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## Chapter 1

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**A**ndy Brennan cursed loudly and flipped off the red car that cut her off in the busy Las Vegas traffic. She hit the wheel in frustration and turned up the loud, pulsing music as she began to accelerate again. She had so much to get done, especially since she was getting ready to make the move of a lifetime. Simply thinking about the life changing experience had anxiety building in her chest. Damn her sister Piper, for falling in love with some Russian bratva leader and making her move across the world! How the hell was she going to adjust to their culture and way of life?

She had struggled to adapt to the rules of her own country growing up, let alone some place she had only read about in books. Not to mention, Andy had just passed the national veterinarian exam in the States and now she had to figure out how to transfer that license to Russia. The only bright spot in her life right now was a guy named Krugan Andreev who was both Russian and very intelligent. Luckily for her, her sister's lover, Nikolai, had left him behind to ensure not only her safety, but a smooth transition. He was not only a huge help to her, but had also become a friend. With all the chaos and upheaval recently,

she needed one, especially with her only family member now thousands of miles away in a foreign land.

Turning into the parking lot of her condo, Andy's thoughts drifted back to the events of the last two months. The craziness had started when her stepsister, Piper Williamson, had been involuntarily dropped into the middle of mafia craziness. Not only had her sister been visited by a half-brother, Paul, she knew nothing about, but she had inadvertently gone from barely having any money to being a multi-millionaire literally overnight. Due to this unknown inheritance, Piper had also been targeted for murder by Paul and a leader in the Russian mafia. Thankfully for them, the men who were coming to kill them had betrayed and enraged a Russian bratva family known as the Volkovs. The younger Volkov, Nikolai, had flown to the States to not only kill Paul, but also to help Piper acquire the large inheritance. While helping Piper, the two had fallen deeply in love in a very short amount of time. After killing Paul, the two lovebirds met with Andy over breakfast to forge a solid plan of moving the sisters to Russia. After all, there was no way that the amber-eyed American was going to live without Piper ever again. They had been forced to do that at an early age and it had been a living hell for them both. If keeping her sibling in her life meant moving across the world, then Andy would do it without hesitation.

Turning off her car, she sighed and tried pushing aside her emotions. Getting out of the car, she was immediately met by three huge men who stood almost seven feet tall. Looking at the giant man in the middle, she asked, "Think you guys can help me get this stuff inside? Unfortunately, my car is packed full and most of it needs to come in."

"Of course." Krugan smiled, taking the items she held in her hands. "You go on inside while we bring it in. Piper should be calling you shortly."

"Oh my gosh! I didn't realize how late it was," she replied, glancing at her watch. "I really appreciate you helping me. Oh,

by the way, I picked up some pizza from Grimaldi's for dinner tonight. You boys help yourself; there is more than enough."

Grabbing the pizzas out of the car, she quickly made her way inside. Maneuvering the maze of moving boxes, Andy tossed the pizza boxes on the kitchen table before she went to the bedroom to grab her tablet. Dropping her purse on the bed, she sat down as the tablet began ringing, indicating a call. She flipped it open, and a smile lit her beautiful face as her sister appeared on the screen. She chuckled softly when she heard, "It's about time you answer my call, heifer. How have you been doing today?"

"You expect me to answer your question after you insult me?" Andy smiled, flipping off her sister. "No way. Look, just because you're now rich and getting plenty of good booty, doesn't mean that you can talk to me any ol' way. Speaking of good sex, how are you and Nikolai doing? Still in the throes of lover's bliss?"

"Yep. I love him more and more every day if that's even possible. You look stressed out, babe. Bad day?"

"Not bad, just busy," Andy replied with another sigh as she removed her hoop earrings and put them on the bedside table. "I'm think I'm just feeling the stress of this move. The closer it gets, the more anxiety I have."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Not really. It's just the unknown that scares me. It takes me back to being a kid and I don't like that. You know I don't do well with uncertainty or vulnerability, and I'm dealing with both right now."

"I know, D, and I hate that, especially since I'm not there to help you deal with it. Just tell yourself this. You're on the verge of having everything you've ever wanted, and no one can take that away from you. Your life is just getting started, babe. That little girl who has become a strong, independent woman will never have to struggle again. Plus, you'll have me. It doesn't get any better than that."

The small smile on Andy's lips faded as she thought about

her sister's words. Piper was right, although that didn't make her feel better. Maybe she would feel better if her younger sibling wasn't giving her half of the inheritance. Although Andy had strongly protested and refused to take the money, Piper had deposited two-hundred-fifty-million dollars into an account with only her name on it. She still had not touched a penny of the money and was struggling with using it at all. The money would change her life completely, but she didn't want to achieve any type of success on the back of anyone else. Yes, they were extremely close and were that way based on shared trauma, but she had always taken care of Piper, not the other way around.

"Um, earth to Andy," the younger sibling sang. "Are you still obsessing over the money situation?"

Rolling her eyes, Andy hated that she and Piper were so close sometimes. "Yes, and I'm trying to get past it, P, I swear."

"Honey, I gave you that money because I love you. You also happen to be the reason I'm alive today. Remember that night your arm got broken? Before you came in to help me, Maury had already told me that he was going to kill me before he knocked me out. I know he was telling the truth because I saw it in his eyes. I have no doubts that if you hadn't hidden me away in that old tent, then I wouldn't be sitting here. I understand that pride doesn't want you taking it, but I do."

A shiver ran through Andy as she listened to Piper speak. She remembered that night all too well. Her father Maury had been on one of his whiskey-fueled binges, which always led to violent, physical abuse. Fortunately for her, she had just come in the door as an unconscious Piper hit the floor. A fourteen-year-old Andy had immediately run to her seven-year-old sister's side and had gotten her arm and shoulder broken trying to drag the little girl to safety. If her father had not passed out while kicking her, she might not have made it out, either. The two children had hidden in an old, torn, tent on their dilapidated Texas property until Piper had finally woken up. Child Protective Services had been

called by a neighbor, but they were removed for only five days before being placed right back in the home.

"Look, I'm not trying to bring the mood down, but I'm not taking the money back. Just lie to me and tell me you'll use it, even if you don't," Piper said, trying to lighten the mood some.

"You know I would never lie to you, but I hear what you're saying."

"You always told me that it feels good to help out those you love, so let me have the pleasure of those feelings this one time. Practice what you preach, sister dear. Now, enough of the sappy stuff. Are you and Krugan an item yet?"

Andy wiped the unshed tears from her eyes and chuckled loudly, "Um, no, we are not. I mean he's hot and very nice, but you know I like a bad boy. I don't think he has a mean bone in his body."

"He's a top guard for one of the world's largest Russian bratvas! Something tells me that it's probably a requirement that he have a mean bone somewhere."

"I'm sure he does, but he's just not my type." She laughed, leaning over to peek out her cracked door at the man in question. She was pretty sure the giant guard had a small crush on her, but Andy just wasn't interested. He was large enough, but she liked her men just a tad bigger, with beards, tattoos, and a whole lot of attitude. Besides, the black-haired American had just ended a quasi-relationship with the leader of a motorcycle gang because she was moving overseas. The two had been off and on for a few months, but the relationship had never really gone anywhere. Quite simply, he had wanted Andy to commit, but she had serious issues with that word.

"You're not still with Jonathan, are you? I thought you told me that you were going to end that."

"I did end it. I just didn't tell you."

"Oh, it's like that, is it?"

"Not all of us can be having multiple orgasms nightly with

the man of our dreams. I'm ridiculously jealous, but I'm happy for you. Nikolai really is a good guy."

"I know. I still can't believe he's mine or what has transpired over the last two months."

"Me either, babe," the older sibling returned just as the conversation was interrupted by a loud, grumbling noise as both women burst out laughing.

"Oh my gosh! Was that your stomach! You'd better feed that beast before it eats you! Have you eaten today?"

"I had an egg and some fruit early this morning, but that's it." Andy grinned, rubbing her hungry stomach through the t-shirt she wore. "Don't worry, though, Mom. I brought home Grimaldi's pizza and am going to tear into it as soon as we're done."

"I hate you right now," Piper groaned loudly. "I would give my right arm for a piece of Grimaldi's. I so miss American food."

"Don't worry, babe. I'm bringing some goodies with me just for you. I know what you like, baby." Her younger sister was a total foodie and could eat ridiculous amounts of junk food. She didn't know where Piper put it, though, because the woman was blonde, built, and nauseatingly beautiful. Watching her sister clap her hands in delight, Andy said, "Okay, I really don't want to watch you drool all over yourself so I'm going to get off of here and get some shit done."

"Okay. Eat a piece of pizza for me tonight?"

"I'll eat two or three. I might even send you a picture of it. Talk tomorrow night?"

"Yep. Love you, D. If you can get over here sooner, please do. I miss you."

"I miss you too, sis. Talk tomorrow."

After hanging up the call, Andy crawled off the bed and made her way to the bathroom. She washed her face and pulled on a pair of black leggings and a heather grey off the shoulder sweatshirt then made her way toward the kitchen. She was not surprised to see a handful of men sitting around the table eating.

"Did you guys save me a slice?" She then took a couple of pieces and dropped them onto a paper plate. Grabbing a napkin and a Coke, she walked into the living room and plopped down on the floor in front of the couch, where four or five boxes sat.

"Would you like some help?" Krugan asked, his eyes touching on the tall, curvy woman. "You look stressed."

"I am stressed," Andy countered, rolling her neck. "I need to pack, yet here I sit, pilfering through boxes that Piper moved in with five years ago. A couple of these damn boxes haven't even been opened in all that time, but she would swear she needs this stuff! Did I ever mention that she is a borderline hoarder?"

Krugan chuckled as he sat across from her on the floor. Pulling a box toward himself, he opened it and began going through it. "So, I have two questions. One, what is a hoarder? And two, what should I keep?"

She took another bite of pizza and wiped her mouth and hands as she grinned. "A hoarder is someone who never throws anything away and keeps stuff they don't need. They attach emotions to junk, basically. I've tried getting her to declutter for years and can't. Anyway, what to keep? Honestly, just use your judgement. Any type of documents that look important, we can keep, but otherwise, throw it away. I guarantee she has no idea what is in these boxes."

"Are you looking forward to moving?" The almost seven-foot-tall guard queried, his eyes lingering on the American's body.

Tucking a black strand of hair behind one ear, she shrugged her shoulders. "Ish. I mean, I am excited to see Russia but a little nervous too. You might have to teach me some words on the plane ride over, especially the bad ones."

Krugan laughed deeply. "I think I can do that. Let's start now, shall we? Here is one I use often. *Poshyel k chyertu!* You say it."

Repeating his words, she cocked a dark brow as she looked at him. Andy couldn't help the smile on her face as he laughed at the way she pronounced the words. "Yeah, yeah. Keep laughing.

I know it sounded horrible, but the Texas drawl ain't going nowhere."

"I like the Texas drawl, but you will definitely need some practice." He winked and chuckled louder as she rolled her eyes.

"Are you going to tell me what I just said, or make me try to figure it out?"

"Figure it out," Krugan said, smiling. "If you haven't figured it out by takeoff, I'll tell you then. Maybe."

"Mm hm," she murmured, before taking a drink of her Coke. "So, tell me, Krugan, I know you run the show here with these men, but what about back in Russia? You run the whole Volkov security team?"

"*Nyet*. I am third in line. Mikhas is above me, but he and I both answer to Vor. He is the Pakhan's captain."

"Vor? What kind of name is that? He doesn't sound pleasant," Andy replied, scrunching her nose. "You said he's the captain, right? Does that make Aleksandr or Nikolai the Pakhan?"

"Da. Aleksandr is Pakhan," Krugan explained. "Although Nikolai is Aleksandr's brother, he still must periodically answer to Vor, especially when it comes to his safety. Vor is all business, no play, and very loyal to the Volkov family. You'll meet him, don't worry. He will give you orders that you will be required to follow."

"Oh, I can't wait!" she scoffed sarcastically, as Krugan chuckled and shook his head. "I'm sure he and I will be the best of friends. That's all I need, is another asshole telling me what to do. Aren't there any female guards employed by the Volkovs?" When he shook his head, Andy rolled her eyes. "Figures."

A comfortable silence then fell over the couple as they sifted through boxes. After a few moments of digging, Krugan found a small, accordion folder in his box marked "memories". Opening it, he saw a stack of old pictures and pulled them out. Holding



them out to the amber-eyed American, he asked, "Would you like to look at these?"

She took the pictures and began flipping through them. "Oh my gosh! I can't believe Piper has these! I thought we had lost these pictures after Lynn died."

The thirty-year-old woman felt unshed tears in her eyes as she stared lovingly at the pictures. Although her childhood had been traumatic, there had been good times early on as well. Coming to the last picture, she gasped loudly and clutched it to her chest. It was her favorite picture of all time, and she couldn't believe she was holding it. In the picture, a six-year-old Piper and a thirteen-year-old Andy were dressed as wrestlers known as Hulk Hogan and Randy "Macho Man" Savage. They were in the middle of a homemade wrestling ring they had made with chairs and jump ropes and were dressed in bathing suits and capes made from sheets. The two siblings had been raised on old VCR tapes of wrestling matches from the 80s and 90s, due to her father Maury being an obsessed fan. The picture meant so much to Andy, because when they were dressed as those characters, they both felt invincible. Not even Maury's fists could penetrate them when they were in their wrestling gear, and they would often pretend that he and his alcoholism were the pillows they annihilated on the floor.

"Is that you and Piper in the picture?" Krugan asked, breaking the silence. He could see the unshed tears in her eyes and was confused by them.

"Yes," Andy replied, quickly wiping at her eyes as she set the pictures on the floor beside her. She hated to show emotion in front of anyone. Showing emotion equated to weakness and she would never allow herself to be weak again. Taking another bite of pizza, she said, "I thought I lost that picture a long time ago and here, Piper had it all along. We used to dress as wrestlers and pretend that the pillows were our opponents. I know we look stupid, but we thought we were kings of the world."

Krugan picked up the pictures and began flipping through them himself. When he came to the picture of a young, dark-haired girl wrapped in a long, flowing sheet with glitter glued to it and heels much too big for her little feet, he smiled. "Is this you as well?"

"Yeah, that's me. I was pretending to be Mrs. Elizabeth."

"Who is Mrs. Elizabeth? I am unfamiliar with American wrestling."

"Mrs. Elizabeth was the girlfriend of Randy, Macho Man, Savage. He and Hulk Hogan, who Piper is dressed as, were our favorite wrestlers. They also had a love triangle with Elizabeth, or so their storyline went. P and I used to think that she was the most beautiful woman in the world. She was so glamorous and respected, at least in our eyes. It's too bad that when you grow up, you realize the truth behind the fairy tales. Anyway, that was a long time ago. Sometimes the past is better left in the past, you know?"

Andy exhaled softly, fighting back the overwhelming feeling of sadness. Mrs. Elizabeth had not only been beautiful in her eyes but loved and protected by the men in her lives. The wrestlers never used their fists against her and put her needs above their own. They were proud of her and boosted her up on their shoulders while everyone cheered. Just once, she would have loved for her father Maury to be proud of her. Hell, just once, she would have liked for any man to proudly sing her praises, but that was not meant to be her reality. Wanting to change the uncomfortable subject, Andy jerked the pictures from Krugan's grasp and put them back under her thigh.

Before he could respond to her actions, one of the other men approached him and said in Russian, "Mikhas is on the phone. Wants to talk to you about the shipment details." However, before getting up, Krugan looked at Andy and raised her chin gently with his fingers. When her eyes met his, he softly said, "*Da*, it is, but it's also important to not let the past impact our futures."

Seeing the moisture in her eyes and beginning to understand her prideful ways, he smiled. "I've got to take this call, kid. Be back shortly."

Andy silently cursed herself as Krugan walked away. Even though she found him easy to talk to, she didn't want him seeing her vulnerable side. People took advantage of the weak, and she refused to be that in the middle of a move to Russia. These men valued strength and didn't want to hear from a whiny female. Besides, she had a feeling that, in their homeland, she was going to have to be able to handle her own. Shaking herself mentally, she tried focusing her attention back to unpacking Piper's hoard. In almost a week, she would be on board a private jet, headed toward a brand-new future. She had no idea what fate held in store for her, but she was ready for anything, well, almost anything.