

YURI

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DEDICATION

For my parents for teaching me that anything can be achieved
through hard work.

CHAPTER ONE

I was about ten seconds away from a meltdown that would rival even the worst mayhem of a certain supermodel. Clenching my cell phone tightly, I gritted my teeth and counted backward from five before addressing the bouncer guarding the front entrance at 716, the club where I was the PR rep.

"Where the hell is the party I booked, Trey?"

The tanned muscle-head shrugged. "Yo, Dragon Lady, I just wave through the ones with the orange wristbands. No wristband? No go."

I bit back the *screw you* burning the tip of my tongue. "Yo, Trey, you know my best friend is getting married to Dimitri over at Front Door Security, right?" From the look on the bouncer's face, he'd forgotten. "Yeah, you can kiss any chance of a job there goodbye."

Head aching, I pushed into the club's noisy entrance without waiting for a nasty reply from the bouncer. Even though 716 paid their bouncers well, everyone wanted to make the jump to Dimitri Stepanov's security firm. It was starting to be a real pain in my ass.

Not only did his bouncers get first dibs on the openings at Faze, the hot new Houston night club owned by billionaire Yuri Novakovsky, but there were rumors Dimitri would be selecting some of his best bouncers for extensive training to work as bodyguards for the wealthy and elite. It was big money—and that rat bastard Trey wasn't getting a dime of it, if I had any say.

Dragon Lady? What a dick!

On the edges of the club, I searched the gyrating crowd for any sign of my lost party. I'd worked my ass off to book the group of professional football players for this weekend. Other than hip hop artists, no one spent money like professional athletes. Considering revenue at 716 was down and my job was on the line, I needed big spenders at the VIP tables.

More importantly, club goers wanted to rub elbows with celebrities. And I'd promised my thousands of Twitter followers and Facebook friends that they'd have a chance to do just that if they came out to 716 tonight. I never lied to my followers and always gave them exactly what I'd promised. Now some sort of velvet rope snafu threatened my reputation.

But as I fought my way across the crowd, I wondered if it really was a snafu. It wouldn't be the first time one of the bouncers had been working a side game to line his own pocket while hurting the club.

As a wide-eyed intern working PR at some of the smaller clubs the firm represented, I'd seen some truly shady shit. Backroom drug deals, hookers, underage drinkers—if there was action to be had, there were bouncers who wouldn't mind getting their hands dirty for some cold, hard cash.

Something fishy was going on here...and this *dragon lady* was going to sniff it out.

At the bar, I planted both hands on the polished quartz and shoved up to reach the ear of the sexy

Brazilian who tended bar on Friday nights. "Where is Bobby?"

Celia pointed behind her, indicating the back of the house. This time of night, the rabbit's warren of hallways and stockrooms turned into a damn den of iniquity. Girding my loins and expecting the absolute worst, I squeezed and shoved my way to the locked door leading to the rear of the building. I grabbed my lanyard and swiped the ID card hanging around my neck through the card reader.

Inside the darkened hallway, I shut the door firmly behind me and let my eyes adjust to the even dimmer lighting. The closed door muted the thudding music and the incessant throbbing in my head eased some. Vivian, my best friend and roommate, warned me that I'd be deaf by thirty if I continued to work the club scene. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was time to give my eardrums a well-earned rest.

Steeled for the worst, I started opening doors. A couple of the rooms were empty. One was being used for some kind of weird amateur porn shoot between two girls and a guy wearing bright yellow briefs. I shut that door fast and kept moving. Another door revealed some preppy college kid scoring coke. Chains, the dealer, was a lowlife I'd specifically asked Bobby, the head bouncer, to keep out of the place.

Holding the door open, I scowled at the kid. "Get the hell out of here. *Now!*"

He dropped the drugs and almost ran me over trying to get out of there. Chains bent down to retrieve his product. The kid had left without getting back his money so Chains pocketed it.

"Baby, I bet I got something here that would mellow you out." His hand brushed his crotch.

I nearly gagged at his disgusting come-on. "Yeah? Well, I got something in my purse that will hollow you out."

His eyes widened but he quickly recovered. "Come on, sugar. Don't be so nasty. Why don't we work together? I'll cut you in on my action."

"Not interested, Chains." I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "It's time for you to go."

He took a step toward me but I didn't move. I'd learned a long time ago never to show weakness to any man. His hand slipped to his pocket. I squared my shoulders and rocked my weight to my back foot. Even in high heels, I could still kick his ass.

"You touch me and you'll be crawling out of here with your balls in your pocket."

"*Ay, mami!*" He laughed but put up both hands. "All right. I don't need to be told twice. I'm out of here." As he slipped by me, his eyes narrowed. "You look familiar. You sure you ain't from my neighborhood?"

The reminder of the place where I'd come from wasn't a pleasant one. "Anything is possible."

His eyes widened with sudden recognition. "Wait! I got it! Are you related to Tommy Cruz?"

I cringed at the mention of my ne'er-do-well cousin. "Yes. Why?"

He sucked air through his teeth and grimaced. "Too bad about that job he fucked, huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." I truly didn't. I tried to stay far away from the criminal activities of my cousin and wayward father. "Frankly, I don't care. Now go."

He looked like he wanted to say something else but didn't. With jerky movements, he pimp-walked down the hallway. I made sure he let himself out before turning my back on him. That same crap neighborhood where I'd been raised had taught me numerous survival skills.

Three doors down, I finally located Bobby. My belly lurched at the sight of him pounding into some girl. Average height and pot-bellied, Bobby wasn't the kind of man a hot young thing like that blonde would normally bang on a Friday night. Her tiny thong dangled from one ankle. She still had her bright red pumps on and her skirt was hiked up around her waist.

Bobby's pasty white ass pumped as he gave it to her. He sounded like a damn pig as he grunted and snorted. Clearly, he wasn't much concerned about her pleasure. She looked about as excited as a girl making her yearly visit to the gynecologist.

When he finally came, he jerked and made the strangest yowling noise. There was no doubt in my

mind I'd be haunted by the sound of Bobby having an orgasm for the rest of my life.

He pulled out and let the young woman drop to the floor without a care for her safety. She landed on both feet but tottered precariously. Unfortunately, I got a good look at his stumpy you-know-what. Now I was almost certain I'd never be able to have sex again. The combination of optical assaults was too much for me. Where was the eye-bleach when a girl needed it?

Bobby leered at me. "Give me five minutes to recover, Lena. I'd love to bend you over that stack of booze."

I shot him the finger. "You're a pig."

"That just got laid."

The woman flinched with embarrassment and I ached for her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

She wasn't. I hated to think that she'd degraded herself for entrance into the club but it wasn't uncommon. The girls who couldn't get into Faze tried 716. If they couldn't get in through the front door, they'd try to catch the eyes of the bouncers. Trading favors in back rooms was the currency around here.

And it made me sick. This line of work was starting to kill my faith in humanity.

Face aflame with humiliation, she tugged up her thong and pushed down her skirt. She extended her hand to Bobby, palm side up. Had I interrupted a hooker turning a trick?

Bobby reached into his pocket and retrieved a bright orange wristband. He slapped it into her hand. "Have fun."

The woman rushed out of the room, knocking into me and throwing me into the wall. I rubbed my arm and glared at Bobby. "Where the hell did you get those?"

"Get what?" He played dumb and tucked his sad little prick back into his pants.

"Don't screw with me tonight, Bobby. Where did you get those wristbands?"

"I don't know. I found them on the bar."

"Liar." The pieces fell into place. "Let me guess. Someone from Faze paid you to swap out the wristbands that were supposed to be couriered to my private party, right? They get the wrong color and get turned away at the door so they go to Faze. You keep the orange bands and sell them to anyone who wants into the VIP area by promising them they'll get to party with celebrities? Is this some huge scam?"

"Is everything a conspiracy with you?"

"What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you know how badly this club needed that party? How do you think you get paid?"

"Alls I know is that before you came here, I was making money hand over fist at the back door. I got a cut of everything that came in here. Then you went on your rampage about underage drinkers and drugs and the whores. How the hell am I supposed to make a living?"

"So that's what this is? Payback?" I scoffed at his plan. "If you ruin the club, you're out of a job too."

"I can get a job anywhere. You? Good luck getting anyone to hire the girl who drove Houston's hottest club into the ground."

"You're an asshole."

He grinned widely and made a kissy face at me. Disgusted, I spun on my heel and left the back room. Back out in the club, I tried to think of some way to salvage the night. If I could find Danny, the club's owner, and get him to okay a markdown on the pricey top shelf liquor we'd stocked in anticipation for the VIPs, we could pack the place with thirsty college kids looking for a deal. They'd spend more than intended if there was no cover charge and a promise of cheap booze.

As I hastily did the math between the wholesale price he paid per case and what I thought my followers would pay, I weaved in and out of the dancing throng. I finally spotted Danny and got his

attention by waving my hand. He wore an expression that didn't bode well for me. My stomach knotted with anxiety.

When I drew close enough, Danny grabbed my upper arm. Fear punched my gut as the painful clutch registered. I tried to wrench free but he grabbed me even harder. Before I could even recover from the shock of being manhandled like that, Danny pivoted and jerked me behind him. I stumbled forward and barely managed to regain my footing as he dragged me through the crowd to a private door. He hauled me into the hallway that led to his office.

"Let go of me!" I pried my arm free from his painful grasp and shoved at his chest. He lurched backward and slammed into the wall. As he glared at me, I rubbed the spot where my arm throbbled. "Don't you ever put your hands on me again!"

"I own you, Lena. This club made your career. I'll put my hands wherever the hell I want."

"Try it, Danny. I'll have you in handcuffs." My nose wrinkled at the scent of alcohol spilling out of his mouth. "You're drunk."

"And you're fucking pathetic. What the hell do I pay you for, Lena? Where's the party you promised me? Huh? Lately, you're all promises but no follow through." Sneering, he hissed, "You're like a high-priced whore who never gets wet. I can fuck you but it won't be any good."

I reeled back in shock at his ugly remark. It wasn't the first time he'd said something that gross to me. He had a reputation for being a real asshole but I'd learned to deal with him. Working PR for the hottest nightspots necessitated a thick skin. In this line of work, I'd grown accustomed to dealing with the verbal abuse and blatant sexual harassment. If it wasn't the club owners, it was the high rollers with their grabby hands or the musicians who thought every woman wanted to flop on her back or drop to her knees.

I always told myself that it was going to be the last time I let someone talk to me like that but the fear of losing my job, of getting knocked off the career ladder I'd fought so damn hard to climb, stopped me. A childhood living hand to mouth had left me craving the security of a steady paycheck.

But this time I'd had enough. I was better than this.

"I don't have to take this shit."

"You walk out of here and I'll make sure the firm shit-cans you. By the time I'm done telling everyone how you've ruined my club, you'll be lucky to get hired by one of the airport titty bars."

"How *I* ruined your club?" Irritated, I shouted, "I saved your liquor license by kicking out the hookers and the high school kids and the drug dealers. I brought in a new and better crowd flush with cash—but you got greedy. *You* ruined this place." I put up my hands. "I'm so over this, Danny. I'm done."

"I'll tell you when you're done!"

Rolling my eyes at his empty threat, I stormed to the door and out of the club. With every step I took, I felt the constriction in my chest ease. For weeks now, I'd been carrying around the stress of this hellhole. It was going to kill me.

After my coworker had stolen my ideas and jumped ship to work on Faze's dedicated PR team, my boss at the firm had handed me the full reins of 716. Basically, he'd given me a cup to bail out a sinking ship.

Danny was increasingly erratic and the bouncers headed by Bobby were impossible to work alongside. The bartenders were gaining a reputation for watering down drinks and substituting cheap booze for the good stuff. I had a hell of a time booking DJs after a bloody brawl broke out in the VIP area because a certain DJ and a local rap star had gotten into it over some girl. I'd specifically warned Danny against booking them both at the same time but did he listen to me?

Out on the sidewalk, I ignored the catcalls from Trey and stalked to the corner in search of a cab. I didn't doubt that Danny would follow through on his threat to get me fired. I'd been walking a fine line at the firm as it was. This would be the last straw for my boss.

He'd been riding my ass for the last week about taking side jobs on my own time. There was nothing in my contract that said I couldn't have outside clients but that didn't stop him from accusing me of putting my own interests before the firm's. It was a bald-faced lie, of course. In the last month, I'd averaged seventy-eight hours a week for my firm clients. Not a single one of them complained about the quality of my work. As always, I received high marks and maintained my standards, even if I was running on caffeine fumes.

A cab pulled up to the curb, and I hopped into the backseat. I met the cab driver's gaze in the rearview mirror. "Where you going, sweetheart?"

God, wasn't that the question of the night! Where the hell was I going? Where was my life going? My career? I didn't have any idea and it scared me. Feeling impotent and confused, I could think of only one place. "Take me to Faze."

"The night club?"

"Yes."

I had a score to settle with Yuri Novakovsky.

* * *

Kicked back in the private section of his Houston night club, Yuri closed his eyes and relaxed. It had been one hell of a week. For the last year, he'd been putting together a pipeline project that would carry gas from the plants he owned in Russia to a spider web system that covered Europe. In the last month, tiny problems continued to crop up with what should have been an easy deal. Every time he put out one fire, another seemed to spark into a raging inferno.

Despite the stress of it all, he wouldn't trade his life for anything. He'd reached a pinnacle of success most men could only dream of and he'd done it all before reaching forty. He'd come from nothing—less than nothing—and soared to an echelon of wealth so astronomically high that there were only a handful of people in the entire world who could call themselves his peers.

But all the money in the world couldn't buy what he wanted most.

Oh, he had the yachts and the cars and the houses and the night clubs. With one call, he could have a private jet fueled and in the air to any continent he desired. Wherever he went, gorgeous women practically threw themselves at him—and he'd sampled quite a few of them.

But the one he really wanted didn't see him.

Once, he'd stupidly believed there were no doors his money couldn't open. Now Yuri knew better. There was one door that no amount of money in the world could ever unlock and it was the one door he desperately wanted to open.

"Sir?"

Lost in his thoughts, Yuri hadn't noticed his bodyguard, Derek, approach. "Yes?"

"Big V wants you to know he just let Miss Cruz through the front door. You said you wanted to be informed anytime she visited the club."

Though he schooled his expression and stayed cool and reserved on the outside, Yuri experienced a surge of excitement. His heartbeat sprinted at the idea of seeing her again. She hadn't ever come to his club alone. Usually it was Erin who dragged her along. Why had she come here tonight?

A flutter of hope invaded his chest but he batted it away quickly. If there was one thing he'd learned about Lena Cruz, it was that she was never predictable.

"Bring her to me, Derek."

"Yes, sir."

After his bodyguard left, Yuri rose from his comfortable perch and moved to the balcony overlooking the dance floor. His searching gaze zeroed in on Lena. Even at this distance, she knocked the air right out of his lungs.

Tonight she wore a curve-hugging dress. The pale turquoise skirt and black strapless top outlined her sexy shape perfectly. Waves of dark hair tumbled around her bare shoulders. She managed to meld together the perfect mix of flirty but classy.

Like him, the men on the dance floor couldn't keep their eyes off her. A few guys tried to dance up against her but she froze them in place with that icy glare. In his entire life, Yuri had known only one other person who could send people fleeing with one look—and that was Nikolai. He knew exactly how Nikolai had developed that particular talent but Lena was more of a mystery to him.

Jake, his other bodyguard, got close to Lena. He whispered in her ear and gestured to the private VIP section. Her gaze jumped to the balcony. Instead of the smile he'd hoped to see, Yuri received only a frown. Anger glinted in her dark eyes. Something told him this wasn't going to be a conversation he was going to enjoy.

Steeled for the worst, he backed away from the railing. If there had been more time, he would have ordered a stiff drink. His gut clenched with nervousness. When was the last time any woman had affected him like this?

Lena stepped through the gauzy curtain separating this private section from the rest of the VIP area. God, but she was even prettier this close. His gaze drifted to those red, pouty lips of hers. What he wouldn't give for the chance to claim them just once!

"I thought we were friends, Yuri."

Frowning, he insisted, "We are."

"Are we?" She took another step toward him. Finger raised, she jabbed at the air between them. "When you found out how Harry stole my ideas and used them to get hired by your company, you promised me you were going to let him go. You swore to me that you didn't like to do dirty business."

"I did let him go, and I don't like dirty business dealings."

"Bullshit!" She angrily gestured over her shoulder. "I just walked through a VIP room packed with the party I arranged for 716. Someone at your club paid one of the bouncers at 716 to switch out the priority wristbands so my party would be turned away at the door and come here. That's so shady, Yuri."

He had no idea what she was talking about but believed her version of the tale. She'd never given him any reason to doubt her. "It is," he agreed. "But I didn't have anything to do with it."

"It's your club, Yuri. I realize you're just the money behind the venture but you set the tone for the employees. If they think they can get away with these kinds of tricks, they will."

"I'm sorry. I'll look into it." He could see how upset she was about being sabotaged. "Let me make it right. How much money did 716 lose tonight?"

Her jaw tensed. "I don't want your damn money, Yuri. That's not why I came here."

"Why did you come here?"

"I..." Lena's voice trailed off and her shoulders slumped. He witnessed the fight leave her and wondered what the hell she'd been through tonight. Rubbing her forehead, she dropped her gaze and shook her head. "I just couldn't take it anymore. I had to get out of that place and then I got out to the cab and I was just so angry. I wanted to come here and shout at you and tell you off for sabotaging me but—of course—you had to be totally reasonable. Why do you always have to be so damn perfect?"

He didn't know how to respond to that accusation. Desperate to lighten the tense mood, he joked, "It's a gift."

She snorted indelicately and wiped at her cheeks. When she lifted her face, Yuri's heart stuttered. Tears shimmered in her dark eyes and dripped onto her cheeks. Taken aback by her unusual display of emotion, he crossed the distance between them in three long strides. "*Yelena*."

He stopped when there were only a few inches between them. Her perfume, that breezy scent that he'd always associate with her, called to him. He wanted to slide his arms around her and gather her

close but he hesitated.

Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, he reached inside his jacket and withdrew a handkerchief. She didn't fight him when he dabbed at the wet trails on her cheeks. Looking up at him through those thick eyelashes, Lena presented such an enticing picture. He fought the urge to tip her chin and claim that sensual mouth of hers.

"I'm sorry." She dropped her gaze in embarrassment. "I shouldn't have come here. Now I'm acting like a hot mess."

"You're not," he assured her. "I'm glad you came to me." Realizing this was the chance he'd been waiting for, he snatched it. "Let's get out of here. Let's find a quiet place to talk."

Her lips parted almost immediately and he tensed in anticipation of a rejection. She stunned him by agreeing with a little nod. "Okay. Let's go."

Hope flared to life deep inside him. The night was young and anything could happen now.