

Because I don't know the language, I let a man poke a device into my ear that translates Russian into English in real time.

I've never met this guy before.

"Hold still, Kira," he says.

We're in the back of an S-class Mercedes, its soft comfort as foreign to me as the city around us. I can feel the vibration of the road in the man's fingers and smell their dark tobacco scent, woody and dry.

I've been in Moscow five weeks, sleeping in a derelict house. It's a place where people arrive then disappear, like a hotel or a prison. Any time of day you find them sprawled out on the broken furniture that fills the rooms or clomping up and down stairs looking for a toilet that works. I sleep in a camp bed in a closet. It smells like mice because they nest behind the walls. These July temperatures make it into a furnace but I'm safe there.

I'm not safe in this chauffeured Mercedes or with this guy, so creepy. He works with calm precision, a pair of specialized tweezers pinched between his forefinger and thumb. He lowers the tiny translation device deeper into my ear canal, sending stinging pinpricks into my jaw so that it feels like I'm swallowing them.

"*Shhh*," he says, as though I've spoken.

In the seat in front of me is the driver. He glances back from time to time in the rearview mirror but says nothing. I stare at the back of his neck, trying to keep my head still.

"*Ow!*" I say.

The man sighs. "You do know that no one is *making* you do this."

Every nerve in my body wants to push him away from me. I can almost feel the relief of it, escaping the tweezers, getting out of the car, my feet on the hot pavement, running. I wouldn't even have to fight to get away. Like the man says, no one is making me do this.