



CHAPTER 1

Part of me knew it was the dream again. The sensible part of my brain was screaming at me to wake up, but when does that ever work? So I watched the film unspool once more, with me cast as the villain.

The bones in my fists crunched with every blow to her face and torso. She fell, and did not move. Her blood dripped off my fingers and onto the body at my feet. I focused on the slow progression of the red trickle, hoping in vain that I wouldn't have to identify my victim this time.

My breath echoed in my ears as the rest of the world grew still. *Drip. Inhale, exhale. Drip.* The pain in my swollen fists forced its way into my thoughts as I stood over her. *Inhale, exhale. Throb.* I shook out my hands and forced my gaze down. I didn't need to see her lifeless eyes look back at me to know who it was. It never changed. Who could inspire a killing rage from me but my mother?

I squatted lower to study the broken form of Senovia. *Victory*—the thought rose before I could squash it, and it made me nauseous though the blood had not. I turned from the body with a jerk.

The jerk took me to the edge of my bed, startling me. I awoke screaming and choking, my hair plastered to my face with sweat. I tried to untangle my hair, but the thick waves were strangling me.

"Galine! Galine, it's okay!"

The sound of my sister's voice drew me back from my nightmare. I was in my bed, my sister was safe in the room with me, and our mother, still alive, was several miles across town. My pulse began to come down to a reasonable level. However, now that I could think, the guilt came. Not only did I commit matricide in my sleep, but I woke Katja in the process.

I blinked, trying to adjust my eyes to the sudden light of the lamp between our twin beds. I propped myself up on an elbow to get a better look at my sister. Kat sat on the edge of her bed, her long legs crossed. The oscillating fan shot a burst of air in my face. It didn't make the stuffy air that much cooler, but it brought me out of my stupor.

"Kat, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep." The words croaked out, my throat raw from screaming.

"Was it the one about Mom again?" I nodded. Katja ran her fingers through her long dark hair. Her brown eyes studied the tips for split ends with an intensity that betrayed her uneasiness. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"It's okay if you need to cry or something."

After having had the dream for years, I couldn't muster that depth of emotion. With my mother, it was best to strive for indifference. She wanted a reaction, and I refused to give it to her, even dream versions of her. "Really, Katja. Go back to bed. I'm fine." She studied me for a moment and saw that I was at least no longer hysterical. Pulling the sheet over her, she lay back down.

I tried to think about something else, but the nightmare was still banging around in my head. The clock on the nightstand informed me that it was forty minutes until my alarm went off anyway, so I crept into the bathroom and showered. I scrubbed my hands raw. The water began to run cold, and still I remained, shivering until my skin grew numb.

My teeth chattered as I finally stepped out of the shower. I wrangled my mass of curly hair into a towel on top of my head, and stared at Katja's hairdryer with envy. She had straight hair that took five minutes to blow dry, and then she looked perfect. But every time I tried to blow dry my hair, it looked like I had a massive dark red shower pouf attacking my head.

Maybe it was the nightmare, which always put me on edge and made me depressed, but I felt frumpy as I pulled on my threadbare hospital scrubs. They made cute scrubs in pretty fabrics and flattering cuts, but I could only afford the basic blue ones. My scrubs already looked sad with their fraying hems, and they didn't do my ample figure any favors, either. I could almost hear my mother pointing out all of my problem areas—hips, rear end, thighs, stomach. I shook my head to clear it. Nope. The days of listening to Senovia's criticism were over.

I marched myself into our tiny living space that held the semblance of a kitchen and dining area and poured myself a bowl of cereal. I ate standing up, leaning my back against our hideous mustard yellow counters. No one should have to look at that color before noon.

I should have opted for looking at the counters, because what I saw on the wall in front of me was much more disturbing. If I hadn't choked on a stray off-brand Cheerio, I would have screamed. A cockroach the size of a toddler was crawling up my kitchen wall. Guessing that a can of Raid would only anger it, I inched toward the coat closet to locate our broom. As I grabbed my weapon, I kept an eye on the monstrosity. It didn't move. Wait a second...

I marched up to the Guinness world record sized roach. It was a painting of a cockroach. "Katja!"

She stumbled out of the bedroom with narrowed eyes. "What?"

"Why did you paint that *thing* on our wall?"

"Oh, you mean Zeke?" She smiled at the painting with pride. "Didn't he turn out great?"

Oh good grief. The thing had a name. "Yes, Zeke's very life-like. Perhaps too life-like. His point?"

"Well, you know how sometimes we get roaches coming over from the neighbors? And the landlord is never going to do anything about it? Well, I thought Zeke here might scare them off.

You know, like this place is already claimed by the big guy."

"I wasn't aware that roaches were engaged in turf wars. Tell me, is Zeke a Crip or a Blood?"

She shrugged. "Hey, you don't know. It could work."

"What if instead, Zeke becomes some sort of cockroach deity and all the roaches in Durham start making pilgrimages to our apartment? Did you think of that? Huh?"

Kat crossed her arms over her chest and gave me her best defiant teenager face. "Listen, if you want me to paint over it, just say so. You don't have to get all snarky with me."

"Listen, even if it did work, I'd rather see an occasional small roach than Zeke here every day. Paint over it."

"Fine." Her mouth was saying yes, but as she studied her nails, I was pretty sure I was going to pay for my lack of tact.

"Kat, you know I love your paintings. The windows, especially." I threw my arms wide to gesture at all of her work around us. Our landlord was notorious for never returning deposits, so I had given Kat free reign with the walls. I didn't always understand her more abstract stuff, but I did love those windows.

In our entire apartment, we had only two actual windows: one that was a mere foot square in our bedroom, and another one just three feet by eighteen inches in the living room portion of our one big room. The little light the windows let in seemed to highlight just how dismal the place was, so Kat had painted dozens of fake windows all over the apartment. The scenery they displayed changed depending on her mood. Right now, most of them looked out on various Nordic fjords and glaciers. It was supposed to help us think cool thoughts since our window AC unit was struggling to keep up in the August heat.

"Whatever." Kat turned in the doorway and headed for the bathroom to get ready for school.

I sighed and picked up my bowl of cereal, then glanced down at my watch. If I didn't leave in two minutes, I was going to be late. I shouted a goodbye to Katja and ran straight out the front door.

I hustled down the apartment stairwell and headed for the bus stop, careful to avoid the obstacle course of trash and the loose step the super was never going to fix. Once on the bus, sweaty and out of breath, I plopped down on the first available seat and zoned out. I would have stayed that way, but at the third stop a passenger demanded my attention.

She was short and anorexic thin, with light brown skin and eyes so dark they looked black. I would have guessed she was from some place in the Middle East, but her hair threw me off. Man, I didn't even want to think about how much that dye job had cost. I counted at least six different colors in her hair—red, burgundy, copper, orange, yellow, gold, and I swear I saw flashes of blue. As she passed me in the aisle, she reeked of cigarette smoke. She was an odd sight, but as soon as she passed, she fell off my radar. Thinking is not a top priority for me until I've had caffeine.

I closed my eyes and leaned against the bus window in hopes of squeezing in a few extra minutes of sleep, but then I felt someone yank on the corner of my shirt. I turned around and saw the woman with the strange hair gripping my scrubs. "*Medicina. Gorod medicina,*" she muttered.

I froze. That was not normal bus behavior. "What did you say?" I couldn't believe what I heard. She released my shirt and scurried to the back of the bus.

That woman had spoken Russian. Durham was full of transients, and one of the city's running jokes was that no one was from here. I was one of the few people at work that was born and raised in Durham. Russians were rare, though.

Still, I had made out what she said, even if it didn't make any sense. Who went around muttering Durham's motto—*City of Medicine*? I gave the woman one last hard look. She was still murmuring to herself, or perhaps to an imaginary friend. The rest of the passengers on the bus gave her the wide berth reserved for those reluctant to use deodorant.

I was trying to decide if it was worth asking her what she meant when the bus reached the hospital, and my decision was made for me. I couldn't afford to be late. I had to run a little, but I arrived at Durham Memorial on time and reported to the nurses' station with three minutes to spare.

My best friend Harper Carlisle arrived right behind me, twirling the keys to her silver Audi on one French manicured nail. "You okay, hon? You look wrecked." Her Southern accent drew out the vowels in a sleepy way that made me even more tired.

"Thanks. We can't all be glamorous, you know." I shouldn't have snapped at her. I knew she was just worried, but I always felt frumpy around her. Who wouldn't feel frumpy next to Harper's glossy blonde hair, model-thin physique, and dazzling blue eyes? All that perfection would have made me hate her if she weren't so darn nice.

"I meant you look exhausted." She smiled at me and patted my hand.

"I know. Sorry I'm such a grouch. Rough night."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Couldn't sleep." I decided not to tell her why.

Harper frowned at me and then began to dig through her Coach purse. When her hand reemerged with her checkbook, I sighed. "It's that horrible bed of yours. I told you not to buy a used mattress. You're probably being eaten alive by bed bugs." She retrieved a pen flashing with gold and filled out my name on the top line. "Let me buy you a decent bed, Galine."

When I didn't disagree with her she smiled and added, "Of course, in that neighborhood of yours even if you do buy something nice, you could have bed bugs again by the end of the week. I don't suppose you and Katja would reconsider moving in with me?" By this point I couldn't help an eye roll, so she added, "You could pay rent. A little bit. If you feel it's necessary."

"No, Harper."

She gritted her teeth, but refrained from pushing the issue of moving. She tore off the check and handed it to me. I didn't bother to look at the amount, but I'm sure it had an excessive amount of zeros at the end. I tore it in half and handed it back to her.

"Galine!"

"I said 'no.' I meant no to everything. My bed is fine."

"You are so stubborn!"

"True. But you're too trusting." I couldn't recall how many times we'd had this argument. Harper had a big heart and an even bigger bank account, and people waited in line to take advantage of that. "Quit flashing your money around." I did a quick survey of the area to make sure no one saw us.

Now it was her turn to roll her eyes at me. "This isn't the Murder Mart, for heaven's sake." I

stiffened at the less than flattering nickname for my neighborhood. "We're in one of the nation's top ten hospitals. I think I'm safe. Besides, I'm standing in the *Carlisle Wing*. I think the word is out that my family's loaded."

"You two going to stand there yakking all day, or are you going to work?" Selene, the charge nurse, yelled at us. Little bits of the Bojangles chicken biscuit she was eating spewed out as she talked.

Harper and I made matching faces of disgust as we moved off in separate directions to begin our rounds. Harper followed the line of nurses and I split off with the CNAs when I heard Selene bellow my name again.

"Galine!" She emerged from around the corner looking annoyed. "Gal—oh, there you are. The fourth floor psych ward called for a nursing assistant. Trouble with one of their patients. I thought immediately of you. You're so good with the difficult ones. Kindred spirits and all." Her smile was so wide I thought her face would crack.

"Sure, no problem, Selene. I'll head over now." Psych did not scare me. Compared to living with my mother, it was a cake walk. Selene was still sputtering, trying to figure out how her plan had backfired. I headed for the elevator.

After what Selene told me about this patient, I was expecting things to be hectic when I got off on the fourth floor. Instead, I found the charge nurse sipping coffee and flipping through a magazine. I could hear a TV laugh track coming from somewhere, but otherwise the floor was silent. I pulled my ID badge forward to present it to the nurse at the desk. "Karsavina. I was told you needed help with a patient."

"Karsavina, right. We need a full time babysitter for this one." She slid a chart over to me. "The police just brought in a Jane Doe. Picked her up on Holloway for a 'drunk and disorderly' but tests showed no alcohol. Suspected paranoid schizophrenic with intent to harm herself and others." The nurse rattled all of the information off in a bored tone, but I was alarmed. "Oh, and she speaks Russian."

I looked up from the chart. "Russian?" What was with the sudden influx of Russian speakers?

"Yes, that's why you're here. We think she might just be refusing to speak English, because she seems to understand us when she wants to. We'd prefer to send in someone with medical training instead of an interpreter if possible."

"I don't know what you've been told, but I'm out of practice. There aren't many opportunities to use Russian in Durham, and my family stopped speaking it when my Dad died."

"Well, some Russian is better than none."

I nodded like I was okay with all of this information, but I wasn't sure that was true. I walked down the hall toward the room number indicated on the chart and tried to take some deep breaths. I hadn't counted on an angry woman shouting at me in Russian. The experience was familiar enough that my palms were starting to sweat. Why did I have to have that stupid nightmare last night? I stood up straight in what I hoped looked like a commanding posture and knocked once on the door before entering.

The cigarette smoke choked me. That was familiar, too. I waved my hand in front of my face to clear the air in the dark room, and spotted her leaning against the window ledge staring into space. The cigarette was burned down to her fingers, but she made no move to snuff it out.

For causing so much trouble, she was a tiny bit of a thing, not much more than five feet tall.

She was also much younger than I had expected; I would guess in her twenties. At first I didn't recognize her, but then the light from the window caught her hair. The strands were shimmering red, as if on fire. Maybe they were, considering the amount of smoke in the room. She was, I realized, the strange woman I had encountered earlier on the bus.

Apparently my Russian wasn't as rusty as I thought, because all the tirades I used to give Senovia on how smoking was both unhealthy and inconsiderate (and in this case illegal) came pouring out smooth as glass. The woman gave me a condescending smirk, then she trashed the cigarette. In the fake ficus.

"Feel better now that you've gotten that off your chest?" Her English was perfect.

"Yes, thank you. I'll feel even better once you've handed over the rest I'm sure you have squirreled away some somewhere." I held out my hand. She gave me a dirty look, but placed two more cigarettes in my palm. "All of them." I flicked the fingers of my palm, demanding more. "And the lighter." She swore at me, but I got the actual pack this time, with four left in it, and a grungy Bic lighter.

As she stretched out her arm to hand over the contraband, I noticed thin scars running along her wrists. The coloring and level of fading alternated between white and a faint pink, suggesting two distinct suicide attempts—she'd meant business. My stomach lurched. She caught me staring and yanked her hand back.

I cleared my throat and looked away. "Now, why don't you start by telling me your name?" I sat down in one of the hospital's molded plastic chairs. It was a super tasteful chartreuse. If I was going to be here awhile, I might as well get comfortable.

"You can call me Manya." Her lips curled into a sneer. Her tone was as bitter as the word's definition in Russian.

"Something tells me your mother didn't name you that."

She gave one short, coughing laugh. "No. And what is your name, O Sharp Tongued One?" "Galine."

The effect of that one word was astounding. She turned the full force of her wide black eyes on me and grabbed both of my arms. "What did you say your name was?"

"Ow! That hurts! Ease off my arms, will you?" Her nails left little half-moon marks. She collapsed onto the floor, muttering.

"It's not possible," I heard her whisper. "I gave up. It's been so long. You weren't coming. He said 'no.' I was sure He said 'no.' I was being punished. After everything, why now?"

"Hey, uh, Manya, what's going on? Are you okay?" I got out of the chair and sat next to her on the cold, industrial floor. Her behavior was starting to worry me.

She came out of her daze. Turning her focus back on me, she grew brighter, almost like that crazy hair of hers was starting to glow. She spoke again, and this time the tone was pitched deeper. Every word vibrated through me. I don't know how I knew, but I was certain what she was saying was important, and that it was true, even though it made no sense to me:

*"In the city of healing you will find your rest,
The one God has redeemed will take your burden from you,
From exile He will bring you,
And you will suffer no more."*

And now I was freaked out. "Manya, what are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, my dear. I wouldn't wish what is coming to you on anyone, but I am selfish enough to still want it." With that, she kissed me on the cheek and died.

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