

## Chapter One.

The line coming through the oaken double doors wasn't unbearably long. But it wasn't quite short either. In fact, those wishing their last regards were non-existent. She even doubted that she herself had any parting words for the man lying in the simple maple box with the thin peach satin lining. The man she hadn't seen in ten years lay in front of her, his face exposed. When she walked into the small reception room, the thought of walking to that box hadn't even occurred to her. Her brothers and sister lived not far from her humble apartment with her mother. But they weren't there. Wouldn't their children want to wish a respectful farewell to their Grandfather? A grandfather they had never even met. Or heard of. What a miracle Yuliya Novikova had even heard of her estranged husband's death.

“Он мёртв,” Yuliya said. Her mother had never quite mastered the English language since her arrival in America nineteen years ago.

“Что?” She was cleaning the dishes and the plate hardly slipped from her soapy hands.

“Ваш отец.”

The welfare of her father had been the farthest thing in her mind since his departure ten years ago. Too many times, he had come home either drunk or distant, to the dismay of his wife. Certainly, he made enough money to support his wife and four children, but sometimes he wouldn't come home for entire weekends. His children would ask for him, they would inquire his whereabouts, and all Yuliya Novikova could tell them was 'hush' or 'leave your father alone'. For not even she herself knew what or where her husband was.

By the time she was fourteen, his absences had become so frequent, Yuliya had had enough. It was a school night, but Yuliya herded her children out of their Brooklyn apartment into the cold November air at ten thirty in the night. Elizaveta, the oldest of the four and named after their grandmother on their mother's side, scolded the younger two for smoking a cigarette they had stolen from their father's coat, while she sat alone across the street, staring up into her broken family's third floor apartment.

Lucy, or Lucya, as her mother insisted upon calling her, had never been quite close to her siblings, and wasn't even her mother's favourite. Yuliya Novikova didn't care for her two daughters; she looked down on them as the weaker. And yet, her sons had been the first to leave her, and most ironically, the least favoured remained to support the now fifty-eight year old widowed immigrant. Lucy had been renewing her mother's visa every year now for the past ten years, ever since her latest ailment of pneumonia. She had made breakfast, lunch, dinner and her evening tea for her for the past ten years. She tucked her to bed every night, she carried her and her mother's laundry down the street to the local coin laundromat once a week, every week, rain or snow, she had been the spokesman of Yuliya Novikova between her acquaintances from Russia, she had sat and waited on the frayed olive Victorian sofa beside the yellow rotary phone every Tuesday every other week waiting for that call from Sergey Bobrovich to meet her at any random corner within six blocks from her home of nineteen years in Brighton Beach. Without a doubt they all knew the money came from her absent father, who cared just enough to allow their mother not to labour to raise her four children.

Elizaveta had stayed long enough to care for the younger, but left soon enough so she didn't have to bear the burden to care for an abandoned ill mother and three young adults. She settled down with a neighboring immigrant down the block and barely called anymore. Clearly, she enjoyed life with her successful husband and two sprightly children. Stas, the first son and named after his father, had left Yuliya Novikova as soon as was permitted and was rarely heard from. The last Lucy had heard, he was working construction in North Jersey. Timofey began college from the aid of scholarships and grants. He was the most Americanized of all, perhaps because he was the youngest and embraced the differences in society much more readily and willingly than his older two sisters and brother. He married a lovely Russian girl from Islip that he had met in college and now lived nearby her parents in Long Island. Timofey respectfully called weekly to check up on his sickly mother and caretaking

sister, but now those calls tended to linger weeks apart. Yuliya Novikova had quickly deteriorated to the point of insanity after everyone left. But could they really blame their father for that? Yuliya Novikova disliked her daughter Lucya but couldn't survive without her, which made her despise her all the more. But she had been a diligent mother, and until Timofey left her alone with Lucy, she had been hard and had her wits about her.

Lucy hadn't the opportunity to go to college so after graduating with her diploma, she set off to work at the small two-room bookstore three blocks away. Sergey Brobrovich only gave them enough money to afford their means. Yuliya Novikova, nevertheless, set aside ten percent of this and her children provided for her as much they could. Lucy couldn't say they lived horribly, certainly much better than when they all lived in St. Petersburg. Indeed, their apartment was cramped and shoddy, especially when they all lived there. But now she had her very own bedroom rather than the shared one she had with her mother and sister after her father left. Her brothers and sister had their own lives to run and dictate, to enjoy and ponder, but Lucy had unspokenly been the designated caretaker since as long as she could remember. In high school, Lucy kept to herself and didn't retain many friends after graduation. Now, six years later, the only friend she had was the Steblov family that owned the bookstore on Neptune Ave. But their eighteen year old daughter Marina, who came in only once a week, seemed to be extremely arrogant and tended to ridicule the helpless twenty-four year old to no end. Lucy took it in stride though; she had been an impractical, illogical and childish character at that age as well. She had her regrets from then and wouldn't let them form prejudice and spite for those of that irrational age.

And now it didn't seem that she had much of a future for herself. Yuliya Novikova kept her on a tight leash with her fears and anxieties ever since her children had left her, and Lucy really didn't have a life anymore. And what could give her motivation to do otherwise? But now the only thing allowing them to survive in an apartment comfortably was no longer.

"Вот." Yuliya Novikova had reached into the small silver jewelry box in the end table drawer and drawn out a certain amount of bills that had been saved up. "Для похорон."

Lucy had stoically dried her hands on the dish rag and taken the money tentatively. She had noticed in the corner of her eye that there wasn't too many bills left in the green velvet-lined box.

"I don't need this much," Lucy stated. "I don't think many people will show."

"То priest тогда."

And their only money source now lay dead in front of her, and Sergey Bobrovich had failed to call the past Tuesday.

Sure, she worked at the bookstore, but she could only make so much from there. They probably only had enough money for three or four month's worth of rent. And then what? Would Yuliya Novikova have to struggle to survive from hereon? Lucy didn't have much affection for her mother, but the principle was still there. Lucy hadn't bothered to tell her siblings that Sergey Bobrovich had stopped calling. She didn't want their money if it wasn't honestly offered, which she knew would never be. And Yuliya Novikova wouldn't accept it either, knowing that her children had more important business to tend to beside her sickly condition. As for the wake? Yuliya Novikova said that it was enough respect paid if she appeared at the funeral and saw him no more.

And no one had come to this wake so far. Not even Stanislov Novikova's second wife had come. Maybe because she knew that Lucy would be there waiting, she knew that Lucy would watch her in contempt, watch her in wonder, in curiosity. But how could she, when Lucy hadn't the slightest idea what this woman looked like. Nevertheless, Lucy sat silent, waiting, watching, listening. She tried to decipher the hushed mumbles coming from the next room, but gave up moments later. The attendant had led her to this small room without a word and just as noiselessly left a door ajar for potential mourners. But there were no mourners.

Lucy brushed aside some lint on her black straight-cut ankle-length skirt and sighed mutely. The clock on the wall told her that two hours had gone by, and only one more hour of solo remained. The

floor lamp in the corner of the room flickered. The peach lining stared back at her. He seemed suddenly to be calling her. She had remained as far away as possible until now, but in spontaneity, Lucy stood up and glided quietly across the cheaply carpeted floor to her father's coffin.

He had always been a calm, refined and intelligent man. But now he looked more so. The anger, vices and defiance underneath the surface he hid so well wasn't there anymore. Ten years ago, when Stanislov Novikova would come home to his four children, he was cool and composed. When he came home to his wife, he was silent. It was then that Lucy studied the lines in his face, telling her an entire story of his life. When his yellow-green eyes squinted, Lucy could see the flames of the lion within darting to and fro, studying, analyzing, dissecting. And when those yellow-green eyes settled on Lucy, the lion disappeared and a gentle lamb appeared, but Lucy could still see that lion flirting in the distance. Lucy was his favourite, and perhaps that were the reason why Yuliya Novikova hated her so. Elizaveta reminded her too much of his wife's irritating mother. Stas' rebelliousness was uncomely. Timofey was too soft, too delicate to be a man, to be worthy of carrying his name. He had confided this with her when he would take her out to a local deli on a rare Sunday. He said she was strong, stronger than her mother; strong like his mother. She had his mother's eyes, he had told her. And to him, that was beautiful. Lucy was a true woman. Stanislov Novikova would caress her black-brown straight hair and praise her until sundown.

But after he left, she never saw him again. His words became a faded memory, a ghost's voice in the wind. Did he love her anymore? Did his new lady-friend remind him more of his mother than her? Was she more beautiful than her?

Stanislav Novikov's face, resting peacefully on the peach cushion, said no secrets. She didn't know how long she stood there, gazing at his face trying to read the more deepened wrinkles and now-peppered curly wiry hair on his scalp. She didn't know if she loved him anymore. The hostility inside him wasn't there anymore. Lucy could believe that was the only reason she loved him in the first place. The way he treated her mother was nothing to mention, and neither was the way he treated her siblings. That mystery kept her wondering, it kept her continuously enthralled with his presence and who he really was. Now that it wasn't there anymore, she didn't know him anymore.

More bitter and cold than when she had arrived earlier that evening, Lucy sulked back to her chair in the far corner of the room. She almost wanted to leave then and there, but public show of honour kept her feet planted firmly inside that stuffy room.

The clock on the wall said eight forty-nine when she felt a change in the draft, and looked up.

The tall, stocky man with orange hair and black eyes wore a black cap and a drab black leather jacket to shield himself from the brisk December air two doors away. He tipped his hat at the lady in the corner and walked briskly to the sarcophagus. Quickly, he bowed, hands clasped, turned around and strode to Lucy.

"Lucya."

"Mister Bobrovich?" Lucy couldn't say that she was surprised.

"A final advance," he stated monotonously. Reaching inside his jacket, he extracted a white envelope, the kind from a bank withdrawal, and thrust it into Lucy's chest. Lucy took it not with pleasure. Sergey Bobrovich tipped his hat a second time and just as quickly left the room.

Lucy glanced up at the clock as she tucked the envelope away without bothering to see how much her father's reserve had left for his wife and children. The clock read eight fifty. That was like Sergey Bobrovich. Her meetings with him in the past were all just as hurried and tacit. The envelope didn't feel thick. Stanislov Novikova had always paid them in fifty dollar bills. From familiarity, there seemed to be less than two thousand dollars in it. But Lucy had the rest of her life to count that money in the envelope.

So Lucy had sat there for three hours for not one do-gooder. Sergey Bobrovich didn't count, for she could see in his eyes the relief that he no longer had to set aside minutes in his day to play the middle man with a man and his daughter.

She stared at her father's sarcophagus. Anyone walking into the room would think this young lady had it against the dead man for dying; but in fact an odd thought had just occurred to her. All this time, she had been worried about keeping up appearances, remarks to say to save face in case an unexpected visitor arrived. But no one had come. All this time she was worrying whether or not she would ever see Sergey Bobrovich again. She was worried how she would support her ailing mother, what sort of excuse she would have to come up with for her siblings not to oblige. Now, blinking in her flurry of ideas and bewilderment, she glared at the maple coffin in scrutiny. How did this man perish so soon? Certainly, he was older than his wife, but not just yet ripe enough to settle back into the earth. A disease? A drunken fall? And argument with a lover? Lucy couldn't pluck any plausible ideas from her mind.

A soft tap came from the door, and the attendant sourly leaned in. "Time, miss," and he pulled his head back, as if sensing the distasteful thoughts in the room and wishing to be elsewhere.

Lucy looked up and the clock told her there were actually five minutes remaining until nine p.m. But what did it matter, and what did she care.

She stood up and briskly walked out of the stuffy room. When Stanislov Novikova would be exiting the church for the mortuary, she would pay him her regards. For bringing her miserable existence into this world.

The cold wind bit her hard and she wrapped her scarf around a third time. Balling her fists, she shoved them into her pockets of her black pea coat, which had originally been Elizaveta's before she left for her husband.

She had taken the train here after work, but decided her fare would be put to better use if spent on something practical. The corner store was still open, and the glass screened door blew her out as quickly as she had gone in. Pausing for a moment, she lit up what was the cheapest cigarette in the shop. She had quit after her most recent boyfriend, but this sudden stress of dependency unnerved her after three years of smokeless nights to give in. Mama would be outraged, for her husband always arrived home stank of cigarette and cigar smoke, but at this point, Lucy couldn't care less. She knew Yulilya Novikova would grab the envelope of bills as soon as she got home. Yuliya Novikova would lecture her upon getting a better-paying occupation. A deep inhalation almost sent her head spinning, and she blinked rapidly before setting off again down 13<sup>th</sup> St. It would be ten more blocks until she would come upon her neighborhood, but she had nothing to be in a hurry about. It would be late by the time she arrived home, and she would probably just make her and her mother's tea, curl in bed with a book and quickly drift off to sleep. She had to work in the morning anyway.

A gloved hand suddenly gripped her around her mouth and dragged her by her feet into an alley. The figure pulled her all the way to the back of the dead-end kicking, when she suddenly felt a thin metal cylinder thrust into her ribs as he backed her into the mesh fence.

Lucy hastily stopped moving. She couldn't see the man's face because the street lights didn't go this far. He lightened his grip, knowing that she understood her dire situation.

"Please don't hurt me! I have no money!" Lucy gasped as soon as she felt the thick suede glove lift off her mouth.

She could almost feel her overtaker's eyes twinkle in mockery.

"Bobrovich gave you your due, did he not?" His thick Russian accent surprised her in the least, less than the fact that another living being knew of this silent pact.

"Eh-n-no!" She stuttered back, second guessing her lie. The envelope in her sweater pocket felt like a hundred tons.

"Лжец!"

She felt a quick sting on her ear from a quick hand and she glowered off in the distance.

"The money."

Lucy hugged herself, ignoring the cold metal of the supposed pistol to her heart.

“Her.” She said stubbornly.

The man wordlessly struck her in the same ear again, and this time it smarted. A high-pitched ring started buzzing in her ear, but she only hugged herself the tighter. Suddenly he grappled her by the arms. All five feet of Lucy wrestled back in vain.

A quick elbow to her left ear stunned her for a moment, then it all went black as the butt of the Smith & Wesson smacked her from above.

☞ Twenty-two minutes later ☜

She sat on the curb, smoking her third cigarette in a row. Times had to be bad for smoking this much. She didn't know what time it was, but it was late enough for Yuliya Novikova to be absolutely furious with her now. And now she had nothing to show for her absence, just a smarting cut on the top of her skull and a bruised cheekbone. Taking one last drag of the cancer stick, she stood up and thrust it away in frustration.

Lucy walked down 12<sup>th</sup> St. with a purpose as the few night stragglers indifferently avoided her path. A clock in a storefront window read nine fifty-six p.m., while it would be another ten minutes before reaching her apartment building. Lucy lit another cigarette and slowed her pace. It would be no use to hurry home, not with these kinds of tidings. Yuliya Novikova would care more about the money than her injuries, for sure. Quick calculations in her mind told her that she made enough money a month to pay for a month's rent, plus enough on the side to be able to afford two packs of cigarettes. Grinding her teeth, she thought hard of what jobs she could take on without killing herself in the process.

Two cigarettes later, she was within a block of her avenue, and her legs exhausted from the extra-hard strides taken from the funeral parlour to her two-bedroom apartment of Brighton Beach. Maybe her mother would have gone to bed by the time she reached home.

A hand seized her by the arm and heaved her onto the building lining the sidewalk.

Lucy closed her eyes and didn't even fight back. Leaning her head back onto the brick face, she mumbled: “I have no money.”

“I don't want your money,” a masculine Russian accent whispered back.

It wasn't the same man. She certainly lived in a Russian neighborhood. But another Russian thief in the same night? “Who are you?”

The man's grip tightened on her arm as he leaned over her.

“Pretend we're together,” he said as he looked to his left.

“I will not.”

He put a cold hand to her throat, his thumb pressing into her jugular. Her head suddenly felt numb and she took a small breath. “Alright,” she replied weakly. “What do you want?”

“You aren't going to your mother's tonight.”

“Кто?”

“Or ever again.”

“What's going on?” she scowled.

“There are bad men waiting for you. They already have your mother.”

“They won't hurt her?” She suddenly felt very cold inside, though her coat was thick.

“I can't be sure.”

“Why? I don't get it!”

“You cannot stay here, either. Come with me.” He grabbed her by the back of her neck and began walking south, past her block. He put his arm around her and began a quick pace.

“Must you do this—“ she struggled to get his arm off of her.

“This is no game!” He hissed back at her. They passed her street but he continued the brisk pace. “Where’s the due from Bobrovich?”

“Someone took it from me.” Lucy scowled and the notion that her father’s death was more than something natural darkened her mind. The man didn’t answer and she looked up at him. His scowl was much deeper than hers. “And so what?”

“They know.” He said. “Come on.”

The two quickly arrived at Brighton Beach Ave. and he made a right towards Coney Island.

“I don’t understand!” She struggled again but to no avail.

“Just be quiet!” At a certain intersection, he stopped, looked around briefly, then led her to an alleyway across the street, where an iron screened door awaited them. Retrieving a single key from his pocket, he pushed her inside quickly as he silently shut the door behind them. It was still cold inside, and a grungy stairwell awaited them. Lucy blindly followed him up the darkly lit stairs to the third level, where the man rapped a swift beat on the door. There was a scuffle, and the door soon opened. An older Russian man opened the door and they slipped inside where it was considerably warmer. The room was artistically furnished—the old man certainly had good taste in interior decorating—if this were his home, anyway. Lucy’s captor abruptly let her go and ordered her to sit. She did in the nearest red velvet stool, and he walked silently to the window which looked down to the street below.

“They took the money, Dmitri,” he said, still facing the window.

“Ahh,” the old man sat in an ornate Victorian armchair in the opposite corner from Lucy. “There is more where it came from.”

Lucy was aghast. She already knew the answer, and didn’t want to ask, but did so anyway. “My father was a thief?”

“Well put, young Lucya Novikova,” the old man quaintly smiled at his lady guest. “Here,” he suddenly stood up from his chair, went to the nearby walnut curio cabinet and retrieved a tall bottle of vodka. Lucy was confused as she aloofly accepted a small shot glass, suited for the feminine drinker.

The middle-aged man at the window approached the small circle by the old man’s beckoning, and together the three offered a toast for better times. The liquor was old and burned harshly as it went down. Lucy was never much of a drinker, and if it weren’t for traditions, she wouldn’t drink at all. The old man disappeared to another room and the two stood in silence staring away from each other until he came back with a small plate of zakuski. They politely took a small bite, though Lucy had no appetite at this moment. Her captor returned to his window sill and the old man returned to his throne.

“May I address you as Lucya?”

“Lucy,” she replied, folding her hands and crossing her legs. What to expect, she didn’t know.

“The man who took your money, what did he look like?”

Still wary, but beginning to believe that these two men were on her side, nevermind their radical methods, she took a breath. “I didn’t get to see. He hit me with his gun and when I awoke, the envelope was gone.” She paused. “What is going on! I don’t even know my father anymore! He left us ten years ago for his mistress, what am I to think? What’s going to happen to my mother? She has nothing to do with this?”

“There’s nothing we can do about this, Lucy.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Dmitri Khokhlov, and he,” pointing to her sullen kidnapper, “is Alexandry Pladnovna.”

“I must go,” Pladnovna exclaimed suddenly. Buttoning his coat, he left quickly.

Lucy felt a little more at ease. If this old man attempted anything outrageous, she knew she had some leverage of youth against him.

“So what must I do about my mother?”

“Wait, Lucy. Things may happen quickly, but sometimes not as quickly as we would like. Take your mind off of her for now; there is nothing we can do tonight.”

“So I stay here?”

“Until we find a more permanent, safer residency for you.” He offered another toast for her future home, and she drank it in silence.

“My father, who is my father?”

“A thief, as you said so yourself before.”

Lucy frowned. “And why do they want me and my mother? What of my brothers and sister?”

“They have nothing to do with this matter. They won’t be touched.”

“How convenient,” Lucy said to herself. “So what am I to do?”

The old man glanced at the bottle of vodka. “Sleep. I have a spare room for you.”

“No, I want to know more! Why do they want me and my mother?”

Khokhlov sighed. “It is a long story, Lucy. I suggest you rest first, adjust to your new life.”

“But my mother.”

He raised a brow, which silenced Lucy.

They took another toast to better news, and he led her to a small side room where he promptly left her alone to her thoughts. With no other choice available, she put her coat on the chair, took off her boots, loosened her clothing, turned off the antique lamp and laid down on the bed. The bars in front of the window cast long, miserable shadows on the ceiling, mirroring the same thoughts in her head.

She wanted to help her mother, who knew if she was still in their apartment, if they were—she despised to think of it—exerting force on her, or whether if she was even alive. How could she sleep? Why were only her and Yuliya Novikova their only targets? Was it because the money from Sergey Bobrovich, and ultimately the money from Stanislov Novikova, stolen? Was it the bad men’s money, and they were there to retrieve it? Then why didn’t they stop the flow before? Did her father insult them in some way? Now she was sure her father’s death was nothing accidental, more like something intentional, sinful, vengeful. She hadn’t known him for the last ten years, and granted it was abandonment, it was still her father, and his actions were still haunting them to this very day.

What could be done? Khokhlov was respectful enough, and he seemed to know her father well enough, but what kind of debt did he owe to her father, and even less, to her? It was a gross situation, and Lucy wished so badly that she were someone else, anyone else except for herself. Lucy glanced at the door. The lamp in the living room was still on, perhaps a beacon for others in danger like herself. The clock on the wall read just after 12 a.m., and she was anything but tired.

She argued with herself for less than a minute, huffed and sat up in the darkened room. She got up and peeked out of the single window, which looked over the alleyway below. Nothing but a garbage disposal and trash. A waft of cigar smoke crept up her nostrils, and she’d had enough.

Still in her wake attire, she opened the bedroom door and saw the old man seated in his armchair, a large cigar in one hand, and the other hand thoughtfully stroking his face. Without a word, she shamelessly sat down in the armchair next to him. He didn’t say a word, though he looked at her probingly.

“I can’t sleep,” she said only to break the awkwardness in the air.

“It’s only been a few minutes,” he stated passively.

Lucy pursed her lips shut, thinking of what she could say to pry information out of this hardened Russian man.

“Who killed my father?”

The old man smiled, turned his body to face her and puffed on his cigar. He seemed ready for conversation, finally. “That, Lucy, I do not an answer for.”

“What happened to him? I saw nothing wrong with him tonight.”

“How much do you love your father, Lucy?”

Her brows knitted. “Enough.”

Khokhlov smirked. “Very crude, Lucy.”

“I don’t care. How did he die?”

“In the back,” he said nonchalantly.

Like a coward, Lucy could finish his sentence, and she sneered as she looked away. “So what do these people want from us?”

He laughed airily. “What else? Money.”

“We have nothing to give them.”

“And that is where you are at a loss,” he smiled and puffed his cigar stoically.

Lucy scowled, angered by this old man’s uncaring behaviour. “Will you help us fix this problem?”

Khokhlov smiled again. “That is up to you. I can show you the way to go, it is up to you to make the best decision.”

“I just want to get my mother and get out of here.”

“You won’t get far on your own, I can assure you.”

“Thanks,” Lucy was snide. “So how do I save my mother? I can’t go back to my apartment, can I?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“So what do I do?” Lucy fumed, annoyed that she had to ask the same question over and over. “Can’t you help me than just agreeing with me?”

The old man puffed his cigar mutely and stared thoughtfully at the zakuski on the coffee table. A few minutes passed in silence, and Lucy began considering going to sleep and forgetting about the whole thing until the morn, but she was curious as to what Khokhlov’s ‘best decision’ entailed. Either way she though of it, nothing sounded safe, unchallenging, or anything she would like to do in particular.

“I will have Sasha Karnovich pick you up from here tomorrow morning. Be ready by 9 a.m.”

“Is that my direction.”

“Да.”

Lucy’s brow furrowed, a face appearing in her mind.

“Да. Хорошая ночь.” She got up and retreated into the guest room, where she laid back down on the bed, face up, staring at the shadows again.

Karnovich. Sasha. That name came with a well-figured, sharp-boned face into her minds eye. Dark brown eyes twinkled back at her, and she suddenly recalled where she knew him from.

Twelve years younger, it was a Sunday at the deli with her father. The sun was hot but the crisp autumn breeze was forcing everyone to wear a long coat. Stanislav Novikov walked hand in hand with his favourite daughter, his favourite offspring. Lucy, twelve years old in a long green Sunday dress and a sun hat sheltering her dark brown hair from flying in the wind, was in her moment of glory as she always shad been when with her father. It was an honour to be chosen among her four siblings by such a revered, ghostly father for his outing.

“We must make a small side route today, little girl.”

“I’m not a little girl anymore, papa.” Lucy squeezed his hand in loving anger. He squeezed back playfully, Lucy savouring every moment. He led her down two blocks and down 6<sup>th</sup> St. and into an ethnic deli, to a table where a boy no older than twenty sat alone.

“Choose a sandwich, Lucy,” Stanislav Novikov exclaimed to his daughter, letting go of her hand and prodding her towards the counter.

“But I just ate,” she protested, having just come from the coffee shop and two cookies.

“So choose one for our friend here,” he gave her a little push and she had no choice. Lucy remembered precisely what she ordered for that young man to this day, whose name she didn’t know till they left the deli. He never told her what they spoke of, but by the time she arrived back at the table with a sandwich, her father had already lit a cigarette and was leaning back comfortably in his iron-wrought chair. The young man looked at the sandwich distastefully at first, but then flashed a smile at the eager-to-please little girl who sat down next to her father. The young man looked away mutely, obviously uncomfortable now that a stranger sat among them.

“How is the family?” Her father questioned.

The young man looked through his sandwich as he replied. “My mother is doing well, considering her state of mind.”

“His father just died,” Stanislav Novikov leaned over and whispered to his daughter.

She covered her mouth and looked sympathetically at the stranger.

“It was some time ago, don’t feel pity for me,” the boy exclaimed, waving his hand. He picked up the sandwich, but put it down quickly. “Anna isn’t coping well. She’s missed the last two weeks of lessons already and she’s caught some illness. We don’t have money to see a doctor...I was wondering...” He trailed off, hoping for some good news.

Stanislav Novikov smiled something devious as Lucy stared at her father, hoping someone, anyone, could aid this tragic situation.

“I might be able to get you a job. Вы походите на сына ко мне.”

Lucy’s eyes largened, looking up at her father, wanting to tell him he already had two sons of his own. But she’d kept her mouth shut.

The young man looked at him gratefully, and Stanislav Novikov decided that would conclude the conversation. He hadn’t touched the sandwich yet as father and daughter left him to muse.

So now it seemed as if this Sasha Karnovich received more than just a “small job” from her father. And where would he be taking her to? Khokhlov was so vague she realized she’d left the conversation with barely the smallest tidbit of new information. Still unsettled, Lucy turned over and closed her eyes, not falling asleep until an hour and a half later.

☞ the next morning; 9.04 AM ☞

She wanted to sit in the back seat, but he coaxed her impatiently to the front passengers seat. Her memory was fuzzy, but he looked the same as she recalled from twelve years ago. Except his eyes didn’t twinkle back at her anymore, and perhaps those were small creases in his forehead she spied from the corner of her eye. The two sat in silence for the whole as he guided the car onto the Belt Parkway, eastbound. Lucy didn’t want to look at him, and she didn’t know why.

Another twenty minutes passed as they drove through the leftover morning traffic, and Lucy decided she’d had enough of her unknown destination.

“Where are we going?”

“Southampton.”

“Southampton? What is there?” Aside from Petersburg and the immigration station in Manhattan, she had never been outside of Brooklyn in her entire life.

“Vanya Lubrev.”

“And who is he to me?”

“The only man who can help you.”

Tell me more, Lucy wanted to demand, but Sasha looked unwilling to talk about anything. But she wasn’t done yet. “Khokhlov wouldn’t tell me anything but—“

“Because he’s a miserable man, a joke. He likes to talk a lot about nothing he knows about.”

Lucy was taken aback by his sudden hate for the old man, and she suddenly felt very uncomfortable and unwanted in this car ride. She was silent for a moment, contemplating whether or not she should continue this conversation. Scowling, concluding that since everyone seemed so surly with her, why should she give convenience to them? “Perhaps you can help me learn more about who my father is?”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Кто?” Lucy said, offended.

“You heard me.”

“Ничего болван.”

Sasha clicked his tongue. “Your father was a bookie, but mostly he was a messenger who stole a little on the side for himself. He never disclosed that tiny bit of information, so he ended up in a puddle of his blood with a hole in his back.”

Grimacing, Lucy swallowed hard. She didn’t expect this man to explain it in such detachment and antipathy. A hard thought came into her head. “And were you the one who put that bullet in him?”

“Hell no, who do you think I am?”

“Well you made it sound so.”

“So I’m crass. My apologies.”

Lucy saw him rolling his eyes and she could taste his impatience and bitterness.

“Did my father help you?”

“What are you talking about.”

“Twelve years ago. When your father died and your mother and sister were sick.”

“How do you know about that.”

“I was there, with my father. We met you at the deli on a Sunday. You were young.”

“Of course I was. So you’re that Lucya.”

“ ‘That Lucya’?”

Sasha turned to her. Lucy could swear she saw the faintest sign of that spark in his eye from years ago. What to expect next, she didn’t know until she saw that spark quickly fade away.

“My mother’s dead, been dead for a long while now. my sisters have been in college for some time, and they’re fine.”

“Did my father help you like he said he would?”

He raised his arms and looked down at himself. “I suppose he did, what do you think?”

Lucy didn’t know what to say, the only thing on her mind that he looked in much better shape than her brothers ever did before they were on their own. What her father said to Sasha, she couldn’t forget.

“What do you do? Are you involved in this...mafia?”

“Mind your own business.”

“Just trying to make conversation,” she said quickly, looking out her window at the passing scenery. It was new to her, but boring, drab. The day was overcast, looked like it might even perhaps snow.

“Who was my father with? I mean did he marry anyone? Did you work with him exclusively?”

“Are you a new reporter or something? Why this childness?”

“I know nothing of my father, who he was or what he did! And frankly, I didn’t care, but now my mother’s life is in danger, and I’m supposedly on some list for debts I’m not even aware of! Can I please have some closure—at least?”

“Your father left you and your family for his mistress because he didn’t want you involved. And by the way, for your so-called closure, his mistress was killed the same night as your father was.”

“What was her name? Did they have children?”

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“Why would he want more children? They’re a burden, a drain and distraction to the emotions, and are nothing more than money whores.” He paused. “Her name was Anastasia Dentkov.”

“Why did they kill her, too?”

Sasha rolled his eyes and didn’t reply.

“Did you work with my father at all?”

“Not directly.”

“What did you do?”

“Hey, listen lady! Am I asking you a hundred personal questions? How would you like it if I pried and poked into your private life?”

Lucy pursed her lips. She couldn’t say she was sorry for prying because she didn’t feel so, and she still wanted to know more. But she got the feeling that he would open up to her. Eventually. “My father—”

“He is dead! Forget it! Bother Lubrev with your never-ending questions! I don’t care enough about your father to tell you. And last I heard, you didn’t care either.”

She looked down into her lap dumbly while the steady hum of the car engine lengthened the silence between them.

The scenery began looking more rural before Lucy opened her curious mouth again.

“Who is Lubrev?”

“A very rich, powerful old man. If you know what’s good for you, you’d be smart to be on your best behaviour around him.”

“Will I be staying with him now?”

Sasha’s jaw tensed for a second. “To my knowledge, yes, for now.”

She couldn’t say she wasn’t happy for leaving Khokhlov. She made a mental note to call Alek Steblov and tell him she wouldn’t be in for a while—probably would lose her job, and suddenly she became fearful of what Lubrev might be expecting of her. She was still young. And probably a little naïve, but she knew a few dark secrets of her people. She rarely went out as a child, but she remembered running hand in hand with her sister from a small deli that seemed to have a small argument which had exploded into loud bangs. Yuliya Novikova had screamed at her daughters when they arrived home without her requested cooking ingredients, and Lucy was restricted from going along with her sister on outing from then on. It was ridiculous, and Lucy hated the fact that she had nothing to do with this accident. And so if anything, she’d led a sheltered life since then. Punishments and restrictions laid down by Yuliya Novikova lasted for years, in Lucy’s case. That’s why she was distant when it came to matters of her sister and brothers. Yuliya Novikova never treated them the same way that she was treated. But at the same time, she was her mother, her caretaker, her safekeeper. She couldn’t pretend that she was happy her mother was missing, she just couldn’t. Though she was a witch, Yuliya Novikova had no one else in the world besides her lone and hated daughter who now took responsibility of her existence and well-being, and Lucy couldn’t help but feel pity for her dependence and stubbornness. And without her mother, where would she stay? Who could she speak to? Her boss was out of the question, she would be shunned forever. In a sick, twisted, ironic and pitiful sense, if it weren’t for her father, she would have been dead. And no one would have known or cared. But it was Stanislav Novikov’s fault for everything happening in the first place! Lucy scowled to herself, angry at herself, angry that she hadn’t broken free from her family a long time ago, angry of her past choices, angry of all the times she could have made a difference in her life. Her nostrils flared in self-pity and she stroked her cheek as she turned to look out the window, to try and distract her fuming mind.

“What is Lubrev going to do with me?”

Sasha frowned sarcastically. “Well why do you say that? Sounds like you already know.”

“Am I to be a whore? I refuse!” Her mind was already tingling from her previous thoughts.

“Calm down, it’s not like you had any other better ideas before. You’ll thank him, believe me.”

A hundred thoughts flashed through her mind. She could open the door, but Sasha was going about seventy miles an hour now, so that was out of the question. Maybe when they got into town, she could make a run for it. Maybe when they got to this Lubrev’s home, she could make her escape. Maybe—  
“Sasha, please don’t let this happen to me!” She turned to him in desperation.

“Lay off of me! I don’t care what happens to you, really, I don’t! Fuck off!”

She retracted into the furthest corner of her seat next to the window, and suddenly she felt very alone in the world. Alone, and very afraid.

