadying breaths and begin to feel more level-headed. I take a deep breath and make my way back to the living room. Fingers crossed that Yuri didn't disappear.

I am pretty sure I am going to hyperventilate and pass out before I make it to the living room. There is way too much happening at once. What am I supposed to do with all this information anyway? My mind is racing with everything Yuri said and I feel like my world will shatter. I feel as though I will wake up from a dream and my heart will break all over again.

I take strategic breaths, close my eyes and shake the nerves out of my hands. I am going to have to suck it up because right now, at this moment, Yuri is here with me, and I'm not going to let him leave me again. I need to know and understand this entire situation. How else am I supposed to help? If I don't calm down, I won't know how to stay safe or how to protect Yuri, so I make my way to the couch, grab my throw blanket, and settle in getting ready for another round of story time.

YURI

I can't stop looking at her. She's trying to be brave and take in every minute detail I give her, but I can tell she is getting overwhelmed. I bring over a mug of Earl Grey with lemon and honey just how she used to drink it and hold it in front of her.

"I wasn't sure if you drank it the same or not. Lemon and honey, right?"

Her eyes dilate a little in surprise and a soft smile tugs at her lips.

"I'm surprised you remembered that." she says, accepting the mug and taking slow, tentative sips. She closes her eyes and breathes deep as if the tea alone is releasing all the tension from her body. "It's perfect," she whispers and glances back at me. "How did you remember how I like my tea?" Her eyes flickering with curiosity.

I don't know if I should express how I feel. What if she is creeped out? I decide it's better not to hold anything back because I know this is something she needs from me, even if it makes me uncomfortable.

"It's hard to forget anything about you." I say trying not to sound like a pansy while also withholding some of the intensity from my tone. I haven't been this vulnerable with anyone in a long time, not even my family. Even if she rejects everything about me and my life, she needs to know what she truly means to me.

"I remember everything you like. Your favorite candy is Almond Joys. Your favorite fast food is a tie between Chinese take-out or pizza. You would drink hot coffee over cold, but always prefer hot tea over iced. You would rather sit at home and watch a

movie than go out, but would rather eat out than enjoy a home cooked meal. You will only accept hugs from those you trust and hate being touched by anyone else.” I take a deep breath and focus on her eyes.

It’s hard not to keep going. I can list her favorite things for hours, but I see the shock on her face and stop talking, hoping I didn’t just make a total ass out of myself. We are sitting so close, I can feel her breath as it skates across my face. I can see her processing everything and I’m trying my hardest not to pull her closer. She takes a deep breath, blows gently along the top of her mug and takes another tentative sip.

“I never expected this,” she sighs softly, her eyes never leaving mine as if she is afraid I may vanish at any moment. “I am not sure what I expected when I finally found you to be honest, but this, this is not on the list of possibilities that played out in my head.”

She takes another deep breath and silence falls between us for a few heartbeats. It’s not uncomfortable silence. It’s not awkward. She needs this time to think and I’m going to give it to her. She moves her feet out from under her and faces the television, processing.

After a few minutes she turns quickly, facing me once more and spilling a few drops of tea as she says, “You and me. Wh...what are we?” Her eyes start to unfocus, like she’s not looking at anyone or anything. “What is this? You and me? I know I’m not going anywhere. But are you?”

The tremble in her voice breaks me and all I want to do is reassure her that everything will be okay. But I can’t promise that. I take a deep breath and open my mouth to try and explain but quickly close them. I don’t know how to explain all this.

Refocusing her eyes, she looks at me letting out another breath. Then she vomits every thought spiraling through her brain, “I mean... you say I’m not safe. I

need to know why! How else am I supposed to keep an eye out for danger if you don't tell me. How can I make sure that I'm ... that we're safe? I have so many questions! I want to do this together . Are we going to do that? Plan together ?”

She looks at me nervously but hope fills her beautiful, forest green eyes. I can't help but touch her face. My hand instinctively goes to her cheek as she relaxes into my hand. It's such a natural reflex, like the curve of her jaw and slight roundness to her cheeks are made to fit in the palm of my hand. I take her hand in my other one and gently rub tiny circles on her palm with my thumb trying to help her relax.

I know no matter what, I will burn the world to keep her safe. I will do anything to make sure she knows and understands that she will be safe with me. I will protect her. I will do whatever I have in order to make that a reality. For the both of us.

“I am not going anywhere. I will tell you everything... in time. I promise,” I say, still holding her cheek and looking directly into her eyes hoping she sees the honesty in mine.

“When will you tell me?” she questions lightly.

Clearly she wants to know everything right now. I'm afraid if I tell her everything right now it will overwhelm her. I really don't want to make her panic any more than she already is.

“Are you sure you're ready for more? I feel like we have unloaded an awful lot for one day.”

She takes another deep breath, removes my hand from her face, places her tea mug on the table next to her, and pins me with her stare, hands in her lap and legs crisscrossed underneath her once more.

“Lay it on me, Yuri. I am not going anywhere.”

Everything about her is so serious; I know there is no coming back from this.



### CHARLIE

Maybe I shouldn't have asked for a full explanation all at once. I mean, he has been in my apartment less than a day. I really shouldn't expect him to unload ten years of whatever he's been hiding right now, but he owes me that much.

Standing from the couch, I make my way to the kitchen where take-out menus are stuffed in a drawer, "We should probably start slow. Maybe don't start with the ten year download? Are you hungry? I feel like this conversation needs a meal or at least snacks!"

"Food sounds good." he says and I squeal as I turn to look at him. He's standing so close to me; I hadn't realized he followed me out of the room.

One side of his lips lift and I can see the tension in his face and shoulders lessen, but he's definitely still worried. It might sound silly, but nothing bad can happen when there's good food and good conversation.

"What are you thinking?" he asks.

I tilt my head ever so slightly and place my index finger on my nose tapping to my internal rhythm and thinking of what sounds good. When our eyes meet we both blurt in unison, "Chinese?"

I fall into a fit of giggles and the longer I laugh the larger his smile becomes. His smile makes the darkness of his eyes sparkle like stars. My stomach does a little flip because it feels like nothing has changed; we are two peas in a pod again. A few

seconds go by and the worry slowly sneaks back on his face. Tonight, this conversation, right here, right now, is going to change everything. I can tell he's hiding something but I need to trust him for this to work.

Once I can talk without going into another laughing fit, I make the call to my new favorite Chinese place. The phone rings and a woman answers.

"Yuri, what do you want to eat?" I ask as he quickly scans the menu.

"Hand me your phone. It'll be easier if I order." He says with a cheeky grin.

I hand over my phone and he orders curry chicken with fried rice. I expect him to hand over the phone for me to order, but then he says, "and we'll get an order of honey sesame chicken with steamed rice and veggies too. Let's also get a large side of egg drop soup and an order of crab rangoons." He hangs up the phone. "Our order will be ready in thirty minutes. They had your address on file with your phone number."

I'm looking at him, my mouth hanging open, "How?" I clear my throat, "How did you know my Chinese order?" He looks at me and smiles. He just smiles like there's no issue here. "I mean, I know I wasn't ordering honey sesame chicken in the fourth-grade."

A look of confusion crosses his face, or maybe he's holding back a laugh. The minute eye scrunch he used to make when we were kids was there and gone so fast I could be interpreting it wrong. Am I reading into this too much or does he look like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar?

"Why do you look so guilty?" I say letting out a nervous giggle.

We've been eating our food and watching 27 Dresses, one of my favorite Rom Coms,

to defuse some of the heaviness from this conversation. I figured it would be a good way to lighten the mood. As Jane is trying on her bridesmaids dresses for Kevin, I come back to the shocking realization that Yuri has been close to me from the moment I came to the city for college. I wasn't surprised to hear he had me tailed, but the fact that he, himself, was near me and he didn't say anything. He just what? Watched me like some kind of stalker?

I always considered myself to be pretty self-aware, but the fact I have no idea that I was not only being tailed but stalked, makes me reconsider my instincts. I'm going to have to be better about paying attention to my surroundings; especially since Yuri seems to think I'm in danger. From what or who I still don't have a clue but maybe I should consider switching up my routine a bit maybe take some kickboxing classes at the Y.

I'm getting frustrated with him because he keeps skirting around who the hell he's guarding me from. I've been asking him a million questions about this but he keeps saying it's "for my protection." If he doesn't start giving me real answers, my face might just stay stuck like that damn eye rolling emoji. Then I'll slap the shit out of him for holding out on me. How am I supposed to keep an eye out and protect myself if I don't even know what the danger is?

I've dropped the argument for now because I honestly don't want to fight right now. We have changed so much in the last ten years, so cuddling and catching up is more important to me right now. I sneak a glance at his beautiful face and smile to myself because even after all the heartache and crazy that comes with knowing and caring for this man, I know this is going to be the best night I have had in too many years and I don't want to waste anymore time.

YURI

Last night turned out much better than I hoped. It felt so good to get everything off my chest and finally see Charlie face to face. Instead of following her around, I was seated next to her and she was in my arms.

We ended up falling asleep on the couch watching some cutesy romance movie. I couldn't focus on the movie though. I couldn't take my eyes off Charlie. Now she is lying next to me, her deep red curls covering half her face . I want to hold this moment. She's safe in my arms but I'm terrified that that's about to change.

I gently lift my arm and glide my hand to her face reaching for the curls to reveal her porcelain skin and adorable freckles that splay across the bridge of her nose and cheeks. She lets out a gentle snore and I hold back a chuckle admiring her.

She must feel my hand near her face because she snatches it into hers and pulls my arm to lay across her. I fucking love being the big spoon, and her curvy frame fits perfectly against mine! She sighs contentedly and I lean down to give her a kiss on the shoulder that's peeking out from the fluffy blanket I found on the back of the couch after she fell asleep last night.

Her skin is soft and smooth as satin. I struggled to sleep from fear that I overwhelmed her too much last night by divulging a tornado of information, but eventually I nodded off and slept better than I have in years.

She sighs again and rolls in my arms to face my chest. She looks up at me with those emerald eyes and I wonder for half a heartbeat if I'm dreaming.

“Good Morning,” I say as her eyes flutter open.

“Hey there,” she yawns. Hands resting on my chest.

“How’d you sleep?” I ask, a little concerned. Did she struggle to sleep like I did? If she did, I couldn’t tell. She appeared to sleep so soundly in my arms. Smiling and looking at her adorable freckles, I wonder if she knows she makes these cute little snorting sounds as she sleeps.

“Like a baby. How about you?” Her sleepy, just-woke-up face is adorable.

“Better than if you weren’t here.” I say smiling gently. “Are you hungry? I can see what you have in your fridge. I make a pretty mean omelet.”

Her eyes light up at the mention of food, “Oh! An omelet sounds great. I’m starving! Though I should warn you, I am shit when it comes to grocery shopping. I have no idea what is in there, or if it’s even still edible.”

She gets up first which allows me a moment to admire her; it’s always bothered me that society thinks women have to be toothpick thin. It’s amazing how a person can stay the same and yet change completely in ten years. Charlie’s never been skinny by society’s definition and I’m glad. She was ridiculed at school for being fat. I never understood why the other girls felt the need to harass each other.

Charlie has always exuded self-confidence. I know the bullies at school got to her, but she never let them know it and anyway those bitches were wrong. She’s gorgeous!

“You coming? Those omelets won’t make themselves and I don’t think you want me to attempt cooking. I may accidentally burn the apartment down!” When I meet her gaze I can see she’s smiling. I’ve been caught ogling.

“Yea. I was just admiring the view.”

“You are such a dork, and cheesy!” her smile grows and she throws her hands over her face to hide the blush touching her cheeks.

“Cheddar or colby-jack?” I joke. “I can always add some to your omelet.”

“That’s not what I was referring to and you know it!” she chuckles and hits me on the arm. Her blush deepening.

“I can’t help but be cheesy with you.” I reach for her hands to remove them from her face. I like seeing how what I say affects her. It’s cute, even in the little things like the blush that seems to be making its way down her neck to her chest. I feel a bit like a love sick puppy right now. I honestly can’t believe half of the things coming out of my mouth. I’ve never been this way with a woman before, but none of my previous relationships, if you can even call them that, meant anything, but Charlie, she’s everything.

“Let’s see what we have to work with.” I say, making my way to inspect her refrigerator. Luckily she has a good amount of fresh food, though most of it looks like it is about to go bad.

“I just went shopping not that long ago. I think? There should be some cheese and at least peppers or something in there. I’m trying to get away from eating like a college student now that I have to be an adult. ”

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to teach you how to cook. But I’m just letting you know, I’m pretty good, so don’t feel too bad if you can’t make a masterpiece like me after the first lesson,” I joke.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. I think I’ll leave the cooking to the professional for now. I’m

going to go get ready. You get cooking. We still have a lot to discuss.” As she heads for her room, I smile and get out the ingredients for the omelets..

I’ve missed this back and forth between us. I’m glad she seems to be adjusting to the initial shock of seeing me again. We do have a lot to discuss, but I don’t know how to explain just how much danger she’s in. She isn’t going to like my suggestions, but I have to keep her safe. I won’t let anyone hurt her, especially that asshole, Dominic.

How can I warn her about the guy who’s been her friend for four years without telling her who he is? I don’t want to inadvertently put her in harm's way any more than I already am. Dominic isn’t the smartest fish in the barrel, so I doubt he knows my connection to Charlie, but I don’t want to be the one to nudge him in that direction.

The omelets are ready and I feel my phone buzz as I’m placing them in the oven to stay warm.

“What’s up?” I say after seeing Andrey’s face light up the background of my phone.

“Are you coming to the gym this morning?” He asks abruptly.

“No. Why? Is something wrong?” I ask, wondering if the cops have made any leads on what happened to Dante and Lorenzo.

“No. Nothing’s wrong. You’ve just been MIA. I think I’ve come up with a plan to take a shipment of cocaine from the Italians. I want to talk through it with you and Maxim today before running it by the boss”

“Stop right there Andrey. Why would we want to take a shipment of drugs? We don’t run COC. We need to be laying low right now.” I say cutting him off.

“Now isn’t the time to lay low, Yuri. You’re too distracted by Charlie to see that we

should be striking while the iron is hot!” he spews.

Andrey is going to be the death of me. I swear I’m going to kill him. I can’t believe what he’s saying. Before I load into him over the phone, I check to see if Charlie has come out of her room. She hasn’t, but I don’t want her to hear me yelling and think something bad is happening, so I take the conversation to the hall outside her apartment.

I check the hallway to see if any of the other tenants are nearby and decide to walk toward the emergency exit for some privacy. I don’t want to be overheard by some nosey neighbor.

“Listen Andrey,” I whisper shout, “I’m getting really sick of your shit. You’re not in a position to be making plans like this and the fact that you think NOW is the time to strike shows how stupid you are. We just took down two of Nico’s men. You really think we should be worrying about some drugs right now?” I’m nearly screaming as I try to get my point to stick to his thick skull.

“Yuri, come on. I can’t believe you’re that blind. Charlie has you whipped already! Can’t you see? Next you’re going to tell me you’re moving back to the suburbs with her! You’re our leader, start acting like it! We’re your family, not her.”

“Andrey, shut your fucking mouth. If you want to keep breathing, I suggest you never talk about Charlie like that again. Better yet, don’t even say her name at all.” I seethe.

I’m shocked right now and need to remind Andrey who he’s talking to. I take a deep breath and try not to scream into the phone. “You’re lucky to even be a part of the decisions we make, and you’re right, I am the boss’ son. So what I say goes. Now shut the fuck up and get your ass down to the gym. Maybe Maxim can talk some sense into you. I’ll be there when I’m done dropping Charlie off at work.” I hang up because I honestly can’t hear another syllable slither from his stupid mouth.



Pacing the hall, I try to calm down before I head back into Charlie's apartment. Andrey is such an idiot if he thinks Charlie isn't part of this family. She always has been. Even if I didn't feel the way I do about her, I'd never let anything happen to her. I never thought he was that stupid but obviously I was wrong.

I'm going to have to talk with Pap about Andrey later. We're going to have to do something to remind Andrey what's important. We may be criminals, but we're not psychopaths. It'd be suicide to try and mess with the Italians' gun-running operation.

When I can finally take a normal breath, I start walking toward Charlie's apartment. I really didn't need this curveball today, but I have to forget Andrey's stupidity and focus on Charlie. We need to talk about how to keep her safe. I'm almost to the apartment door when I hear my name being screamed from inside.

It's Charlie. Fuck! What happened? I never should have left. If anything has happened to her I'll never forgive myself. I throw the door open and see Charlie wrapped in a towel, her curls still wet. Drip. Drip. Drip. I hear water hitting the floor. Her face is red and she has tears in her eyes.

"Charlie? What happened?" I say rushing over to her.

"I thought you left!" she says breathlessly.

YURI

“I’m not going to leave you Charlie,” I say catching my breath after the panic of worrying someone got to her while I was on the phone. I can see she’s trying to stop herself from crying. She’s looking up at the ceiling and taking measured breaths.

It takes her a few heartbeats to respond, “Don’t make a promise you can’t keep Yuri,” she says with a small snuffle.

“I don’t make promises lightly, Charlie. I mean it. I will never leave you again. Here,” I pass her a plate and a fork, “Try this. Tell me what you think.” I watch as she examines the omelet lightly picking up a section of egg with the tip of her fork.

Cooking has always brought me peace. There are rules to cooking, but you can also experiment with flavors which I truly enjoy. I used to create experiments for my family when we first moved back to the city. My mother humored me, but my brothers and Pap didn’t hesitate to tell me when one of my dishes was a fucking disaster. I’m no sous-chef, but I’m pretty good at creating a meal on the fly.

“What’s in the omelet?” She asks.

“Try it and find out.” I smile. She takes a small bite of the omelet and her eyes go wide and then one eyelid flutters closed and opens again as a moan escapes her lips. “That good, huh?”

“Damn, Yuri! This is the best omelet I’ve had in a, I don’t even know, a while. I know I didn’t have any fancy spices or sauces, so what’d you do to make it taste so

good?” She asks taking another bite. I love watching her enjoy the food I’ve made.

“It’s a secret.” I say with a grin. “Do you want to go get dressed before we eat? I want to talk about something before you have to get to work.”

“No. I’m good.” She says with a smile, “I’ll get dressed in a bit. But I want you to tell me what your secret is with this omelet soon! It’s really good!” Her praise makes me smile.

“Want some coffee?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“Is that even a real question?” She says, the corner of her eyes lifting as she smiles. “The coffee grounds are in the cabinet above the microwave. Don’t forget the creamer in the fridge.” She instructs.

“Oh, don’t worry, Malyshka . I’ll take care of everything.” I nearly purr and get to work on brewing the nectar of life.

Once we’ve finished our omelets and we both have had at least one cup of coffee, we head to the couch. I don’t know how she’s going to react to my suggestions to try and keep her safe, but I can’t let anything happen to her. I just hope she’ll be reasonable.

“Do you want another cup of coffee before we talk about the safety measures I’d like to put in place for you?” I ask.

She sits next to me on the couch, legs crossed and hands in her lap like a kindergartener ready to hear the best story of their life.

“No, I think I’m good on caffeine right now. What do you mean by safety measures?” The litter furrow in between her brows makes me want to reach up and smooth out her worry.

“Like I mentioned last night, my family doesn’t live a very safe lifestyle. I can’t let anyone hurt you. I won’t.”

“I don’t honestly think I’m in any danger, Yuri. I’m a nobody.” She says, sounding a little dejected. I hate hearing her put herself down like that. It reminds me of when the girls at school would gang up on her and call her names.

“You’re somebody to me.” I remind her, holding her face in my hands. “If the people who hate my family find out about us, they’ll hurt you to hurt me” I sigh, bracing myself for a potential argument and trying to find the words to make her understand.

“Charlie, I know you don’t believe that anyone knows who you are. I pray that’s true, but I won’t take that chance. I can’t.” I say, hoping I don’t sound like a bumbling idiot.

“Ok then... What did you have in mind?” She asks. Completely skirting over the fact that I called us an “us”.

“Well,” I hate to change her whole world, this isn’t fair to her, but it’s too late to turn back now. “I was thinking you could move in with me.” I rush out.

She hesitates, she opens and closes her mouth before she finally states “Move in?” Her hands are in her lap and she keeps closing them tightly into a fist and then releasing them, “like... live with you?” I can see the wheels turning in her mind. “Like I would no longer live here? Or you just want me to stay at your place from time to time?”

“I don’t want you to feel overwhelmed, but for your safety, I think moving into my apartment and living with me is the best way to keep you safe. We can still keep your apartment, but I don’t want you staying here.”

Panic and a bit of defiance reach her eyes, “Woah! Ok, hold on just a minute. I worked really hard to get this apartment and my job. Do you expect me to just sit in your apartment all day? Because there’s no way that’s happening!”

“I know how hard you’ve worked Charlie,” I say quickly, “but it’s not safe for you to stay here. If you start writing articles about the crime in the city you’ll put a target on your back. I can’t let that happen.”

“I’m going to write about whatever I want, Yuri! I’m a grown ass woman. You can’t just waltz back into my life after ten years of being a ghost and expect me to drop my whole life.”

“Charlie, listen...” I start to explain.

“No, you listen to me!” She stands from the couch abruptly and spins, pinning me with her stare. “I’m no damsel in distress, okay? I am happy to have you around to help keep me safe, but I will not be locked away in a tower. Do you hear me?”

She caught me off guard a little with her response. I always knew she was stubborn, but I didn’t think she thought so little of her life to allow herself to be put in danger without a care in the world.

“I’m just trying to make sure you’re safe, Charlie, I don’t want to be some controlling mother-fucker. I’m not going to snatch you and lock you away.” Does she really think I’m some kind of monster?

“Well, if you expect me to drop my whole life for you, then you don’t know me at all.” She throws back, “I appreciate the protective boyfriend vibes you’re throwing out, but don’t think I’m some weakling! I’m not worried about anyone coming to hurt me. If the circumstances change, then maybe, MAYBE, I’ll consider moving, but until then, I’m staying right here.”

Damn! Charlie's sexy when she's determined. I don't know how I'm going to keep her safe if she won't let me, but I won't let her stubbornness and ignorance of just how much danger she's in stop me from protecting her. I backpedal a little to try and regain some ground.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I know you're not some sheltered princess. I don't want to stop you from living your life. I will; however, keep you safe, so here's what we're going to do," I take a deep breath and hope she doesn't throw away everything I've done over the last ten years to keep her safe. "I will take you to work everyday. If I can't, one of my guys will. Can we start there?" I ask.

"Fine. If you want to be my chauffeur, go for it, but I don't like the idea of a random guy I've never met driving me around."

"I'll have Maxim and Andrey come by after I pick you up from work so they can introduce themselves." I say kind of enjoying this back and forth power play we have going on. I'm not sure I want Andrey to meet Charlie after the way he talked about her earlier, but maybe if he talks to her, he'll see why she needs to be a priority.

"Fine. I'm going to finish getting ready for work. We can talk more about this later." She says as she heads for the bedroom, "and don't think I'm not appreciative. I am, but you haven't been in my life for ten years, Yuri. I just got you back and I don't even know what that means yet."

"I know. I get that."

"Then don't go grade-A-asshole on me. Okay?"

"Okay. Like I said before, I won't let anything happen to you and I'm not going anywhere."

“Good. Just so long as you know I’m not some princess who’s waiting for my prince charming. I won’t just dig a hole and hide because you have some big, bad enemies.”

I chuckle at her description of the Italian Mob, “Go get ready. We’ll talk more on the drive.”

She heads into her room to get ready and I brew her another cup of coffee before we head to my car. As we drive, I wait for her to bring up our previous conversation, but she doesn’t. We talk about her family and my brothers until we reach the building that houses The Chicago Times.

“Thanks for the ride,” She says as we pull to the curb, but she doesn’t get out of the car.

“I’ll pick you up from work and we can have dinner at my place. We can talk more then, okay?” I hate how she must think of me.

“Okay, sounds good.” she smirks at me. “I’ll see you after work.” She opens the door of my Audi, but before she steps a foot on the pavement I take her hand in mine and draw her close.

“I’ll see you for dinner.” I lean in; our lips centimeters apart, but I don’t initiate any further. She closes what little space is left and kisses me, soft and sweet. I savor the taste of coffee on her lips and deepen the kiss before we separate. Breathless.

“See you later, Yuri.” Charlie whispers onto my lips releasing my hand. She steps out of the car and walks into the building.

### CHARLIE

I am, once again, in Yuri's apartment this morning while he is making me breakfast. These last few weeks seem to be going by really fast and I am not sure what we are. We haven't really talked about it since the whole “move in with me” argument.

“What are you thinking about?” he says as he places a plate full of pancakes, eggs and turkey bacon in front of me with that knowing smile I love to hate.

These last few days have been amazing, but I've been so confused. I hope the worry and confusion isn't written all over my face.

I take a big bite of eggs to give myself a few seconds to put my thoughts together before saying, “It's just, well, what are we? Are we a ‘we’?” His head tilts in a cute puppy-like question. “Are we a thing? I'm sorry my brain is really going into overdrive this morning.”

He sighs, “You don't have to apologize Malyska .”

I suck in a breath determined to speak my mind, “I mean, the last few weeks have been amazing and I don't want us to not be a thing. It's just. It's nice having you around, and being there, and I really enjoy spending time with you. And honestly, I am terrified you're going to disappear again and I don't think I can handle that.” I rush it all out in one breath trying to gulp down enough air after that emotional word-purge-meets-panic-attack at the thought of him leaving again.

“Hey, hey,” he says softly. He walks over to me, grabs my hands which causes me to



stand up from the table. Bringing his hands to my face, he forces me to look him in the eyes and my hands fall to his waist. “I am never leaving you again. Ever. Unless you ask me too, and even then I don't think I could.”

I take in another gulp of air and try to smile as he rubs his thumbs in a comforting rhythm over my cheeks. “You are it for me, Malyshka . You’ve been it for me ever since you stood your ground and claimed me as yours on that school bus. Charlie, I’m yours.” he whispers and places a gentle loving kiss on my forehead.

I nod slowly as one tear slides down my cheek. He wipes it away as I try to regain my bearings.

“Now why don’t you eat breakfast and get ready for work? Unless you want to take the day off?” he throws out suggestively.

I sigh and roll my eyes, though the not-so-subtle hint of just staying home with him all day is tempting, “No, you’re right. I just got in my head I guess. The pancakes look good. They’re my favorite.” I smile softly and sit back down at the table.

“Oh, I know. I have to butter you up somehow with all the insults you’ve been throwing at your body guards.” He says as he pulls a chair up next to me and places his own plate of food down.

“Hey, it’s not my fault that the spearmint twins aren’t any fun and don’t enjoy following me around.” Honestly, I wouldn’t enjoy following me around all day either, so I can’t really blame them. “They don’t have to be there, you know? You could reassign them to, I don’t know, anyone but me.”

“You know I can’t do that,” he signs.

“I know you believe that,” I say right as my phone pings to let me know I got a text.

“Saved by the text message.” He grumbles

Dominic: Hey!! Guess who’s home and ready to partyyyyyyy?

Holding back a laugh and shaking my head, I frantically text him back.

Charlie: Shut up! When did you get back?

I look up at Yuri as I wait for Dom to answer and I can’t tell if he looks curious or angry. Maybe both. It’s like he’s in the middle of taking a bite of eggs and chose not to. I’m about to ask him what was up when my phone pings with Dominic’s response.

Dominic: A couple days ago. Had to get unpacked ‘n rest. Ya know, get back into U.S time! The 7 hour difference is a real bitch. lol

Charlie: Oh, so I am the last to know huh?

I giggle knowing full well he would have texted me sooner if he wanted, but I get why he waited. I glance up at Yuri and he looks so mad. He’s cutting up his pancakes like they’ve done something wrong to him. I’m confused, but then I realize he can read my text messages from where he sits and probably doesn’t understand who Dom is to me.

“That’s Dominic, a friend from college, who just messaged me. He’s back in town after spending the summer with family overseas.” I explain jovially, but the tension on Yuri’s face is getting stiffer by the second. “Why are you looking at me like that? He’s just a friend from school. Why do you look like I kicked your puppy?” I ask as I angle my body away from him a little.

“I - I don’t look like that!” he stammers angrily. “We were just having a conversation over here and all of a sudden you’re texting some random guy I don’t know. How do

you expect me to react? Especially after you just wanted to define our relationship.”

Is he seriously getting jealous over someone he doesn’t even know before getting an explanation?

“Wait, a second,” I say, turning around to face him again, “Don’t you know who he is? I mean you followed me around for how long? You had to have seen him and know who he was.”

“He’s back in town? Are you going to hang out with him?” he snaps right as my phone alerts me to a new message. I roll my eyes and check my phone, not dignifying that ridiculousness with an answer.

Dominic: Not last, never last C.C! Are you busy this weekend though? I would love to catch up and see how the new job is going and check out the apartment.

“Seriously Charlie? Are we not going to talk about the other man in your life?” he starts to raise his voice.

“What do you want from me? I have a friend, one friend, who just happens to be a guy, and you go all caveman! What the hell?” I huff.

“I am just trying to protect you and keep you safe!”

“Don’t raise your voice at me like I’m some petulant child! I am an adult, not a child. I don’t need you or your henchmen to babysit me twenty-four-seven. I can have a friend over to catch up without you breathing down my neck. I have been doing it for years! I will see my friend. I don’t need to ask your permission to do so.” I get up to leave his apartment and the spearmint twins are hot on my heels as I violently text Dom back.

Charlie: I sure am. I will send you my address. How does Saturday sound? I'll have pizza hot and ready when you get here.

I am so over this over protective caveman bullshit. He needs to figure his shit out and stop treating me like I'm some kind of fragile thing he has to coddle and protect. I am steaming mad as I storm out of his apartment building and go to work.

My phone pings another message but it's from Yuri. I am not in the mood to talk to him right now, so I put my phone on silent. He'll be lucky if I respond to him at all the rest of the day.

### THE SNAKE

The piece of shit actually did it! The selfish bastard! How can he think he is so high and mighty when he just put Charlie's life in more danger by busting through her apartment door and waltzing back into her life? Just another reason I hate the prick!

He has been trying to protect her for years, and now he just walks into her apartment and says, "Hey Charlie, I'm back!" What the fuck! Now how am I supposed to get close to her?

I've got to come up with a new plan. Again! After the restaurant failure and not knowing about the park situation, I'm starting to wonder if the Volkov's are even worth it.

But I've put so much of my life into this! I won't back down now. The Volkov's are going to get their just deserts even if it takes me another year of planning to bring them down!

After confronting my new 'partner' and getting some half-assed excuse for why he didn't let me know about the night at the park, I was going to kill him, but he's earned his way back into my good graces by giving me a great lead and a new idea on how to bring the Volkov dynasty down!

I make a quick call to my cop on payroll, Detective Missy Graves, to let her know about an arms deal that will go down in a few weeks. If she can catch the Volkov's and their client, then I'll have a few pawns out of the way.

It's time to get back on track!

YURI

The last few weeks have been heaven with Charlie and then I go and fuck it all up. Why did I act like a possessive asshole? It's not like she knows who Dominic really is or how dangerous it is for her to be around him. It's equally dangerous for her to be with me, but I won't let anything happen to her. I still can't figure out why Dominic got close to Charlie in the first place.

I try to text Charlie and apologize, but she won't respond to my message or answer my calls. Instead of blowing up her phone with texts and voicemail messages, I decide it's best for me to give her a little space while she figures out how she is feeling.

I clean up the plates from breakfast and call Maxim to make sure he and Andrey are at their posts keeping her safe. Once I'm confident in her safety I decide to head to the club to let off some steam. I have to keep busy or I'll march into Charlie's office and force her to talk to me and that won't help my case at all.

Once I've sparred with half the gym, I head home to get cleaned up for a meeting with my Pap to discuss the situation with Nico and his men. Plus I need to check in on Daniil at the hospital and see how he's doing.

Being with Charlie this much has made it hard for me to go to meetings and check on important things, but she's worth it and I'm thankful Maxim and Andrey have picked up some of the slack for me.

Andrey was glad to be off guard duty while I was with Charlie, so he wisely didn't

complain when they had to follow her after she stormed out of my apartment this morning. The boys have been checking in with me every hour to let me know where Charlie is and if they've seen Dominic. Luckily, she's been at work, but they haven't been able to pin down Dominic.

I'll have to get some other guys to find and follow him for me. He'll be an easier target to assign someone else to since Maxim and Andrey are the only two I trust to keep tabs on Charlie.

Now that I've showered and don't smell like death, I decide to go check on Daniil before my meeting with Pap. On my drive to the hospital I get a call from Maxim.

"What's up Max? How's Charlie?"

"She's fine. She went to lunch with some coworkers and then went back to the office. I've been having Konstantine monitor her phone; she's been messaging Dominic all day and they are planning to meet up on Saturday for pizza and a movie." He explains.

"I have Ivan and Mark trying to track down Dominic so we have his location. Just keep me in the loop."

"You know it."

We hang up just as I'm driving into the hospital parking structure. I'm eager to see how Daniil is since he was in a coma for a week. He's been awake for at least that long now but I haven't been able to talk with him about what happened. Pap said he couldn't remember anything when he first woke up, so I'm hoping he'll have regained some of his memory by now. We need to know how Nico's men got the drop on him.



I park my car and head up to the intensive care unit to Daniil's room. When I walk in, he's looking better than I expected laying on his bed watching television. His eyes move from the TV on the wall to me as I take in his appearance.

He has a bandage around his head and I can see his hands are badly bruised. The bruising on his face has finally started to clear up and Daniil is starting to look human again.

"Hey Daniil, how are you holding up?" I ask.

"Long-time no see, man! I'm doin' pretty good," he says with a touch of excitement, but his voice is still raspy. He coughs and takes a drink of water before saying, "I'm better than I was a week ago! Those bastards really did a number on me, but I'll live."

"Yea, you will. They can't say the same," I say with a grin.

"Did you guys figure out how they were able to track me down?" He asks, his eyes growing wide with curiosity.

"You did a good job trying to shake 'em, but they must have known where you were headed. Konstantine checked the security cameras all along that route and you shook 'em off a few times," I explain.

"That's what the boss said, but it doesn't make sense to me. They must have had some type of heads up about where I'd be going. Don't you think?"

That's been the running theory between Pap and the guys at the gym. We can't figure out how they knew which car to follow and then where Daniil would go if he knew he was being tailed. We have back up plans in place for scenarios like that and they've never failed before.

“We’re working on it, Daniil. I’m glad to see you looking less like a corpse these days,” I joke.

“Yea me too!” He says with a laugh before a string of coughs cut him off. We talk a bit longer about when he’ll be healed up before I leave to meet up with Pap. Unfortunately, his memory still hasn’t come back, but I don’t think he’d be able to tell us anything the cameras didn’t show us.

I make it back to the club to meet with Pap around two o’clock. The meeting was small, only me, the boss, and a few of his trusted advisors.

“Hey boss,” I say as I head into his office.

“Son, how is Daniil?” He asks.

“Better, but he couldn’t think of anything to help us.”

“Damn, well, we’ll just have to keep digging.”

“Did you get anywhere with Lev?” I ask. Pap seems to think one of the runners ratted us out. He’s been interrogating some of the new recruits in the basement of the club, but so far he hasn’t gleaned any new information.

“Nah, he hasn’t been helpful.” Pap says with a deep laugh.

“He’s been too busy stutterin’ and mumblin’ that he didn’t say nothin’ to nobody. Who recruited this pansy?” Pap asks.

“No one boss, he reached out to us a few years ago.” Viktor says, “Just showed up at the club wantin’ to learn to fight. He’s what? Eighteen?”

Pap sighs, “Yeah, I don’t think he’s our rat, but the boy needs to toughen up. He might have said somethin’ without knowing. Viktor, you talk with him and see who he’s been hanging out with. Jeremie, see if Konstantine can do what he does and find anything on Lev’s computer.”

“You got it boss,” Viktor says and heads to the basement. Jeremie nods and goes to meet Konstantine.

“What do you need me to do boss?” I ask.

“You figure out why Dominic Romano’s back in town?”

“We haven’t been able to suss out any plans Nico might be putting into motion.” I say. “He might have just missed his son or wanted him close to home since we retaliated after the situation with Daniil.” I surmise.

“Maybe,” Pap walks to sit behind his desk. He pours himself a glass of whiskey before saying, “how’s our girl, Charlie?”

“She’s good. Safe. Andrey and Maxim are with her now.”

“Good. You three keep checking into Dominic. Maybe Charlie can help you get some information out of him.” He suggests.

“Pap. I don’t think that’s a good idea. We’re already using Charlie as a resource since we have the tech on her phone, but I don’t want her involved.” I respond, trying not to let my fear show through my voice.

“I get it son, but Charlie’s already involved whether you like it or not. Her friendship with Dominic puts her in a precarious situation. We need to utilize her otherwise the Romanos might use her to get to us.”

“That’s what I’m trying to prevent. She has no idea who Dominic is. She just found out I’m alive. I only just told her about our family. She doesn’t fully understand what our family does. That keeps her safe,” I try to explain.

“I’ll let you do what you think is best for now, son, but if she becomes too much of a liability, we’ll have to deal with her differently. I know you’re taking it slow in telling her about the family business, but it might be easier to rip off the bandaid. Then she’ll know what she’s in the middle of.” He suggests.

“I don’t want to overwhelm her. I just got her back. I won’t do anything to put her in any more danger. The less she knows, the better!” I say emphatically.

“Like I said, I’ll let you handle this for now, but if I have to step in for the sake of the family, I will. You know I’d never do anything to hurt Charlie. She’s like the daughter I never had, but if her ignorance will hurt you, your mother, or your brothers, I’ll have to handle the situation myself.”

I know my father means well, but he wouldn’t know the first thing about “handling” Charlie.

“Alright Pap,” I say, “I’ll keep you posted. Konstantine is working with Ivan and Mark to locate Dominic, so we should have some information soon.”

“Good.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” I say heading for the door.

“Son,” he says before I fully exit his office.

“Yes,” I say looking back.

“Remember, Charlie’s friendship with Dominic is a resource. Don’t let it go to waste.”

I know what my father wants me to do but I can’t put Charlie in that situation. She’s already pissed at me for going “caveman” on her earlier. If I try to tell her Dominic is the enemy, I’m afraid I’ll lose her for good.

“I know,” I respond and am about to leave his office when he gets a phone call and motions me to wait, “Who is it?” I ask.

“It’s Liam.” he says furrowing his brow and answering the phone. “Liam,” he says, “What’s going on?”

I don’t hear the other side of the conversation but Pap looks worried and pissed all at the same time. Liam starts talking and seconds later, Pap sits down.

“What’s wrong?” I ask while Liam is still on the phone.

Pap pulls the phone away from his ear, but doesn’t hang up, “Someone caught wind of our upcoming deal. A Detective Missy Graves is apparently assembling a group of ATF agents and is planning a raid.”

“The fuck?” I say shocked.

Putting the phone back to his ear, Pap says, “Liam, thanks for the heads up, we’ll take care of everything on our end.”

Hanging up, Pap looks at me with murder in his eyes, “I smell a rat...”

“Who in their right mind would go to the cops?” I ask.

“That’s a good question. One we need answers to, now!” He says standing up from his chair with purpose.

“What do you need me to do?” I ask.

“Nothing right now, you focus on getting Charlie to talk about Dominic. I’ll take care of the rat infestation.” He says and walks out.

I’m left standing in my father’s office confused and unsure what to do. I take a few heartbeats to gather my thoughts and then decide to head back to the apartment and get dinner started.

I’m hoping to convince Charlie to come over so we can talk. I’ve given her time to think, but we really need to talk. I can’t have her putting herself into a dangerous situation when I don’t know what her “friend” is planning. If Dominic does anything to hurt Charlie to make a name for himself in this business he’s going to regret the day he was born.

I am about to pull up to my apartment when I get a call from Maxim.

“What’s up Max?” I ask.

“We have a problem,” He says in his gruff, yet panicked voice.

“What is it?”

“Charlie invited Dominic over for dinner tonight. I guess she’s really pissed because they’ve been talking on and off all day,” he reports.

“Shit!” I say, frustrated as I hit my fist off the steering wheel causing the horn to blare.

“What do you want us to do?” He asks.

“What time are they meeting at her place?” I ask, trying to come up with a plan.

“Six o’clock.”

“Okay, that gives me two hours to convince her to...”

“You want us to stay here?” Maxim asks.

“Yes! Of course!” I nearly shout, “Why would you even ask that?”

“Andrey wanted to know.”

“Put him on the phone,” I demand.

“Hey Yuri,” Andrey greets lightly a little tremor in his voice.

“Andrey, why the fuck would you ask if you need to stay at Charlie’s place until I get there? Are you stupid?” I seethe.

“No, it’s not that, I ... I just thought since you’re already on your way...”

“Do you have someplace to be?” I ask, curious.

“No, not really. I just wanted to stop by the club and talk to the boss. I’d like to help. I know he was talking to Lev this afternoon, so I thought I could be useful. Lev and I train from time to time, you know, I kind of took him under my wing.”

“Wait, what? You’re training Lev? Since when? You know what, I don’t care! Why do you think you get a say in what you help with? Are you the boss now?”

“No. I’m sorry Yuri. I am just trying to be helpful.”

“Well, you’re not! I thought after the last few weeks you would have realized that! Just stay put until I get there, got it?”

“Yea. You got it.”

I hang up the phone trying not to smash it against the dash. Andrey is going to be the death of me I swear! What an idiot!

I change direction and head for Charlie’s apartment. How am I going to talk her out of hanging out with Dominic? Why doesn’t she want to talk to me about this morning? Shouldn’t we be processing this together?

My anger has simmered down a bit by the time I arrive at Charlie’s. I park my car behind Andrey’s car just as they are getting out of the vehicle.

“Maxim, you can head back to the club. I’m going to have a quick chat with Andrey.” I say, dismissively. I don’t like talking with my friends like a dick-head, but sometimes my anger gets the best of me.

“Okay, Yuri. I’ll see you later,” he says as he heads to his car.

Andrey stands tall and I can tell he’s trying to put on an air of confidence. He makes a point to push his shoulders back and point his chin further in the air. He’s unsuccessful because he looks like an arrogant bastard, not the confident, helpful friend I used to know.

“Before you yell at me,” he starts, “I just want you to know that I have been supportive of you and this business since birth. This ‘stop being an idiot’ and ‘you’re not the boss’ attitude you’ve got going for you is pointless. I know I’m not the boss,



but can you really say you're acting any better?"

I stare at Andrey in shocked awe. Is he serious?

"Andrey, I don't know what is going on with you, but you need to get your shit together. I always knew you weren't Einstein, but I never thought you were dumbass!" I slap him in the back of the head, my anger flaring.

"See, this is what I'm talking about! When did you start talking to your friends like that!" He shouts, rubbing the spot I just smacked.

Stepping in closer to him so I don't have to shout, I don't want to bring unwanted attention to this conversation, I say, "Listen Andrey, I wouldn't talk to you like a damn toddler if you would fucking act like a responsible member of this Bratva!"

"I have only ever thought of the brotherhood Yuri! That's what you're not understanding! Charlie is a risk! A fucking liability! Following her around only brings unwanted attention onto her and us. We should have left well enough alone. There's no way Dominic knows about her and you. At least he wouldn't have had a way to find out if you didn't talk to her and hang out with her twenty-four-seven like a fucking love-sick puppy!" He surmises.

"You are acting like a jealous bastard, this is getting ridiculous!" I seethe.

"I'm not fucking jealous. I just want you to think with your head and not your dick! Getting rid of the bitch is better for her and us!"

"Andrey, what have I told you about talking about her like that? Charlie is part of this family and we take care of our own! She may not have been born into our pack, but she is still a member, she is mine. Do... you... understand?" I say between clenched teeth.

Andrey takes a step back and puts his hands in the air like he's surrendering. "Yeah, whatever man." he says nervously.

"Good! We better not have this conversation again, because it will not end well for you. You're one of my best and closest friends, not that you have been acting like it lately. I get that you're trying to be a protective brother, but it's not necessary. I've talked with the boss, and he knows what is going on, so I'm not making decisions lightly. Got it?"

"Yea." he replies coldly. His attitude is a conversation for another time.

"Good," I sigh rubbing my hand down my face, "Now sit your ass in this fucking car until I text you that it's clear for you to leave. Then you can go back to the club, understand?"

"Yes." He says as I turn my back on him and head toward Charlie's apartment.

I can't tell if he's just pissed or what. I hate having to talk to Andrey like that, but he needs to learn his place. He isn't going to advance with the attitude he's been sporting lately. I don't know if I can trust him. I sure as shit am not giving him more duties if he can't even handle the ones he's got.

I reach Charlie's door and knock lightly. I have a key which she gave me just over a week ago, but since she's mad at me I don't want to push my luck at the moment.

I hear light footsteps walking toward the door and see the shadow of two, petite feet just on the other side. Charlie must have looked in the peep-hole because the next thing I hear is, "Go AWAY!".

### CHARLIE

I stare through the peep-hole in shock. “Go AWAY!”, I yell and turn to lean on the door, arms firmly crossed over my chest in comfort and frustration. I am not sure why I am so shocked he’s here. He has proven over the past few weeks that he has serious control and trust issues. If he was just honest with me this wouldn't be a problem. Of course, he’s trying to get me to move in again without an explanation is also part of the problem.

I’m determined to hold my ground and pray he doesn't say anything to change my mind. Taking a measured breath I say through the door, “I am not talking to you right now Yuri, I need space to think!”

He makes an audible sigh of defeat, “Charlie, I just wanted to talk. To apologize. Please, let me in. I really don’t want to be yelling this conversation through a door in your hallway.”

I turn to look in the peep-hole once more and see him staring through it with his dark puppy eyes, hands braced on the door. Now I am the one sighing.

Giving myself a pep talk, I close my eyes and put my hands out in front of me as I talk to myself in a whisper, “Just hear him out but do NOT give in. Hold your ground. If he wants this to work he has to be honest.”

I crack the door open but keep the chain in place in an effort to maintain some boundary and prevent myself from just forgiving him.

“Speak,” I say curtly, internally high fiving myself for holding my ground and not melting on the spot.

His eyes go wide in shock like he wasn’t expecting me to give him a chance to explain.

“You have five seconds before I close this door,” I begin to say and then soften a little because I have been ignoring him, but I will close this door in his face. He must see the determination in my eyes and he sighs again before speaking.

“Look, I know I messed up but this is all knew to me,” he says running one hand through his hair and then over his face, “I am trying and I am sorry that I am coming off like an asshole, but you have to understand that in my line of work everyone I love or care about can be used against me. You are and will always be in danger because I am a selfish asshole that can't let you go. I just want to protect you, Malyshka .”

I am determined to hold on to my anger which is difficult because I can tell he is being sincere, but I worry about giving in too quickly. I don’t want him to think all he has to do is flash those gorgeous, deep starlight eyes at me and apologize. I can’t let him get away with talking to me like this.

“Look, Yuri, I get that you're living this big bad life. That’s not the issue. I mean it should be, but it’s not. The issue is you thinking you can boss me around and manipulate me into doing what you want. That... isn't going to fly with me.”

Sputtering angrily, he rushes out, “That isn’t my intention! I am just trying to protect you. How can you not see that?”

Holding up my hand to stop him, I continue, “I need my job, my friends, and my independence. I love having you back, Yuri. You have no idea how long I wished to

see you, but you can't come barging back into my life and start controlling everything! I need time. I need my own place and space. I don't need babysitters and I don't need you rushing me to move in with you when I just got you back less than a month ago! I know you want to keep me safe and that you are worried about me, but for the last ten years I have been taking care of myself. Having you jump in all of a sudden is jarring and you not giving me the space to think isn't cool."

"I get that, but you need to understand that I will do anything to keep you safe. I am worried about the company you keep. You don't understand how dangerous people can be." He says, raising his voice a little.

Now I see red, "What the hell does that mean?"

Putting his hands out in front of him like he's warding off a fight, he backpedals, "That came out wrong. Look, I am concerned about that guy, your friend from college, Dominic. He isn't someone you should be spending your time with, trust me."

I scoff, "Trust you? Yuri, are you hearing yourself? You sound like an overbearing, jealous boyfriend! Why shouldn't I trust him? He hasn't given me a reason not to! He was there for me when you weren't!"

I am done with this conversation and need him to leave! I am so angry. Nothing good or productive is going to come out of this conversation. I know my face is twelve shades of red right now, I'm raging, "Get out!" I shout, "Have a good night and keep your goons away from me. I don't need them." I slam the door in his face and lock it immediately. I'm breathing too fast. My heart is pounding out of my chest. Panicking right now will not help, so I try to slow my racing heart. I close my eyes, stretch my neck, and ball my hands into fists and stretch my fingers. I repeat this for what feels like an eternity. Once I hear a few pops from my neck and feel the tension leave my body I open my eyes. I can't believe that just happened.

I check the peep-hole and nothing. I look out my window and don't see his car or any evidence he left the spearmint twins either. I am not sure how I should feel about that, so I push down the conflicting emotions that are creeping in and order the pizza for me and Dom. I will not let this argument ruin my night.

When Domonic shows up at my apartment I am swept up into the biggest hug ever. It's great to have him back and I needed that hug more than he knows. Once my feet are back on the floor, I give him the grand tour.

"It's definitely a cute place C.C! Perfect for you."

We grab some pizza slices, sit on the couch, and he proceeds to tell me all about his adventures overseas. Even though he complained about having to go in the first place, it sounded like he enjoyed himself and learned a lot about his family's business.

"So what exactly will you be doing for your dad? I mean, I know you studied business but what does your family do?" I say hesitantly, definitely trying to keep the conversation on him and his plans instead of me.

"Oh, I thought I had mentioned that before." My family runs an import export business. You know standard goods and services stuff. We are trying to expand into some docks in Florida and Texas right now, but mostly we use planes to move our goods around the states and other territories, even Canada and Mexico. That sounds really boring when I say it out loud to someone that isn't in the business." He chuckles and takes a big bite of pizza before he asks, "What have you been up to lately? We haven't really talked much. Work getting busy? Any big stories you are working on?"

I sigh and set my plate of half-eaten pizza on the coffee table and tell him everything, mostly. At first I'm determined to leave out any discussion of Yuri and our sexcapade because honestly it makes his reentry into my life sound like he was a manipulative

stalker but I need Dom's male perspective. Maybe I'm being overly sensitive about the entire thing or maybe Yuri is a controlling asshole that needs to take a chill pill. I don't know, so I need an unbiased third-party-opinion to balance out the tug of war going on in my head.

We finished our pizza and now we're sitting on the couch drinking some much needed hot tea.

"Wow, well that sounds like an eventful summer thus far. Where has he been this entire time? Has he said? Why come back now?" Dom looks surprised and a bit confused. Welcome to the club.

I chuckle, "Wow! You sound like a girl wanting all the tea!" I say grabbing my mug of earl grey and laugh at the pun. "He told me some things and they make sense, I'll give him that, but I don't know. I'm just so confused. He was so sweet and caring when we were younger. Now, I don't know. He seems paranoid, overprotective, and is acting like he has gone through something or thinks someone is out to get him. He keeps saying people will hurt me to hurt him. It sounds nuts, I know!" I say exasperated and throw my hands in the air.

I run my fingers through my hair in an effort to tame the curls, get rid of some knots, and do something with my hands. I'm so confused about the position I have found myself in. Saying it all out loud is helping a little. I kind of get why Yuri is scared. I mean he's in the damn mob! This feels surreal, like I'm in some new age mafia movie. I appreciate his caution, I really do, but at the same time, he can't just take over my life and lock me up for safe keeping. I won't be a prisoner even if the cell is fancy. I will not thrive like that; we won't survive like that, but I can't risk losing him either. Maybe I am over reacting. I am so damn confused !

"Honestly C.C., he sounds like a walking red flag. One you should probably avoid until you know what is really going on. He is obviously hiding something or doesn't

want to let you in. If he loved you, don't you think he would want to let you in? Plus who wants to date an overbearing ogre?" He takes a few sips of tea and looks at me. The room goes quiet for a few heartbeats and he puts his mug back on the coffee table. He keeps flexing and clenching his fists in his lap. I can see he wants to ask something else, so I stay quiet. Clearing his throat he says, "You didn't say what brought him around again or what caused his disappearance to begin with..." he pauses, then he asks, "Do you even know?"

I get this odd feeling in the pit of my stomach. His line of questioning seems... off? I can't quite put my finger on it, but something doesn't feel right.

"Like I said Dom, he explained himself. I know why he left, and it makes sense to me now why his family had to leave the way they did. My issue right now is his behavior. Why he is back or why he left to begin with isn't a problem. Does the reason he left matter? He's back now."

His eyes flash with an odd cold sort of darkness but he smiles his usual cheesy grin saying, "I just care about you, that's all. You're sure it's him though, right? He's not some creep who knows you've been looking for a long lost childhood friend? Someone could be messing with you."

"It's him Dom, I am not an idiot! Seriously, what do you take me for?" What is with the men in my life these days?

"Hey," he says with his hands up in mock surrender, "I'm just asking. I didn't mean anything by it." He glances at his watch and sighs, "It's late and I have to be at the office in the morning. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I am just looking out for you." He squeezes my shoulder, stands and gently kisses the top of my head, brings his plate to the kitchen and says goodbye on his way out.

I sit there in my apartment. Alone. Once again confused and trying to get my head on



straight. I am not normally like this. I mean a little over dramatic sure but never this emotional. “Oh wait! SHIT!” I say as I run to the bathroom.

I should have known! Aunt Flo’s in town wreaking havoc which sheds a little bit of light on the situation, but still. Why are the men in my life suddenly treating me like I have a ton of rocks between my ears?

I decide to treat myself to a rootbeer float since I’ve been through the ringer and head out to Tastee-Freez before I go crazy sitting in this apartment alone with my thoughts.

### THE SNAKE

How the Fuck did the Volkov's find out about the plan to take down their arms deal? Now I have to come at them from another angle. Trying to get unnecessary pawns out of the way is proving more difficult than I thought. It might be time to bring backup.

I should have had my boss helping me from the start. He may be pissed, but ever since Ilya came back into the city, he's been focused more on expansion than revenge. He'll see it my way one way or another. If we work together I know we can take out the Volkov trash.

I have information about another arms deal that's going to happen, so I will call Detective Missy Graves again and she better not fuck it up this time! She had one job! If this doesn't work, I'm going back to my original plan and just grabbing Charlie.

I'll need to put a few pieces together in case the bust doesn't go as planned. While they're worried about their guns, I'm going to take their precious gem!

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

YURI

I never should have gone to her apartment. I knew I wouldn't be able to keep my temper under control, but we needed to talk about Dominic. There was no way around it. I can't tell if Charlie is being stubborn or if she really doesn't trust me.

After everything we talked about, I can't believe she still had him over to her apartment. The bastard must be very convincing. I hate that she trusts him more than me. All I want to do is keep her safe and now she won't talk to me again.

Still fuming and driving like a maniac, I head to the gym. Once I've fought off some of this anger I'll be able to think more clearly. I don't want to be the inconsiderate and controlling man she claims I'm being.

I knew she wouldn't be open to my suggestion not to hang out with Dominic. What did I think would happen? He's been there for her in a way I couldn't be these last four years, but I know he's not in this friendship for her benefit. He can't be. He's too selfish! I need her to see Dominic's true colors. I'll have to come up with some sort of plan to show Charlie he's not who she thinks he is.

I don't want her to feel like I'm trying to stop her from living her life, but how can I keep her safe if she won't trust me? How can I stop whatever plan Dominic and his father have put together if she won't listen?

Two hours later I head back to my apartment with a cooler head on my shoulders. I decided not to call Charlie while I was at the gym. She deserves some space to think, but when I call her now she just sends me to voicemail. Instead of blowing up her

phone with annoying voicemail messages, I call Maxim and Andrey.

“Hey guys where are you?” I ask when Maxim answers the phone.

“We’re sitting in Andrey’s car outside one of the grocery stores on State. We’re out of sight though, don’t worry. Charlie doesn’t know we followed her,” He gruffs out.

“Good. I’m going to head over to Dom Chaya . Meet me there in ten. We need to talk about some things,” I explain before hanging up.

Ten minutes later I’m pulling into the parking lot of Dom Chaya , my favorite restaurant and tea room. My Babushka used to bring me here as a boy before we left the city and they have the best tea in town.

My family owns The Tea House, but we didn’t traditionally discuss business here until after my grandparents passed. We like to discuss business at the bar or the club because no one comes through those doors uninvited, but I’m trying to channel the peace and clarity my Babushka always evoked in this place so we can come up with a plan to remove Dominic from Charlie’s life.

Andrey and Maxim walk in a minute after I do and we head to the back dining room for privacy. We order some Zavarka tea and Sushkie . I wouldn’t be able to enjoy my tea without the amazing cookies. The Brits have their biscuits, we have Sushkie.

“So, what’s the plan Yuri?” Andrey asks once the waitress leaves the table.

“We need to deal with Dominic now. He is too embedded into Charlie’s life. I was stupid not to handle him sooner,” I say chastising myself. “Whatever we do, Charlie cannot learn that we’re behind the reason he’s no longer in her life,” I warn, mostly looking at Andrey.

“It’s going to be tricky,” Maxim starts, “we don’t want to kill him outright, at least not yet. Dominic is a pansy-ass! I say we scare him a little. It won’t be too hard to make him back off of Charlie.”

“What do you have in mind?” I ask, “We need to send a message since he is no doubt aware of Charlie’s importance now.”

The waitress comes back with our tea and mini-crispy-bagel-like cookies a few moments later, we sit in pondering silence for a while as we enjoy the aroma and comfort the tea and snacks bring.

“Let’s not overthink it,” Maxim says, his mouth full, “We know Dominic thinks he can’t be messed with. He seems to like that car of his a little too much. Why not burn it while he’s out with Charlie?”

“I don’t want Charlie near him when we send our message. We need to send the message loud and clear; I don’t want him getting any sympathy from her. He will stay away from Charlie or he’ll be the one up in flames next!”

“I think Dominic will act like an idiot when his car is burnt to a crisp. He’ll be so angry he will lose control over his fake cool and calm act,” Maxim explains, “It’ll be the perfect way for Charlie to really see who he is.”

Andrey finally pipes up with his concerns, “I don’t think it’s a good idea. We don’t want to mess up the boss’s plans by going after Dominic. Charlie isn’t in any danger with him. If he wanted to hurt her, he’d have done it already.”

Maxim and I both look at Andrey with disbelief. I’m left slack-jawed by Andrey’s comment, so Maxim finally says, “Dominic had no reason to hurt Charlie before, that we know of...” He pauses, “Now he knows about Charlie and Yuri. Do you really think his plan was being her friend? He’s not the type to be friends with a girl for no

reason.”

My frustration with Andrey only grows with his response.

“I guess... but do we really think the boss will be ok with destroying the car of the son of his biggest enemy? He’s got plans in motion, Yuri. We have to remember that.”

“You don’t think I don’t know what my father’s planning. I’m not going to kill the bastard, but I need Dominic to know his place. He’s not going to continue sitting in Charlie’s apartment eating pizza and pretending to be her friend. I won’t be responsible for him hurting her. We’re going to destroy his car... tonight.”

We leave after finishing our tea and I send Maxim and Andrey on a mission to find out where Charlie and Dominic will be tonight. We have to do this now! There’s no time to wait.

After the shittiest day, we are finally set up for operation free-Charlie-from-this-douchebag! I sent Andrey and Maxim to get supplies; with the way Andrey’s been acting lately, I don’t trust him to go alone for something as important as this. Knowing him, he’d get the wrong accelerant. Now it’s time to force Dominic to show his true colors. We decided the term go-big-or-go-home was appropriate!

I watched Charlie and Dominic enter the Italian restaurant thirty minutes ago and am itching to get started. I’m waiting on Maxim and Andrey to arrive. We don’t want to start another Chicago Fire, so they are taking necessary measures to ensure only Dominic’s Range Rover goes up in smoke.

Of course not everything can be avoided, so if the Italian’s lose a restaurant in the process, I’m not too concerned. I would like to avoid hurting innocent people though, so I made sure to have Konstantine check that the sprinkler system in the restaurant is

functional and have him standing by to reroute traffic with the flip of a switch.

A few years ago, Konstantine figured out how to hack into the traffic lighting control for the city. It's come in handy quite often. We have the city on a tight leash since no one is as good as Konstantine and the cops can't figure out how our men keep getting around their roadblocks and past their stupid checkpoints after a big job. We've even managed to reroute Nico and his men straight into the hands of the cops a few times.

Most people in Chicago don't follow the rules of the road, but when you change a green light to red at the last minute, that can really jam someone up, so for this job, we want to make sure all lines are open for the firetrucks to get to the restaurant, but not too quickly. I still want to see that bastard's car burn and watch his friendship with Charlie crumble.

Maxim and Andrey pull up behind my car and walk to the driver's side window. I roll it down and ask, "Everything set?"

"Yea. We got everything we need. Andrey and I are going to set that car off like an M-80. I can't wait to see the look on that fucker's face," Maxim says with a smile.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Andrey whines.

"Don't be such a coward Andrey," I say with a sigh, "You do your job, I'll do mine, and this will go off without a hitch." I explain.

"You got it man." Maxim says and they both walk across the street.

I quickly grab Andrey by the shirt, "And don't forget to wear your earplugs!"

"Right." he says walking away rummaging through his pockets.

I call Konstantine to double check he's ready to go with the stoplights and any security cameras. We don't need video evidence of me sitting in my car or the boys lighting this car up.

Once he gives me the go ahead, I signal to Maxim and Andrey. Maxim breaks into Dominic's car, bypassing the alarm system, in seconds. I can't see what he's doing in great detail, but I know he's pouring gasoline all over the interior. Andrey's job is to haul the gas cans away so Maxim can get in my car as soon as the car bursts into flames. I quickly put in my ear plugs because I don't want to go deaf and watch with glee and anticipation.

We don't want to stay long, but I need to see Dominic's reaction. Within seconds Andrey is hauling ass toward his car and Maxim is throwing an old beer bottle filled with gasoline and stuffed with a piece of kitchen rag through the open driver's side window of Dominic's precious car.

Maxim is throwing himself in my car within a few heartbeats and the next thing we see are red hot flames skating across the inside of the Range Rover.

**BOOM!**

Glass shatters littering the sidewalk and street. I pull my car out of its spot and drive down the block, take a left, and park quickly.

"I'll be back," I say to Maxim as I get out of the car.

"Is that a threat?" He chuckles and I start power walking back toward the restaurant and stand in the crowd of onlookers.

Some people are running away from the scene, some are crying, but it's mostly silent. I hear distant sirens and feel the buzz from my phone in my pocket.



I check my messages and it's Konstantine letting me know the fire department is five minutes out. I send off a quick "ok" and duck in an alley so I can watch the scene without being seen.

Next thing I see is Dominic storming out of the restaurant, they must have been seated toward the rear of the dining room for privacy, the bastard, and he didn't know it was his car that exploded only moments ago.

"WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED?" Dominic shouts.

Silence.

"I WANT TO KNOW WHO DID THIS! RIGHT NOW!" He shouts indignantly.

No one speaks. He's fuming, just like his car.

"NO ONE? NO ONE SAW ANYTHING?" He demands from the crowd.

"Dominic, calm down. We'll figure this out. Maybe there was faulty wiring or something? We are lucky to be alive!" She says, trying to console her friend.

"No! This wasn't an accident. Do you really think a car will explode like that just from some faulty wiring? Are you stupid?" He insults her and I know now that my job here is done.

Her cheeks burn red and I know it's not only because she's standing near a burning car.

"Excuse me?!" Charlie says, raising her voice.

"You heard me. There's no way this was an accident! Think C.C!" He continues

digging himself a hole so deep, he won't be able to climb out.

"I did hear you. Listen, I know you're upset about your car, but you don't get to talk to me like that. You're my friend. So stop being an ass!" She shouts.

She's pissed and he's doomed. Perfect. She's walking toward Dominic and I think she might slap him, but I don't get a chance to see because my phone vibrates in my pocket.

I wrestle it out of my jeans and see my father's name. I answer and take a few steps further into the alleyway, "Hey Pap," I say in greeting but I don't get a chance to say anything else.

"I need you, Andrey, and Maxim at the club now! Someone tipped off the cops again." He growls out.

"What?" I say shocked and stop in my tracks.

"I got a call from Liam just in time and we were able to get everyone out of there, but this needs to stop now!"

"Okay, I'll get the guys and we'll be on our way." I say hanging up the phone. I make my way back to the car just as pissed off as Pap. Who the fuck is ratting on us? This makes no sense! Without Liam on our side and warning us, again, we'd be toast.

I make it back to the car and throw myself into the passenger seat. Andrey is in the back and Max is at the wheel.

I don't waste time telling them about the boss's phone call, "We need to go now!"

As we drive, I think about Charlie and Dominic back at the restaurant. I hate leaving

her with no security, but I don't have any other choice.

Remembering their argument, I chuckle to myself. Dominic has always been a hotheaded idiot, so I'm not surprised by his reaction, but he's been doing his best to hide his true nature from Charlie over the past four years. Now she'll have to decide who is worth trusting.

It's been twenty-hours and I haven't heard from Charlie. After leaving the restaurant, and dealing with the rat situation, I decided to wait a few hours to call and check in so I didn't seem like an overbearing asshole, but she wouldn't answer my call. I want to give her time, but I wish she would reach out to me.

I know she was mad at Dominic for being a dumbass, so I'm surprised that she isn't answering my calls or texts. I figured she'd call me right away since she was at the scene of a car explosion. I thought she would have wanted to rage about Dominic or that she'd at least be more upset at him than she is with me. I guess she just needs more space than I expected.

Andrey and Maxim have been keeping a close eye on Charlie for me, discreetly. I don't want her to be more angry with me about the spearmint twins, but I won't be able to get any work done if I don't know she's safe.

I'm terrified that the wrong people may know about us now. I know Dominic is dumber than a box of rocks, but there's no way he hasn't put two and two together about who I am, but since they're so close I know she confided in him about me. That fact is still boiling my blood.

He may not know I'm Ilya's son, but he definitely knows how Charlie feels about me, and that's not good. He's still dangerous, even if he doesn't know anything. I've texted Charlie five times and called her just as often throughout the day just to check in. I've tried to keep my voicemails light and my tone soft in my texts. I don't want

her to think she can't call me or text me about Dominic.

I don't care that she's still mad at me, but I wish she would answer the phone. I need to hear her voice. I was forced to be apart from her for too many years, so these last few weeks have been a breath of fresh air. I didn't realize how much I missed the way she laughs, how she sighs when she's frustrated and doesn't know what to say, or even the obnoxiously cute way she sneezes.

Her calming effect started to overwhelm me, but now that she won't talk to me, I realize how much I need her. When we're together I know she's safe. When we're together, life seems less crazy, less like a pile of shit.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

### THE SNAKE

I am taking matters into my own hands!

One more pawn to play and then I'll have the Queen!

If you want something done right, do it yourself!

YURI

I decided to head back to Dom Chaya to work instead of stewing in my apartment waiting for Charlie to call or text me. I would have gone to the club, but I've had enough of grappling with the guys and I don't want Pap to see me like this. He would just say, "I told you, son. You should have left well enough alone. If you would have forgotten about her, you wouldn't be in this mess", and I don't need that right now.

So instead, I brought my laptop to the Tea Room to get back on track with a few projects. Pap put me in charge of one of our gambling dens a few years back and I need to balance the books to make sure no one is trying to take off with any extra cash. I haven't been as focused as I should be.

I know Andrey's been trying to keep me on track, and maybe I should have heeded some of his warnings, but Charlie is more important than a dumb game of chance, even when that game of chance makes us over \$200,000 a week.

Baba started the gambling dens back in the fifties. You'd be surprised how many cops and lawyers, even the mayor and a congressman or two you'd find at one of our dens. Everyone likes a gamble, but I won't play with Charlie's life.

I've spent half the day going over the books in an effort to distract myself. I know Andrey and Maxim have everything under control, but I can't help but think that something bad is about to happen.

I'm up to my elbows in numbers when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

I see my Pap's face light up my screen. If he starts yelling at me for not having these books done, I'm going to lose it.

"Hey Pap, what's up?" I ask.

"You need to come back to the apartment, NOW!" he says, sounding breathless.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Alek. I don't know what the fuck is going on! He was on his way home from hanging with some friends and got jumped. I don't know anything else right now. I have some guys on it, but I need you in this apartment NOW!" I can tell he's trying to stay calm. My mom is probably going out of her mind with worry.

"Ok. I'm on my way!" I say, "I just need to pack up my things and see if I can convince Charlie to come with me. I'll be there in five minutes."

"I don't want you to stop for any reason. Bring Maxim and Andrey with you. I want all hands on deck for this! We can check on Charlie later."

"They're at Charlie's apartment already. I'll call them. Pap, I know you're worried, but I'm going to leave Andrey there. I won't leave her unprotected."

I can hear his teeth grinding through the phone. I don't usually go against his orders, but he knows how important Charlie is to me.

"Fine! Just get here NOW! Not five minutes from now... RIGHT NOW!" He hangs up and I'm dazed.

What the actual fuck is going on? I'm used to our guys getting into fights on the street nearly every week. But this is getting ridiculous. Pap has worked hard to keep

our family safe and out of the spotlight.

First Daniil, now Alek. Something isn't adding up.

First my mind goes to Dominic, but why? He wouldn't have known who sabotaged his car. He may have some inkling that it was us, but it could have been any one of his enemies. He has so many of them. How would he know it was us? And why Alek?

This has to be something different. I don't usually believe in coincidences, but maybe this is a random mugging that just happened to take place the day after we made his car go BOOM!

Muggings, car jackings, and rapes happen more often than I'd like. We've worked hard over the last ten years to make the streets safe. We went so far as to create our own patrol to fight the Italians. Every time we push them back, they come back and dirty up the city.

Most people are safe walking around the city in our territory. If Nico is trying to make a push for more territory, I wouldn't put it past him to create fear with random muggings. I just don't like that this happened on the heels of our mission yesterday.

I quickly grab all my stuff and head to the car. It doesn't do me any good to guess. Once I get back to the apartment, Pap and his team will have answers.

Once I'm in the car, I head toward Charlie's apartment first and I call Maxim. He answers on the first ring.

"What's up man?" He asks.

"Alek's been mugged. The boss wants us at the apartment now. Tell Andrey he's to



stay there. You meet me at the apartment.”

“Ok. He’s up the block always monitoring the entrance to the street. I’ll go over and talk to him.”

“I’m going to try and get a hold of Charlie. If I can get her to come with me to my apartment, I’ll feel better about all this. Tell Andrey I’ll call him with an update about if he’ll be able to meet up with us, until he hears from me he is to stay with Charlie!”

“Understood.” he replies.

I hang up and try calling Charlie.

She doesn’t answer, so I call again, hoping that she’ll answer since I don’t usually spam call her.

I call three more times, but she doesn’t pick up the phone, so I leave a message.

I turn around and head for my family’s building instead. Andrey is there, so I know she’ll be safe, but I’d feel tons better if we were in the same building.

CHARLIE

Pacing.

I have been reduced to pacing. What is wrong with me? My mind is going a mile a minute and the men in my life are fucking idiots.

Yuri and I still haven't made up. Could I just have a conversation with him and maybe set a boundary? Sure! Of course I could. I still haven't spoken to Dominic after the car explosion situation. Is that even a situation? How does that even happen!? Instead of reaching out to either of them I am here fucking pacing in my apartment, I'm still fuming and making the situation so much worse by hyping it up in my head. Do I care?

Nope.

Yuri has been calling and texting. Trying to check in and see how I am. Not that he has any idea what happened with Dominic last night. Have I called him back? Nope. Will I? I have no idea. Rubbing my hands over my face lost in a never ending loop of thought, I stop pacing.

This is ridiculous. Charlie just call him and tell him you want to talk. Better yet, you want him to listen! If he wants this thing between the two of us to continue, we need complete honesty. I won't let him boss me around! I already have a dad !

He's my boyfriend! I think? We never really discussed what exactly we are. Damn it!

I start pacing... again.

I am surprised I haven't heard from Dominic even though he was being a total ass last night, I expected some type of communication this morning. It isn't every day your friend's car just blows up at dinner! He was definitely shocked and overwhelmed with the situation, but I have no idea why he wouldn't talk to me about it. All he did was talk down to me like I was some kind of moron!

He didn't seem all that surprised though which is a tad concerning. I really need to talk to him about that. The entire situation is a bit weird. I don't know but the math isn't mathing for me.

"Gahh!!" I throw myself on my couch lost in my endless monologue when I get a call from Yuri. I send him straight to voicemail. Again. I still can't muster the courage to talk to him. I'm afraid I'll cave.

"Ughh!!" I shove my face into one of my throw pillows and then sit up. I take a deep, measured breath, "Okay, you know what? No. I am not doing this. I'm calling Bill. I'll work from home today and get my shit together." I shoot a text to Bill and tell him I am working on a story, which isn't really a lie, and bolt to my bathroom. A shower will help me clear my thoughts, so I crank the heat on and wait for the bathroom to fill with a soft mist, give myself another horrible pep talk, and get in the shower.

I stand under the stream of hot water long enough that my entire body is pink when I get out, towel off and get ready for the day. I refuse to look at my phone, so I put the kettle on for some tea and turn on the news.

Grabbing my laptop I set to work, researching one of the stories Bill asked me to work on.

The kettle starts to whistle and now it's hot tea time.

After focusing on work for the day I finally check my phone and see that Yuri has called a handful of times in a row? Odd... I sigh and take a deep breath and listen to his voicemail.

“Charlie, it’s me, Yuri. Look, I know you’re mad at me, but I need you to call me back so I know you’re okay. Alek... Alek has been attacked and I just, I need to hear your voice. I need to know that you are okay. Please, just... Please call me back.”

Holy Hell! I hit the phone icon on my cell phone so fast, and the phone barely completes its first ring when Yuri frantically picks up.

“Charlie! Thank God! Are you okay? Are you home?” he exclaims frantically.

“Yuri, yes, yes I am home and I am fine. What the hell happened to Alek? Is he okay?!” I am trying to keep him calm so he realizes that I am fine so he can focus on his brother.

“He’s in the hospital, in a coma. Look, I am on my way and I need you to come with me. I need you to stay with me until we know who went after him...” he rushes like he is afraid I am going to hang up, which if he keeps asking me to move in. I might.

I sigh, “Yuri, I won’t do that.” Having this conversation over and over is getting exhausting.

“Listen to me!” raising his voice almost hysterically, “No one knows who he is. He is still in high school and we keep him out of everything. They found out who he is and attacked him. I can’t risk you too!”

Trying to understand and keep the peace I say, “Yuri, I am not doing this again. I am

fine.” I say as calmly as possible. “I will stay in my apartment. I promise I am safe here. I can take care of myself. You stay with your family and focus on Alek. He needs you more than I do right now.”

“I know you believe that but there is more to this than you know. I will explain everything, but I need you to trust me and come to my place with me.”

“I’m done! I’m not having this conversation again! Especially now, not with everything your family is going through. I am hanging up now. I am home and I am safe, but we are not talking about this again.”

I hang up. Not sure if that was the smartest thing to do right now, but I am so frustrated! I know he’s emotional with Alek being hurt. I really hope he is okay. I understand why Yuri is worried. I mean, I can’t believe someone would go after Alek, but no one is out to get me. I am a nobody. I put the kettle on and begin to pace, again, and think.

I am finally settled into my couch sipping on my tea when a knock sounds on my door. Exhausted, I get up and look through the peephole.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!”

I throw open the door and there he is, in my doorway, again.

Yuri.

YURI

I'm at her door. Again! About to plead with her to come with me. Again! We need to get to a place where we understand each other better. I realize now that she needs more from me. I can't expect her to be a damsel in distress and just come with me because I say so.

I gave her the bare bones, but she needs to know more. She needs to know who Dominic is, but when I tell her will she believe me? Will she understand how dangerous he is? I thought after hearing about Alek being in the hospital in a coma that she'd understand what I'm up against.

That phone call didn't go well, so I'm here, in person even though she didn't invite me over to talk this through. I'm determined to tell her the whole truth so she'll see why I'm so concerned. I don't want her to move in with me because I'm a misogynistic pig. I want her to move in so she's safe, so she'll have more freedom.

I know she won't see it as freedom, but until we can figure out who we are battling against I can't just let this go. I'm fighting blind here.

I knock on her door, knowing she's about to be pissed, but I'm prepared. We have to talk, now.

She opens the door so quickly and the look on her face is pure rage.

"I told you NOT to come over here, Yuri! Why aren't you listening to me?" she shouts. She is holding the door in a death grip. I have never seen so much fear and

rage on her face before.

I blow past her and walk into her apartment, I can't give her the chance to run or hide away from me again. "We need to talk, Charlie. This is important..." I start to explain.

"That's why you should be with your family, with Alek! Not here with me! That seems a bit more important!" she says, raising her eyebrows and tilting her head. Crossing her arms over her chest clearly thinking she won the argument before it has even started.

"I know where I need to be, and I need to be here, with you." I say pointing down toward the floor. "You've been wanting full honesty from me, and I see now that there are things you need to know if you're going to understand where I'm coming from. Please, just give me five minutes." I said please, I never say please but she needs to understand the seriousness of this situation.

She starts pacing. She's so cute when she's mad, but I have to focus. I can see the wheels turning in her mind and know she's furious that I'm here right now.

"Yuri, this is beyond irritating." Her eye starts twitching and I can tell I am in for it. "You aren't listening to me at all. You want me to listen and understand where you're coming from but you're not listening to me. How are we supposed to make this work if you aren't hearing me?" she says. Pleading in her eyes but I know if I leave her with this it will only put her in more danger. She needs all the information. That's why I am here.

"I know. I know. That's why I'm here. We need to talk. I want you to say everything you've been holding back, but I need you to hear me on this." I explain. Hands up in surrender hoping she will hear me out.

She stands there, eyes flaming with rage, boring into my soul. If her face gets any more red it might explode.

“Fine.” she huffs breathing out, “but I have a feeling this is going to take longer than five minutes. Do you want coffee?” she asks.

“Yes, please.” I say with a sigh. Thank God that she is finally hearing me out. I walk over and take a seat on the couch.

Once the coffee is brewed and we are sitting across from one another, I take a deep breath, “Do you want to start?” I ask.

“No. You go ahead, since you seem to have a lot to say.” she says sarcastically.

I hold in a chuckle because I know she’s mad. I haven’t thought through how I’m going to explain everything, so I take a few heartbeats to organize my thoughts.

“Okay, I’m not sure where to start, so I’m just going to go with what I think is most important, but I need you to keep an open mind, okay?”

“Sure...” she says, crossing her arms over her chest, coffee forgotten.

“Alright, well, we’ve already discussed the family business, and that my father has worked tirelessly to keep me and my brothers out of the spotlight. He was always worried about his enemies coming after us to get to him...”

“Yes. I know.”

“Okay, well that’s why you coming and staying at my apartment is so important. I’m not convinced that Alek was mugged at random. This was an attack on my family, Charlie. What I don’t know is if it’s because of something I did, or if it’s related to



something my father's been working on."

"What do you mean? How could it be related to something you did?" she asks. Confusion plastered on her face.

"Before I go into that, we need to discuss Dominic." I say.

"Um... What about him? How is he related to any of this?" She asks, clearly frustrated at me bringing up a person she believes to be a friend.

"Dominic isn't who you think he is," I begin and I can tell she is putting up a wall, "He's dangerous Charlie. I don't want you around him."

"What the hell?" His head moved as if she had been slapped. "We're back to this again?" I can tell she is holding back her rage but I don't have much longer before that red head energy rears its ugly head, focused solely at me.

"Yes! Charlie, please, let me explain. I know you've known him for a long time and that you trust him. But he's been lying to you."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing right now." She stands abruptly, clearly and visibly upset.

"Dominic's family, has he told you anything about them?" I ask.

"No, not in any great detail. I know his father owns a big corporation that deals in imports and exporting of goods, and that Dominic went overseas to learn more about the company so he could start working with his dad. Why does that matter?" She says exasperated as if we have had this conversation a hundred times and she already knows how this ends. Boy is she wrong.

“Dominic’s father is the leader of the Italian mob.” I say.

“What?” she scoffs, eyebrows flying into her hairline in shock. But I see her anger crack. “That’s ridiculous!” she says, her eyes going wide.

“Any more ridiculous than my father being in the Russian mob?” I ask.

“Yes. This is all ridiculous!” she says.

“But it’s true. His family and my family have been fighting for generations. He’s a scumbag, Charlie.”

“Excuse me? I can’t believe what’s coming out of your mouth right now! How do I know you are being honest and not just trying to get me to move in by trying to scare me?” Hands going to her hips. I try not to get too distracted from the goal, my focus now being pulled to her curves.

“It’s true.” I say clearing my throat and getting back on track. “He is in charge of finding women to be trafficked. His family business is buying and selling women, Charlie. Importing and exporting humans . Among other things.” I say and I wish I had some physical proof to help her come to terms with this information.

“I... This is all too much...” she says, covering her face with her hands. I want to just go up and hold her through this revelation but I worry about making it worse by touching her.

“I know it’s shocking.” I say, taking a step towards her. “He’s a good actor, I’ll give him that, but he’s not your friend Charlie.”

“Okay, no. I can’t take this. This feels very manipulative.” She puts her hands up and starts to walk away from me. I reach out and gently touch her elbow guiding her back

to a seat on the couch.

“I’m not trying to manipulate you. I just want you to have all the information, to make an informed decision when it comes to a person you trust. That I honestly think you shouldn’t trust. This is the truth as unbelievable as it sounds. He’s dangerous to you Charlie. I don’t know if he knows about us or not, but if he does, he’ll use you to get to me.”

“What do you mean? Why does it matter if he knows about us?” I am overloading her again. I can tell she looks like her head is about to explode.

“Because of our family businesses, we are not on the best of terms. His family hates my family for many reasons. They’ve been looking to take over for years. If Dominic thinks he can use you as leverage against me and my family, he’ll use it.”

She takes a minute before responding, “So, what you’re telling me is he’s only my friend to get to you? But you said he doesn’t know about you. I have never told him about your family business, or anyone for that matter, all he knows is that I was searching for you and now you are back in my life.”

“If he doesn’t know about me and my family, then I don’t know why he’s been getting close to you, but it can’t be for anything good.” I don’t know how to get her to see, to understand and believe that the guy she thought was her friend for the past four years is using her.

“Why would he pretend to be my friend for four years if he doesn’t even know who you are? I didn’t even know you were alive until a few weeks ago Yuri, you’re not making any sense!” She says standing and pacing the room.

“I honestly don’t know Charlie, I am trying to look into more. I know this is a lot to take in, but come back with me to my apartment where I know you’ll be safe, then

we'll be able to talk more. I have a guy who can show you security footage and pictures of Dominic that prove what I've told you. Please, come with me Charlie." I say, hoping the promise of some physical evidence will convince her to come.

"I don't care what you show me, videos and pictures can be messed with. I think I'd know if I was being played for four years. You may think you know Dominic, but he'd never hurt me. He's been nothing but a friend to me. I'm done listening to this."

"Charlie..."

"No, Yuri. I'm done. Leave. NOW!" she nearly shouts.

"I'm not leaving here without you. You can ask more questions or we can talk more about your concerns, but I will not ..."

"You aren't going to force me to come with you! I can't believe you right now!"

"I'm not going to drag you out of here kicking and screaming. I want you to come with me so you'll be safe. Why can't you see that?" I'm getting frustrated now and I know she won't like my tone, but I need her to hear me.

"Just stop, Yuri! You're asking me to accept the fact that the man I've known for four years has been pretending to be my friend. I've only just gotten you back into my life and you expect me to drop everything, my job, my life, my friends and come with you. That's fucked up Yuri. How can you not see that?"

"I know that this looks and sounds ridiculous. I wish things were different, but they're not. Please, come with me. I'll show you proof and it'll all make sense."

"No. GET OUT!" Her face is reddening and her eyes are darting everywhere. She looks like she is about to bolt.

“I’m not leaving.” I say, digging in my heels.

“If you won’t leave, then I’m leaving. Have fun in my apartment...” she heads toward the front door, “and don’t even THINK about following me!” she says, slamming the door behind her.

“Charlie, wait...please...” I say, but she’s already gone.

I do as she asks and don’t follow her. That won’t help. This is really hard on her, I know. If I just learned my best friend was lying to me for an unknown reason I wouldn’t believe it at first either. She just needs some time, but I need to make sure she’s safe so I grab my phone to call Andrey.

He doesn’t answer, so I send a text to see where he’s at. He should have followed her.

Instead of waiting for a response, I call Maxim to let him know I’m on my way, but he doesn’t answer either.

“What the fuck?” I say in frustration, “Where the hell are those two?”

I head back to my car and drive back to my apartment. I’ll talk to Maxim when I get there and give Andrey a call too; he better be looking after Charlie.

### CHARLIE

I burst through the lobby door onto the sidewalk outside my apartment. Closing my eyes, I lift my head to the sky, take a deep breath, and hold for a moment. It was getting to be too much in there and I need to breathe. It is drizzling and the air smells like concrete and rain instantly calming my nerves. I take a few more breaths. In... Hold... Out... If I didn't know any better I would say I was having a panic attack. Honestly though, my brain is just on overload and I need a moment of quiet to think.

I need to walk and those assholes Yuri has on my tale better not follow me. I need to be alone for now and really think about everything Yuri said. I start heading down the sidewalk instantly wishing that I grabbed a hoodie or something to protect myself from the cool rain, but maybe the cool, fresh air will help me think.

I start making my way down the block toward the coffee shop I found when I first moved here. A hot drink and a walk sound perfect. Thank god for ApplePay, because my purse is definitely still in the apartment.

As I walk, I think through all the little moments from the past four years of my life. Since meeting Dom, has anything stood out to me? I mean he was the only guy I ever met who didn't try to date me or get in my pants; let's be real guys are pigs. He was always there when I wanted to talk about anything, including my missing friend.

I always thought he was humoring me, but now I'm starting to wonder if he knew who Yuri was this entire time. Did he use me to find Yuri? I continue my walk as the sun sets. More clouds roll in, the rain gets heavier, the air gets colder and I start to shiver.

“Great!” I sigh and pick up my pace. I duck under a dark green awning across from the coffee shop and try to get my bearings before walking in.

Then, out of nowhere, I am grabbed from behind and slammed face first into the wall.

“You are making this a little too easy, princess.” Someone whispers with a sneer, his lips touching the shell of my ear. I attempt to shove him back but he has me locked in place. His voice sounds vaguely familiar, but I am struggling to place it. He pushes my face further into the wall, scraping my cheek on the brick and I cry out in pain.

“What the hell do you want?” I shout.

“We need to have a little chat!” he says.

“Who the fuck are you? At least have the balls to talk to me to my face, you prick!” I manage to say.

He pauses for a moment, shoves me further into the wall, and then I feel something being tightened around my wrists so hard my fingers tingle.

“Ouch! That fucking hurts!” I shout.

“Shut the fuck up you bitch!” He says, whipping me around, my head cracking against the brick as I face him. Stars are swimming in my vision. He presses his forearm against my throat, restricting my breathing enough to be a bit concerning, and pinning me to the wall again.

“Andrey? Is that you?” I croak out, confused, “What’s going on?”

“Like I said, we need to have a chat!” he seethes, removing a small amount of pressure from my neck so I can talk.

“Did Yuri seriously send you to follow me, man handle me, and bring me back?” I ask, dazed and confused.

He just laughs.

I let out a nervous laugh, then feign confidence I don’t feel when I say, “I told him to let me be! You bastards need to leave me alone and let me go!”

“No, Yuri, didn’t send me to come get you, but Dominic wants to have a little conversation with you.” He chuckles darkly leaning in so close I can feel his breath on my face.

“Wait!” I say struggling in his grip, even more concerned. “How do you know Domonic? What is going on, Andrey?” Something doesn't feel right and I’m scared shitless. I start to thrash around a little more trying to loosen his grip and get him off me, which is proving difficult with his size and strength.

“You are coming with me sweetheart.” he whispers in my ear, chuckling again.

Then I feel a sharp prick in my neck and feel a bag go over my head as my entire world goes dark.



YURI

Forty-five minutes later, I'm at my parents' apartment to check in with Pap about Alek. I walk through the door and head toward my father's office. The door is wide open, but I still knock announcing my presence.

Pap looks up from his desk. When our eyes meet, I can feel his furry.

"Why are you just NOW getting here?" He asks, his eyebrows drawn together creating a deep crease across his brow.

"I ran into an issue." I say not elaborating.

He points at me and it's like a knife going through my chest, "I needed you here! This is the only issue that matters right now!"

"The two are related." I say confidently. Looking around the office, I see Viktor and Jeremie, but no Maxim, "Where's Maxim?"

"I could ask you the same question!" my father growls out.

"He said he was on his way here thirty minutes ago." I say, confused.

"Well..." Pap says, looking around, "unless he's invisible, he's not here."

"I'll go see where he's at. Maybe he got hung up on something." I say exiting Pap's office quickly before he can respond. I make my way toward the living room and

head over to the floor to ceiling hutch that makes up the bar area, pour myself a small glass of whiskey for fortification, then sit down on the couch and shoot off a text to Andrey because I haven't heard from him tonight either.

Yuri: Call me back ASAP! Maxim is MIA and Charlie ran off. I need an update from you NOW!"

Taking a sip of whiskey, I call Maxim but he doesn't answer.

Fuck! This is bad! What could have happened to cause both Maxim and Andrey to ignore my calls and texts? Andrey's been off for months now, but to go completely silent is not like him and it's definitely off for Maxim.

With the way our plans have been getting royally screwed, nothing would surprise me at this point. Finally, I send off a quick text to check in with Charlie hoping she'll respond so I know she's alright.

Yuri: Hey Charlie, I'm sorry for coming over unannounced, but I really needed to see you and try and talk through these things with you. Please text me back so I know you're ok. We'll work this out, I just need you to trust me.

I hear the door to the apartment close and turn around to see my father walking toward the bar. He grabs a glass off the hutch, adds some ice from the ice bucket, grabs his favorite whiskey bottle, and pours generously.

I just stand there and watch the strongest man I've ever known remove his mask of power and replace it with one of fatherly concern.

"How's Alek?" I ask. When Pap doesn't answer right away, I sigh, take a deep breath, and take another swig from my glass. His back is still to me when I ask, "How's mom?"

He walks over, sits across from me in a dark brown leather armchair that used to belong to my Pap, takes a sip of whiskey and says, “Alek is the same. There’s no change. Your mother is...” he pauses, takes another sip and continues, “there are no words to describe how she’s feeling. She won’t leave his side.

“What happened?” I ask.

“We don’t know.” He says, swirling the whiskey and ice in his glass, “Konstantine, Viktor, and Jeremie are looking into it. We’ve made a call to Liam, he’s going to call if the cops get any leads.”

“What’s your plan?” I ask.

“Find out who did this and kill them! That’s my fucking plan.” He seethes.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, so I dig it out and see Maxim’s name light up the screen. I answer immediately, “Max, where the fuck have you been?” I demand.

“Yuri...” he says out of breath, “I was heading to talk to Andrey to tell him about Alek...” he takes a few shallow breaths, then continues, “but when I got out of the car someone bashed me over the head. I must have blacked out. When I woke up, I was confused and lying face down on the sidewalk. It took me a while to sit up and get into the car and find my phone. I couldn’t remember where I was or what I was doing right away, but as soon as I did, I called you.” he says.

“Fuck!” I say, “Did you get a look at who hit you?” I ask.

“No, they hit me hard from behind with a brick or a piece of cement or something. I don’t know how they got the drop on me.” he says.

“Fuck!” I say, because I can’t seem to think of anything else, “Everything has gone to

shit! Can you go check on Charlie? She stormed off. Hopefully she's back at her apartment by now. I can't get a hold of Andrey either. See if he's been knocked out too." I say.

"Okay, I'll call you back in a few." he says.

"What happened?" My Pap asks and I bring him up to speed.

"This is getting out of hand!" he shouts, "Since when are my people so easily incapacitated?" He gets up from his chair and heads back over to the bar.

I wrack my brain for any detail I might have missed while I was entering and leaving Charlie's apartment, but I didn't see anyone or anything out of the ordinary. Pap brings the whiskey bottle and refills my glass.

"I didn't see anything while I was at Charlie's that looked out of place." I say.

"So that was the issue you ran into?" He asks, stopping mid-pour.

"I had to talk to her Pap. She's in just as much danger as we are." I say defensively.

"There's no excuse. Your brother was attacked and I told you to get your ass over here. I specifically said not to make any other stops. You blatantly disobeyed me!" He shouts walking back toward the bar and slamming the whiskey glass down so hard I'm worried it'll crack.

"I'm sorry Pap, but...!" I say, starting to plead my case, but he cuts me off.

"No. Don't apologize for something you're not actually sorry for. You made your choice. How do you think it looks that my son, my own son and heir disobeys me?"

“I know Pap, but listen please,” I begin again.

“No! You listen! If you want to be in charge one day, you need to learn how to take orders. You’ve gone rogue these last few weeks. Your actions have consequences!”

“Did Andrey come crying to you? Because that slacker has been griping and moaning about having to protect her for weeks and I’m tired of it!” I shout.

“He did come and talk to me, but that’s not why I’m bringing this up!” he says, his anger at a boiling point, “We need to work as a team. We need to pool all our resources and not split our focus.” he tries to explain.

“I know, Pap and I’m sorry! I’ve come to you with my concerns from the start. You gave me the green light to work with Konstantine to come up with a way to ensure Charlie’s safety in a way that would allow me to complete all my other jobs. I know I’ve been distracted and let a few things fall to the wayside, but if you think that me being concerned for Charlie’s safety has caused all the shit that’s gone wrong these last few months, you’re wrong. There’s something bigger going on here.” I say as my phone buzzes again and it’s Max calling back.

“Hey Yuri, I didn’t see Charlie anywhere. I went up to her apartment but there’s no sign of her. Her door was unlocked and I didn’t see her phone.” he says.

I sigh, at least she has her phone. “I want you to go look for her,” I say.

“Do you think she’s still in the area? Where does she go when she’s pissed at you?”

“What the fuck, Max? You think she has an I’m-pissed-at-Yuri spot?” I say trying not to let my anger and worry get the best of me. I take a few deep breaths before I respond. “Check the local coffee shops and let me know when you find her!”

When I hang up the phone, my father looks like his head is going to explode, “This is what I’m talking about son! Your brother’s been attacked and you’re more concerned with your girlfriend’s whereabouts!”

“That is not true! I am concerned about both of them. I know where Alek is. I know he’s in good hands. I’m pissed that someone thinks they can come after my family like this, so I’m doing everything in my power to keep those I love safe. JUST LIKE YOU!” I shout before I can stop myself.

Before I know it, my father has crossed the room and has me by the throat, “I don’t know what gave you the idea that you can talk to me like this, but I won’t stand for it!” he says, shutting my airway.

“Pap, listen...” I struggle to say.

“I want you to listen son! And listen good! You will be in charge one day, but today is NOT that day! I know you love Charlie and you want to keep her safe, but I will NOT allow you to undermine me...” he says and then releases my throat. I stagger back hitting, my legs against the couch and struggling to maintain my balance.

“What the fuck?” I say, “Why did you do that? I’m not your enemy here Pap!” I decide to sit on the couch before I fall over.

“From where I stand, you don’t seem to be on my side either!”

“Of course I am!” I scoff, lifting my hands in frustration, “Everything I do is to protect this family!” I’m so confused right now. Pap has always been a hard nut to crack, but he’s never laid hands on us before. “Listen, I know you’re up to your eyeballs in stress with Nico making a push for territory, plans going up in smoke, and now Alek being mugged. But we need to stick together or whoever the fuck is messing with us wins!” I say trying to bring my anger down and show my father I’m

on his side.

He's pacing now and I wonder how we got here. When did things start to fall apart? I rub my neck, which is only a little tender, and run my other hand through my hair. My phone begins to vibrate, so I pick it up to answer. I clear my throat before speaking, "Maxim, did you find Charlie?"

"No sign of her. I've driven up and down the neighboring streets and alleyways and went into a few coffee shops nearby and nothing."

"It's dark and raining, there's no way she'd still be walking around the city for this long without going inside someplace to stay dry and warm." I say, getting more and more worried.

"You think something happened to her?" Maxim asks.

"Seeing as Alek has been mugged, you were hit over the head, Andrey's missing, and now we can't find Charlie, yes!" I say irritated.

"Do you want me to keep looking?" He asks.

"No, you need to come here and get your head checked out." I say.

"My head is fine. It's hard enough. There's only a little blood and I have a small headache."

"I need you here now!" I demand, "I don't need you passing out. You're no use to me that way."

"Okay, okay. I'll be there ASAP." he says, hanging up the phone. I look across the room to find my father standing at the window looking out at the city.

Clearing my throat, I stand and start walking toward him. I try to break the ice, “Pap... I’m sorry that all of this is happening. I don’t know if anything I did made things worse, but I’m here, on your side. We will figure this out. Alek will be okay.” I reach out my hand and tentatively place it on his shoulder not sure what to expect.

He takes a deep breath and says, “If you think this is all connected, who’s behind it all?”

“I think I have an idea...” I say shoving my hands into my pockets and walking toward the kitchen. I decide to sit on one of the island stools.

Pap follows me into the kitchen, stands across from me, leans his elbows on the granite countertop, and with one hand gestures for me to continue.

He raises his eyebrows and just stares at me for a few heartbeats. He’s going to pretend like nothing happened. Okay, I’m fine with that. I’d rather spend the next few hours locating Charlie and Andrey and figuring out who hurt my brother than hashing things out with my father.

“Okay...” I begin, “You know how you suggested I use Charlie as a resource to get closer to the Romanos? I went to talk to her today about Dominic, to try and show her who he really is, but she freaked when I even brought up the idea of Dominic using her.” I begin.

“And...?” he questions irritably rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“I think Dominic attacked Alek to get back at me, at us.” I say.

“No, that’s not possible!” He says, getting frustrated again.

I attempt to explain without setting my father off on another tirade, “Pap, a lot has



been getting fucked up lately. I think everything is connected.” I lift my index finger and begin counting off my examples, “Daniil’s attack, then our last two exchanges were nearly blown, and now Alek is getting mugged! Then Maxim is knocked out? Maxim, of all people? There’s no way there are that many coincidences.”

“NO!” He shouts, “I won’t accept this! I worked too hard to keep you boys out of harm's way!”

“Pap, we’ve been in danger from the moment we moved back into the city. Since we were inducted into the family business. You couldn’t keep us a secret forever.” I say.

“This isn’t what I wanted for you boys.” He says, covering his face with his hands. I’ve never seen my father like this and it’s frightening me. I need him to be the strong, immovable rock that he’s always been.

“I know, but when uncle Boris fucked with the whole must-kill-Nico situation, you did what you had to. We respect that. If you hadn’t come back, think of where this city would be. Nico would have moved in and taken control and you know you wouldn’t have been able to live with yourself if that happened.”

“You were just children when we moved back into the city. I should never have brought you back here.”

I’ve never seen him like this. “Your plan worked Pap,” I encourage. I want him to know that I’m in this with him. “We all knew the danger we were walking into. You made sure of that.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt you boys again!” he says determination crossing his face.

“Pap, there was always a chance that one of us, hell, even all of us, would be hurt in this life. You couldn’t prevent this. You tried and succeeded in keeping us safe for a

long time. It's not your fault." I say placing my hand on his shoulder.

"Okay, enough of this self-doubt and pity party nonsense!" he says, "We need to get to work! You think Dominic is behind it all, but how? There's no way his father would allow his son to endanger all he's worked for over the years."

"I don't know how much control Nico has anymore." I say, connecting the dots in my mind, "With how unorganized the attacks on us have been, I think Dominic is doing this without his father's permission or knowledge."

"That weasel doesn't have the balls to do this on his own!" My father says, "His father must know about this. Nico's never been the greatest leader. His ambition outweighs his skill. His father must be thrashing in his grave with all the fuckery Nico and Dominic have caused over the years." he says, chuckling a little. I can see the courage returning to his face.

"Okay, well if it's Nico and Dominic, how do they know so much about our operations?" I ask.

"I don't know," Pap sighs, "We've suspected there was a rat among us, but I never imagined this one of our people would work with Nico."

"The only way Dominic would know about me, about Mikhail, or Alek is if someone we know, someone we trust, told him. It's the only thing that makes sense." I say.

"Whoever it is, they have to know we're onto them." he says.

"Remember Lev?" I ask, thinking back to a conversation I had a few weeks ago.

"Lev? The boxer-mob-boy-wannabe?" Pap asks.

“Did you learn anything from talking with him? How did he hear about the gym? How was he welcomed into the fold so quickly?” I ask, the gears beginning to turn in my mind.

“He’s just an ambitious boy with big dreams. We scared the pants off of him, and didn’t learn anything of consequence.” He says.

We both sit in contemplative silence for a few minutes. Whoever this rat is, we’re going to coax him out. We just need to connect a few puzzle pieces.

Pap looks at me with renewed determination, “Call Konstantine, I want him working on this ASAP. I’ll call Viktor, I want Lev brought here from the club. I want to ask him a few more questions.”

While I call Konstantine, Pap calls Viktor and we get this plan in motion.

We’ve been working tirelessly for three hours and nothing! We still don’t know where Andrey or Charlie have gone and we’re no closer to figuring out who hurt Alek. Maxim saw my Pap’s doctor when he got to the apartment. He has a concussion and a nice size gash on his head, but he’s as strong as a bull, so I’m not too concerned.

Charlie’s phone must be off because we can’t trace her. I’m frustrated with myself because I’ve been so distracted with protecting Charlie that I opened the door for her to be a target and for this asshole, whoever he is, to mess with my family. I fucked up and now I have to fix this!

After seeing the doctor, I sent Maxim to see if he can help Konstantine in any way. Pap, Viktor, and I went to the basement to interrogate Lev, while Konstantine tried to locate Andrey or Charlie. After two hours of mind numbing questions, Lev had nothing new to say, if he knows anything, he isn’t giving it up.

Now, I'm pacing the apartment. I hate not knowing where Charlie is and it's killing me. After nearly ten years of keeping her safe, I've failed her.

She could be in serious trouble and it's all my fault because I tried to push her. If I had just listened to her, she never would have run off.

On top of that, Andrey is still MIA. Konstantine said his phone is off too, which is a coincidence I can't ignore.

Everything is going to shit and I'm panicking. I'm about to go back to the basement and force Lev to give me something to go on, when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

My heart begins to race hoping it's an update from Charlie, but I'm disappointed to see a message from Andrey.

Andrey: Hey boss, sorry I didn't get your calls before. What is going on? My phone died.

Instead of texting him back, I call him and he answers on the first ring.

"Andrey, Where the FUCK have you been? I need you at my apartment now! Maxim was knocked out!" I say, trying to keep my cool.

"I'm on my way!" he says and hangs up.

Thirty minutes later he's standing in the doorway of my apartment.

I don't give him a second to settle in or gather his thoughts, "Where were you Andrey?" I ask.

"Sorry man, my phone died." he says nervously.

“You said that. That’s not what I asked. Where the fuck were you?” I ask again.

I walk toward him and motion for him to move further into the apartment. Once he heads toward the living room, I close and lock the door. He takes a seat on the couch and I’m trying hard not to strangle him on the spot.

“I’m not going to ask again.” I say.

“There’s no excuse, Yuri. I’m sorry. You’ve just had me running around like a chicken with my head cut off for weeks...” he starts to babble anxiously, “...and I needed a break. I turned my phone off and decided to go for a drive to clear my head. After Charlie took off I figured you’d follow her and she’d be okay.”

“Well,” I say, seething, “you figured wrong!” I shout and don’t hold back my rage. I grab him by the collar of his shirt and shove him to the floor.

“What the fuck man?” He says.

“I don’t believe you for a second!” I say stalking over toward him. “You expect me to believe, after ten years of friendship, that I don’t know when you’re lying?”

“H- Hey, just calm down...” he stammers.

“I won’t calm down,” I say standing on his hand, crushing his fingers beneath my weight.

“Yuri! Stop! Fuck! That hurts!” he cries.

“I know... and it’s going to hurt a lot worse if you don’t tell me everything!” I say.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” he lies.

“Sure you do!”

“You’re crazy, mam!” he shouts.

“That may be, but I’m not stupid. You’ve been openly questioning my decisions and talking openly about your hatred for Charlie. Did you really think I would choose a weak sack of shit like you over her?” I say stepping down harder on his hand.

He reaches out to grab my ankle in an effort to free his hand, but I’m way ahead of him. I grab his other wrist, take my foot off his now crushed hand, and force him to stand.

I straighten him up and dust off his shoulders, “Now, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way...” I begin to explain.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he asks

“You can stop acting innocent and dumb anytime.” I say releasing his wrists.

He looks at me with disgust and is about to say something when Viktor and Pap leave the office and join me in the living room.

“H- h- hey boss,” he says shakily and starts backing toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I ask menacingly.

“I - I think you need some time to cool off and think clearly, so I’m gonna go.” he says pointing with his thumb toward the door, and turning to run, but I grab him by the back of his collar, which causes his shirt to rip, and I slam him to the floor.

“You’re not going anywhere!” I growl and bring my foot down hard on his face

knocking him out cold.

CHARLIE

Drip. Drip.

Cold. All I feel is cold. Straight down to my bones. Heavy arms try to move but can't.

"You need to get the hell out of here before he suspects... Distract the bastard anyway you can..." Hungry! So hungry! Mind wandering and confused.

"...want to get as much out of the bitch as I can before... realize she's gone." Someone snarls, I know that voice. Who is it?

Tired. Try to wake but can't.

"I'll do what I can but he is obsessed... He is going to notice she's gone... not sure how long I will be able to give you." Another man whispers-shouts back, another familiar voice. Can't place it.

Wake up. Charlie. Wake up.

"Don't make me... Distract him! ... if he finds her, she will be nothing but used up rat food... men are interested in her." He chuckles darkly. "I want him to suffer.... I will take him down and it will start with that whore! Out!"

Drip. Drip.

Drip. Drip.



Trying to wake up. Legs stiff. Headaches. Everything just hurts.

“Yes, I have her but I have questions for her first. Once I am done with her I will take the pictures and add her to the auction.”

Silence...

“I know how this works! The auction isn’t for a few days. I have time to question her and clean her up. I don’t care who gets her, no restrictions.” Dark laughter echoes. “They can do whatever they want with her, just have them reach out and I can send over what they want. They wanna sample the goods, fine by me.”

Silence...

“Perfect. I gotta go.”

I am so tired. My head hurts. I can’t seem to open my eyes or move. I feel weighed down and heavy. Something is not right. I don’t feel right. All I want to do is sleep...

Drip. Drip.

Achey. My entire body is stiff and my head is pounding. It smells dusty and moldy, which is confusing. My apartment doesn’t smell this bad. I try to move and realize I don’t have much room. I slowly start to open my dry, heavy eyes and blink away blurry vision.

When I finally get my eyes open, I see a dark, empty room. Or what was once a room. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness that surrounds me.

“What... the hell?” I choke out. My throat is dry, like I haven’t spoken or drank anything in days. “What happened?” I try to look around but my neck is stiff. I try to

stretch it out and realize my hands are tied behind my back and my ankles are tied to a chair. I am tied to a damn chair! Above me is one dim light bulb attached to an old wire.

As I'm searching the room, I remember leaving my apartment and Andrey shoving me against a wall.

"Wakey, wakey C.C." Someone laughs darkly. He's standing in the shadows. I try to focus my eyes to make out his features, but it's still too dark to see, the light above me only illuminating me and maybe a foot around me.

I hear heavy footsteps. The man is walking closer so I ask, "What... is going on?"

Dominic, fucking Dominic, steps out of the darkness and just stares at me. He takes a few more steps in my direction and reaches for my face. He starts stroking my cheek with an unfamiliar gentleness and I try to lean away, but the chair isn't letting me.

He chuckles then says, "You and I are going to have a little chat about your boyfriend." He's talking to me like I am a toddler. He starts stalking around the chair in an agonizingly slow circle. Once he's behind me, he grabs me by the hair and pulls my head back hard. "You're going to tell me everything I need to know or I am going to kill you." He grunts in my ear, his disgusting breath fanning in my face. "Slowly..." he says, slithering his tongue like a snake. "And then I will send you back to Yuri in pieces. Is that what you want C.C?" he asks, condescension dripping from him with an assurance that makes me want to throw up.

"Why am I here Dominic?" I am trying very hard not to panic, but I am pretty sure Andrey drugged me and brought me here - wherever here is - and now I am tied to a fucking chair. I have no idea how long I have been out of it or if Yuri even knows I have been taken. I have a bad feeling I'm not going to escape and Yuri's not going to show up just in time to save me like I've seen in the movies. I. Am. Fucked!

“Do you even know who he is?” Dominic yells, releasing my hair forcefully, moving around the chair, and pacing in front of me. The relief on my scalp is instant, making it difficult to focus on what he is saying. “Do you know what he is? What has he done? Or did you just see his pretty face and fall to your knees the second he said your name?” He barks out at lightning speed.

Now I see it. What Yuri was trying to warn me against. My stubborn independence is going to be the literal death of me.

The realization that Dom was never my friend stings. He just used me to get to Yuri... But how the hell did he know who Yuri was? How did he know about our childhood friendship? Or that we felt more for each other when I didn't even know until a few weeks ago?

Determination hits me like a tidal wave. I can't tell him anything. I won't. I need to figure this out and somehow get the hell out of here. Alive.

“Why the hell do you even care?” I spit out, “We were never friends, right? So what's it to you if I know who he is?” raising my voice, I try to sound strong, but the waver behind my words gives me away, my fear slipping through. “I should have known!” I sigh, getting a little choked up. “How was I so blind?”

Why is this my life? How did I get here? I start to panic, then remember Yuri. I can't lose my cool. I need to get Dom talking so I can figure out how the hell I am going to get out of this place, get back to Yuri, and warn him about Dominic. I won't be able to do that if I freak out. I have to get out of here. I have to get back to Yuri.

Dominic growls and stalks back up to me and grabs my jaw hard with one hand. “Answer my questions you fucking bitch! Do you know who Yuri is and what he has done!?” He squeezes my face, which causes my head to pound even harder, nausea comes over me in waves, and black spots start to cover my vision. Something isn't

right. I look into Dominic's blurry face as everything goes black.

When I come to, I hear Dominic talking. I try to open my eyes, but they won't stay open!

"Something is wrong with her! She's white as a sheet and she just passed out for no reason! I haven't even touched her yet!"

There is a ringing in my ears and when I try to move it's like my body is stuck in wet sand.

"She's got a nasty bump on her head..."

I feel fingers digging into my hair and I try really hard not to wince at the pain.

"...definitely a welt. It's the size of a fucking baseball!" he shouts causing me to twitch involuntarily. "That fucking idiot had one job!"

A few heartbeats of silence cause me to panic and I try and fail again to open my eyes. With every passing second I feel like my arms and legs get heavier.

"Well she is no use to me if she can't stay conscious... No, send the doctor before the auction. She is no good to me dead."

My head is pounding. I can feel it pulsing. I groan and go to reach for the spot on the back of my head that hurts but I can't move my arms. Everything comes floating back. I'm not in my apartment. I have no clue where I am. Shit! I slowly open my eyes and realize I have been moved from a chair to a bed.

Fuck! Note to self: Don't pass out when kidnapped!

I look around, or try too anyway seeing I am tied to the bed and no longer in the clothes I wore when I got here. I am in some silky white, nearly see-through, sleeping dress with a lace-lined neckline that plunges in a V down my chest and a matching lace hem.

“What the hell?!” I whisper-shout. The bed is a basic metal frame with a shitty twin mattress on top. I move my head around slowly so I don’t get dizzy again and that’s when I see him, Dom, just sitting there with a sleazy smirk on his face. Shit! “What happened?” I say, waiting for an explanation. When he doesn’t give one, I ask “Why am I on a bed and where are my clothes?” trying and failing to keep my voice from breaking. It’s then I start to wonder what his real intentions are. Before, I would have never thought Dominic would hurt me, but now, I don’t know what to expect and my stomach drops. “What are you going to do with me Dominic?”

He laughs. He fucking laughs, making my fear kick into high gear. “You have a concussion. That is why you are on the bed. You’ve been cleaned, prepped, and medicated. Now, you will answer my questions. How you answer them depends on how intact I leave you.” His eyes have grown dark and now I am even more terrified. He starts walking towards me and I try not to cower. He braces his hands on the bed and leans in so his face is so close to mine I can feel his breath slide across my face.

“How long have you known who Yuri is?” he whispers in my ear, breathing heavily.

I try to shrink away but the ties just pull a little tighter pinching the skin around my wrists making me gasp with the pain. He laughs at my reaction.

Then, before I see it coming, SMACK !

“Ahh!” I let out a breathy shout as a stinging pain radiates the side of my face and my vision goes hazy. “I just found out he was still alive a month ago you psychopath!” I say breathing erratically. “I think I am going to be sick.” I blurt out. My stomach

rolling and my head pounding.

“You’ll be fine you stupid slut! Now tell me,” He growls gripping my jaw so tight I can feel the bruises beginning to form under the pads of his fingers. “He and his father are making plans. I know you know what they are. I know they are trying to stop our expansion. WHAT. IS. HE. PLANNING !” he spits out his grip growing tighter.

I force out. “Can’t. Speak.” With how hard he’s got me I can barely form the words. He releases his hold on my face gripping my neck. Further emphasising his control over whether I live or die. “He kept me in the dark about everything...” I tried to speak forcefully and confidently as I glared daggers at him. I think I know where this is going and I won’t die here. “...for my protection. I don’t know anything!” Making sure to put emphasis on the fact I know nothing! I can feel his grip getting tighter and then he lets go.

He is walking away, but stays in my line of vision. Then, he spins around quickly on the wet cement floor. I need to figure out how to loosen these restraints to get the hell off this bed! I look around for any identifying features: doors, windows, anything to help me figure out where I am, but all I see is darkness. All I hear are the echoes of his feet as he makes his way close to me again.

I try with every fiber of my being not to react to his closeness, but he can see the subtle flinch on my face. Then he spits at me, he just fucking spat on my face! Then he takes out his phone and starts taking pictures of me. I’m trussed up like a lamb being left for the slaughter, and I try to hold back the tears.

No! I tell myself, determination filling my body as I begin to rage silently. I won’t let him make me feel this way. I can’t stay here. I won’t let him win.

“What do you want with me Dom?” I rush out trying to keep a steady and even tone.

Pushing down the fear. His face shifts and darkens. My stomach drops and I have a feeling this is way worse than just getting revenge on a family.

“What do I want with you?” he laughs so hard it echoes off the concrete walls. “I am going to sell you off to the highest bidder.” He laughs out the sentence and I feel my face drop as his smile gets bigger. “I want to watch you bleed, scream, and beg for it to stop. Then I want to watch it happen all over again.” His voice is getting deeper. “I want to see you break. Then return you to him. Just to see his face when he realizes you will never be his again.” My stomach is rolling, and I feel the color drain from my face. I think I am going to be sick.

“Why?” I whisper completely dumbfounded by the situation I find myself in. This can’t be real.

With fire in his eyes and a wide smile spreading like a crack across his face, he lets out a villainous laugh. “Why dear C.C. because I can! Because I want him broken.”

I begin to shake and it’s getting harder to fight to keep my tears at bay, but I will not cry in front of this asshole. I won’t.

He continues, “I want him so broken that he has NO chance to destroy what I have built. I want him out of my way!” He comes closer and I see a light reflect in his hands. I dart my eyes in a quick glance toward his hands and see it, a knife. He’s going to kill me!

He goes for the bed. Launching himself at me like a possessed spider monkey. He’s on top of me so quickly, before I know it his legs on either side of my thighs and one hand is braced on my shoulder. I don’t waste any time! I buck my hips to prevent him from putting his whole weight on top of me. He tilts forward just enough that when I swing my elbow up it makes contact with his eye!

Yes! I nearly shout, but I stop myself.

He lets out a frustrated growl and moves to reposition himself on top of me again, but I keep squirming and wiggling around as much as I can hoping he'll drop the damn knife. I need to keep moving and keep him off balance. Maybe he'll even accidentally cut my ties. I am doing everything in my power to get the hell out of here.

He grunts again, "Stop moving your stupid bitch!"

A nervous giggle slips from me, "What? Too afraid of a fair fight?" I say while thrashing, "Are you so afraid I'll beat you that you had to tie me up? You're a coward! You're weak!" I snarl, "It doesn't take a strong man to slice up a girl when she's tied to a bed!" I goad him trying to get him to untie my hands. If I can get the knife from him. I can run.

He's still on me, but I keep using his momentum against him. Everytime he tries to straddle me, I buck him off. He leans in and I use my knees to propel him face first into the headboard. I can feel the ties on my hands loosening. No. Fucking. Way. I keep moving my arms and hands. I can feel the rope burning my skin, but I push through the pain trying to loosen the restraints.

"Stop fucking moving!" He grinds out in frustration through clenched teeth. Then he grabs me by the neck with one hand and starts to squeeze. I move to buck him off again. I knee him hard in the ass, causing him to flail. One hand lands on the wall above me, the other is at my side. All of a sudden, I feel a burning pain and gasp for air. The pain is so sharp it takes my breath away.

"Wh- What...what did...you...do?" I continue gasping for breath and see his eyes go wide. He seems shocked.

"Now look at what you did!" he yells.



Smack! He backhands me across the face.

“You’re going to ruin everything you stupid bitch!”

Smack! He hits me again and I see stars cascade across my vision.

I feel dizzy. I feel Dominic loosening the restraints on my wrist, then he unties my ankles. I’ll only get one chance to escape! I fight through the pain as adrenaline fills my veins. I touch my stomach at the source of the pain and wince. I pull my hand away and see blood. FUCK!

“You stabbed me?!” I shout, my pitch so high I let out a squeak. I try to stand but have to sit because the room starts to spin. I look at him, horrified, “You really fucking stabbed me!” I place my hand firmly over the wound to try and stop the flow of blood.

He walks away from the bed and quickly returns with a cloth and throws it in my face. I grab it with my free hand, in shock. I quickly examine it, but I can’t tell if it’s clean. In a place like this, I doubt it, but I take the chance and press it firmly to my side.

“You’ll be fine. I’ll get the doc in here and he’ll stitch you right up, good as new.” He says matter-of-factly. I feel more blood seeping through the cloth and try to stand again. I’m wobbly on my feet and the room starts to spin again, but I focus on centering myself.

Move Charlie, you have to move! My inner voice yells at me.

I take a step and almost fall but manage to stay upright. I take one, two more steps before my breath becomes labored and my vision starts to go. I begin to feel cold and know this isn't a minor flesh wound. He hit something vital. I’m dying.

I.

Am.

I hear a loud bang as my world continues to darken. I fall and my knees hit the floor with a crack and I land hard on my shoulder. Throwing the useless cloth I start to crawl. I have to keep moving! It's so dark, I can't see where I'm going but I just keep crawling!

YURI

After knocking Andrey out, I thought about my Ma or Mikhail coming home to a scene. I won't do that to them, not after everything they've gone through. Pap, Viktor, and Jeremie are all looking at me, waiting to see what I'll do next. Scanning the apartment, I see a roll of duct tape on a side table and grab it to bind Andrey's wrists and then tape his legs at the ankles.

"Right, let's get this started. I'm done giving this asshole the benefit of the doubt."

"Where do you want to take him?" My Pap asks.

"Let's go to my apartment." I suggest.

"Wouldn't the basement be better?" Viktor asks.

"I want him to see me clearly when I talk to him!" I say.

"Ok, cool. What do you need me to grab?" Jeremie asks.

"Let's go with the usual supplies, plus the suspension kit. I want this pig strung up!" I bite out.

"You got it!" Jeremie says and heads for the basement.

Pap leads the way as Viktor and I drag Andrey to the elevator and head up to my apartment.

Once we're inside I toss Andrey to the floor, his limp body landing with a thud. I take in the sight of my once peaceful apartment and sigh, resigned. How many times had Andrey and Maxim been over for nights of beer, pool, and planning? Frustrated, I move the coffee table so it's out of the way and head to the kitchen, grab a chair and bring it to the center of the living room. I haul Andrey up by his arms and toss him over my shoulder then slam him down in the chair.

Pap and Viktor walk around Andrey and each take a seat at one of my black, leather armchairs. Pap watches me as I move through my apartment. I've seen my father interrogate plenty of scumbags over the years, but I've never been in charge of one on my own before. It's weird that my first interrogation will be with someone I once considered a friend. That's life though.

Since Andrey is still out, I don't bother tying him up. I head to the windows and close the shades. No one can see us this far up, but better safe than sorry. I walk over to the lighting console and brighten up the gloom so I can see what I'm doing. So Andrey will be able to see everything !

I enter the kitchen and open the refrigerator with no purpose in mind. I stare blankly at the shelves for a few heartbeats and then shut the door, walk back into the living room, and sit on the matching black, leather couch.

"Are you sure about this son?" My father asks.

"Yes." I say assuredly.

"Okay, you want me to lead?"

"No, I can do this..." I hesitate for only a second, "for Daniil, Alek, Charlie and Max."

Jeremie walks into my apartment with two large duffel bags slung over each shoulder.

“Fuck, man, What did you get?” Viktor asks, raising his eyebrows and looking at the duffels.

“Well I wasn’t sure what Yuri wanted, so I just grabbed a little of everything.” he says, dropping the duffels on the floor causing a minor earthquake. He kneels down, zips the first one open, and starts pulling items out. He unpacks a folded plastic tarp first, “Thought you’d want this so your floors don’t get fucked up.” he says.

“Good idea.” I say getting up and walking toward Jeremie, “Viktor, come help me spread this out.”

“You got it!” he says.

We get all the supplies laid out on the coffee table that I moved, and start putting together the suspension kit when Andrey starts to wake up. He groans and looks around the room, startled. He looks at his duct taped wrists and then down to his feet. We make eye contact and he starts to stand, but Pap was already getting up from his chair and walking over to Andrey. He placed both hands on Andrey’s shoulders firmly, and pushed him back down into the chair. I’m not sure what Andrey thought he was going to do, hop away?

“You’re going to sit right here!” He demands, “Don’t move a muscle. We have some questions that need answering!”

“Yea...” he says in a high pitched, breathy voice, “You got it boss.”

Pap gives us the time we need to finish setting up the suspension kit that Konstantine designed a few years ago. He commissioned a few companies to see who could create

his design best. It all came together, and now we have a portable, durable, and strong device that makes it so we don't have to destroy our ceilings every time we want to suspend someone for questioning.

As we finish putting the system together, I keep looking over at Andrey. He's scared shitless, but I can tell he's trying to act tough. He's seen people be questioned in this thing, but I doubt he ever thought he'd be attached to it.

Once everything is ready, I storm over to his chair, Pap backs up, and I grab Andrey by the back of the head, getting a fist full of his hair, and pull him over to the hanging system.

"Listen man, you don't have to do this! I don't know what you think I've done, but you don't have to treat me like some low level asshole." He says, holding his bound hands up in supplication.

"You are a low level asshole Andrey, this is what you deserve!" I growl out as Viktor and Jeremy each take hold of Andrey's shoulders, steadying him under the X shape that houses the wire hanging down the middle of the iron bars. Andrey looks up and whimpers like a child.

I grab a pair of heavy-duty handcuffs, place them around Andrey's wrists, and tighten them until he lets out a cry. His hands are still duct taped together, so I make sure the cuffs won't slip off. Then, I lift his hands and clamp the cuffs to the suspension system. Viktor quickly pulls a rope off to the side and hoists Andrey up until his toes barely touch the floor.

"Really, Yuri! This isn't necessary. I'll answer all your questions. Please man, I'm your friend. You don't want to do this." he pleads as I get him secure.

"I need you to be honest with me, Andrey! How long have we been friends?" I say as

I tie his legs together at the knees and ankles.

“Te- Ten years,” he says stuttering, “Just let me down, and we can talk.”

“Let you down? Why would I do that? This is much more beneficial and quicker too.” The look on his face is priceless. He’s shocked, confused, and pissed.

“Boss...” Andrey pleads looking at my father, “You’re just going to let him do this?”

“Yup.” My father says matter-of-factly.

“The boss and I have been talking while you went on your little drive, ” I say, placing air quotes around the word and walking in a circle around my friend , “and we’d like you to a few loose ends for us.”

“Sure, sure. I’m sure this is all just a big misunderstanding,” he says nervously.

“Right... a misunderstanding,” I scoff. “First, I’d like to know how Nico and his men found out where Daniil would be.” I say calmly walking around him, “Only a select group of people, including you, would have known his location and his backup plan.” I say trying to lull Andrey into a false sense of security.

“How would I know? I was with you, remember? How the fuck would I know how they found out? And I wasn’t the only one who knew, you just said so!” He defends.

I stop right in front of him and look him right in the eyes as I say, “Right...Right... Well, how about our two locations being compromised for trades? After Daniil was hurt, we tightened security, as you know , and the circle of trusted people with sensitive information got smaller...you were still part of that group...seems like an awfully odd coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Not really...” he says defensively. “Again, I wasn’t the only one who knew. You, me, and Maxim all knew about Daniil and those meeting spots,” he says laughing nervously.

I walk over to the coffee table and take my time scanning over each implement with my fingers as I look for a pair of pliers, “Hey Viktor, take his shoes and socks off for me, will ya?” I ask as I keep looking.

“Wh- What do you ne- ne- need my shoes and socks off for?” Andrey stutters and kicks out with both feet trying to prevent Viktor from accomplishing his task.

“I don’t think you’re being honest with me, friend . You just accused me of ratting on my own father!” I say furious. Narrowing my eyes, I stalk toward him. “Jeremie and Viktor, lift his legs for me”

“You got it!” Jeremie says, and they both move forward, grab Andrey under the knees, and hoist his legs high in the air.

“Yuri, wait... please... I haven’t done anything wrong!” he shouts.

“I highly doubt that,” I say, “Ever since you started complaining about how I am running the jobs I’m given, I’ve known something was up. You have been more concerned with your own place in the family ...” I say walking closer and grabbing his big toe.

He’s thrashing around, but between the handcuffs and Viktor and Jeremie, he’s not going anywhere. I grip his big toe right at the base of his nail, and jam the bottom tooth of the needle nose pliers under his nail causing him to shout. I move the tooth along the tip of his nail and jam it into the flesh underneath. Then I clamp the top tooth over his nail, pull and wiggle, pause, pull and wiggle, just to see the color drain from his face. and yank, hard, and pull his toenail clean off.



He starts to scream and I'm glad Pap made sure to soundproof all of our apartments. Blood starts to drip from his toe. I toss his toenail to the floor and grab his other big toe.

"Are you going to tell me what you know?" I ask, "Or are we going to continue like this?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" He shouts.

"Let's continue then," I say, "If I have to rip off every one of your toenails for you to tell me how Nico's men knew not only how to find Daniil, but could learn the location of our meetings..." I pause, take a deep breath and motion for Viktor and Jeremie to put Andrey down. I want to look in his eyes when I say this, "If you don't tell me how someone FOUND OUT WHO THE FUCK MY brOTHER IS, I'll take your toenails, then your fingernails, and I won't stop there!"

"Yuri, I swear! I had nothing to do with any of it!" He says, but I'm not convinced.

"Andrey, Andrey, Andrey," I sigh, not wasting time, One by one I peel off his toe nails. He screams, blood drips from his toes, but he'll live.

"Fuck you!" He seethes, "I had nothing to do with your brother being attacked or Charlie's disappearance. So FUCK OFF!" he shouts.

"Hm..." I say, rubbing my chin, "I didn't say anything about Charlie disappearing?"

He goes pale and I know I've got him! Stuttering he says, "You... You texted me... You said she went missing..."

"No! I said she stormed off!" I shout!

“Well, I just assumed that she was missing, since she’s not here...” he babbles.

“If I had FOUND her... don’t you THINK I’d have SAID something?”

“I... I don’t know...”

“Where is Andrey?” I ask walking closer to him. At first I thought she just stormed off and was somewhere safe, seething mad. But now? “What did you do?”

“Fuck... YOU!” he shouts.

We’ve been at it for nearly twelve hours and have nothing to show for it. I’ve called to check in on Mom and Alek a few times and there’s no change. Mikhail had to run out and get mom food because she refuses to leave Alek’s side until he wakes up. I’m so pissed right now! I wish I could do something other than sit here waiting for answers!

I thought Andrey would crumble quickly, but for some fucking reason, he won’t give in. He must be holding out for something. Whatever Nico and Dominic promised him, I need Andrey to realize they used him and his time is up!

He’s hanging by his wrists in my living room. His hands and feet black and blue from the removal of all his fingernails. He hasn’t had any food or water and even though he’s begged, I haven’t let anyone tend to his wounds.

After we separated him from his nails, I needed a few moments to regroup. I talked with Konstantine to see if he could get me any physical evidence to connect Andrey to Nico or Dominic. So far, nothing. I need to know what promises they made to Andrey before it’s too late for Charlie.

I need answers NOW!

I walk over to Andrey, grab him by his hair and force him to look at me. One of his eyes is swollen shut, his lip is split, and I'm pretty sure I broke his nose when I stomped on his head yesterday. He looks like shit, but I don't care.

"Andrey!" I shout, and he startles, "Have you had enough?" I ask.

"Fuck... You..." he whispers.

"I guess not..." I say, dropping his head walking over to the coffee table. I'm running out of time. If Dominic has Charlie, she's running out of time too. I don't want to think about what he could be doing to her! "You're going to start talking Andrey!" I say as I grab a knife, "One way or the other, you're going to tell me everything you know! Why not end your suffering? Do you really think I'm going to let you out of here alive so you can ride off into the sunset with Dominic? What did he promise you? Huh?"

"He's treated me with RESPECT, unlike you!" he finally admits.

"Oh, really?" I say, "and how has he done that? Looks to me like he fed you to the wolves!"

"Shut the fuck up Yuri! You don't know anything!"

"You may be right, but at least I'm not a gullible asshole like you!" I laugh.

"He's going to tear Charlie up and send you back the pieces! So I'd stop showboating if I were you!" he growls.

I launch myself at him! I punch him in the gut so hard he starts to swing back and forth. I'm almost knocked over by him as he swings toward me, but I quickly move out of the way.

He coughs, spits blood and starts laughing. "I'm not gullible!" You're the one who let a bitch control you!"

I grab him by the hair again and yank his face up, wrenching his neck back. I shove the knife under his chin, he gasps, and I push ever so gently until I see a bead of blood peek out from under his skin.

"You're such an idiot Andrey!" I laugh, "Charlie wasn't controlling me and I wasn't controlling her! If you ever had a girlfriend, you'd know that! Now, you're going to tell me where Dominic has Charlie or I'm going to start cutting off body parts, one... by... one..."

I move the knife from his throat, drop his head and grab his ear and slice! Blood sprays, he shouts, and I throw his ear on the floor by his nails. I walk over to his other ear, grab it and lean in to whisper, "Have I made myself clear?"

It didn't take long after losing his ear for Andrey to break down and tell me everything. Pap was furious and almost killed Andrey right there after hearing that Andrey was the one who told Dominic about Alek and Mikhail. I guess he's known about me for a long time but didn't have the balls to come after someone his own size. Luckily, Viktor and Jeremie were able to hold Pap off and convince him to go with them to talk to Konstantine.

They've been gone for about an hour, and unfortunately, Andrey passed out before telling us which room Charlie was being held in, but I plan on rousing him soon.

It won't take long to put together a group of guys to head over and storm the place, but we don't know if Dominic and Nico have a hoard of guys over there or if it's just Dominic. I'm not about to rush in and make the same mistake my Uncle Boris did all those years ago.

We're going to be smart about this. The plan is to scope out the building and see if there are any of Nico's men on the lookout. Once Konstantine finds blueprints, we'll have a better understanding of where Dominic might be holding Charlie in case Andrey doesn't come to.

One thing working against us is the fact that the building is under construction, so the blueprints might not even be helpful. Konstantine is seeing if he can hack into the contractor's email and get the building plans so we know where we're going.

An hour has passed. I got Andrey to wake up and give me a few more details, but I finally decided to head over to the gym and meet up with Pap and everyone. He's organizing a group of ten men, including himself, me, Viktor, Jeremie, and Maxim to head over to the building.

Konstantine gave us as much information as he could, so I feel confident we'll be in and out in under an hour with Charlie safely in my arms. I'm clinging to hope. That's all I can do at this point.

Once I reach the gym, I make my way through the building and find everyone waiting by the large ring.

"Are we ready?" I ask as I walk toward my father.

"We're all set!" Viktor announces.

"Alright," I say, "Let's go!"

We drive over to the run down office building and discuss who will be entering by which entrance. It's not a large office building, by city standards, but it'll still take time, time we don't fucking have, to find Charlie and Dominic.

Maxim and Konstantine were looking at local security cameras and saw Andrey and Dominic bring Charlie in. No one else entered or exited the building in the last twenty-four hours other than Andrey, so we're pretty confident it's just Dominic in there with Charlie.

He's such a fucking idiot! Not that I'm really complaining, his stupidity will make this job easy. Pap wants to bring Dominic back with us to the club and interrogate him to see what Nico's role in all of this was, but if he laid a finger on even one hair on her head, he's dead. We can deal with the fall out with Nico later. I don't give a fuck!

We make good time and arrived at the office building in thirty minutes. Maxim and I go through the south entrance while Viktor, Pap, and Jeremie take the North. Pap's other men split up and take the perimeter in case Dominic tries to run.

The door is locked, but Maxim kicks it down with little effort. The bang when the door hits the wall is the only warning Dominic will get that he's got company.

Konstantine was able to hack into some emails and we used the plans to help us map out our search. Maxim and I go straight for the kitchen. That's the most logical place, in my mind anyway, for Dominic to take Charlie. We make our way through half torn down drywall and exposed beams and enter the kitchen guns drawn.

We search, but there's no sign of Charlie. Fuck!

"She's not here!" I seethe.

"We'll find her!" Max encourages.

"Ok, let's go check out the surrounding offices. Maybe he's holed up in one nearby."

We search for ten or twenty minutes with no luck. We're wandering around this dark, shell of an office building, and I'm starting to get pissed off.

"Where the fuck is she?" I say through gritted teeth.

"Shh..." Maxim says, "Did you hear that?" We both go deadly quiet.

Then I hear it. A scream. Charlie! I barrel toward the sound of her voice and crash through a closed door. Maxim right behind me.

I see Charlie on her hands and knees and Dominic with a bloody knife in his hand.

"You're going to wish you never laid eyes on her!" I shout at Dominic. His eyes go wide with fear and he turns to run. I make to go after him, but Maxim stops me.

I turn around to see Charlie's prone body on the floor.

"She's hurt bad, Yuri. You should take her and go. She needs a doctor, NOW!"

I growl in frustration, "Fine! But I want him dealt with. We're not wasting another minute on his worthless life!"

"I'll take care of him. You get her and get out of here!" He says.

I pick her up and cradle her in my arms. I hold her tight against my chest and whisper in her ear, "Don't worry. I've got you Malyshka ! You are safe!" and sprint for the nearest exit.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm*

CHARLIE

I'm crawling and my side is stinging with every shuffle I make. All I can focus on is moving forward. Just. Keep. Moving. I cry out in pain.

I start to hear shouting and I panic. Does Dominic have backup? Is someone coming for me? I scream and fall to the floor again.

My vision goes completely black. All I feel is cold, but the last thing I hear is...

“I’ve got you Malyshka ! You are safe.”



YURI

I exit the building and head for my car. One of Pap's men sees me coming with an unconscious Charlie and runs to help me get her in the car. I start to place her gently in the back seat.

"You ride with her," he suggests, "I'll drive."

I let him because I honestly can't handle not having her in my arms right now. I'm so scared right now. Her side is a bloody mess and more blood keeps seeping out.

Once we're seated, I place my hand on her side and applied pressure. She winces and cries out in pain her eyes still closed.

"Don't worry. I'm here! We'll get you all fixed up." I say, "Drive! NOW!" and we're off to the hospital. I don't give a fuck that the doctors and nurses will probably call the cops, but I probably should.

"Call the boss and have him tell Liam which hospital we're going to. I want him to run interference with the hospital staff." I command.

"Will do!" he says.

We're weaving in and out of traffic and running every red light and stop sign. I'm glad I have Charlie secured in my lap so I can help buffer her body against any pot holes. She is turning whiter by the second.

“Go faster!” I shout.

It seems like it takes us hours to arrive, but once the car is parked, I throw the door open, position Charlie so she’s comfortable in my arms and run in through the Emergency Room doors.

MAXIM

Dominic is so dead! I think as I chase his sorry ass around the building. I may be big, but I'm fast which not a lot of people seem to believe.

He's a few paces ahead of me and is about to take a corner when I lunge out and grab him by the shirt. It rips, so I don't get a good hold on him, but it causes him to trip.

I slow my pace as he turns on his back. He lifts himself up on his hands and feet like a crab and starts scooting away from me. The patheticness of it makes me laugh.

I reach him in two swift strides and step on his ankle which puts a stop to his retreat. His eyes go wide as I press all my weight on his ankle. I hear a loud CRACK as his bone breaks beneath my foot.

"Fuck!" He screams.

I release his ankle and connect my foot with his face! He flies back and hits a half demolished wall then slides to the floor, the dust from the drywall falling on his head and shoulders.

"You know Dominic, I never thought you were smart, but I really didn't think you were this... fucking... stupid." I say as I walk toward him.

"My father will KILL you!" He threatens.

"Oh no! I'm shaking in my boots!" I say feigning fear and pretend to shake all over.

“You know, Yuri and I have been friends for a long time. You seem to have been aware of him for a while, so what made you think you’d be able to pull this off?” I ask with genuine curiosity.

He’s sitting on the floor, dazed. “He’s not the King of England. He’s not perfect!” Dominic spits out, trembling.

“Well... that may be true, but come on? Did you really think you could take Charlie and not get caught?” I ask.

“Don’t act like my plans didn’t work! You Russians think you’re untouchable, but I was able to undermine your operations from the inside for MONTHS without anyone knowing!” he brags.

“You really think Yuri and his father didn’t know someone was ratting on us?” I scoff, “Let me enlighten you!” I say grabbing him by the collar and lifting him so his feet dangle off the ground. “Yuri knew something was off the moment Andrey started questioning his decisions. You don’t get to question the son of your boss without raising suspicion.” I say, pushing Dominic against the wall.

“We knew it was just a matter of time until the rat made a stupid mistake. And we were right!” I let go of Dominic and he crumples to the floor groaning. Yuri knew someone was following him, he knew something was up with Andrey, so Yuri, Ilya, and I devised a plan to suss out the rat. You both took the bait so easily!”

It takes him a few seconds to sit up, but when he does he laughs, “You expect me to believe this was a trap? I’m the one who took Yuri’s precious little whore !”

“Watch your mouth!” I say pulling him up off the floor by his hair. He stands unwillingly and tries to balance on his good leg, then grabs my hands to try and free himself but is unsuccessful. “Did we expect you to try and take Charlie, yes! We did

everything we could to keep her safe, but she's a strong, stubborn woman. Yuri wasn't going to tie her up to keep her out of harm's way. It's not his fault she chose to run off! But I'm getting off topic..."

"Oh, so now you're blaming all of this on Charlie! I see how it is! Yuri is perfect and can't do anything wrong!"

I release his hair and punch him in the gut. He doubles over, moaning.

"I'm not blaming Charlie for anything! You saw an opening and you took it. But it was a stupid choice."

Coughing, he starts to stand upright and argues, "Stupid? I'm stupid? How is kidnapping my enemy's lover stupid?"

"Well, to start..." I pause and punch him in the face, aiming for his left eye, "You are an impulsive prick." He staggers back and uses the wall to stay standing, "You didn't plan! You saw an opening and you grabbed her. Oh wait, I'm sorry, you didn't even grab her yourself! You sent Andrey..." I punch him again, in the jaw this time, "Andrey, really? Another stupid choice!" This time he falls to the floor and goes boneless. "Then you brought her to an abandoned office building that's in your father's company name. Did you think we wouldn't find you?" I laugh.

He's motionless on the floor, so I kick him in the gut and then haul him up and over my shoulder. This is going to be fun!

### CHARLIE

I hear chaotic, muffled sounds all around me. I'm not sure what to make of my current situation because I'm in so much pain and I'm so cold. I hear whispering in my ear but I can't make out the words. My head feels heavy and I can't seem to concentrate. I'm shivering so bad my teeth are chattering.

I'm scared. I don't know what's going on. Nothing is making sense. I'm trying to think, to form cohesive thoughts, but everything is muddled and I feel heavy, so heavy. All I want to do is sleep. That's what I need. I'm going to sleep. Just for a few minutes.

"Charlie! Charlie! Stay with me!" I hear somewhere far away.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

I don't remember changing my alarm clock sound. That beeping is going to drive me crazy! I try to roll over but realize I can't really move my body. In fact, I feel super stiff and I'm trying to open my eyes, which is proving difficult. I swear my eyelids are weighted down by ten pound dumbbells. Groaning, I take a deep, steadying breath and am finally able to open my eyes a crack and I'm instantly assaulted by a bright light above me.

“Wha...!” I grunt out and throw my arm over my eyes in reflex to shield my burning eyes. .

“Hey! Hey... it's okay. You're okay.” Yuri says soothingly. In an instant he's by my side, placing his hands on my cheeks, cradling my face and talking to me like he would to calm down a feral animal. “You're in the hospital. You're safe! Can you stay calm for me, Malyshka ?” he breathes out a worried sigh.

I move my arm and place my hands in my lap. Then I look at him, really look at him. He's looking at me like he's afraid I'm about to break into a million pieces, and I'm scared that I might do just that.

I look at him confused and croak out, “What, what happened?” Shaking my head, I try to remember what could have happened that ended in me being brought here.

“I found you and you're safe. The doctor said it may take some time for all your memories to come back due to the trauma, but I will answer any questions you have as soon as they start to come back. I...I don't want to overwhelm you.” He sighs, taking my hands in his, “I am so sorry I didn't figure it out sooner. I should have. I should have seen what was happening and told you sooner so you would understand. I shouldn't have hidden anything from you. I am so sorry!” He buries his head in our conjoined arms on the bed.

I sigh and take in my surroundings. The hospital room is scary white, like overly sterile white. White walls, white sheets, white curtains... a private room? It must be, since I am the only person in the room. I don't even see another empty bed. Of course he would make sure I had my own room. He thinks of that kind of stuff. I sigh again, exhausted.

“How long have I been asleep? I feel like I could sleep for a year.” I giggle trying to break the tension.

His brows pull together sadly; he looks me in the eyes and touches my face again, “Charlie...you’ve been unconscious for three days...the scariest three days of my life.” He whispers gently, concern dripping from his features.

It's then I see the bruises under his eyes and the cut on his forehead. I try to sit up and reach for the stitched up gash on his face, but I stop when a sharp, stabbing pain forms at my side. An injury I can't remember getting.

He helps me lay back down, grabs my hand, and kisses my palm in reverence. “I am fine,” he says clearly seeing my concern, “and I’m better now that you are awake.” He sighs, breathing deeply, still holding my hand to his mouth. “I don’t know how I would survive without you in this world.” He takes a deep labored breath and looks me directly in the eyes as if punctuating how serious this entire situation is.

He almost lost me? Oh! My! He almost lost me! I almost died! I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart so that the heart monitor doesn’t show just how scared and concerned I am.

“Come here,” I tell him softly, gesturing to the bed for him to slide in next to me. I need him to hold me. He climbs up and when we’re situated, I snuggle into him. “I will never leave you alone of my own free will. Ever!” I whisper against his chest. Closing my eyes and falling asleep.

The room is dark and all I hear is deep, menacing laughter. My body is cold, I’m shaking and terrified as I see the shadow of a man approaching me.

I startle awake, gasping for air and hear the heart monitor going crazy as I breathe through the panic.

It was just a bad dream! Wasn’t it? “Holy shit! Dominic!” I look around to assess my surroundings. Was I dreaming that Yuri was here? Did Dominic take me to hospital to treat me? Is he still going to sell me to the highest bidder or worse?!



Panic floods over me and I curl into a ball. I can't breathe until Yuri comes running into my room. As soon as we make eye contact, I cry. He's by my side in a second. I'm safe. Yuri saved me. It was real. He's here. I keep chanting those truths over and over in my head.

I know I'm ugly crying and my face is red and puffy, I can feel it, but I can't stop the tears. I won't let go of Yuri. I'm too afraid this is all a dream and when I wake up I'll be back there... alone.... with Dominic... dying.

I have a death grip on Yuri's hand, not that he is complaining, but I am pretty sure the second I try to release it my hand will hurt from being stuck in one position for so long with so much pressure. I don't care. I need to feel him touching me, reminding me that this is real and not a dream.

"What do you remember? You don't have to tell me everything, or anything really if it is too much right now." He says gently rubbing circles on the top of my hand. I am pretty sure even if I tried to pull away he wouldn't let me at this point either.

Yuri's dad ushers in a man. He's tall and has pale skin like me. His dark red hair is styled short and sleek. He's wearing black dress pants, a deep green button up shirt, and a matching suit coat. He looks important and I'm nervous. Yuri's dad whispers to him sternly and then he nods before walking over to stand next to Yuri.

"Hi, Charlotte, I'm Detective Liam Fitzpatrick," he introduces himself in a soft, gentle, yet firm voice. "I need to ask you a few questions. I know you've been through a lot, so take your time. Wherever you are comfortable saying now would be helpful to us in our investigation."

I look at Yuri, my eyes asking if it is safe to tell him the truth. He gave me a subtle nod.

I take a deep breath, grounding myself in the smell and touch of Yuri, "It... It was

Andrey. He..." I take another steadying breath. "He cornered me in that alley by the coffee shop by my apartment, I don't remember the name of it. It was raining so hard and I could barely see, so I went under an awning to get my bearings. He...He came up behind me. Scared the shit out of me." I take another slow breath to keep myself from panicking. He isn't here. I am safe. I am with Yuri. I chant once again in my head before I continue. "He drugged me? I think?"

Next thing I knew I was with Dominic and he..he was so mad. He hates Yuri and his family and he wanted to get back at them for something. We fought." I begin to blink back the tears. Still in shock that I lived through that. That I am here alive. I am safe. I am with Yuri. "I had to get out of there. He said... he was going to sell me! I heard him talking about some auction. He took out a knife and he, he stabbed me. I think...I think he was going to force himself on me and I, I couldn't...I couldn't." I say, shaking my head, "I thought he was my friend. He was supposed to be my friend and he used me and then..." I begin to cry again. Heavy, hard, terrifying tears. I can feel my fear and anger easing with each drop that falls from my cheek. I can't even think about what would have happened if Yuri hadn't shown up. I could have...I would have died if he hadn't found me.

"You don't have to say anymore. What you gave me is more than enough. I will leave my card with your boyfriend. If you need anything at all. Don't hesitate to reach out." He nods at Yuri handing him a card and leaves the room.

I look at Yuri and tug him closer. I need him touching me. He must be able to tell by the look on my face because he climbs into the bed with me holding me while I cry.

"I hate seeing you like this. I want to take it all away. I wish it was me," he whispers into my hair. "You are so brave and strong and I love you so fucking much Charlie." He kisses my hair and holds me tightly as I continue to cry into his chest.

I slept for a few more hours after Detective Fitzpatrick left. Telling him about what happened wiped me out. When I woke up my doctor came in to introduce me to one

of their trauma psychologists. I was nervous at first, but my determination to overcome this, to not let Dominic win, spurred me on, so I met with a psychologist.

We've been meeting every week for a few months now, and after a lot of talking, she and I both agreed that meds were not for me. But she had another idea that I fell in love with instantly. She recommended, since I'm a journalist, that I use my creativity to express what happened to me. She said writing can be a great way to process my trauma, so I figured what the hell? Why not?

Bill welcomed me back to work after I recovered and was very supportive of the story I wanted to write. He said it would "look really good on paper" and be "helpful to the general public" to get a good look into organized crime. So with the support of Yuri and his family, my boss, and my psychologist I wrote my story.

I met Yuri and his family when I was five years old. I was finally going to full-day school...