

If the Darwin Award existed as an actual trophy, I'd bet my favorite PS5 controller I'd win it. The dedication would read, *To Lena Kozek, for bravely—and idiotically—holding a mob boss at gunpoint in a public library.*

Because that's exactly what I'm doing, and it's making my upper lip sweat like a shot glass of Fireball on a humid summer's day.

I make it a point to avoid stressful situations like this one. It had been easy, back when I didn't have a clue about who I was, who the guy on the other end of my gun was, or who the other people in the room—all holding guns—were. But now that I'm in this situation, I feel myself hovering above it, as if someone knocked me out of my body to float above the library's reading room.

And yeah, I said library. Twice. It's a weird situation that I'd love to explain, but right now I've got a mobster to neutralize, should I ever return to my body.

He's a small-*m* mobster, although the weapon he has trained on me is a big-*G* gun. His eyes flutter from my gun to my face, then to my legs, which are visible below the hem of the checkered sundress I'm wearing.

Why I'm wearing a dress is another thing to ponder if I live long enough to have a quiet moment of reflection.

Mobster guy's gun is on me, but there are two guys nearby—also pointing guns but thankfully at mobster guy.

One of them is a superhot FBI asshat. The other is a schlumpy, delusional dork of a police detective who got himself entangled in an outer layer of my heart. If you repeat the part about my heart being susceptible to someone like him, I'll hack your computer and steal your credit card info to buy myself several new gaming systems.

But I'm getting off track.

Behind me is a half circle of gray-haired grannies, their postures rigid like deruny that've been left on the counter overnight. That's a potato pancake, if you're not Ukrainian. They're best right out of the cooking oil.

The grannies think they're pointing their guns at the mobster, but since I'm standing between them and trouble, I can't see how I won't catch a few bullets should they fire. Their eyes

are full of cold, hard malice (and maybe a cataract or two), but their half dozen hands are trembling like boiled cabbage.

My Auntie Korinna is the wrangler of this group of badass gray hairs. It's fifty-fifty on whether she's pointing her gun at me or the mobster, which adds a little unexpected spice to this whole situation, don't you think? She's my deceased mother's sister, may her soul rest in peace, but since I'm the blackest sheep of the Kozek family, it means our relationship is deliciously layered like a Napoleon cake minus any sweetness.

Was it only three days ago that this whole mess started?

Thirty-six hours ago, I was in New York, just another nobody at a boring job, doing mundane things like resetting forgotten email passwords and retrieving accidentally deleted files. And when I wasn't working my 9-to-5, I was killing my old college buddies in some dystopian computer game. I was a tiny cog turning inside the larger gears of a boring but gunless life. Tick, tick, tick.

Then my simple life went boom when I tried to exact revenge on my slimy boss, who was attempting to—

“Galyna,” purrs the guy on the other end of my gun, and I snap back into my body. I gotta say, the dress feels nice. “Think about this,” he reasons. He's calm. Friendly, even. “Killing is so final, family or not.”

“Family,” I repeat, the tone of my voice hinting that I'm open to contemplating what he's saying. But when his finger tightens on his trigger, mind does the same, and his pupils shrink to pinpoints.

“Tak, rodyna,” he says with an ingratiating smile. “We have much to talk about, and I can't talk if you shoot me.”

What a slimeball, thinking he can play the family-should-talk card so late in the game. Plus, he hasn't been juggling felonies or gangsters or ghosts like I've been.

I haven't mentioned the ghost yet, have I? Well, hang in there. It's coming.

“I don't need to think,” I tell him as I let the sight of my gun hover over the space between his eyes.

He smiles. Then shrugs.

“So who will shoot first?” he muses, his gaze flicking behind me, then back.

If I shoot him first, it would solve a lot of problems. For my aunt and her friends. My hometown too. But mostly for myself.

They might arrest me for murder, but he’s pointing a gun at me, so I could claim self-defense. And going to jail wouldn’t be so bad. After all, they give you three meals a day in jail. Better than making nutritional choices based on which is the fastest-heating pizza pocket.

Sorry about all the food references. I’ve only had one decent meal since all this started.

Any or all of the grannies might shoot first, so if I hear any of them move, I’ll have to beat them to the trigger. I would never deprive the world of their amazing varenyky and holubtsi.

But I’d be pulling the trigger for my father too. Even though I’m back home, he’s still waiting to *go* home. He’s also the only one who didn’t side-eye my combination of sundress and army boots. For a grouchy, dead hit man, he’s been very supportive. He’s the ghost I mentioned, although he’s nowhere in sight right now.

“What are you waiting for, Galyna?” coos the mobster.

It’s a solid question. Thinking back over the last three days, I can see I *have* been waiting for something. A missing part of myself, perhaps.

Three days ago, I didn’t think anything was missing. And I’d been excited to pull the trigger on something completely different...