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# LINDSAY McKENNA

UNFORGETTABLE

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Blue Turtle Publishing



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*Unforgettable*

First edition 2023

Original Copyright © 2015, R. Eileen Nauman

ISBN: 978-1-951236-47-2, Kindle Edition

Excerpt from *Hostile Territory*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Dear Readers,

You've met the Shadow Team in *Last Stand*, Book 1, and Book 2, its *Collateral Damage*. Readers have fallen love with the strong second character, Ukrainian combat medic, Alex Kazak. They clamored for his *No Quarter*, Book 3 of the series. Now, his best friend Nik Morozov begins in Book 4, *Unforgettable*. Daria and Nik were strangers. They had a mission to perform. And it all seemed small in comparison to Ukrainian combat medic Nik Morozov, who went under cover and turned to illegal smuggling to save his brother's life. The US government insisted Nik had an undercover woman partner to help capture a Russian drug team leader, Korsak. The last thing he needed was to fall hard and fast for the woman who would pretend to be his romantic interest.

Daria Kozlof was abandoned by her mother in St. Petersburg, Russia. A kind Ukrainian couple adopted her and took her to Kiev where she joined her family. She had talents and real skills that the US military wanted back home. She became a citizen of that country and became a world-class Marine sniper fighting in the Middle East.

Thrown together in the Peruvian jungle, each with their brutal battles from their pasts hanging over them, Nik and Daria had nowhere to turn but to each other. Neither of them expected the fierce passion that exploded between them. It was the wrong time and wrong place. Russian drug smugglers took no prisoners when someone crossed them. Danger stepped into pushing Nik and Daria closer to one another. And closer to death.

Warmly,

Lindsay McKenna aka Eileen Nauman



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Daria Kozlof was abandoned by her mother in St. Petersburg, Russian. A kind Ukrainian couple adopted her and took her to Kiev where she found family. She had talents and real skills that the US military wanted badly, and she became a citizen of that country and became a world-class Marine Corps sniper fighting in the Middle East.

Thrown together in the Peruvian jungle, each with their brutal baggage from their pasts hanging over them, Nik and Daria had nowhere to turn but to one another. Neither of them expected the fierce passion that exploded between them. It was the wrong time and wrong place. Russian drug smugglers took no prisoners when someone crossed them. Danger spiraled into pushing Nik and Daria closer to one another. And closer to death.

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## **Dedication**

To all the readers who love romantic military suspense!



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Excerpt from Hostile Territory

Available from Lindsay McKenna

Everything Lindsay McKenna

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# CHAPTER 1

**D**ARIA SAT TENSELY in the mission briefing room, waiting for Jack D the owner of Shield Security, to arrive. She groaned to herself, her damp as she opened her laptop, getting ready to discuss her forth mission. Her left thigh ached and she shifted to relieve the tension in it knife wounds had been sliced into it as she'd fought for her life aga Taliban soldier who had tried to kill her with his curved dagger. Daria the visceral memories away. They haunted her nightly. She couldn't them to cloud her thoughts now. Jack was giving her a chance to reposition as a security contractor at Shield, after she'd refused to be a any longer.

Her throat closed with tension as she swept her long, thick black between her shoulder blades. The early May spring air was welcome Alexandria, Virginia region. Daria wore a bright-red long-sleeved pullover, and her black leather jacket hung on the back of her chair. Her black leather boots, a matching black, were wet due to the Spring rains coming in the area. She fiddled with opening her work laptop, moving the cursor to the mission tab on the toolbar. Was she ready for a mission what had happened to her four months earlier?

Daria didn't know, but the psychiatrist who worked at Shield, Dr. Armstrong, felt she was ready for some kind of low-level mission to get back in the saddle once more. She hated that her fingers trembled as she pushed a few errant strands of hair off her furrowed brow. Her hair had always been steady as a rock before she'd nearly died on that Afghanistan mission. Daria tried to control her breathing. Any moment now, Jack would enter the room. Jack had worked for two years with SHIELD as a sniper and had always done a good job, had always been successful on her missions. *But not that last mission.* Her spotter partner, Melissa Andrews, had been stabbed to death during that botched mission, and Daria had barely survived it herself. Guilt ate at her. Why the hell hadn't she paid closer attention to her instincts? When Jack told them there was perishable intel from a nearby village located by

Pak, Afghanistan-Pakistan, border, and that they were to take out a high value target, there, Daria hadn't felt good about it, but hadn't spoken. Two days after building their hide to wait for the Al-Qaeda HVT to cross the border, they'd been attacked one night by five Taliban soldiers with knives.

"No..." she whispered fiercely beneath her breath, shutting her eyes. Kate had taught her that when the memories came slamming back, when the adrenaline started to course through her veins, to start taking slow, deep breaths. Kate had offered to give her anti-anxiety medication, but Daria had refused the thought of being drugged up. She would handle this on her own. Everything else in her life had been hard and challenging. The attack she survived was just one more thing she had to struggle through.

The door quietly opened. Daria's eyes snapped open as Jack Driscoll entered the room. He gave her a slight smile of welcome, his sharpened gaze on her. He was six feet tall, lean as his military nickname, 'Jaguar', implied, and moved with the grace that only an ex-Navy SEAL could pull off. He was dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and ivory Chinos and wore a pair of Merrill hiking boots, his favorite of some SEALs. Jack, as always, appeared casual. He nodded at Daria and pulled out the chair at the other end of the polished maple table. Daria's hair gleamed with gold highlights. His black hair was military short, emphasizing his oval face and strong chin. There was nothing soft about Driscoll. Daria had always appreciated that he ran SHIELD like the military: disciplined and organized. His employees, for the most part, had been handpicked from the various branches of military service.

"Hey," Jack said, sitting down, "good to see you back here, Daria. How are you feeling?"

She wanted to tell him the truth, that she was unsure about any number of things. She was still feeling so raw and uncertain. She'd pushed and begged and pleaded with Kate to certify her ready for some kind of low impact mission. Daria was slowly going crazy in her two story cabin outside the city, as her pain slowly healed from the massive damage done to her left thigh. The walls were closing in on her. She *had* to be distracted and a mission would surely accomplish that. But if Kate, and especially Jack, knew this truth of vulnerability, Daria was here, sitting in the briefing room, neither would approve her return to mission status.

"I'm fine, Jack." Daria forced a smile. "Feels good to be back here."

“HVT, frankly. I’m ready.” All lies of various colors and intensity. She sat up, gauge her, open his laptop and turn it on. Jack was renowned to have the almost psychic ability to look through a person and see their real motives. emotional state, as well as their intent. Could she fool him? Would her eyes. written approval be enough?

When the “How’s the leg doing?” he asked, looking up over the top of his cap, even at her.

Daria hated “Really good.”

“I see here you’ve finished the physical therapy portion on it,” Jack said, pointing to the screen, looking over her medical evaluations.

“Yes.”

“Still tender? Hurt a little when you put a lot of stress on it?”

Daria wasn’t going to lie about that. “Yes, but a hot bath or shower will help with the stiffness afterward. No problem.”

“I see Kate’s released you from your psych eval, for duty.”

Nodding, her mouth going dry, Daria said, “I’m more than ready to get back to work, Jack. I’m climbing the walls. I’m not used to being punished to pasture like this.”

He gave her a thoughtful look and nod. “Yeah, but this is the first time you’ve been wounded and almost died, Daria. Sometimes, Type A people like ourselves, want to try and bounce back too fast from situations. Well-experience.”

Stomach clenching, Daria held his incisive look. She could feel almost psychic energy piercing her mind and heart. She had one hand on the table, resting on her right thigh, finger curved into her palm. “I’m not,” she said abruptly, as if daring him to disagree with her. Because, Jack smelled any weakness in her, she knew he’d take her off whatever mission she had in mind for her. And she’d be forced to pace rooms, climb walls, Daria was want to scream, unable to stand the cascade of memories that she could physically escape. If she had a mission, she knew the past would haunt her less. She was be focused on something else. Distracted. And she was desperate to avoid as hell the emotional pain and horrifying memories of that attack. Especially the memory of Melissa, which she held herself personally responsible for. She had been ready to the sniper and Melissa, her spotter. It had been her duty to keep her alive and safe. But she hadn’t. And now, Melissa was dead. Would she get here, get Melissa’s screams out of her head? Daria didn’t think so, but would



aw himher right arm if they would stop waking her up every night.

ave an There was a knock on the door. Jack lifted his chin, calling out,  
ital andin...”

Kate’s Confused, Daria stared at the opening door.

“Ah, here’s Alex and Lauren...,” and Jack gestured toward the  
mputercouple as they entered the room.

Alex Kazak shut the door behind him. He sat down next to hi  
Lauren Parker-Kazak, across the table from Daria.

ie said, Daria smiled, happy to see them. She was Ukrainian by birth and  
Alex. Ever since she’d come to Shield, Alex had been a guiding force  
big teddy-bear brother to her. And Lauren, who was the chief  
instructor at Shield, ran the program for those entering the civilian s  
er curescompany. Both had taken her under their wings, and she felt  
combined with happiness spread through her chest by their mere pr

“Hey, nice to see you two here. I didn’t know you were coming  
7 to getbriefing.”

t out to Alex grinned and laid his arm across the back of Lauren’s chair  
asked us to be here.” He gave Jack a curious look. “We do not know w  
st timeWhat do you have in store for Daria?” he asked his boss.

erators, Jack gave a faint smile in their direction, waiting for both of them  
uch anup their laptops so the briefing could begin. “Oh... something.”

Snorting, Lauren said, “Beware whenever Driscoll says ‘some  
. Jack’sDaria. It always means an off-the-wall mission.”

beneath “I’m more than ready for one,” she assured Lauren.

ready,” Alex gave Daria a warm smile. “You look good this morning.”

if Jack “Feeling better every day.” Daria knew she could fool Alex and  
ision heIt was Jack she was worried about. She saw some concern in his incis  
lls, andevery time he looked in her direction. Her heart was beginning a slow  
ouldn’tof desperation. Jack *had* to give her a mission! She *HAD* to get the hel  
. She’dher cabin before she went stark raving mad.

void all “Ready?” Driscoll asked all of them. When he saw three heads l  
the lossput the mission up on the huge screen hanging on the wall at the other  
ad been the table. “Okay, Daria, here’s your mission, if you want it.” He cl  
spottercouple of keys and several photos came up along with a map of Peru.

he ever Alex groaned. “You have to be joking, Jack.”

ild give “That’s why you and Lauren are here. Both of you had tir

experience in Peru.”

“Come Daria stared at the map and at the photo of the bald-headed Russian named Ustin Korsak, on one side of it. On the other side was of another man, a rugged type, judging by his face, the name ‘Nik Morozov’ married beneath it. Daria knew that Nik was Ukrainian, and had been Alex’s best friend when they’d been on the same Russian mafia drug team together in Peru. She knew better than to ask questions. Jack would give the lead and, afterward, he’d invite any questions that still lingered. Her husband was funny things as her gaze automatically went to Nik Morozov’s image, like she’d never seen a photo of Nik, but had always heard Alex speak passionately about the man, near his same age, and like a brother to him. They had security Spetsnaz soldiers in the Russian black ops Army as combat medics for warmth before going to Peru to join Alexandrov’s Russian drug team.

Alex scowled. “You have Nik down there. What is going on?”

“Don’t get protective,” Jack cautioned him smoothly. He turned to “Okay, this is a level two mission. That means it’s not lethal if you play cards right.” He flicked another photo up on the wall. “This is Sergeant Kilmer. He left the Army after getting bit by a Fer-de-Lance snake. As you know, he’s working here with us, in Mission Planning as an American expert. A month ago, I asked him to reassemble the team he’d been in charge of before he left the Army. The DOD, the Department of Defense, gave its permission for him to do so. Right now, he’s the leader of an Army three-man Special Forces hunter-killer team that’s operating in the Highlands and jungle area near Machu Picchu. I had the Army send his team down there a month ago on this one, special mission that Lauren he’d take. The reason is this: The CIA just lost their case officer Steve Hutchison, two months ago in Aguas Calientes. A small tourist town of 700 people at the base of the World Heritage site: the Machu Picchu complex. All the evidence points to Korsak, or one of his men, finding out Sam was CIA and slicing his throat.

“The Peruvian police found Hutchison dead in his apartment six days later. The stink alerted nearby neighbors, and the police were called. He was killed at that time, Hutchison was working with three other Spec Forces teams to pinpoint where Ustin Korsak’s drug team would be. Their job was to find and capture Korsak and take him out of the leadership position, bring him back to the USA and try to flip him. The Department of Justice, DOJ

him bad. They think if Korsak can be apprehended, that they can work with him, squeeze the intel out of him, and promise him Witness Protection status for the rest of his life. If he gives up the other Russian team in the Kazak's region that is." Jack shrugged. "Sounds like a pretty cushy deal to me. The US offers Korsak ongoing protection and a much better, safer life than he'd ever get back in Mother Russia."

"Mace knows Korsak better than anyone," Alex agreed. "The other teams haven't been able to touch him, as I understand it."

Jack nodded. "There's two reasons we've pulled Mace back into the situation. First, he knew Sam Hutchinson very well and they were good friends. Secondly, if Daria agrees to this mission, I want Mace down there shadowing her throughout it. Providing it's a successful mission, and everyone gets home, Mace will be coming out of the jungle and returning here for mission planning."

"I bet Sierra isn't happy about this," Lauren said, frowning. "They got married and she was glad Mace was out of the Army."

Grimacing, Jack said, "Life changes. Mace wants to avenge Sam's death. And he wants Korsak and he'll find him."

Daria felt the tension in the room, but inwardly, she was relieved. Mace was going to be in the area where she was supposed to be.

With a keystroke, Jack put another photo up on the screen. "Okay, move on. We have a new Russian mafia leader in New York City, Yevgeny Pavlovich. When Yerik Alexandrov's son, Vladimir, was killed by Sam and Mace Kilmer, the next in line, Petrov, took over. He was also killed. Pavlovich filled that vacant mafia position in New York City and took over. Sam Pavlovich is new to the position, and the five mafia teams operating in the city were previously under Petrov's direction. Now, Pavlovich, from the inside, is going to fly down there shortly to meet with the teams, each of which are composed of five or six to ten ex-Spetsnaz soldiers. He'll ask for a loyalty pledge from them. He's heading down in six days but we don't have his exact ETA yet. When we do, you will be in touch with him."

"Pavlovich is filling the power vacuum left by the death of Yevgeny Alexandrov," Alex growled, unhappy.

"Bound to happen," Jack said. He glanced at Daria. "You're going to be undercover as a Russian. You speak the language because you

rk with orphaned Russian child, later adopted by Ukrainian parents, but you  
here individual citizenship. My team is preparing deep-cover protection for you  
s in the speak. You'll go in as a botanist from Kyiv National University of  
ne. Theand Arts, taking a one-year sabbatical from your teaching duties to  
an he'd write a book about orchids in Peru," and he flicked a hand toward the  
the wall. "I hope you like flowers?"

er three Daria nodded. "I love all of Nature."

"She might have been orphaned, but I believe she was born on Uk  
nto the soil, but no one knows her past history," Alex said, "and we are tied  
friends beloved Ukraine and the Earth. We would rather be outdoors than in."

dowing "I hope someday to know where I was born," Daria said with son  
comes behind her words. "I was at a St. Petersburg orphanage the first year  
, to do life. When my Ukraine parents adopted me, they tried to find out a pap  
on me, but there was none." She smiled a little. "I hope you're right  
hey just because I've always love plants, flowers and Nature."

"I'm sure of it," Alex said.

s death. Jack nodded. "Good, because I'm sending you a file right now on  
in that area that you'll have to commit to memory. Plus, memorize the  
ed that of the orchids themselves. Your cover is that you're renting an apart  
Aguas Calientes. You'll be out and about, in the jungle, in the Hig  
y, let's area, hunting for local orchids, taking photos, sitting and  
: Rolan measurements and anything else a botanist would do to a flower. Yo  
ergeant putting your 'findings' in a journal or notebook and then, later on, tran  
. Rolan information and photos to a special laptop we have ready for you to c  
k over you."

in Peru "There are many orchids down there," Alex said, nodding. "Be  
ntel the ones."

h these "I saw a lot of them," Lauren agreed. "Jack gave me a similar cover  
Russian I went down there, but I never had to use it. Should be an easy cover  
n there, for you, Daria?"

alerted, "Well," Jack interrupted, holding up a hand, "Daria might not thi  
as easy. Let me lay out the rest of this op."

: Yarik Daria grew tense inwardly, not liking that half-smile Jack had on h  
It warned her there was a twist coming to her mission.

g to go "Nik Morozov, is the combat medic in Korsak's team, and it  
i're known he would never rape or hassle the Quechua Indian women

ou holdvillages on their circuit. He abhors rape of a woman and walks away  
as weather men on the team do it. Later, he cares for the woman medically  
CulturePetrov was killed in a firefight. Nik was wounded and brought state  
here to recover. DOD and CIA wanted him to infiltrate his old team, the c  
map onUstin Korsak has taken over. Korsak hates him because he won't be  
the boys' and 'have a little fun'. But he can't do without a medic in t  
because, as Alex and Lauren well know, bacterial infections that tal  
rainiancan kill a person within forty-eight hours without antibiotics or swift  
l to ourintervention. Never mind Dengue Fever, Malaria, Hanta Virus, Chole  
a whole host of epidemic infections you can get down there for free."

re hope Alex nodded, scowling. "All of that is true."

of my "Plus, Nik had agreed, via the CIA, to become a mole in Korsal  
per trailand feed them information. He's seen as a loner by the team, but is a  
it, Alexbecause he's a damn good medic. He and Alex used to work toget  
Alex knows how good Nik is."

"Nik is one of the best when it comes to jungle medicine."

orchids "He saved me," Lauren told Daria. "After I got kidnapped, it w  
photoswho cared for me and then got me the hell out of that situation."

ment in "I owe him," Alex said, giving Jack a glance. "I wish Nik had not  
ghlandsto return to the CIA."

taking "He didn't have a choice," Jack said. "His younger brother, Da  
ou'll beneed of a technique called brain entrainment, that can only be perfor  
sfer theone neurologist who has a clinic in Colorado Springs, USA. The C  
arry onpromised Nik that, if he'll be a mole and help get Korsak captured, th  
Department will grant Dan and himself political asylum. They'll be  
eautifulremain in the US and obtain citizenship. Plus, Dan will receive th  
therapy free of charge."

er when Alex's eyebrows raised. "Really?"

activity Jack smiled a little. "Yes. Your best friend is seeing the light at the  
the tunnel. All he has to do is hook up with Daria, and keep feeding h  
ink thison where Korsak's team is heading next on their jungle and His  
circuit."

his face. "How will he do that?" Daria wondered.

"Well, you are probably not going to like this, Daria, but Nik has  
's wellbeen told you're coming down to Aguas Calientes and that you are l  
in thecontact. Not only that, you're going to eventually, after meeting, j

y when lovers.”

Then, Her own eyebrows shot up this time. “Excuse me?” Her heart p  
side to once and she stared at Nik’s photo in the projection on the screen. A  
one that she was drawn to him. But his lover? “What, exactly does that mean, J  
‘one of “Nik is known to have no relationship with any woman in Korsak’  
the unit He will meet you in Aguas Caliente at the Catholic church, noontime  
ke hold the main plaza, in plain sight of Korsak and/or his men when they c  
medical for R& R for five days in that town. Nik will make overtures toward  
era, and if meeting you for the first time, and you’ll show interest in him. W

Russian team rests up, Nik will be out and about with you. You wi  
that you’re interested in him. We need Korsak to buy into the facade t  
κ’s unit has finally found a woman that he wants a relationship with. Th  
accepted Korsak won’t realize that you are Nik’s contact and that you’ll be  
her, so taking any intel he can give you and sending it on by satellite phone  
CIA. You will also be in sat phone contact with that Special Forces  
mentioned, Sergeant Mace Kilmer’s, so they can hopefully, at some  
as Nik corner Korsak, capture him and get him the hell out of Peru and back  
us on US soil.”

agreed Frowning, her heart skipping beats, Daria said, “Just how far do  
love-interest thing go?”

n, is in “Hold hands while out in public,” Jack said. “Later, maybe Nik gi  
med by a quick kiss on the cheek or something. You two can work out the  
CIA has Nothing will be asked of you that you aren’t comfortable with. Eventu  
re State will be living with you at an apartment during those five day R& R  
able to when Korsak’s team comes back to Aguas Calientes to rest up.”

e brain Daria felt her heart twinge. “Live with me?”

“You have to make it look like you two have a serious, torrid a  
Korsak. Right now, when Korsak’s team comes in for R& R, th  
e end of prostitutes, and they do drugs and get drunk. Nik will spend time anc  
er intel with you. During the day, you can go with him to where he spends his  
ghlands a medic helping at an orphanage that is run by the Healing Hands ch  
that town. He never participates in what the rest of the team does w  
R&R.”

already “Nik is a man of strong morals, integrity and values,” Alex to  
his new “Like me, he hated seeing the team rape women out in the villages.  
pose as wrong. It will always be wrong. Nik and I would leave the team

village. If we had tried to interfere and stop the rape, our leader would have put a gun to our heads and killed us. We were helpless to stop it, Daria. Nik never approved of hurting anyone, especially an innocent woman or child. We are medics. We care for the sick and helpless. We do not harm people.”

Daria considered the information. “So, he has to stay at my apartment.”

“Yes,” Jack said smoothly, “otherwise, Korsak won’t buy his cover for you, as he’s finally fallen in love with a woman. This will all make him more trustworthy to his team in general, but especially with Korsak. That will show him hoping that Korsak will trust him and give him pertinent information on what Nik is taking his drug team next. They have a ten-village circuit and at that way, keeps mixing it up concerning the exact day when he’ll go into a village to collect the cocaine the Quechua Indians have been forced to make for him. If the Nik could know ahead of time, he MIGHT be able to give your team information so that Kilmer’s Spec Forces team could be in place to capture him at that point, Korsak and remove him.”

“But Morozov is only coming into Aguas Calientes once a month, Daria,” Alex protested.

“Well,” Jack said, “that’s why you have the botanist job as cover. Daria will be a woman in each of these ten villages that he passes notes to. And then you will then pass it on to his contact, which used to be Hutchison. As a botanist, you are expected to be out in the field, in the jungle, looking for orchids. Usually, he can wander into these villages, approach Nik’s contact, and see if there are any periods for you or not. If there is, then you can alert the CIA and the Army to the sat phone you’ll have with you.”

“I see.”

Alex scowled. “What are the chances of Daria showing up at a village the same time Korsak and his team is visiting it? That could be dangerous for Daria. Korsak or one of his other men could rape her.”

Jack shook his head. “We aren’t letting Daria stick her neck out in the field until it has been well established with Korsak that Nik has claimed her as his woman. He will respect that and leave Daria alone.”

Rubbing his jaw, Alex’s mouth pursed. “I do not know, Jack. Korsak could do anything, is unpredictable. He has an eye for beautiful women. And Daria was very beautiful. She will attract his attention.”

“He won’t lay a hand on me,” Daria growled.



ld have “Let’s not go there,” Jack said. “We need Daria to have time to ria. But depth with Nik about all of this. I’m leaving it in his hands to decide i man or will be safe out there or not. If he says no, then we play the cat-and-ot harm game with Korsak. The best that can happen is Daria will be given i Nik once a month. It lengthens their time of trying to catch Korsak, ent?” one wants to put Daria at risk or in that situation, either.” He looked a ver that “The choice is up to you. Even if Morozov is sure Korsak will lea n more alone because you are his woman, you do your own gut check on this, ay, Nik Daria nodded, her heart in turmoil. She was already drawn i where Ukrainian medic! What if he honestly liked her? And she liked him Korsak then? Where did mission end and personal time begin? She wasn’t a llage to admit she was drawn to Morozov to anyone. That would be disastro him. If Daria wanted out in the field more than anything. “Okay, sounds goo ou the do this.” She felt Jack’s gaze trying to penetrate her innermost thoug kidnap feelings.

“I think,” Alex said, “that if Nik acquired a woman in town, this w ” Daria toward Korsak trusting him more. He would be living with this wor they would like that. He would appear to be more like them in some Nik has not standing off, as he did before. I think it is a well-planned mission, i woman “Thanks, Alex. I think so too.” His voice lowered as he looked otanist, Daria. “More importantly, how do *you* feel about all of this?” ds. You Shrugging, she said, “So long as Morozov understands my groun e’s info I’ll lay out to him. We might have to spend time together at night eam via apartment, but he’ll sleep on the couch and I’ll take the bed.”

“Well,” Jack murmured, his mouth twisting in a slight smile, “I kn will set him straight on the rules of the road regarding his behavior age they you. During the day, though, you need to be seen together, like love rous to have a problem with him holding your hand? Putting his arm arou Maybe a kiss? He has to convince Korsak one-hundred percent that h t in they you, and that you are his woman.”

ned her “I’ll deal with it,” Daria grumped, avoiding Jack’s penetrating sta knew Nik well enough from Alex’s and Lauren’s stories, that he was rsak, if man who cared deeply for people who were in pain and suffering. Daria is truly a medic, just like Alex. The stories Alex had shared with her ab had always made her wonder what it would be like to meet the man so Well, she was going to get her chance to find out, wasn’t she? Part

talk in-thrilled at the idea. The other part of her was wary.

if Daria “Alex? Do you know if Nik has a relationship?” Daria asked.

-mouse “No... none. Nik’s only focus is on his brother, Dan, and getting intel by medical help he needs. All his money he earns in the drug team, goes but no Dan’s welfare in Ukraine. Dan has a traumatic brain injury and he is t Daria. of a very specialized TBI technique. It can only be performed here ive you USA. Nik is determined to get his brother here, in order to receive you okay?” treatment. It has something to do with brain syncing of electrical impulses to this “And that’s why he allowed the CIA to use him,” Daria said.

? What Alex sat up a little straighter. “Yes, that is true. But Nik and I were about to leave the drug team because of the rapes, and the unprovoked beatings us, and the Indians. We could no longer stand it. I was lucky, I escaped. I did. I cannot bear up under this terrible situation, and he does it for Dan. I hope it ends else.”

Nik was a certified hero in Daria’s book. When she was invited to go to Alex and Lauren’s home for a good, Ukrainian meal, Nik was always involved in the conversation. “I see,” she murmured. Giving Jack a steady gaze, confidence, she said, “In some ways, Jack, I already feel like I know Jack.” Alex and Lauren. If I didn’t, I probably wouldn’t take this mission, I know over at the man would be a complete unknown to me.”

“I know that,” Jack said. “Given your last mission and the fact you followed the rules, coming out of it, I felt this one was perfectly suited for you. You’re a hero in my Morozov in one sense. Alex has said that he’s reliable and trustworthy. I wanted a soft mission for you, to bring you back onboard. I’m not convinced your leg is all that sturdy yet. You are a mission specialist, with a preference toward assignment if you keep your cover. I believe Morozov will respect you. You Daria. I don’t think he’ll try anything on you that you don’t want.”

Did you? “Nik would NEVER push himself on Daria,” Alex agreed steadily. “He loves Never. He is a man of absolute integrity, honor, and with a compassionate heart. He is sensitive to others. He is a healer.” Alex gave her a steady gaze. She “Nik is very protective of women and children, just as I am. He will respect you as a kind you, Daria. You need not ever fear being in his presence.”

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out Nik  
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: of her

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“And that’s why he allowed the CIA to use him,” Daria said.

Alex sat up a little straighter. “Yes, that is true. But Nik and I were ready to leave the drug team because of the rapes, and the unprovoked beatings of the Indians. We could no longer stand it. I was lucky, I escaped. But Nik must bear up under this terrible situation, and he does it for Dan. No one else.”

Nik was a certified hero in Daria’s book. When she was invited over to Alex and Lauren’s home for a good, Ukrainian meal, Nik was always brought up in the conversation. “I see,” she murmured. Giving Jack a steady look of confidence, she said, “In some ways, Jack, I already feel like I know Nik via Alex and Lauren. If I didn’t, I probably wouldn’t take this mission, because the man would be a complete unknown to me.”

“I know that,” Jack said. “Given your last mission and the fact you’re still coming out of it, I felt this one was perfectly suited for you. You know Morozov in one sense. Alex has said that he’s reliable and trustworthy. I wanted a soft mission for you, to bring you back onboard. I’m not convinced your leg is all that sturdy yet. You are a mission specialist, with a pretty easy assignment if you keep your cover. I believe Morozov will respect you, Daria. I don’t think he’ll try anything on you that you don’t want.”

“Nik would *NEVER* push himself on Daria,” Alex agreed strongly. “*Never*. He is a man of absolute integrity, honor, and with a compassionate heart. He is sensitive to others. He is a healer.” Alex gave her a steady look. “Nik is very protective of women and children, just as I am. He will respect you, Daria. You need not ever fear being in his presence.”

## CHAPTER 2

“**D**O YOU THINK she is ready?” Alex asked Jack after Daria left. His head was heavy with doubt.

Jack shrugged. “Kate gave her approval.”

Lauren turned to Alex. “In this country, a shrink has the override.”

Shaking his head, Alex muttered, “Jack, she is NOT prepared for this mission yet. I do not care what anyone says. I love Kate. I think highly of her, but Daria is not ready. I see it in her eyes. I feel it around her. She is so different from that firefight where Melissa died.”

“Daria is not in good shape,” Lauren agreed, and she raised her hand in a silent protest before Jack could speak. “I know, I know, I’m not a therapist. But dammit, Jack, she has PTSD. Anyone with a set of eyes in their head can see it. I think sending her out now is too soon.”

Jack looked closely at all the tests Kate had given Daria over the last three weeks. “Look, she’s passed all the mandatory tests. And who among us doesn’t have PTSD? We still can operate, regardless.”

Alex got to his feet, shoving the chair back. “Daria may have been born in Russia, but she is Ukrainian in her heart,” he snapped, striking his forehead with his hand. “I have a greater connection with her, Jack. I am telling you she is a liability to herself, to Nik, and to this mission. You should NOT send her out. She is still healing.”

“She has so much grief and guilt,” Lauren argued passionately about Melissa’s death. “To this day, Daria has told us she feels that Melissa died because of her. That’s crazy. They were attacked by Taliban soldiers with knives. But Daria doesn’t see it that way, and that worries me, Jack.”

Jack eased back in his chair, studying his two contractors. He was breathing hard, his eyes flashing with anger and concern. Lauren was upset, which wasn’t like her because she was a cool-headed sniper that never allowed emotions to enter into her duties. “Okay,” he said in a low voice. “what’s the workaround?”

“You’re still going to let her go down there?” Alex demanded hotly.

“Yes, and there’s no more discussion about that. What I need from you is other ideas, outside the box, on how we can support Daria during this mission?”

“Keep her here,” Lauren muttered, angry at Jack. “She’s still too emotionally unstable.”

“Prove that to me,” Jack challenged her in a quiet tone, holding his hand to his forehead, his eyes flashing.

“I had a talk with Daria two days ago,” Lauren told him, getting a hold of her emotions. “Daria’s hands tremble. All the time. She doesn’t sleep at night. Wakes up screaming. Has flashes of Melissa bleeding out next to her while she was fighting for her own life. Never mind she’d been stabbed several times in the thigh already and was bleeding out herself. I asked Daria if she’d ever cried yet.” Lauren’s mouth tightened. “She said she hadn’t cried since that happened. Jack, that’s just pure craziness! I’ve been in firefight situations where my life was at stake before, too. And I can guarantee you that afterward, I cried for days, weeks, and months more. Just ask Alex.”

“We’ve never seen you cry, Lauren.”

“That’s because I hid it. I did it where no one could see or hear me.”

“So,” Jack said in a reasonable tone, “why couldn’t Daria be doing the same thing?”

Alex paced the room, muttering curse words in Ukrainian. He jerked his head to look at Jack. “I believe she has not. She is a stubborn Ukraine woman.”

“What does that mean?” Jack asked.

“That we are very strong people emotionally. That we can take a beating and never cry out. Daria might be a woman, but she is as tough as a Ukrainian bear. She will not break down. She will not show her weakness to anyone.”

Lauren gave her husband a softened look. “That’s true,” she told him. “I’m still learning the ins and outs of Alex. He hides his stuff and it’s so hard to access it or get him to let it go. It’s VERY frustrating.”

“So, Daria is doing the same thing?” Jack demanded.

“Yes,” Alex growled.

“Okay, then don’t you think that Nik, who is also Ukrainian, is going to sense this situation? We have no way of contacting him and bringing him back to speed on Daria or her present emotional situation with her PTSD. They need to get Korsak kidnapped sooner, not later. They have contacted”

om yousecurity contracting company, trying to find the right woman to p  
ing thisAguas Calientes to be Nik’s love interest. We’re the only company w  
someone who is a Russian born female: Daria. So, this isn’t just sor  
w. Toowe can lightly dismiss or walk away from. Korsak knew more  
Alexandrov’s operation in Peru than any other drug team leader. Tha  
ing herthe CIA wants him so badly. They know that Pavlovich is going to be  
Korsak’s team sooner or later. The CIA would like to snatch Korsak  
hold ofas possible and cut off that intel trade to Pavlovich.”

leep at Running his fingers through his hair, Alex continued to pace, h  
t to herbody moving with surprising grace around the small room. “This  
ed threegood.”

if she’d “Can Nik sense where Daria’s at emotionally, Alex? Does he h  
since itsame intuitive gear you have in place?” Jack asked.

ere my Halting, Alex stared hard down the table toward Jack. “Yes, of co  
I crieddoes.”

’ “Then, don’t you think Nik will feel her out? Know tha  
emotionally fragile? He might not know what caused her to be in thi  
.” but maybe he’ll sense it and deal with her accordingly so the miss  
ing themove forward?”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “Jack, she’s a human being who is hurt  
ked histime. I know her leg has healed up enough to deal with the demands  
” mission, but dammit, her heart is in shreds over Melissa’s death,  
mention almost dying herself.”

beating “Daria flatlined twice on that Medevac helo that came in to rescue  
h as aAlex darkly reminded Jack. “She had lost so much blood enroute t  
pain toeffectively died. Twice! If there had not been good combat medics o  
and plenty of fresh blood available on that helicopter, Daria would b  
d Jack.now and we would not be having this conversation. They saved her, l  
damnedher back.”

Lauren leaned forward, clasping her hands onto the edge of the  
buttonholing Jack. “And you know damn well that when you almos  
changes you forever. And it’s even harder to work through that, neve  
oing tolosing your partner in the firefight, too.”

him up Grimly, Jack barely nodded, his gaze moving from Alex to Lau  
he CIAback. “We can’t pull her off this op. That’s a done deal. What can be  
l everysupport Daria through it?”

plant in “Nothing from our end,” Alex said heavily. He rubbed his eyes and who had dropped his hands to his sides. “It all falls on Nik’s shoulders to figure nothing out, to sense where she is at. He must protect her at all costs because about Korsak decides to go after her, Daria will NOT be able to handle the situation’s *why*, *at all*.”

visiting “But you said Nik is a big, protective guard dog,” Lauren argued, as soon her husband a concerned look.

“He is.” Frustration came through Alex’s thickly accented voice as he is large not believe Daria will be forthcoming with Nik. I believe she will refuse to tell him anything about herself or what has just recently happened to her. She will hide her real feelings, her wounded heart.”

“Well,” Lauren murmured, “I got *you* to loosen up.”

Alex gave his wife a patient, but loving look. “That is because I know of course he would love you. You made it easy for me to open up and confide in you.”

Lauren. You gave me a safe place where I could finally spill everything to you. You’ve held my fears, my pain, my grief and guilt. You were there to hold me and comfort me in any state. You never judged me. You just let me cry in your arms when I needed it. Thank you for that.”

Jack grimaced. “Nik is not in love with Daria or vice-versa. He’s a soldier, a medic, a big player, playing undercover roles.”

“Of course,” Lauren, hands on hips, cut back, “So were Alex and I! But I still don’t know what Alex has told me about Nik, that he’s a wily Ukrainian sniper that can smell what’s going on with Daria, in a manner of speaking,” she said. “He’s a combat medic. One of the best in the world because of the special medical program commensurate to the Army’s 18 Delta program here in board USA. They are field surgeons, when needed.”

“But,” Alex said gently, “this is not about surgery, Lauren. This is about the pain that brought Daria’s wounded soul and her grieving heart that was torn apart by the death of Melissa. She carries deep guilt about it and none of us have been able to help her to release any idea of it in four months.”

“Well,” Lauren muttered, “she’s a sniper and the lead sniper is responsible for his or her spotter. Of course, Daria is feeling guilty because she was trained into us in the Marine Corps sniper school we are fully responsible for our spotter at every turn.”

“Okay,” Jack said, “what’s the consensus of opinion here, then? That Daria has the goods, the perception and sensitivity to feel out Daria and know



nd then hurting? To maybe be a support of sorts to her? Is he a good commu-  
ure her Alex? Can he get her to talk or fess up about personal things?"

ause, if Alex replied, "In the field, the Quechua Indian women and childr-  
tress of him. Nik is very kind and gentle with them. The children flock to hi-  
do not fear him. The mothers lean on him because they know he care-  
giving all of them. He is a good listener."

"In other words," Lauren said, "he's got a damned good bedside m-  
e. "I do "Then," Jack said, standing and closing his laptop, "that's what  
fuse to have to pin our hopes on."

er. She

"NIK, THIS IS the operator you're to meet." Sergeant Mace Kilmer s-  
handed the Ukrainian a small photo and a piece of paper. He studied  
ve you he frowned and took the documents. They stood behind a ten-foot w-  
in you, The cave chamber was large enough to hide away from prying eyes a-  
ing, all one of the few places where they could safely meet.

l listen. Nik scowled, looking at the grainy black and white photo of a w-  
d to do head and shoulders. "Is this in response to the CIA operative, Hut-  
being killed? She's taking his place?" he asked, looking over at Mace.

They're The Special Forces sergeant shrugged his broad set of shoulders.  
know. The agency didn't tell me. That's all we got." He poked at the  
I think, "This is the time and place you're to meet her in Aguas Calientes. She  
an wolf already be there by now, waiting for you. When are you going th-  
Lauren R&R?"

naz has "Tomorrow the Russian helo will pick us up and drop us off at the  
e in the airport just outside Aguas Calientes." Nik rubbed his beard and g-  
Army friend a long look. "A woman?"

s about "Read the rest of the mission brief, maybe?"

loss of Nik lifted his head. The sound of the waterfall was almost drown-  
e to get their voices. Korsak and his team were at the village of Kurmi, Quec-

'rainbow,' on the banks of a small, unnamed river, picking up t-  
iper is cocaine for transport tomorrow morning, to be put aboard the I-  
er it. It helicopter. This afternoon, Nik wasn't needed for such a task and ha-  
onsible into the jungle and had hurried at a swift jog to meet Kilmer. A week

at the village of Tinti Kaballu, 'dragonfly,' the wife of the chief had  
hat Nik him a written note from Kilmer to meet him here at this specific ti-  
w she's

nicator, date.

Quickly, Nik scanned the one-page brief concerning the mission of the team and what was to be expected of him. His mouth tightened as he finished reading the orders. "Have you read this?" he demanded of his American colleague.

"Yeah." Kilmer grinned. "I was jealous. If I wasn't already married, I wish to hell it was me instead of you. I'd have liked the idea of sharing a lady for five days straight once a month. Been two months with my wife. All I want to do is go home and stay there."

Flashing Kilmer a look of teasing contempt, Morozov growled, "Silence, Kilmer." The sergeant's mouth drew into a beatific smile. He smiled often.

Nik was always amused by the fact the black ops soldier fell like a mischievous little boy when he smiled, and not the lethal soldier he really was. Kilmer was deadly, and Nik knew it for a fact. Every man on the team was a hunter and a killer. They were a focused team out here for one reason: to keep American interests protected, and able to survive their enemies' attacks.

Even Kilmer's wide, intelligent blue eyes, which danced with mirth, didn't give away the fact he was a veteran hardened soldier. "Don't mess with me," he said. "I've been through ways of deep undercover ops like this one. He knew Mace had been in this role because of this new op, and his time down here was temporary. Nik was jealous."

"I think it's a good idea. Korsak doesn't fully trust you because you won't screw around with the prostitutes or take part in the village at small Mace gestured toward the paper in Morozov's long, slender hands. "Nik, you're the only white knight here in this fucking jungle. I'm sure this woman operator will be safe with you're around her."

"He's a bastard," Morozov hissed under his breath, giving Kilmer a deadly look. "Women and children should be treated with respect, never like Korsak and his men use them." Mace patted him on the shoulder. "Nik, you're the only white knight here in this fucking jungle. I'm sure this woman operator will be safe with you're around her."

Shaking his head, Morozov handed the papers back to Mace. He couldn't afford to be caught with anything on him that might rouse Kilmer's suspicions that there was a mole in their midst. "It's a good plan, act just don't feel up to it."

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Kilmer's grin widened. "Up to it? Is that a pun?" and he snickered, tipping a significant glance down at the crotch of Morozov's dark, worn cargo pants.

"Get off," Nik growled.

"No, no, the American slang would be: 'fuck off'."

A sour grin pulled at one corner of Nik's mouth. "That too. Alex King always had a bad time with American slang, too. Maybe it's a Ukranian thing?"

"Maybe, my friend," and Mace chuckled and tucked the papers and a knife into the knapsack that sat between his wet combat boots. He straightened up. "You didn't tomorrow you're outta here for five days? Then back on the circuit again?"

"Yes." Nik gave him an unhappy look. "But Korsak, as usual, isn't a soldier here where we'll start on that circuit."

"And that leaves us in the lurch," Mace agreed, hefting the one-hundred-and-twenty-pound ruck across his broad back. He cinched up the straps, then adjusting the weight across his shoulders. "Maybe if Korsak sees you with a woman, visiting her monthly, he'll start trusting you a little more, comrade."

"That is the plan, isn't it?" Nik said, hauling his own heavy-enough ruck, which he recalled still only half the weight of Kilmer's, onto his back. He cinched it up, then thrust his hand toward Kilmer. "Stay safe out there?"

"Right," and Mace grinned, clenching Nik's hand in a brief shake. "You sweat standing out on his bearded face. "You too, hear?"

Nodding, Nik rasped, "You leave first."

Mace turned and walked toward the other escape route from the woman behind the waterfall. Nik stood there; his AK-47 rifle in a chest holster anchored across his body. After watching the Special Forces soldier disappear into the gloom, he turned, walking silently toward the waterfall entrance.

Waiting a few minutes, he moved closer to the waterfall entrance a few feet. Light spray hit his face and body as he peeked out one side of the opening, then the other side, to check that no one was in the immediate vicinity.

When in the years he'd spent here in the Peruvian jungle, none of the Russian soldiers had ever discovered this place. That was lucky for him and his American contacts.

Often, he would have met Sam Hutchison here and they'd exchanged words. His heart felt heavy. Sam had been a damn good CIA case officer, and he deserved getting this throat slashed by Korsak. How had Korsak found

ckered, out? The Russian was wily, and Nik never forgot it. He was glad that  
Kilmer was down here for this new op, and that Mace was very aw.

Sam had been his good friend. He was glad that Mace had brought him  
this mission, and especially glad knowing that the CIA agent was

Korsak's blood. He glanced down at the watch on his wrist. Five  
minutes and then he'd slip out and head back to the village. Along the  
rainian he'd grab some plant or other and Korsak would think, as usual, that

his interest in Quechua herbal medicine was the reason he'd taken the  
way indisappeared for a while. He kept a notebook, filled with drawings  
up. "So, scribbles, plus the Latin identification of the plants he'd found. It was  
his cover."

telling The mid-afternoon humidity dampened and stuck his olive-green  
and camo trousers against his tall, lean body. He moved like a ghost o  
hundred-behind the waterfall and into the surrounding jungle. Nik heard the  
straps, thunderstorms that popped up every afternoon and evening, their r  
with a vibrating through the air. There was never any sunlight in this jungle  
*padre.* foggy-looking clouds that hung drunkenly just above the triple cano  
sh ruck, then, at night, lowered to the ground so that no one could see their  
up and front of their face at times. The wet plant leaves slapped against his  
body, keeping his clothing damp as he moved swiftly away from the  
like, the spot.

Topping another small hill, Nik took the three-foot-wide red clay trail  
would lead him back to the village of Kurmi. Loping along, his legs lo  
re cave covering a lot of ground, he felt his knees start to gripe dully. He'd b  
st sling here humping around the jungle and Highlands for too many years  
soldier joints were wearing out from carrying such a heavy medical pack. He  
aterfall, turned to Dan, his brother, who was twenty-seven, two years younger  
nd exit was. His brother was six foot two inches tall, with green eyes, brown h  
it, and a square face, taking more after their father. Nik took after his mo  
So far, looks. Last month Korsak had had the whole bunch of them flown into  
n teams for seven days R&R, which was more than welcomed by the exhauste  
merican There, Nik called his brother in Lviv, Ukraine, to find out how he was

Dan had been a member of Spetsnaz, just as he had, following  
ge intel footsteps. Dan too, had become a vaunted combat medic. And then  
l hadn't incurred traumatic brain injury in a fierce fire fight with Russian rebels  
nd Sam heart ached as he remembered the Dan of old: dancing green eyes, h

it Macevoice filled with laughter and good humor. Now, his brother was an in are that and rarely laughed. Even more rarely joked. He longed for his real m in on back, not this stand-in who was a shadow of Dan's former self. out for prayed that this new, advanced technology created in the US, s e more brainwaves together again, could make the difference. As his boots ie way, muddy red clay, puddles of water splashed around them, Nik's that his deepened. He would continue this mole work in Korsak's murderous off and team of hardened Russian soldiers so his brother could get that help gs and nowhere outside the USA.

part of If he could deliver Korsak to Kilmer's stealth team, his job dov would finally be over. And he was more than ready to see it done. N: T-shirt on tightly to the promise of the CIA to give him and Dan political a ut from They both spoke English, which was lucky for them. He wouldn' nearby himself to dream too far ahead. If he didn't keep his head in the gan umbles Korsak, who distrusted him, he could find himself with a pistol poi e. Only him, and the bastard more than willing to pull the trigger and kill l opy and some perceived infraction. No, Nik knew how to manipulate Kors hand in never got too cocky about it. Korsak had already killed two member s low team because they'd failed to follow one of his orders fast enough. T : hiding replacements were Neanderthals in comparison: rough, brutish and v humanity in them at all. Korsak was never to be taken for granted. Eve rail that The male Quechua Indians were loaded down with sacks of coca ong and were being ordered to the edge of the village when Nik returned. Kors een out in a good mood judging from his expression, his bald head shining and his sweat. The other men were buckling up their rucks, and getting re is mind move. The Indian women all had worried looks on their faces fo than he husbands. Their children clung, hiding behind their mother's skirts, air and husbands were herded toward the trail like mules bearing heavy loa oter in stopped and made a noteworthy show of stuffing his handful of ca o Cusco chosen plants into his opened medical ruck. Korsak was used to hin d team. so, and would think nothing of it.

doing. The Indians would be herded at a fast pace up the steep climb fr g in his jungle to the Highlands above the village. Up there, mostly only he had survived, with a bit of soil clinging in between them at seven thousand s. Nik's elevation. The Indians would offload their heavy sacks from their is deep backs, stuffing them into a hiding place in a series of nearby caves

ntrovertthey'd done their duty, they would be released and told to go hon brotherthey'd gladly do so. A Russian helicopter, manned by pilots who wer And hein disguise, would land at 0900 at that GPS location. The drug team syncingthen load the cocaine, and then, climb on board themselves.

hit the Nik had nothing to do but follow and remain watchful as he broo resolve the rear of the group. No one spoke to him, which was usual , brutalconsidered him to be an oddball, not part of the group. But no one ) foundoutright say that because what if they got infected or bit by a venomc

de-Lance snake? It would be he who took care of them and saved thei vn hereassed lives. And one never made an enemy of a combat corpsman. Ev ik hungtheir glances confirmed their disgust at him from his refusal to act l asylum.rest of the team. That was all right with Nik. He'd withstood this paria t allowfor many years now, and the end was in sight. All he had to do was m ne withnew woman operator, pretend she was his new lover, and hope li inted atKorsak would let down his guard and allow him in on the intel he gav him forrest of the team. It sounded easy, but Nik knew it wasn't.

ak, but As he kept watch by turning often to look down the trail that s of his through the dark, green, humid jungle, he felt exhausted. Tired to h the twoAnd yet, as he divided his sharpened attention between the group str with noahead of him and keeping their rear protected, his mind wandered bac r.

r. woman operator known as Daria McClusky. He was sure that wasn't i ine andname. But she was beautiful! Even with a lousy black and white pri sak wasphoto of her, Nik wasn't blind. In fact, when he thought about her, hi ig withbody stirred. That surprised him in some ways because he'd always eady tosex with some kind of meaningful emotional relationship with his or theirpartner. He didn't even know Daria. Only that she was a Russian orq as theirbirth, adopted by a Ukrainian couple. She was fluent in both langua ds. Nikknew little else of her background. And he doubted she'd fill him arefullyanything unless it was need-to-know basis only. She was undercov n doinghimself.

Still, his curiosity was piqued because his body seemed to know rom thethan he did. Smiling to himself, he felt as if cooling winter air was t / rocksthrough him, refreshing and vitalizing him. He missed the winters l feet inhome. The snow. The biting cold. And he'd loved ice skating as a chil skinnygrowing up with Dan. They had done everything together. Now, the s. Once separated half a globe away. Would this woman be a CIA agent like S

ne, and been? He'd never interfaced with a woman undercover agent before the KGB men.

It would be titillating to think about getting to touch her, hold her hand maybe, steal a kiss out in public now and then. But it would have to be caught up with Korsak or his men could see them. Korsak might finally trust him if he did. The woman he'd even fictionally bedded when they next came into town would be Calientes. He would be one of them. *Finally*. In all their years together, the Fer-team had never seen him take a woman or even show any interest in one. For sorry-way, Nik thought, it would be VERY interesting to see the men of this team have a reaction to him finding a woman that finally suited his tastes. At least he'd like to see what they would think. He wondered how far the team would welcome his status back into their collective embrace. Especially Korsak.

There was no question he was an outsider. And what kind of work would he do here? Daria? He had so many questions to ask of her. What part of Ukraine was she from? How did she get caught up in underground work? What was her story? Nik found himself wanting to know even more about her. It was her eyes, he decided, that spoke most powerfully for her soul. What color were they? She looked exhausted in that photo. Maybe it was an old photo? Not a recent one? What had made her look so soul-deep sad? He laughed to himself because he was a sucker for any child or woman who was hurting in any way. Alex Kazak had always roughly teased him, but he couldn't stand the sight of a woman's or child's tears, that he would lower himself inside out to stop their pain and suffering. And, in the photo of Daria, it looked as if she was so close to crying. *About what?*

As Nik jogged along, the Indians keeping up their fast pace on the slanting red, muddy trail that would lead them to the harsh, rocky High Gorge. His heart wanted answers, too. Which was odd. How could a grainy photo of an unknown woman touch him so profoundly? He almost felt like a lover who had searched all his life for his mate and never found her. Until

now...

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been? He'd never interfaced with a woman undercover agent before, only men.

It was titillating to think about getting to touch her, hold her hand and maybe, steal a kiss out in public now and then. But it would have to be where Korsak or his men could see them. Korsak might finally trust him if he had a woman he'd even fictionally bedded when they next came into Aguas Calientes. He would be one of them. *Finally*. In all their years together, his team had never seen him take a woman or even show any interest in one. In a way, Nik thought, it would be VERY interesting to see the men of this team's reaction to him finding a woman that finally suited his tastes. At least, that is what they would think. He wondered how far the team would welcome him back into their collective embrace. Especially Korsak.

There was no question he was an outsider. And what kind of woman was Daria? He had so many questions to ask of her. What part of Ukraine did she live in? Was her family still there? How did she get caught up in undercover work? What was her story? Nik found himself wanting to know everything about her. It was her eyes, he decided, that spoke most powerfully to him. What color were they? She looked exhausted in that photo. Maybe it was an old photo? Not a recent one? What had made her look so soul-deep sad?

He laughed to himself because he was a sucker for any child or woman who was hurting in any way. Alex Kazak had always roughly teased him that he couldn't stand the sight of a woman's or child's tears, that he would turn himself inside out to stop their pain and suffering. And, in the photo of Daria, it looked as if she was so close to crying. *About what?*

As Nik jogged along, the Indians keeping up their fast pace up the slanting red, muddy trail that would lead them to the harsh, rocky Highlands, his heart wanted answers, too. Which was odd. How could a grainy photo of an unknown woman touch him so profoundly? He almost felt like a lone wolf who had searched all his life for his mate and never found her. Until just now...

## CHAPTER 3

**T**HE MID-MORNING SUNLIGHT peeked through the cottony, slow-moving that drifted about a thousand feet above Aguas Calientes. Tensi through Daria as she looked around her recently rented second apartment. It sat halfway up the long asphalt hill in the small, but crowded tourist town. It was on the side where the volcanic hot springs located. She wiped her damp palms down the sides of her green cargo glad to be in a place that had some heat to stave off the cool days outside.

She tugged at her bra, wanting to take it off from beneath her sleeved cream-colored top. She hated bras and never wore one when on an op. But this one was different. She didn't want men ogling her breasts she walked and they just naturally moved and bounced beneath the top covering them. Not that she had huge breasts, she was small there, more the slender, model-like body she'd been born with. Still, Daria detested tightness of the bra around her torso, lamenting the whole situation. It was just another way to control her body in one more way and she really hated the idea completely. Her body belonged to her. In the end, she got rid of it and said to hell with it. She'd be wearing her jacket, anyway. Her breasts would remain hidden from the sight of males.

Looking at the watch on her wrist, Daria saw that she had to make it to Morozov at the settlement's only Catholic church, at the other end of town in thirty minutes. Not that the town was all that large. It would take her fifteen minutes to walk down the hill and over to the plaza at the other end of town. The people who lived here were mostly Quechua Indians, with a few Peruvians from Lima scattered in, owners of the many shops that lined the sides of the only concrete road in the area. She wiped her brow, standing in the small living room with its rectangular coffee table set between a leather couch and a dark-blue fabric sofa chair. The furniture had seen many days, no question, but the place was clean and she spied no cockroaches which is what Daria cared most about. As a sniper, she lay for

unmoving while anything and everything in the area crawled over and her as if she were part of the natural landscape. She had a special hatred for cockroaches, smart bastards that they were. They seemed to know that she hated them, and delighted in running up and down her arms or getting under her trouser cuffs, and racing up and down inside her pant legs. They knew they were doing. They knew she would not move to crush them.

She hoped she had memorized everything that was needed for her job as a botanist and, frankly, was glad for the distraction. She'd even managed to get up without screaming and waking everyone up around her on the Airlines flight from Miami, Florida to Lima, Peru. Being on this mission was a way to shove all the horror and emotions far down inside her where she wouldn't be bothered by them. At least, not for a little while, Daria thought. The month of May in Peru was the beginning of their winter. It was supposed to be drier, but it had rained on the trip from Cusco along the Inca trail line to this little town two hours out from the major city. It had kept raining when she'd disembarked and had two boys carry her luggage from the station, across a violent, dangerous river channel and then up the opposite bank and into the town. Her clothes were still damp even though she'd had a rainproof nylon jacket, her trousers getting especially soaked. Alex had warned her she'd be wet or at least damp all the time, no matter what season it was. The ancient radiator heat was warming up the equally damp rooms of the apartment, and was beginning to dry out her trousers. It was the high humidity that made Daria feel like her lungs were slightly clogged. She had been used to the dry, desert climates of Afghanistan and Syria.

Her heart stuttered when she thought of Nik Morozov, and her upcoming meeting with him. Lauren and Alex had invited her over for dinner a few nights before she'd left for Lima and they'd tried to give her a verbal heads-up of the man. He sounded really nice. A reasonable, honorable man who had happened to live and work with murderous thieves. Alex had told her stories of he and Nik working together and how they had both delivered a fair share of babies over the years, a high for both of them. Lauren had nothing but good things to say about Nik, too. He *had* helped capture a black kidnap her, but later, as she'd pleaded with him, and then, after Nik found a better way to handle her, that she knew Alex, he had released her. Nik then risked his own life to get Lauren back to the safety of the Army Special Forces team that was trying to find and rescue her.

around After having heard all the stories, and seeing the photos of him that had brought out, Daria wondered how someone like Morozov managed to hang on and continue to live in such a brutal environment. She understood it was his loyalty to his brother Dan that was his motivation, but still... it was a lot to ask of any human being for that long a time. It showed that Nik dealt a bad hand, remained responsible and did the right things for the right reasons. He was so much like Alex in some ways and that stilled Daria's worries and anxieties about working with him.

American And the truth? She was so moved by Alex and Lauren's heart-cand sincerity that frankly, Nik sounded like a dream hero concocted from her wildest imaginations. Daria honestly didn't know what to expect when she met inside the church during the noontime Mass. She supposed that he and his men would never set foot inside a church, given the brutality of the railroad dark souls. It was a safe place to meet for the first time. Daria wondered if Nik was Catholic; it would explain why he wanted to meet there. So she would know.

opposite

Nik sat in the back-most row of pews, away from the two large, Kazakh wooden doors, swung open to invite people in for the Mass. Quechua men were silently filing in, taking blessed water from the bowl near the doorway, making the sign of the cross before moving up the polished cream stone toward the dark wooden pews, where the priest stood nearby to greet them. She Nik tried to tame his expectations and concern. Would Daria show up? Or not? If she was an operator, she would, unless she was dead. When the hand on his watch hit noon, he saw her enter.

It felt as if someone had stolen the air out of his lungs. His eyes watched her slightly as she entered, hands stuffed into the pockets of her down jacket, looking for him. His heart beat rapidly in his chest as their eyes briefly held, and then their gazes drifted apart. She was artful, Nik decided, and continued to look around as if she were a curious tourist. She, like the others, dipped her fingers into the marble-cut bowl and made the sign of the cross. Trying to breathe normally, Nik watched her move with the grace of a wild animal. Her eyes were a golden brown, reminding him of a shade browner than a lion's, and her eyes were amber eyes. His gaze missed nothing. Her nose was clean and

at Alex nostrils slightly flared. That mouth of hers sent his lower body into a aged toof sudden, molten desire and it surprised the hell out of him. Nik h stood it plenty of pretty young women but had never had this kind of reaction it was a of them.

ς, when But Daria McClusky, or whoever she really was, brought back t ae right for him the best of the feminine attributes a woman could have a lot of disposal. Her hair was set in a single, long black braid and her skin golden color, making him wonder how many hours she had spent ou entered sun. Her face was oval, with a slightly stubborn chin. His gaze flicked m their her wide mouth and those full lips that were now a bit pursed.

en they Their eyes met again. Nik looked down to his right, as if to tell Korsak come and sit near him.

of their She did.

lered if His nostrils widened and, as he caught her subtle scent of oran on, she wondered if it was from the shampoo she used on her luxurious bla that gleamed with blue highlights among its strong, silken strands. Hi thick lashes were incredible frames for those gold eyes of hers that he intelligence, that missed nothing. She might look like a tourista to ev , heavy Indians else, but to Nik, no. He saw far deeper into Daria.

oor and As she scooted over a bit more his way to allow two other Q ne aisle women to come and sit in the same pew, he moved away from her a t them amount in order to give her some room and allow her to become comi r up on in his presence. Nik saw her lean forward and pick up a hymnal wr Just as Spanish, holding it between her graceful, long fingers. No matter w did, it was like being in the presence of a ballerina. His lower body tig widened What an unexpected reaction to her!

jacket, Nik drew in a ragged breath, trying to still his rebelling body. He ily met, known what to expect when meeting this woman, but it certainly v , as she what was happening with his physical body right now. It wasn't her : all the only he could stop picking up the unique, feminine scent that was h 1 of the had always had an acute sense of smell. Dan had often accused him o ce of an a Ukrainian wolf in disguise, what with his exceptional hearing, sm ee they vision. Daria smelled so damned good that his body was going into s large, silent kind of celebration. She was less than three feet away from him :traight, could feel the heat of her body in the cold, damp church.

The doors closed and the sound echoed, as if in a cavern. Like a

the door shutting forever kind of sound. The church had been built so  
had met during the 1700's by the marauding Spanish, all out of gray stone. The  
to anywhere crowded with Indians, but the first rows were reserved for the  
skinned rich Peruvians exclusively from Lima. The priest began his  
to mind Latin. Nik wondered how many of the Indians, who only spoke the  
at her Quechua language, understood anything he was saying. Most Indian  
was a pigeon Spanish and no English. They held on strongly to their tribal cu  
t in the Worse, he had to sit here for forty-five minutes and say nothing t  
back to and vice versa. The church was only being used as a way to m  
another. Korsak would laugh, but accept his excuse to leave the team l  
l her too often, Nik *did* go to church. It gave him nearly an hour of being alc  
away from them. He prayed for the women his team had raped, and t  
Korsak had killed, and the children the Russians had beaten to for  
ges, he fathers to carry cocaine up that godforsaken mountain to the Highlan  
ck hair had lost track of how many times he'd found himself kneeling, h  
er long, buried between his crossed arms, hot tears rolling down his cheeks a  
ld such in this church. He believed in the power of prayer for others. It was t  
very oneth thing that kept him sane at times in this deadly dance with Korsak.

Just having Daria next to him was calming in another way. This  
Quechua Nik. He was always usually tense. On guard. Alert. But right now?  
n equal PEACE. As if... that was *possible*? The feeling of coming home? To l  
fortable gave himself an internal shake. What the hell was going on here b  
itten in them? Was this some kind of magic? Insanity? Wishful thinking on l  
hat she because he'd been so damned alone for so long? He hadn't touched a  
htened, in five years. His life in Peru hadn't allowed him any real time to get t  
a woman like he needed to in order to pursue an intimate, c  
: hadn't relationship with one.

was not Nik never saw women as sex objects like Korsak and his men did  
fault. If were a nameless body to be used by these men, as far as they were con  
er. Nik They did not see them as human beings. They were a set of breast  
f being vagina, that's all. Women were to be used by the men to pleasure them  
ell and but never to receive pleasure back in return. Nik had had three mea  
its own relationships in his life and each stood out in his heart. Those three  
and he had each given their heart to him as he'd given his heart to them. Ea  
been a fair, wonderful exchange. But this woman sitting quietly beside  
l prisoner face so incredibly serene, was unforgettable to him.

metime Nik closed his eyes momentarily, her profile burnt into his brain, like the pews into his skittering heart that was thumping like a wild, living thing against his white-chest. Automatically, his medic hand pressed against his jacket, about to be taken in any heartbeat. Her scent encircled him as if it were the rarest and most delicate of its own kind, the orchid fragrances he'd ever inhaled. It was *HER*. Not the shampoo she'd used on her hair, nor any perfume she'd sprayed on her skin, but that natural, almost instinctive scent of alluring spice that was just her. Nik swore he could feel her heart beating, the palpitations, the urgency with which it moved within her. She sat on the floor like a small buddha who was at one with the world and everything in it. Her lips parted slightly, dressed up with a soft pink glistening lipstick that only emphasized her slightly fuller lower lip. Nik closed his eyes and he mentally visualized how good her mouth might feel against his. How lush and soft their lips would be. Daria would open to him like an orchid spreading its petals in the sun. Nik smiled for the first time. She smelled like the orchids he would pass by in his headjungle. That scent of heavy, sensual fragrance entering his nostrils as he sat moving deep into his lungs, reminded him of all the beauty that existed in the only world between a man and a woman. He did not belong in the world he was in now. Daria's scent was like a drugging heaven, and reawakened hope that she would shock him on every possible level.

He felt *Crazy!* What was going on with him? Was he finally having the relief he'd been craving? Or was it a nervous breakdown from all the unrelenting stress of being in the middle of a war? Trying to stay one step ahead of the darkly intelligent Korsak? Was it just his partit *HER? Daria*. He played her name over and over again in his head, catching the nuances of all the vowels and consonants of it, a melody that kept on singing to his heart, his soul, bringing him fully to bright, living life. He knew Daria was a Ukrainian name. Was it her real name? He thought so, because it fit her so well. It suited her. She was a symbolic island of peace. They to Nik, soothing the tightness in all his muscles. She soothed his worries, the constant anxiety that haunted him, and he felt all that burden disappear and more and more with every slow, shallow breath she took. Out of the corner of his eye, Nik watched the slow rise and fall of her jacket. There was a peaceful, almost serene serenity surrounding Daria. How could that be? How could an agent of war be so relaxed and utterly trusting?

Each had a question. Did Daria sense him? Trust him in particular? Did she have more feelings for him, perhaps knew him much more intimately than he'd realized? And what was why she could sit next to him and be the island of tranquility that

branded desperately sought? The one that had always been out of reach until now in his *Just now*... He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, feeling sure above his unsure of his feelings toward her. This was an undercover operation where all were supposed to pose as lovers discovering one another for the first time. But what was real? What was not? Her breathing, slow and cadenced, filtered subtly through him, pouring coolness on the flames of anxiety and danger that always threatened him. He had a thousand questions for her.

She sat. Halfway through the Mass, they all stood. Nik watched her unwind. Her lithe jaguar awakening from a long nap. Daria clasped her lovely, long fingers together in front of her, reciting the words of the priest in a breathless, hushed Latin that his wolf ears picked up, absorbed, and consumed like the best of her lips really was. And never once, did she look over up at him, her eyes fixed to the ahead, her expression focused on the ceremony echoing around the nave in the stone church. And yet, Nik stared down at her, helpless not to do so. He noticed now the tiny black strands of hair that had been crinkled by the thick humidity, saw them curling around her high cheekbones and the lone braided hair that lay over the right shoulder of her nylon jacket.

His gaze fell to her lips and his entire lower body flexed and he gazed inwardly. Surprised, Nik had never felt such lust, such a driving need for a long-woman as he felt right now. Her lips beckoned. Incredibly beautiful lips, a CIA shape. Their fullness, and the way the corners where they met curved upward, inspired his fevered imagination. He was reminded of the Madonna in the Sistine Chapel. Or was inspired his fevered imagination. He was reminded of the Madonna in the Sistine Chapel. He looked at Daria's classic features and saw the Madonna in her. He wondered if she had already had children? Married happily to a man who appreciated her as he did right now? His gaze drifted downward to where her hands were calmly relaxed and clasped across her softly rounded belly.

No, she had never been pregnant. From his years of training as a soldier, he knew a woman's body quite well. He'd delivered more than enough women in South America to know the difference, seen too many women whose bodies changed by the child growing within their bellies. After a woman appeared a child, her shape subtly changed. Her hips flared a little wider. Her face grew a little more stretched and pearlescent and, even from his brief glance over at her, he could see that Daria had never carried a child. And at that moment, Nik fantasized that she was carrying *his* child. Their baby. He had seen the glow of pregnancy on the faces of many Quechua Indian women.



il now.it was beautiful, and yet, indescribable. To him, growing up in the C  
iddenly religion as he had, he always thought of that glow as Madon  
1. Theysomething so sacred, so sublimely radiant and magical. And Nik saw  
st time.and again. Pregnancy made a woman luminous from the inside out.  
flowedwas the most sacred of moments a woman would ever experience. H  
ger thatblessed, literally even, to help bring over fifty babies into the world c  
last five years. To hold the slippery child coming out of one o  
d like awomen's exhausted bodies, to be the first human to touch and welco  
g handschild into the world, was akin to a miracle. Nik could never give a  
hushedwords to that sacred, miraculous moment. He could only feel the w  
ggar heemotions flowing strongly through him as he worked with the p  
straightwoman. Then see her baby crown from her straining body, and have th  
nassiveslide into his awaiting, gloved hands.

He saw Only, this time, it wasn't the birth of a child he was coaxing out i  
, heavyworld. No, right now, with Daria, this was a symbolic birth of a d  
g, tightnature, Nik dimly realized, trying to quantify it, to understand it.

couldn't because it was birthing right now between him and this agen  
groanedmade him feel as if he could finally surrender his tattered soul to h  
d for a five long, hard years. He could collapse into her arms and Nik  
in their intuitively that she had the strength to not only hold him, but to slide h  
upward, around him, rock him and allow him to sob out all the horrors that we  
ma, St.and prowling around within him on a daily basis. Only that kind o  
oked at special rebirth could take away all that dirtiness built up inside h  
l if she terror, the disgust and revulsion at all he'd seen. Only holding a ne  
is much clearing the fluid out of its tiny nostrils, cutting the cord and then clear  
ls were tyke off, bundling her or him into an awaiting soft, warm alpaca o  
blanket of welcome, had ever made him feel clean once more. We  
medic, continue to live.

babies Daria was a dream-spinner. Someone who, by her mere presence  
r young give a dying man hope that there was something better than the life  
an had was quickly losing his grasp upon. Something worth fighting for. Sor  
er belly worth giving one's life for, if necessary. Her energy, her aura, w  
glance anyone wanted to call it, was touching, infusing and healing him. Ukr  
d, for a were great believers in mysticism, in the magic of life. In the mystery  
y. He'd un seen that truly did exist. Nik might have grown up Catholic, but his  
ren and had imbued him with the mysteries of the world through Ukrainian f

Catholicism had taught him that those too were just as sacred, as profound, as transformative, as sitting in a church pew and praying.

At that time Nik had no idea what to do or say as the Indians silently filed out of the church, the Mass having just concluded. If this was what heaven felt like, he'd felt he didn't want to ever leave it. Or her.

Over the  
years of those  
years that  
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the child

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folklore,

and had taught him that those too were just as sacred, as profound, and as transforming, as sitting in a church pew and praying.

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## CHAPTER 4

**D**ARIA WATCHED THE last of the parishioners leave the church and then the medic sat alone in the hallowed, partially-darkening church. The boys assisted the priest as they went around putting out the candles, shutting off most of the overhead lights in order to save the pricey, v electricity.

It was time. She lifted her chin, tilting it his way to engage him. E as she did, she saw Nik turn, his gaze meeting and locking onto hers.

“I’m Nik Morozov,” he said, holding out his hand to her.

Relief fled through Daria that he’d taken the lead. She’d no undercover work like this before and didn’t know all the nuances ar about it. “Daria McClusky.” She tried to hide her eagerness in lift hand and sliding it into his. Her fingertips were cold because there heat in the church. His hand was large, warm and rough-feeling smoother flesh. Her heart amped up momentarily when she saw h narrow slightly, turning a darker shade of blue. Daria felt as if h literally burning her face into his memory. His grip was firm, but he crush her hand, either. Tiny sparks leapt from her hand into her wrist up her arm. And when the corners of his mouth relaxed and she saw quality in his expression, her heart flew open. For whatever rea dropped his game face. Stunned, it took her breath away.

Releasing her hand, Nik said quietly, “Would you care to join m cup of tea at a local restaurant on the other side of the plaza?”

She felt bereft as his hand fell away from hers. Her flesh was doin than tingling now. It was *itching* to continue to touch this man with th half smile on his wonderfully-shaped lips, his gaze intent and curiou studied her. “I’ll come if you offer me a cup of coffee, instead, Mr. M I’m not a tea drinker.”

Nik unwound, standing up. “Call me Nik? And of course, Peruvian is always good to drink.” He offered her his hand once more.

Daria was struck by his European courtliness. Her lips lifted into

of her own, and she placed her fingers into his opened palm. Not on there thick callouses dotting it, she also saw a number of old, white sc even newer ones that were pink and shiny. Nik had beautifully-shaped just as she'd imagined. As Daria rose, she reluctantly withdrew her from his. She pulled the strap of her purse over her shoulder and left th

her and Outside the church, she waited for him. The broad, white marbl  
ie altar still shined from the most recent shower. Above them, the clouds c  
les and silently and a break in them allowed a momentary ray of sun to peek t  
aluable The warm slats of light cascaded around her. Daria felt Nik approa  
stand slightly behind and to the right of her, a very protective gesture  
part toward her. She twisted and looked up at him. He was half a hea  
but, just than her, and she watched his gaze move circumspectly around the c  
square plaza. That sense of his radar being on and scanning was a ve  
sensation to Daria. She could feel the heat of his body behind her on h  
it done and right shoulder, and luxuriated for just a moment in what it felt lik  
id rules shielded by a warrior. Back in the church, he had dialed that ener  
ing her down. But out here? As she watched him scanning the colorful cr  
was no locals mingling with the tourists, there was no question he was on gua  
to her more. Had the church given him a moment of reprieve? Daria wantec  
is eyes him.

ie were "Do you come often to this church?" she wondered, engaging h  
e didn't mouth had lost that half smile and was now a thinned line. It made hi  
, flying hard and uncompromising. But, when she spoke, she saw the corner  
r a wry mouth soften. And so did the look in his eyes as he settled his gaze upc  
son, he "I get into town once a month for five days. I like to go to the chu  
sit in the back."

ie for a "Does it give you peace?" Daria wasn't sure she was playing the r  
it was her curiosity eating her up alive about Nik. She saw a veiled :  
ig more come into his eyes for a moment. His mouth twitched and then he gav  
he faint lazy shrug.

is as he "I'm still trying to find it. I thought it would be in there..."

orozov. That response slashed through her heart. Oh, she knew exactly v  
meant. Nodding, Daria's throat tightened as she whispered, "It's like  
1 coffee me, too." Instantly, she saw regret and something else in his eyes.

a smile "Well," he teased lightly, "let's get you that cup of excellent  
American coffee and it may improve how you feel?" He placed h

ly werelightly against the small of her back to urge her on down the fifteen  
ars andmarble steps.

l hands, His hand felt warm and comforting against Daria's back. It  
fingerspossessive gesture, as if he were not only guarding her, but that  
ie pew. claimed her as his mate and was going to make sure she was protect  
le stepsdidn't protest his lingering hand. Didn't pull away from him. Rather  
hturnedback a little more firmly into his opened palm. She could feel his  
hrough.through the material of her jacket, her skin prickling pleasantly beneath  
ach and As they descended the steps, she looked around, trying to pretend  
e on hisa tourist. She felt Nik monitoring the pressure of his hand upon her ba  
id talleroverwhelming sensation of being shielded by him avalanched over  
rowdedthey reached the busy, crowded plaza. The pavement's white stones g  
ery realthrough the standing puddles. Nik guided her smoothly, never bumpi  
er backor halting someone in their path on the way to the small restaurant,  
ce to beby a Peruvian Flute sign out in front. Once on the wooden porch, he r  
gy wayhis hand and opened the door for her. It struck her again that he po  
owd ofold-world charm and excellent social skills.

rd once Inside the small restaurant, the round wooden tables were drape  
l to askred-and-white checkered tablecloths. Most of them were empty. Th  
crowd was gone. She heard Nik switch to Spanish as he raised his han  
im. HisPeruvian owner behind the counter, calling a greeting to him. He then  
im lookDaria to a corner table diagonally opposite the door and pulled out a c  
s of hisher. She could get used to this.

on hers. Thanking him, she sat down. For the first time, she got a really go  
rch andat Nik Morozov. He wore a very old brown leather jacket, with a da  
long-sleeved sweatshirt beneath it, well-worn Levi's and scarred  
ole or ifcombat boots. There was nothing trendy about his man. He was ha  
sadnesslean-looking, and Daria would bet his muscles were ropy and powerf  
ze her awas deceptive upon first sight, but to her trained eye, the way his sh  
stood back with pride just shouted of military bearing along with und  
confidence. Even more teasing was that male sensuality she'd picket  
what hearlier. He was not a flirt. But she could feel his maleness and how it  
that forher body to life. Nik reminded her of an eagle, his gaze seemingly  
nothing. His black hair was military short, his skin darkly tanned from  
Southof being outdoors. More than anything, the ruggedness of his face, th  
is handlines here and there, told her of the harshness of his life as nothing el

n wide,would.

“Black coffee?” And then he smiled a little. “Or are you one of the  
was needs milk and sugar to tame the taste of it?”

he had Heat swept through Daria, that look he gave her was of a man wan  
ed. She woman. Was it for real? Or was this him playing his role with her  
; eased found herself wishing it was real. “No, just black. Thank you.”

fingers Nodding, he turned and casually walked over to the counter wh  
h them. owner stood waiting for their order.

she was She liked his rangy way of walking. It was a deceptively relaxed  
ack. Anbut she felt tension radiating naturally off him. Daria sensed that if  
her as occurred, he’d snap into muscle memory, with a swiftness that wo  
learned nothing but a blur of reaction toward the threat. She saw no pistol car  
ng into him, unless he had one tucked down the back of his Levi’s, hidder  
marked waistband and cloaked by the jacket. Did the Russian crews carry w  
eleased on them here in town? In Peru it was illegal to have any military wea  
ssessed all. Even pistols had to be registered with the government. But she w

since they were drug runners, that they had to have an arsenal  
ed with somewhere.

ie noon Her heart wouldn’t settle down. To see Nik fully, in good light, m  
d to the want to stare at him even more. He had an arresting face. It wasn’t a  
guided man’s face, but that of a man who had seen too much. That was par  
hair for complexity of him, Daria decided. She looked around, her gaze

around the plaza through the huge windows. Everything seemed norm  
od look what did she know? This was her first day here in Aguas Calientes.

rk-blue It took every bit of control Nik had to remain calm and collected.  
leather the yellow ceramic mug with fresh, steaming coffee, across the table to  
rd- and Having deliberately placed her so that he could see who entered and  
ful. Nik premises from where he sat, he sipped his own coffee, nearly burn  
oulder tongue. In the druzy sunlight shining through the carelessly-washed  
eniable windows, he really saw how fresh and beautiful Daria truly wa  
d up on highlights caressed the long, thick braid that lay over her right shoul  
t stirred down across her upper chest. Her skin was a golden color. Most of a  
missing the grainy black-and-white photo of her had failed to show was the sl  
n years to her eyes, giving her a decidedly exotic look. Her high cheekbones,  
re deep eyes, told him that she might have Russian mixed with Scythian and p  
se ever Mongolian heritage somewhere in her family tree. He smiled to hims

wondered if it came from the women warriors of that time in Asia, like those who looked like royalty and warrior all at the same time. Daria's ears went far beyond just being attractive. That photo did her no justice at all. Nik forced himself back to the present. "What are you doing here in Dariatiny town far away from civilization?"

"I'm an adjunct professor from a Kiev University," she said in Spanish. "I'm taking a one-year sabbatical to write about the orchids that grow in this area. I'm collecting information to write a book on them."

"A biologist?" he asked, also switching easily to Spanish.

"No, a botanist." She managed a slight smile and saw a bare nose sticking out from behind her. "I love flowers. All plants, actually."

"So do I," he admitted, watching how her lips fit against the ceramic rim of the cup. She was so lush. Like a ripe fruit he wanted to peel open with his hands. And he wanted to taste her, starting with those shapely lips and working his hands downward, slowly, across her entire willowy body. There was a faint smile in the recesses of her gold-brown eyes. His senses were finely honed from years as an operator and, if Nik wasn't misreading Daria, that was his interest banked up in them. *For him*. He could feel it. Literally. Which would help his situation. He silently thanked the Levi's he wore. No one would notice. The zipper was wide and strong, the fabric even stronger. But from the beginning to feel a little cramped down there for him.

"To photograph them?"

"Yes, but also to measure them, and make observational notes in my journal about each one I find." She shrugged. "I have a laptop, but even He slid told me, unless it was a Toughbook, to leave it in the apartment and take Daria's field notes to it in the evening where it couldn't get rained on. I left there only on good ole ancient notebook and pen for now."

Nik was impressed with her role playing. He saw the owner, Pedro, listening to their Spanish conversation. And he'd deliberately chosen Spanish. Blue language so that Pedro, if questioned by Korsak or one of the other men, would tell him about their flower conversation. It was the perfect cover, what would rouse Korsak's suspicion that Daria was something much more than a girl. She spoke the language fluently and with ease. "When did you arrive here?" he asked.

"About nine a.m. I have an apartment for the duration of my stay. I need to get settled in." Daria brushed some hair away from her chin.



because wanted to explore this town, so I came to see the church close up. Gothic types of cathedrals.”

“It’s a good place for downtime too if you’re wanting to get away from that crowd out there,” he agreed, slipping his long, large knuckled hand around his bright red mug.

“What are you doing here?”

Now his lies began, but Nik knew them by heart. “I’m with an exploratory mining team. We’re looking for mineral deposits between the Highlands and the Highlands. It takes us out in the jungle and we come back here every five days to rest up and get some decent sleep and food.”

Nik saw her tilt her head and study him. His heart cracked open. It had been shut for the last few months, and he’d felt numb to the world and eat. He felt a trickle of returning feelings and it felt damn good to him. Daria had magic. At least for him.

“Then, you must know the good restaurants here?”

“Yes. There’s three. The rest,” and he raised an eyebrow, “let’s just say that there are no sanitary rules down here in this jungle outpost. No one didn’t try to protect people from how the food is handled.”

“Food poisoning.” Daria wrinkled her nose. “Definitely let me know the names of those clean restaurants.”

He looked at her through his thick, short lashes. “Actually? I’m wondering if I might take you to dinner tonight to one of them? I could give you a lot of information about the area. There’s plenty of orchids everywhere, and I could suggest some trails that you might take to find a lot of them in a hurry?” Her eyes widened slightly and her lips drew into a line of concern.

“I’d love to take you up on that invitation, Nik. Thank you. You’re a lifeline to me because earlier in my apartment I was wondering who to talk to to find out about the flora and fauna around here. A local person that knows where the orchids would be.”

“I’m the person you want.” He looked at his watch. “May I escort you back to your apartment? I could drop by, say, at seven p.m. tonight and have you to dinner?” He saw her cheeks grow pink and it made her seem like she was becoming to him. That wasn’t a reaction an actress could force. The eagerness shining in her eyes and he could feel her truly looking for him and seeing him alone. He was too, but for different reasons. Behind closed doors.

“After sweeping the place for bugs, they could shed the role playing.”

I lovedown to business.

“Wonderful,” she murmured, tipping the mug and swallowing the  
y fromher coffee. She set it down and, before she could get up, Nik had sto  
fingerspulled the chair out for her.

“Chivalry is not dead,” he murmured in an amused tone near her ear

His moist breath sent a skitter of tingles across her ear and scalp. T  
vith antheir faces only inches from one another, she found herself drowning  
en herestormy-looking blue eyes, and her voice went oddly husky. “I see that.  
ere foryou...”

. It had

\* \* \*

. Now?

Truly, NIGHT FELL QUICKLY in the jungle, Daria had discovered. It was con  
dark outside the venetian blinds of the window that looked down up  
busy tourista street of Aguas Calientes. Nik would arrive any mome  
felt anxious. Excited. Along with some dread. Her heart wouldn  
just say skipping around, telling her how much Nik affected her as a woma  
o FDA man was, in her eyes, a certifiable hunk. Now, Daria wished that Lau  
ow the warned her about that. Maybe it would have prepared her more, ma  
little easier not to be ensnared by that slow, heated smile that son  
shadowed his chiseled lips. Or to fall so easily into his narrowed ga

I was feel consumed by the invisible fire that throbbed organically between  
ld give Her body was at a five-alarm-fire stage of alert, and she couldn't d  
around ignore it or stop it. The man reeked of male sensuality so thick and  
of them such that Daria had no experience with. Sometimes in that cafe, as she  
relief. at him, sensed him, she thought he might be more jaguar than human  
ou're a was a decidedly primal animal side to him that he hid well, but it  
I could from hidden from her. And that is when Daria realized that he was  
always powerfully drawn to her as she was to him.

ort you Rubbing her palms against her black wool slacks, she didn't kno  
nd take to do or what to say. Maybe just ignore this invisible, scorching con  
o damn simmering between them? Stay focused on the assignment? Her  
ere was trembled slightly as she smoothed her white silk long-sleeved blou  
ward to tucked it into her waist a bit more. She'd chosen a pale-pink alpaca  
l doors, scarf that she'd looped around her neck and shoulders, and a set of sm.  
and get Incan earrings. There was a soft knock on the door and she jumped, h

slamming into her ribs. She was acting like a teenager full of uncontrollable hormones! Gulping, she nervously threaded her fingers through her long, combed hair. Did she look all right? She wasn't sure to expect because they hadn't had a chance yet to actually sit down and talk without being overheard.

Turning, Opening the door, she looked up and met Nik's warm, shadowed eyes in his. "For you," he said, holding out a spray of white and purple orchids. Thank wrapped in silver foil encircled with a purple ribbon.

"Oh..." Daria whispered, taking them, brushing his fingers during the transfer. "They're beautiful. Thank you," and she stepped aside, allowing him in. How different he appeared tonight. Earlier in the day, Nik had looked like an adventurer of Indiana Jones origin. Tonight, he wore a pressed white long-sleeved shirt, a black blazer over it, and black chinos trousers. Over his right arm was a tan raincoat. His combat boots were gone and he wore black leather oxfords instead. The change in him was startling. He reminded her of a rogue corporate businessman, the idea making Dara smile inwardly. The rugged face would never be that of the suave, elegant businessman who had graced the covers of GQ magazine, but that didn't bother her at all. She quickly shut the door. As soon as she did, her voice sounding breathless, she said, "Please, sit down? Do we have time to talk at all tonight, or do we go eat?"

Nik nodded and casually folded the raincoat over the back of the leather chair. "Yes, the reservation is for eight p.m. We have an hour before the primal, placed his finger to his lips.

Dara understood he wanted to check the apartment for bugs. She had, but another set of eyes wouldn't hurt. She'd found none, but gave a grave nod of her head, stepping out of the way as he began his thorough search, saying, "Do you mind if I briefly use the facilities first?"

Daria, understanding his ruse to disguise the lack of talk between them, while he looked around, replied, "Not at all. Go ahead. I'll be right here waiting."

Once the search was done and he hadn't found any bugs, Nik came back to the living room where she stood silent. He nodded in affirmation that they could drop the act now.

He opened his sports coat and sat down.

Daria placed the spray of orchids into a vase and sat it on the coffee table.

of wild, as she sat down on the couch across from him. "I've got to say, you're fingers good at undercover work."

re what He raised his eyebrows. "You were perfect out there this afternoon and talk saw instant relief in her expression.

Giving him a rolled-eyed look, Daria admitted, "This is new for me yes. sniper by trade. Shield Security, who I work for, gave me the orchids because I speak Russian, Ukrainian and Spanish languages. I've never done undercover work before." Dara leaned back, crossing her long legs and resting the counting on you to help me, Nik."

ing him He frowned and studied her. "I will take care of you."

ked like Daria's heart took off. He'd said those words to her with great weight long-she suddenly felt that armor-like energy almost visibly surrounding his left. There was a look of the warrior in his eyes for a moment as he stared blackly at her. It made her anxiety dissolve. This man was more than a shadow to her. He was a long-time operator. A hardened warrior, a fact which he masked with the most part from the world around him, putting on the combat face that facade, instead.

ill. She "Thanks for the support," she said. "First, I want to tell you that a little Kazak said to tell you hello."

l before Nik straightened; his voice suddenly thick with emotion. "Alex, do you know him?"

e black Her heart clenched at the raw, sudden emotion flooding his voice. "He expression. If Daria had ever doubted a genuinely warm tie between them, she had her proof now. Nik's eyes glistened and, for a moment, she already thought she saw tears in them. Just as suddenly, they were gone. He knew him and his wife Lauren very well."

orough "Alex? Married? Wait... Lauren...? Lauren Parker? The woman who helped kidnap and then helped to escape?"

n them She saw disbelief flare in his eyes as she nodded. "Yes, the very woman. They were married after coming back from that mission in Peru. You."

ne back appear, "They told me so much about you, Nik. I came here with far more information about you, your background and life, than what is usually available."

Alex loves you deeply, as you know, like a brother. Lauren is forever grateful to you for helping save her life. They both want only a good outcome for everyone table down here in Peru." She swallowed convulsively as she saw so many faces

He really reflected in his suddenly readable expression. It was like a miracle, revealing her sharply of Luke and his ability to shed that operator's mask when on." He alone with her. Nik was doing the same thing. It made him just that much more of a draw to Daria because he was able to expose the softer man behind the mask. I'm aside of himself to her.

mission     Sitting up, Nik pushed his long fingers through his hair. "I-I never done know..."

s. "I'm     "Alex said to tell you that you'd better get your ass home to Virginia. They said they have a room at their new cabin in the woods and it's got you on the door. They both want to help you and Dan when you're finally caught and get free of this place... free of Korsak."

ng her.     Grimacing, Nik stood up, his scowl deepening. "Thank you for letting me know, Daria. I love Alex with all my heart. But you know that already, soldier." She gave him a warm look. "Yes, I do."

ked for     He stood and paced, moving to the now closed venetian blinds. Camera lenses peeked out from one side of them, studying the hill and highway below them. Turning back to her, he said, "Slavik Brudin, second in command of Alex our team, saw us at that restaurant this afternoon." He walked over to her, holding her worried gaze.

x? You     "That's what you wanted. Right? That they know you've hooked up with a woman?"

ice and     "Yes. It was a good thing. Do you have photos of the rest of the team?"

the two     "Yes, Alex provided them to me."

ent, she     "And their backgrounds?"

"Yes, I     "Yes. Why?"

1 that I     "Because Brudin saw you coming down the hill from your apartment before you made it to the church. He told me later, when I came back to the hotel we all stay at, that he didn't know you were my woman. He had eyes on you already and was going to hunt you down."

ru with     A chill worked up her back. "Hunt me down?" Her voice sounded hollow to even to herself.

ar more     Nik gave her a grim look. "I told him I'd just met you, that I had no interest in you."

grateful     "What did he say?"

for you     "He was surprised. It's the first time I've laid claim to a woman in this town." His mouth thinned. "I know Brudin will take that info to..."

nindingKorsak.”

he was “Again, that’s good. It’s what we want.”

it much “Yes,” he muttered, studying her beneath the weak lamplight. “Bisculina loose cannon. He’s a predator with no human feelings.”

“Where I come from? That’s what we call a sociopath.”

didn’t “He is, believe me,” Nik rasped.

“So, your team knows we’re going to dinner?”

nia. He “Yes. And I wouldn’t be surprised if they shadow me. More ir namecuriosity than anything else. I’ve been with them five years and never able torelationship with a woman.”

“It’s been two years for me,” she said wryly, giving him an understanding melook.

?” “My job leaves me no time to develop a relationship with the woman,” he said beneath his breath. “I don’t like it. I never did. But refully,going to pay for a prostitute like they do. It’s not in me, I guess.”

r below She felt his heart open more. “I saw how lonely you are at the and ofNik.”

and sat “I am. Five years of nonstop hell.”

“You’re doing it for a good reason. Dan will be brought over to t up withThat neurosurgeon has agreed to help him. You are courageous in my Daria admitted quietly, holding his hooded stare. “I don’t know if I com?” five years down here to make enough money to pay for that kind of edge medical technique for a kid brother or sister, even if I had one. B you’re doing? You’re a hero in my eyes.” She saw ruddiness come cheeks.

artment “I’m no hero. Don’t ever call me that, Daria. I’m as far away from k to theyou can get.”

l set his The low snarl in his voice, the pain behind it, slammed into her. S the anger and years of regret in his eyes, heard the wearine hollowdisappointment in his low, tortured voice. He sat down. “Okay,” she won’t repeat it.” But dammit, he was a hero to her, whether he ever l had anfrom her again or not. The devastation in his expression tore at her : knew from what Alex had said that they’d seen the rapes and mur innocent villagers on a regular and ongoing basis. Daria couldn’t i in thiswhat that did to the combat medics. She saw, clearly, how upset ack tobecome. Holding out her hands, she said soothingly, “Look, let’s focu

right now. Where are we at with Korsak's team? With Brudin? Do you think Brudin will be tailing us tonight?"

Brudin is "I'm sure of it," Nik muttered.

She saw the tension in his shoulders, heard the mounting tightness in his voice. "Tell me what I need to do to make this solid and safe for you," she urged. Because Nik had to convince Korsak that he was falling in love with her. That there was a relationship burgeoning between the two of them that he wasn't about to put his life on the line any more than it already was.

"Just what you're doing. Tonight, we need to look like two people who are helplessly drawn to one another."

"Like, me touching your hand at the table while we eat? Smiling at you? All my attention on you?"

"Yes, all those things." Nik gave her a flat look. "I don't imagine I'm not ever signed up for this... I mean... us..."

"I was briefed fully on my role for this, Nik. I know I'm to be your ally in the church, at least, in the public's perception. It's important we convince Korsak that Brudin is going to be watching us like a fox, then we just play the part."

He stared moodily at her. "You've never done undercover before." "I've done it in the US."

Daria gave him a patient look. "Listen, you're a very handsome man with blue eyes," she said, looking into his eyes. "And I like you already because of what Alex and Laurence told me last time we shared with me about you. I'm not stressed out about it, Nik. Does that help you relax?" Daria could see some of the shadowed worry in his eyes, but what was dissolving beneath her sincerely-spoken words. If he only knew how much she was drawn to him! And yet, she didn't DARE breathe a word of the truth to him. He had enough on his plate to handle. And she was completely sure *he* was drawn to *her*, even though the signs were there for anyone to see.

Releasing a breath, Nik sat back, slowly rubbing his palms down his face and across his curved thighs. "That is good to know. A relief, really. I will have to kiss you goodnight at your door tonight. Brudin will take it all back to Korsak and say, 'I give him a report. Are you okay with that?'"

He heard it. Her heart cracked a little because now she realized Nik was a child of his time and she a knight of old. He lived his life within those boundaries. Alex had told her so much. But then, Alex was just like that, too. Daria could see why the two of them were brothers in arms, and fellow combat medics, sharing so much in common that they did. Yet, the rest of Korsak's team were little more than predators on us.

controlled predators toward all women. "I'm more than okay with that."

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controlled predators toward all women. "I'm more than okay with that."

ou think just a show to convince Korsak. I'll be fine with it, Nik. Don't worry."

"I worry." He shot to his feet and began to pace, his fists opening and closing at his sides as he moved around the room. "I've seen too many Quechua women and girls harmed by Korsak and his team. I cannot give you," she cries of terror and pain out of my head. I live in fear of ever making a woman feel powerless and fearful of me."

1. Daria Getting up, Daria stopped him mid-stride, reaching out, curving her hand around his arm. She felt his bicep, tight and lean. He halted, turning, his face pale with anguish as he stared down at her.

"I'm looking forward to kissing you," she whispered unsteadily. A gasp was all she could say to try and convince Nik that she didn't want to live in angst over hurting her. Daria couldn't imagine the hellish life he lived in these ongoing circumstances. Alex had told her it had gotten so bad he couldn't deal with it any longer, glad to be out of the team. Glad to be with his lover. US. He worried about Nik remaining in this situation, what it was doing to him, and if him.

s." Now, as Daria searched his eyes, she saw the utter hopelessness suffering palpable in his blue gaze. She wanted, in that moment, to throw her arms around his shoulders, draw him to her, share her warmth, her ability to give a woman to give him a momentary safe harbor. Daria knew she could do that for Nik. The raw, unhinging violence of seeing men hurting others had opened a canyon of pain within him. He was, after all, a medic. A healer who lived to help stop suffering, not watch it occur and not being able to do anything about it. The tension in him was palpable as he stood there, wasn't watching her.

2. He was fragile, Daria slowly realized as she searched his gaze. Nik wasn't hiding from her in any way, and what she saw was horrifying to her. He carried so much anguish over so many years, helpless to stop the violence from happening to people who could not defend themselves. His fingers curved more surely around his arm. "Listen, we'll get through this together. You and I. We'll convince them, no question. And you must tell her that I'm not disgusted or feel uneasy about pretending to fall in love with you, Nik."

3. Daria forced a tight smile for his benefit and gave his arm a little squeeze. "You're not hurting me. I personally like you. Okay?" She bit back the words. It's that he was a good man, just as he'd requested. Nik didn't believe



good at all because he'd allowed those predatory men to hurt others.  
ing and "Are you SURE?" Nik demanded, digging into her gaze. "Are you  
o many SURE, Daria?"

get their *To hell with it.* Daria realized in those tense seconds that, of the  
ing anythem, she was the less wounded. "Let me show you how I feel about  
she breathed, sliding her arms around his tight shoulders, leaning u  
er hand She placed her lips against the harsh line of his mouth. Instantly, she f  
his eyestense. He was shocked by her boldness as her mouth moved softly  
his, asking him to participate. And then, she felt him relax as the heat  
and that built between them. She was taking a terrible risk by doing this but  
him to lips parted, almost shy in their exploration of her offering, she wante  
d under for all that Nik had endured. No one but another military person w  
that he been in battles could truly understand the depth of wounding the cor  
e in the carried. She felt an explosion of surprise and disbelief shatter through  
loing to he lifted his hands, gently framing her face.

Daria closed her eyes, her flesh reacting wantonly as he leaned i  
ess, the mouth, taking hers more surely, sliding, tasting and feeling his awa  
row her but tightly controlled, desire. Daria had been kissed before. She knew  
lity as a man really wanted to kiss her or not. Nik was holding back. She could  
do that all through him as his long fingers closed more firmly against her fa  
ad to r gently angled it so that he could afford full contact with her searching  
ler. He against his. She felt his terribly fragile state, the surprise at her acti  
e to do warmth that swirled and built like a bonfire between their barely-to  
stiffly, mouths. Daria stood quietly, no longer the aggressor, but simply a

Nik to explore her at his own pace, as if deciding what he wanted to do  
Nik was Her heart snagged in her chest as she felt his continued hesitation  
r. He'd felt the strength of his mouth brushing against hers, tasting her. This w  
onstant sided. Her side. She ached for Nik, as woman to his man. But it  
es. Her mutual. He was sipping from her lips, as if testing her, as if to adjus  
gh this needs and desires. She wanted to cry, but instantly shoved that reacti  
st knowdown inside her.

ve with And then, she felt something snap and break within Nik. Not in th  
sense, but she felt a huge shift within him but was unable to define  
e shake. was or what it meant. His moist breath flowed across her nose and  
e words Then, her world tumbled into a shocking heat as he stepped closer, p  
he was the length of his hard, male body against her softer, curved one. His

was no longer hesitant or shy. In the next second, she felt him open his mouth VERY with contained strength, deepening their kiss, widening his exploration of her mouth, his lips gliding hungrily against her own. A soft moan rose in her throat as his two arms tightening around his neck as she surrendered completely to you,"embrace, to the gentle strength of his mouth against hers. Her lower lip upward.throbbled, hungry for his touch.

felt Nik Her mind was barely functioning now as she became lost in the scent and power of him as a man wanting his woman. And it was clear rapidly that he WANTED to kiss her now. Whatever had happened at first, whatever hurdle or wall he'd encountered within himself, was now dissolved. He knew how to kiss. He reminded her sharply of Luke, who had taken her to know pleasure in slow exploration of every nook and cranny of her mouth and body. Nik was the same... only... better. *Much better.*

him as Her knees began to feel weak, and Daria had to lean heavily into him to remain standing. Nik sensed her quandary and eased his hands from her shoulders and onto her arms and allowed them to drift across her shoulders and slide down the length of her spine and cup her hips. When he splayed his strong fingers out over her hips and brought her firmly against his erection, she groaned, deciding to feel it the kiss between them. Her whole body went red-hot and she nestled back against his own. Daria didn't want to think about what was happening. It was very clear to her right now that Nik *did* want her. As his tongue slowly moved across her lower lip, tasting her, she moved closer, touching against him, letting him know she liked it. And, as his tongue touched her, Daria clung to him, hungrily returning that first contact.

She was breathing raggedly as Nik reluctantly eased his mouth from hers. Lips throbbing from the power of his kiss, she dragged her lashes up to meet his dark, searching cobalt gaze. He was trembling. But so was she. Daria saw shock in his eyes, entwined with the sudden new realization that she liked kissing him just as much as he liked kissing her. There was a deep arousal in his eyes and she absorbed the hardness of his erection against her soft belly. Her arms unlocked from around his neck and she fiercely looked back at his searching gaze, filled as it was with a mixture of awe, arousal, surprise, and what itpleasure.

cheek. "Now," she whispered in an unsteady voice, "don't ever think of me as coming out that I don't enjoy you touching or kissing me when we're in public, Nik. I think you know that I like it. I WANTED to kiss you.

her lips your touch. This isn't role playing. It's for real..."

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oat, her  
to his  
er body

ie heat,  
r to her  
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his man  
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eopening  
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ion that  
was raw  
inst her  
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m here  
out in  
I LIKE

your touch. This isn't role playing. It's for real..."

## CHAPTER 5

**N**IK COULD BARELY think, the taste of Daria on his lips, her scent arousing him until he wanted to continue that kiss to a blazing conclusion. The sincerity of her words pulverized his pounding heart. He kept a hand on her shoulder because she appeared dazed. So was he. He'd never expected this! Not after five years not even touching a woman, and then to have this specimen come boldly up to him, press her warm, willing mouth to his? His mind exploded with shock. For that moment, Nik had been stunned. Her lips moving lightly across his. Her scent filled his nostrils, the warm curves of her breasts lightly pressing against his chest, her arms fitting warm around the nape of his neck, all conspired to momentarily place him in a state of paralysis. It were as if a fairytale had turned upside-down and a princess had awoken the sleeping frog-prince from a hundred years of long sleep!

He saw a hint of chagrin come into her wide, glistening gold eyes, although arousal clearly pooled in them, along with what he dared he'd get from the pleasure from the kiss he had returned. Nik knew how to please a woman. The surging starvation tunneling through him right now made him want to take her into his arms, and carry her into the bedroom. Shame passed through those animal thoughts as he searched her innocent features, the stubble of her chin, her words echoing through him, through his raw heart that suddenly so needy and hungry. His mind shouldn't go there. He was not like Korsak and his men. Nothing like those predators.

He treasured the act of love with a willing woman who wanted as much as he wanted her. The drought of no sex was like a jagged edge cutting through his rock-like control. Daria's mouth lifted a little, unsureness, a touch of shyness, coming into her expression. He sensed her worrying that she'd done something wrong. She'd done something so right. Her kiss and boldness, had reminded him that he was human and had needs like any

"That was," he managed in a rasp, "... unexpected..."

Daria gave him a confused look. "I know... I didn't... I mean, I

mean to kiss you. Well, that's not true. I did," and her hands f  
nervously as she ducked out from beneath his grasp. Wrapping he  
around herself, Daria stood there, uncertain, with heat stinging her  
"I'm not making much sense."

Wryly, he murmured, "No, you aren't..." There was uncertainty  
eyes. Her cheeks were a bright red and he managed a slight smile. "  
okay. I think I understand why you did it."

"You do?"

"Alex told you about all the stuff we've seen and been through,"  
heavily, avoiding her caring gaze. "I just didn't want to enter into th  
you and have you feel as if I was taking advantage of you, was all."  
her eyes, and saw them growing even more sympathetic. "Was I right  
kissed me to show me that you didn't mind if I kissed you when the s  
demanded it?" And Nik wished suddenly, that Daria had *wanted* to k  
because she was attracted to him as much as he was to her. That v  
secret wish. He knew he had no right to expect that from her at all. The  
strangers thrown together on an op. And yes, Daria had gone into  
knowing the part she must play. Still, in Nik's mind, it was a highly p  
intimate kind of demand being thrust upon her, this fake relationship.  
bothered him, maybe more than it should.

"You were right," Daria admitted quietly, allowing her arms to  
her sides. She swept her thick hair across her shoulder. "I'm not apolo  
Nik. You needed to know I'm okay with all of this."

"Oh, I got your message loud and clear."

"You're not going to hurt me. I know that. But don't err on the  
caution, either because if your team is watching us, it has to look g  
between us. We have to sell to them that we're falling in love. That's a

His heart twinged and he couldn't stop the hurt from flowing t  
him. Daria's kiss had been convincing. Too convincing to his sex-  
body, to his heart that yearned for the softness of a woman in his li  
more. "You're right, we do. They will never see it as love, howeve  
sex."

She looked incredible with her long, straight black hair laying ac  
shoulder like a dark cape, emphasizing the clean lines of her face an  
golden eyes that he swore still had arousal in them. He had kissed  
real. It wasn't an act on his part at all. Once he'd gotten past the sho

luttered heat of her mouth and the press of her sweet, innocent curves against his arms smashed through his rigid control, and he'd kissed her reverently, with his cheeks against her cheeks, his heart, through every movement of his mouth. A kiss was far more than just lips meeting. His heart was involved. His soul. And Nik had a part in her himself, for that brief, exquisite moment, to kiss Daria with all the need. But it's beauty he had to share with her. Only... she was such a good actress.

If he believed her explanation, it had all been just an act on her part to convince him that she was okay with him being intimate with her. He said point. As he pushed his fingers through his hair, his heart, which had misled him wrong, whispered to him that she'd meant every last bit of that. He met that it *wasn't* a game. Or a cover. Or a convincing lie to fool Korsak's? You Daria had kissed him because she was drawn powerfully to him in that situation instincts, the same ones that had kept him alive so many times when he should have died, knew he was correct. His head warred with his heart. He should believe Daria's offered explanation or not?

They were He didn't want to, dammit. His body was on fire. His erection throbbing. Not having had a woman for five years, after living like a monk all that time, like the man in prison that he was, her kiss and the innocent movement of her body against his, was like the key that had unlocked a dungeon door, wide open, and released all his imprisoned needs. All those urges, that he had ignored up until just now, came roaring to the surface. What a fucking mess!

"We need to go," he said, his voice thick with hunger, desperately trying to once again wrestle all those needs back down into a dark, hidden corner inside of himself.

"Yes... of course..." and Daria turned, picking up her light, wool-lined, red-colored coat. It turned cool and damp in the evening around here.

Nik moved over to her, taking the coat and helping her slip it on. He starved watched her arrange her black hair and pink scarf with such feather-soft movements that he felt like a slavering, half-insane wolf wanting his mate. Only And honestly? That is how he felt toward Daria. She was his mate. She didn't know it. Yet. Nik found that he had to willfully force his fingers across her release Daria's coat to be able to break away from her and walk over to the chair across which his raincoat hung, and pull it on. His hands were steady. Hell, *he* wasn't steady, his body for a start, not to mention his mind, spinning with heat, arousal and desire for her. And, judging from the

him had Daria's wide, flawless eyes, she was just as dazed by their coming together as he was. She wasn't a good liar. He still saw arousal in her eyes. That could not be faked.

allowed He opened the door for her, and the cool dampness hit them. Daria descended and down the exterior stairs, hands on the wet metal railings and Nik followed.

Below, there was the noise of rasping, throaty flutes, drums pouring a rhythmic beat, and tourists in front of the many brightly-lit stores descending up to the street. Nik swiftly scanned the area. He knew Brudin was down somewhere in the shadows. Watching.

at kiss. Daria pulled her pink scarf tighter around her neck and then turned to see her team waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs, her hands in the pockets of her coat. The street lights were glaring and bright on both sides of the asphalt concourse. Colorful flags hung everywhere outside shops to attract customers.

Nik halted just behind and to the left of her, his hand naturally came to rest on the small of her back. He could smell the spices and the meat cooking, the air filled with their odors. Dinner started between eight to eleven p.m. in the States of America. He leaned over, his mouth almost brushing the hair coverlet. "I'm sure Brudin has been ordered to be Korsak's eyes and ears."

he ones Daria turned, their faces inches apart. "Did you run into them earlier?" She saw his eyes flicker with anger and then it was gone.

"We're all at that hostel outside of town. When I came back after trying to escort you to your apartment, Brudin jumped me about you." Nik did not want to go into all the lurid details of the man's cruel remarks nor did he want to mention his small, mean brown eyes dancing with devilry as the usual conversation commenced.

his small, mean brown eyes dancing with devilry as the usual conversation commenced.

"They hassled you."

on. He He placed his hand on her shoulder, smoothing her coat's golden lining, feeling the strength of her beneath its fabric. "It's their nature. But," his mate became grim, "Korsak took instant interest. Brudin always does his job. He just works for him. You have a photo of him?"

gers to "Yes."

r to the He could smell her scent and it was driving him crazy, "If you speak to him, pretend not to see him. Just tell me? I'll probably see him, anyway. It's their tactics."

look in She smiled a little and leaned in against his tall body. "Then, let's go."



ether asthem *really* think we're falling in love with one another."

ouldn't The huskiness in her voice, that smoky look in her shadowed eyes gleamed with mirth, made him relax a little. "You remind me of a started jaguar, you're a *kotya*, a little cat." he whispered, deliberately dropped low, rasping endearment right by her ear.

iding a Laughing a little, Daria slipped her hand around his arm and reaching in close to Nik as he guided them into the busy street, heading up the hill there been called a lot of things in my life, but never that." She gave him a look.

ied and How badly Nik wanted this to be real. The urge to see even a single of her in her eyes to fully persuade him that it was, made him long for the wide, relationship with an intelligent woman like her. "*Moya kotya*," he said, to attract her a heated look she couldn't misinterpret. *My little kitten*. It was the a lover whispered, and as he murmured it by her ear, strands of hair brushing tickled his nose and mouth for a moment. Nik felt and saw her reaction, the air deeply meaningful words. "And yes, it is my sweet words for you. Even in South I met you, you reminded me of a lithe, beautiful female jaguar. You saying her he said, lifting his hand toward the darkness where Machu Picchu rose above them, "there are jaguars in this area?"

arlier?" Daria raised her eyebrows, and said, "I read that there were. Have you ever seen one?"

ick after One corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "I have one on my arm and I didn't know." He saw her eyes flare slightly, saw them soften, and knew without a doubt that Daria liked the endearment he'd chosen for her. *Kotya* teasing kitten, but in his eyes and heart, she was a fully-matured, dangerously sensual female jaguar. There was a solid confidence that radiated from her and it intrigued him. He wanted desperately to have the time to find out about her on personal terms when they were alone and away from the city and her eyes.

is dirty He guided her to the top of the hill and lead her into Hotel Machu Picchu, the newest one the small town had to offer, boasting a full four stars. He knew that only well-heeled patrons, those with a lot of money, were going to stay at it. There were two bellmen in gray-and-black uniforms at the crystal-cut glass doors. Beggars had been driven off, not allowed anywhere near the entrance he saw. Normally, he would never eat here, preferring instead a local place he had made down near the church that served good, clean, solid food at a low price.

his money was going into a bank account for Dan's medical he  
res thattonight... just this one time, Nik was going to loosen up those purse  
femaleHe wanted to give Daria only the best and, from the look of awe on h  
ing theat the hand-carved quartz crystal doors that reflected Machu Picchu  
above, she was impressed. He couldn't wrap his head around the fact  
mainedhad this beautiful, sensual woman on his arm. She was smart and qu  
l. "I'vee he loved being around a woman like that.

teasing Daria managed a whispered, "ohhhh..." as they walked into th  
rotunda-like foyer. The tiles were gold-veined white marble interspac  
le lookblack ones in designs that honored ancient Incan designs and symbols.  
a realthem hung a thousand-piece quartz crystal chandelier, sending out sp  
, givinglights in all directions.

term of Nik enjoyed her reaction to the elegance and richness of the hot  
ier hairstaff, all Quechua Indians, were in gray-and-black uniforms. "Your  
t to hisoutshines anything you see in here," he told her as he eased the coat  
er sinceHe saw her lips twist, her eyes flashing with warmth up at him o  
know," whispered words.

se high "You are a romantic, Nik. More from the Victorian Age than a n  
day twenty-first century man. How did you get that way?"

ive you "I don't really know. Perhaps I need you to discover those things i

He led her over to the coat room and the young woman with long  
m rightbraids took their coats, giving the check stub to Nik. He slid it into the  
ithout aof his blazer. Turning, his hand on her upper arm as he led her tow  
was a sumptuous restaurant, he said lightly, "We have all night. I'll tell yo  
ous andtales, *Moya kotya*, if you want to hear them."

n Daria She gave him a merry look. "Oh, I'm all ears, *Moya prekrasnyy* j  
ut moremy beautiful jaguar, believe me."

prying He managed a sliver of a grin. "I like your endearment. It slips like  
off your tongue. Thank you..." He walked up to the tuxedoed maître  
Picchu, was clearly from Lima, Peru, and not from around here. The midd  
Nik sawman with his thin pencil mustache and arrogant-looking face waited fo  
inside.He looked them up and down critically, sniffed and then nodded, as if  
doublehis blessing that they were dressed well enough to be allowed entrar  
rtrance, the dining room. Nik maintained his hardened expression, speaking n  
l eateryin Spanish, but in *Castilian* Spanish, which only the upper-crus  
ice. All residents spoke, not the bastardized, common Spanish that the masses

lp. ButThe maître d's eyes popped. And then he quickly cleared his thro  
strings.looked nervously down at his reservations book.

er face “Yes, of course Señor Morozov, you are right here.”

1 rising “I want that booth over there,” and Nik pointed to one in the da  
that hecorner.

ick and “Of course, sir,” he said, nodding and with a flourish, said, “I w  
you there myself, Señor and Señorita?”

ie huge Daria looked up at Nik and withheld a smile. When he wanted to  
ed withwas pure alpha male. Around her, he was not. Protective, yes. But

Above like the unearned arrogance of this maître d who was putting on so ma  
arks ofthat she wanted to laugh outright. But that wouldn't have been a goo

so Daria kept her game face on, pretending to be looking around  
el. Thebored. Inwardly, her heart was starting to turn to mush. Every tir

beauty leaned close to her, she inhaled the male scent that made her lowe  
off her.shimmer with possibility. She wished she could control her body,

ver hiscouldn't. It clearly had a damned mind of its own. His softly-  
endearment for her made her want him even more. She liked that he s

modern-as a deadly female jaguar. Indeed, she was.

The maître d made a huge, grand celebration, gesticulating with h  
n me?”of pulling out the gold-colored mahogany chair for her. It was upho

, blackwith a rich tapestry of blue, gold and soothing green tones. In fact, t  
pocketgreen of the ceiling along with the equally pale blue of the walls did h

ard therelax a little. She sat down and got comfortable, glad to see the maître  
u manyand a young Indian woman in a crisp long-sleeved white blouse and

black ankle-length skirt come over. She smiled at them and it was genu  
yaguar, “Welcome,” she greeted in flawless Spanish. “I am Maria.” She

each of them a huge leather-bound menu. “May I get you somet  
e musicdrink?”

d who Nik looked at Daria who sat at his left arm. “What interests you?”

le-aged “I like wine. Do you?”

or them. “I was weaned on wine at our local Catholic church, so yes, I l  
f givingwine. What kind do you prefer? Red or white? Or, perhaps champagne

ice intoopened the wine menu for her. He was going to spare no expense thi  
ot onlyHe knew Korsak and the team would laugh themselves silly because

t Limawell-known as ‘The Penny Pincher’ among them. They spent hundred  
; spoke.dollars on prostitutes. He saved his money. But there was no exp

that and would spare to make Daria happy. And that came from his heart, not some act they were supposed to perform. He noticed, as he covertly gaze around the room, that Brudin was not yet present, but he hadn't expected the coarse Russian to be here right on time. He'd never get an inspection of that haughty maître d'. He'd be outside, hidden in the brilliant trees, watching through a window. Nik hoped it started to rain and it would be the bastard. That, or a poisonous centipede could maybe crawl up into his leg and sting the hell out of him.

nothing "Are you a white or red guy?" Daria asked.

any airs "Either. I like all wine. Pick something you want to drink. We'll do our best idea, bottle."

utterly Daria gave him a warm look and nodded. She showed their server the name of the wine, pointing it out on the menu.

er body Maria nodded and replied, "A very good white, Señorita. If you don't mind, but she citrus finish? It is semi-sweet."

-spoken "Sounds wonderful," Daria said, thanking her.

saw her Another waiter, an eager younger man, came over with a basket of freshly-baked bread and a silver bowl of butter accompanying it.

his arm, Daria sighed and looked around and said in Ukrainian, "This is a wonderful beautiful restaurant, Nik. Hard to imagine something this fancy out here in the pale middle of the Peruvian jungle," her expression softening even more.

help her "My eyes are only on you," he murmured. He liked the fact that she'd leave a new Ukrainian as well. Brudin would go out of his mind when he found she spoke that language. The other patrons nearby were from many countries, but he was betting that no one knew their shared mother tongue, so he handed a safer to talk in Ukrainian, instead. He saw Daria's cheeks grow pink catching a compliment. His words stirred Daria and, to his surprise, she gave him a sweet smile that melted his heart.

"I think there are many sides to you, Nik Morozov."

"I am complicated because of the life I chose."

like red "Aren't we all?" She sipped her iced water. "But, you honestly interested?" Nik smiled. "I feel there's so much to you, and all I'm seeing is just the tip of the iceberg."

he was "That is American slang?"

s of US She grinned. "Yes. We're great at slang, aren't we? Do you know any more?"

ot from He nodded his head. “I took an advanced immersion course in I  
slid hiswhen I was in the military. My friend, Alex Kazak, did not. He neve  
hadn’tgrasp contractions. And he’s awful at slang. But,” and he gave her an  
past theglance, “I don’t pretend to be a complete expert on American slang, eit  
ush and Daria laughed outright.

soaked Her laughter riffled through him like a lover’s caressing hands. I  
side hisrich, full-bodied sound, husky, straight from Daria’s heart. His  
expanded with so many emotions that Nik couldn’t process them a  
among them was happiness. It had been such a foreign feeling to him  
order ashe walked into his life. The sparkle in Daria’s eyes whispered throug  
There was real joy radiating from her to him. And that delicious m  
ver thehers that he’d tasted earlier, and instantly become addicted to, v  
undoing.

I like a

sket of

truly a  
t in the

t Daria  
und out  
untries,  
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of the

r what I

He nodded his head. “I took an advanced immersion course in English when I was in the military. My friend, Alex Kazak, did not. He never could grasp contractions. And he’s awful at slang. But,” and he gave her an amused glance, “I don’t pretend to be a complete expert on American slang, either.”

Daria laughed outright.

Her laughter riffled through him like a lover’s caressing hands. It was a rich, full-bodied sound, husky, straight from Daria’s heart. His chest expanded with so many emotions that Nik couldn’t process them all. But among them was happiness. It had been such a foreign feeling to him. Until *she* walked into his life. The sparkle in Daria’s eyes whispered through him. There was real joy radiating from her to him. And that delicious mouth of hers that he’d tasted earlier, and instantly become addicted to, was his undoing.

## CHAPTER 6

**D**ARIA COULD FEEL the tension in Nik as they ate their dinner. It was obvious, but it was there. They sat close enough together so as not to be overheard because of the booth he'd chosen.

"Are you concerned about Brudin watching us?" and she saw him shift fractionally as he lifted the fork to his mouth. The change in Nik, just in his clothes standpoint, was amazing. They were out in a jungle where sweltering high humidity were the norm. Yet, tonight, he looked like a self-made corporate lion. His confidence was rock solid and she knew he'd been that way through his life as a black ops soldier.

"Yes. Korsak always sends Brudin to do his bidding."

"Do you think you'll be hit with a lot of questions when you get to the hotel tonight?" She cut some of the carrots on her plate with her knife and fork. They'd been drizzled with local Peruvian honey and were amazing. She saw the corner of his mouth draw in fractionally in place of a verbal response and then she continued, "I take it that's a 'yes'?"

He met and held her gaze. "Brudin is a bully. He lives to hurt other people."

"Do you think they'll buy our burgeoning relationship?"

"Yes. Tomorrow? I want to pick you up around ten a.m. There's a trail around her base south of town, along the railroad tracks. I'd like to take you there. We need to verify your cover as a Kiev university botanist in charge of local orchids." He gave her a slight smile. "That particular trail is loaded with orchids hanging off the branches of the trees all along either side of it."

"Mmm, sounds nice. Away from prying eyes too?"

"Can't assume it. Brudin knows how to hide and trail with the best of them. We're going to assume they have eyes on us any time we're together unless I tell you different."

She felt her lower body twinging with need again as he gave her that dark, heated look of his. How she wished she could kiss Nik and that she wouldn't even be to show Korsak's team. It would be because she wa

The memory of his strong mouth cherishing hers was... *unforgettable!*

“Have you given any thought to staying overnight with me in your apartment?” she asked.

“Yes.” He wiped his mouth with his white linen napkin before putting it back across his lap. “They’ve never seen me have a woman in my life now. But they know I’m a cautious person, a conservative one.” He finished and cut into his beef steak. “I’ve given a lot of thought to this, Daria. By the third night, I can stay with you all night, and the team will expect I do it too soon, it may come off looking fake and raise their suspicions. On the second night, I’d like to spend about an hour with you on the plane before we go back to your apartment. I can get you up to speed on the villa and frequent. There’s pictures I can draw for you that will help even me that including the Army Special Forces team that is trying to shadow me. Staying over will have to wait for a few more days.”

She thought about Nik being in that apartment with her. “You’re not going to tell them, so I’ll trust whatever you say.”

He studied her for a moment. “Trust me, I would like to go home with you and stay all night.”

Daria wasn’t sure how he meant it. To love her? To finish that kiss in his bedroom? Or to give her the information she was seeking that would help her find out if the Army teams shadowing Korsak?

It wasn’t something she could ask about out in public. “Whatever you think will work best to convince me, I’m fine by me.” She saw the look in his shadowed blue eyes and felt a pang of longing within him. It was sweet, sharp and poignant. Nik opened his mouth but then frowned and shut it. What was it that he’d wanted to say to her?

Nik walked Daria up the flight of wooden stairs to the door of her apartment. Overhead, going on ten p.m. now, the white, gauzy clouds had lowered to just above the town still rocking with drums, flutes and war songs. Tourists crowded on either side of the street. He followed Daria up the stairs.

It was chilly, and the dampness ate into his clothes. He enjoyed the feel of her hips swaying in front of him, his fingers itching to cover those soft cheeks and feel her warmth and her mouth upon his once more. It was impossible to wipe that kiss from his mind and heart.

The nape of his neck prickled in warning and Nik knew Bruce was nearby. Probably invisible somewhere in the crowd below, watching. He kept watching. Reaching the platform in front of the brightly-painted red



door, he took the keys Daria had in hand and opened it for her. The heat in my had made the tendrils of dark hair around her face soft, and his heart to

“I need to kiss you goodnight,” he said in a low, gritty voice, slipping the keys into her awaiting hand. He saw her give him a playful smile before he placed them into her purse.

“Yes, Brudin would expect that.” She slid the strap of her purse over

I think left shoulder and lifted her arms, sliding them around his shoulder to accept it. If looking forward to it...,” and she leaned upward as his hands cupped her shoulders, gently drawing her against him. There was a hint of confusion when Nik’s eyes flickered for a split second. Did he not want to kiss her? If she had asked a question about that, he expunged it by leaning over, his mouth brushing her cheek, gently ‘hello’, as if asking permission. Daria felt the tension within him relax. Nik’s fingers curved around her back, drawing her closer until her breasts

came up against his jacket and chest. His breath was warm and she knew her lips, wanting more contact with him. Daria thought she heard him

but wasn’t sure. His mouth slid across hers, capturing her, and Daria felt a wave flood her lower body. This was a man who wanted to kiss her. If

unsure, it didn’t feel like it now as he coaxed open her lips more, drawing her in from her like a bee gathering nectar from a flower.

Daria felt cherished, and sensed his wanting to take her along with

lightly This was no raw, sexual kiss. This was a man exploring the woman he held in his arms, almost worshipfully, as he caressed her lips, deepening their powerful connection. A small sound of pleasure vibrated in her throat as he brought his mouth, fully against her, his mouth masterful, stirring her to bright, aching longing. She was lost in him, in his scent, in his strength that he monitored as he explored her mouth more surely. Daria wanted so much more. Nik felt so confident against her. She knew without proof that he would protect her, his impression swirling around her. She could feel him guarding her on the stairs, knew obliquely, through the heat and fire flaring to life within her, that he would give his life for her without hesitation.

That jolted her. Daria felt as if they were in telepathic connection. It was one another, feeling his intense, consuming hunger wrapping around her. His mouth taking hers to a level where she could no longer think, on a level that was only need.

Always As their mouths reluctantly parted, her breath was shallow, and as she drew in his. She lifted her lashes, staring up into his stormy, blue gaze. He held

umidity solidly against him and she could feel his erection pressing insistently  
ok off. Her belly, flares of heat throbbing down through her.

ing the “Wow,” she murmured, her own voice sounding dreamlike to her  
as she really know how to kiss a woman.”

Nik slowly released her and she swayed. He kept one hand on her  
ver her arm, seeing the heat in her half-closed eyes, seeing it in the richness  
s. “I’m parted lips, and in the flush creeping up into her cheeks. “You make a  
ped her hungry, Daria,” was all he could force out, the throbbing in his erection  
ision in proof that he wanted this woman: body, heart and soul. She felt  
ad any yearning in him, whether she knew it or not. She was a soldier, a  
ng her woman with confidence to burn, and he’d tasted all of that in her  
n as his arousing kiss. Daria didn’t seem at all afraid to commit to him. The only  
lightly question was: was it real between them? Or only part of her undercover  
opened It hadn’t been from his end. Not at all. Nik wanted to lead her thro  
groan, open door, shut and lock it behind them, lift Daria into his arms and ca  
elt heat into the bedroom where he wouldn’t allow her to leave his arms un  
he was pleased her, and then she would never want to leave his side again.  
sipping all a fevered dream, but one that had sprung to life within his chest and

body until he couldn’t think coherently any longer. He felt as if a wild,  
th him. animal was howling within him. One that wanted to be released.

held in He saw Daria’s faint smile, saw the arousal clearly in her eyes th  
sacred No woman could fake that look, and he knew it. Joy flowed through  
ight her this realization hit him. Nik reached up, caressing her cheek, pushing  
ife. She strands of hair back behind her ear.

claimed He said, “I’ll see you tomorrow at ten a.m.? Wear your jungle  
lid and clothes? Boots? And bring a knapsack with water. I’ll bring us some  
ect her, eat for lunch.”

and she She gave him a heated look, her hand moving down his other arm  
that he sounds wonderful. Thank you for a lovely day and night, Nik. Plea  
safe?” and her gaze dug into his.

on with Nik heard the concern in her husky voice and released her arm, a  
er own, her to stand on her own. “I’ll be fine, *moya Kotza*.” He nodded tow  
ly feel. open door. “Go inside? Lock the door behind you.” He saw the regre  
eyes, the way her mouth closed, that lower lip in a slight pout, entici  
s fast as all over again.

held her “Yes,” she said in low voice. She let her hand fall from his

tly into “Goodnight... *Moy prekrasnyy yaguar*, my beautiful jaguar...”

Nik gave her a slight smile and touched her cheek one last time. Then, “youthing he wanted to do was leave Daria. The invitation was there in her

Was it real? How he wanted it to be! But she was a consummate actress. Her upper lip might well be for Brudin’s benefit. Waiting until she slipped inside, she quietly closed the door, Nik stood there until he heard the lock slide. A jaguarplace. Turning, he walked slowly down the steps, the round metal pommel clear the railings beaded with the dampness of the high humidity hovering over the town.

strong As he walked into the now thinning crowds and the music blared boldly, from the restaurants at the top of the hill, Nik felt the nape of his neck tingle in warning again.

react? A sleazy shape he recognized slid out from under the shadows of a doorway. “Well,” Brudin growled, giving him a leering look as he caught up with her in the center of the street where they started dodging clumps of tourists until he’d had a sweet kiss you gave her, Morozov. Why didn’t you follow her? It was she looked like she wanted you to do just that.”

lower “Because I’m not like you.” Nik reined in his irritation at the bald-headed soldier who was dressed in a dark green t-shirt and cammos and mud

hiking boots. Nik smiled inwardly. Brudin had spent quite some time in the mud, hiding among the plants near the window, while himself and Daria had eaten their meal in warmth and comfort inside. He knew Spetsnaz soldiers were tough and that physical discomfort was something they

learned to ignore. Still, it gave him a considerable sense of satisfaction. Brudin had spent two hours in the damp chill and rain watching them.

hiking to Brudin chuckled darkly, matching Nik’s stride down the street toward their hotel at the base of the hill. “She’s a fine piece of tail.”

1. “That “Shut your mouth, Brudin.”

use stay Brudin grinned, showing two lower teeth missing in the front of his mouth. “Touchy, are we?”

llowing Anger soared through Nik, but he instantly clamped down on it. “I’ll never treat a woman like any of you do.”

t in her Crowing, Brudin delighted in his prickly reaction. “Why, Morozov, don’t know what to think. Ever since I joined the team, you’ve been a

Now, suddenly, this new woman coming into town has turned your head. It is rather fascinating to me. We’ve never seen you around a woman

Maybe you can teach us something, Comrade.”

The last Grimly, Nik flashed him a glare. Brudin was thicker and heavier  
er eyes.was, but a good three inches shorter. “None of you treat a woman  
ess and respect. I always will.”

ide and Chuckling, Brudin gave him a merry look. “Right. I saw that erec  
de into yours. You’re no better than we are, Morozov. And you’re a liar. You  
sipes offuck her, pure and simple. No question about that. And just because w  
over the wine and dine a woman, it doesn’t mean our objective isn’t the same  
need a good fuck. That’s what women are good for.”

ing out Ignoring the laughing Russian, Nik said nothing. He’d learned a lo  
prickle ago that Brudin was a bully who delighted in torturing anyone else,  
woman.

n leave. “So,” Brudin said, “tell me about her.”

to Nik Nik gave Brudin her cover story. The idiot’s thick brown eyebrows

s, “that “She’s from Kiev, Ukraine?”

inside? “You know every nation on Earth comes to Machu Picchu. W  
Ukraine? Do you know what a botanist is?” Nik goaded him.

·headed Shrugging his meaty shoulder, Brudin shrugged. “A biologist.”

dy, wet “Close. She is an expert on plants and South American orchids.”

e in the “So?”

ria had “She’s here to write a book about them.” Nik was going to drip-  
-trained little information about Daria to this piece of shit—even about her  
ey had identity—as he could, feeling aggressively protective of her. He s  
ion that interest in Brudin’s eyes for Daria and that wasn’t a good thing. The I  
soldier got this same feral look in his face whenever he was going t  
toward woman down and rape her. The nape of Nik’s neck tightened. His  
curled into fists but he forced himself to relax.

“So,” Brudin muttered, sliding him a sly glance, “that means she’  
of histo be around here for a while, eh?”

Scowling, Nik said, “I didn’t ask her.”

“I will “I imagine you’re maneuvering her so that she yearns for your bod  
you are gone and you just conveniently show up once a month and ca  
ozov, I five days in her bed.”

monk. Nik shook his head. “Unlike you, Brudin, I respect women. I don’  
ad. It’s where this is leading with Daria. But I want to find out.”

before. “Looks like you’ll have the time to plot, plan, and then get he

ping for you when you're out with us in that green hell."

than he Nik remained silent as they reached the bottom of the hill. The  
an withone that was used by prostitutes, was always busy with men comi  
going. It suited Korsak and his team perfectly, but Nik hated it. He wi  
ction ofwas back in Daria's clean, quiet apartment instead of going to his re  
want tothe third floor with too thin of walls. And by tomorrow mornir  
re don'texpected Brudin to have filled Korsak in on his burgeoning relationsh  
ne. WeDaria.

*Desayuno*, brunch to an American, would not be a pleasant meal v  
ng timeleader tomorrow morning, either. He worried that Brudin was showing  
man ormuch interest in Daria. The two men reached the porch of the hotel a  
split up upon entering the foyer. Nik went to the stairs to go to his ro  
he walked through the lobby, to his left he saw Korsak and his me  
s rose. women on their laps, drinking vodka and singing bawdy Russian song;  
voices were deep and hoarse and he wanted to crush his hands aga  
Why notears and blot all of it out.

"So," Ustin Korsak said slyly to Nik over their brunch of *desayun*  
restaurant the next morning, "Brudin tells me you have finally found  
in heat."

Nik cut into his steak and glanced across the table. Everyone e  
feed ashungover, their eyes red-rimmed and blurry-looking, their faces un  
r covertheir bodies unshowered, and their hair uncombed where they sat aro  
aw thetable in the otherwise empty restaurant. "I've met a very nice young w  
Russianhe snapped back, glaring at Korsak whose thin mouth lifted at its corn  
o run aa parody of a grin.

s hands "He's a gentleman," Brudin stage-whispered to Korsak. "You  
have seen how sweetly he kissed her last night at her apartment door."  
s going The other men hooted and grinned wickedly at Nik.

"I didn't know you had it in you, Morozov," Ustin said mildly, s  
"Here, we thought you had taken a vow of chastity. A Catholic monk  
y whenus, without the robes."

n spend "Unlike you," Nik muttered, "to me women aren't animals  
manhandled."

't know All the men snickered, the clink of cutlery against plates the onl  
sound.

r to be Ustin's brow rose slightly. "So, she's a Ukrainian botanist? F

assignment?”

r hotel, “Yes.” Nik knew Ustin wasn’t stupid. Unlike Brudin, who had  
ng and what a botanist was, he never assumed such ignorance of Korsak. He  
shed hebe hungover this morning, but that steel-trap mind of his worked flav  
oom on Nik forced himself to chew his food and pretend he wasn’t tense and w  
ig, Nik “Where did you meet her?”

ip with “At the Catholic church yesterday at the noon Mass.”

Brudin snorted, “Imagine that? Meeting a woman in church. Thi  
with his has to be blessed by Heaven itself.”

; far too The group snickered and laughed.

nd then “Well,” Ustin told his second-in-command mildly, “you woul  
om. As meet one there because you never go to church, Brudin. Maybe y  
en with missing something, eh? A much classier type of woman?”

s. Their The table of soldiers chortled, well entertained.

inst his “Morozov, on the other hand, is in that church two or three tim  
week when we come here for R&R,” Korsak pointed out, stabbing his  
o at the Nik’s direction. And then his smile grew as he pinned his gaze on h  
a bitch “He prays for our depraved souls. Don’t you, Nik?”

“You’re all going to Hell. I don’t ever pray for any of you b  
lse was You’re all a lost cause.”

shaven, The table erupted into rolling, rollicking laughter. Korsak gave  
und the thoughtful, amused glance.

oman,” “Ahhh,” Korsak said, “our mild-mannered do-gooder combat co  
ers into has his hackles raised this morning.” He cast a look to Brudin who sa  
right. “I wonder? Is the good doctor falling in love with that black  
should beauty? Head over heels? What do you think?”

Brudin sneered. “He’s got a set of balls on him after all.”

Nik ignored them, taking a sip of his coffee, giving Korsak a cali  
miling. He knew not to break and become emotional. The tension at the tal  
amongstrung taut and he could feel it.

Korsak had put a pistol to his head one time when he’d tried to r  
to bescreaming, frightened fourteen-year-old girl they’d chosen. He had n  
about to let them harm her. Alex Kazak was already gone from the t  
y other that point, and might have made a difference. But Nik, even on his ov  
been desperate to protect that screaming, terrified child. And that’s  
lere on was really: a child. Her parents had sobbed and pleaded with Korsak

hurt their virginal daughter.

no idea     Korsak had jammed his pistol against Nik's temple and cocked the trigger. It was the darkest moment of Nik's life and he'd had to frantically scramble away from under the threat of the gun, away from the shriek of a terrified, helpless girl's cries. He had hidden in the jungle, blindly taking a trail for himself, crying for the girl, for her family. And the overriding sense of helplessness and anger that he hadn't been able to do anything about it haunted him to this day. Alex Kazak had come within a hair's breadth of being a hero like Alexandrov when he'd tried to stop another woman from being raped by the team a year earlier.

He never     Bitterness thrummed through Nik, his mouth tightening. The tension on his shoulders was daunting and yet he had to look relaxed among his teammates as if nothing were wrong. He felt Korsak's digging stare, but he did not respond. He could feel Ustin trying to figure out what was going on between him and Daria. He'd started inwardly when the bastard had forked her a 'black-haired beauty.' Nik was sure Brudin had given Korsak every detail about her.

It sent dread flowing through him. These men used prostitutes in every town. None had any kind of decent relationship with any woman. It was all about sex. Again, he was the anomaly standing out among the team members. Nik prayed that Korsak didn't get too interested in Daria. Would he try to rape her? Every protective gene in his body reacted to that question. Nik's own experience with Korsak when a team member had one steady woman on his life. He had no idea what his boss would do. But he certainly knew what a black-haired monster was capable of.

One thing that helped tamp down his sheer terror for Daria's sake was that, when the team came to a larger town, they left women and girls alone. They didn't just grab one of them off the street, drag her into a house and rape her as they would out in the smaller villages. Korsak had a strict order that none of his team was to touch any woman or girl here. This was a tourist town. This was their safe place. They couldn't afford to bring a riot into it, cause a stir, and then have the Peruvian government intervene. So, maybe based upon Korsak's directive, Brudin would leave Daria alone too, because she lived in the town. He dragged in a long, slow breath, praying his logic was correct.

He couldn't     "What are you doing today, Nik?" Ustin asked casually, cutting in

steamed vegetables on his plate.

Nik lifted his head. "I'm taking Daria down a trail where there's no local orchids. I'll be seeing her from ten a.m. onward."

Nodding, Korsak said, "You like this woman?"

Did he? *God yes.* But he played it differently. "We have just met her. But I don't know where this will lead."

"The way she kissed you last night," Brudin said with a grin, "I dragged her into that house and we'd still be in bed fucking through the morning. I wouldn't be taking her anywhere this morning."

Keep her my prisoner."

Nik was well aware of Brudin's sadistic streak. He liked cuffing a prostitute of his choice to the headboard and having his way with her in the morning, the men bragged of what they'd done the night before. They went out every night, and never returned to the hotel until after dark. That way, he called the whole sordid affair. Lifting his chin, he said, "That's the difference between us. I respect women. You would be the last people I'd suggest on how to treat one."

More guffaws.

Brudin scowled deeply, his lip lifting to reveal his yellow-coated teeth. Korsak chewed his food thoughtfully, not joining in with the laughter. "You've been with the team five years, Nik. What is it about this woman that suddenly draws you out of your monk's cave?"

Nik reflexed inwardly, feeling Korsak wanting to know more. "I don't know. I wasn't looking for a woman, like all of you always do."

Korsak considered Nik's reply. "How long will she be in this area?"

Shrugging, Nik said, "I don't know. How long does it take to write a book on orchids? I have no ruler to measure that by."

"Sounds boring as hell to me," Brudin growled.

"There's a lot of orchids in this area," Korsak said conversationally, finishing off his vegetables and cutting into his beef steak. "So, Nik? How long will you be in this area? You will have something to look forward to once a month when you come back here to Aguas Calientes?"

"I will," he said.

"Instead of sleeping, eating and hiking around here, and playing dominoes at that orphanage at the other end of town to fill your hours," Brudin said sarcastically.



Nik leveled a glare at Brudin. He hated the man to his very soul a lot of what he'd done to the villagers. "Mind your own damned business."

More snickers and humored looks between the men.

Nik didn't take any guff from these men. Just because he was a t. I like medic didn't mean he was worth less than any other trained Spetsnaz

He was just as good as any of them. And, although Brudin pushed 'd have times, the idiot circled him warily because Nik was not one to be pushed the night far. He'd already broken Brudin's nose two years ago and the ng. Tieremembered that event. He'd stopped bullying Nik at that time because medic had refused to just lie down and take his shit. And, although ing the was pissed at him to this day and still made petty riposte attempts to g . Every he knew if he pushed Nik too far, he'd react. And he didn't want h Nik left broken again. Or worse. Nik was a CQC expert, close quarters combat avoided that meant he knew how to kill. His hands were literal lethal weapons. Brudin kept that in mind.

ask for "Well," Korsak said lightly, "perhaps, if things go your way, y introduce me to her at some point?"

Nik snorted. "In a pig's eye."

Brudin grinned.

Korsak gave Nik a steady, assessing look for a moment, nodded that nothing and popped a slice of meat into his mouth, biting down on it h.

Nik could feel Korsak wanting to know a hell of a lot more about 'I don't felt a tinge of curiosity from the man, but more along the lines of trying if she was legit or not, rather than anything more sinister. Today show " that for Korsak. Nik intended to spend a lot of time out on the trail a book Daria doing whatever she did for the book she was supposed to be writing was important to get her cover solidly in place and this was the way to

Nik pushed back from the table, his plate clean.

Korsak looked up. "When we see you? Fill us in on what your hi f things like today."

Nik hesitated and gave his boss a hard look. "What? You're not : Brudin out to follow us today?"

Shrugging, Korsak said, "We'll see... He didn't like sitting for two doctor to out in the rain and mud last night watching you two eat."

This time, it was Nik's turn to laugh.

. Hated

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soldier.

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Brudin  
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## CHAPTER 7

“**D**O YOU THINK Brudin will follow us this morning?” Daria asked, pulling the straps of her knapsack across her shoulders. She walked with Nik through the always noisy and crowded tourist area of the town. Overhead, the clouds had parted and she saw rifts of blue sky here and there between them. Picchu rose like a loaf of French bread sat up on one end. Its massive green lava sides were covered with thousands of orchids and bromeliads, making the sharp, cutting basalt it was made from seem more inviting. She cast a concerned look. He had been quiet and she could feel him doing something but didn’t know what. She tried to keep her emotions out of it, having given herself a stern talking to last night before she fell asleep while her body aching for this complex soldier.

“There’s a good chance.” His mouth lifted a little. “But I lied to the *desayuno* earlier this morning. I told them I was going to take a certain route but we’re taking another one. If Brudin thinks he can get ahead of us and we’re on the trail we aren’t going to use, I don’t care.”

“Aren’t you the sly fox,” she teased. Daria wore a rainproof jacket with a hood because the weather was still coolish and one never knew when it was going to rain again in the jungle. She wore her dark-green camouflage pants, waterproof hiking boots, and a short-sleeved gray pullover with her raincoat over it. Nik was dressed in nearly the same colors and style except for a black t-shirt that showed off the expanse of his deep chest beneath his waterproof black jacket. Like her, he had a knapsack or what he referred to as a rucksack on his back. She’d made sure she’d brought all her tools and identification books with her. If they were going to be watched, she could turn into a botanist for a while.

Nik shrugged. He kept his voice low, so that only she could hear them. They turned onto the plaza, made a left turn and headed for the railroad tracks just outside of town. “I have to be.”

“How is your team handling your new romance?” she wondered aloud to him.

His face hardened. “They tease me, but that’s nothing new. I feel like I’m buying it, but Korsak isn’t sure yet.” He gestured down the tracks and stepped over them. “We need to continue to validate that you’re a bona fide

“Well, I’ve got everything in my knapsack to prove it, plus a deodorant,” and Daria gave him a wry smile. He wore a black baseball cap and hadn’t shaved this morning. The dark stubble did nothing but emphasize the rugged, harsh lines of his face. Yet, Daria was constantly surprised by the way he usually spoke in a low, softened tone exactly like she would expect from a military medic. No one knew better the power of a calm voice during the chaos of combat when a fallen team mate was bleeding out than she did. She would never forget the combat medic, Pascal, who was the first on scene after the Black Hawk medevac had landed to rescue Daria and Nik. The carnage, the bodies, her continued bleeding out as he knelt to her, his hands incredibly gentle, his voice low and soothing. That was when Daria knew she would survive.

Stealing a look at Nik as he walked down the middle of the tracks, the gravel crunching beneath their boots, she felt that same sense of protectiveness radiating out from him toward her. There was more than just desire burning in his blue eyes when he’d knocked at her apartment door. There had been desire in their depths. Daria had tossed and turned all night, her body achy with the memory of what good sex felt like. Having had sex for such a long time made her edgy. And the look in Nik’s eyes confirmed that he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

As they followed the tracks out of town between the huge, jagged monolith of Machu Picchu on their left, Mama Putukusi, the equally large lava mountain on their right and between the two, further down, Machu Picchu, Daria felt the size of an ant in comparison to these mighty mountains thrusting up out of the green jungle that surrounded them on all sides. To the left she could hear the roar of the Urubamba River which snaked a path between these three massive mountains. The river almost sounded like a giant’s foot.

Looking around, Daria saw they were alone, now that they’d left the tracks behind them. Only a swath that had been carved out to allow the trucks to come and go through the massive, thick triple-canopy jungle, embraced them now.

“Is it safe to talk right now?” she asked.

“Yes.” Nik cut her a look, his gaze never still, always alert. “What

hey are want to ask?"

icks and "I've got hundreds of questions," she assured him in a drol  
nist." watching the corner of his mouth hook upwards for a moment. Nik wa  
agree in and on guard this morning, although to any observer he would look  
and heard casual. He was not.

size the "Korsak suspects something about us?" she asked him.

because "I think he's being very careful, which is normal for him." Nik rep

ect of a "What do we have to do to convince him?" She saw Nik grimace.

ing the "Probably, by tomorrow night, I need to stay at your apartment. Th  
ian the think we're making love, of course. We want him to think that. I beli

was the spend the nights with you from now on, it will convince Korsak about

her and "Okay," she murmured, her body suddenly taking off with possi

elt next The way Nik had kissed her, had cherished her, left Daria wanting to

at was this man intimately and thoroughly. But would he go that far? Daria

sure about anything right now.

railroad "It's just a cover," he reassured her, giving her a concerned loc  
ense of sleep out on the couch. They'll never know otherwise."

an care Nodding, Daria said nothing, afraid to broach how she really felt.

earlier. trail are we taking?" because she saw two branching off and Nik was s  
l night, down.

ad none "The one on the left." He stopped and turned, looking back do  
rified railroad tracks toward Aguas Calientes. There was no one following th

shifted his attention back to Daria. "From this point on, you must ex  
rising are being watched and monitored. Only when we get back here to the  
caf-like can we speak more honestly."

Huynu "Got it." She followed him up the narrow, winding path that wou  
r giants them to the slope of Mama Putukusi. Everything was muddy, we

To her would fall off and strike her hat and shoulders from the canopy of  
ind slide above. By the time they had climbed about five hundred feet around t

angry. of the lava mountain, the bill of her cap dripped with the water comin  
ie town The jungle was dark, hiding the druzey light from above. It was a dep

rains to place to Daria.

ed them Nik halted at a wide spot in the trail and pointed up at some tree  
the orchids up there?"

Narrowing her eyes, about ten feet above them on an overhangin  
do you she saw two flowering orchids growing where the branch forked out fi

trunk of the tree. "Yes."

ll tone, "How do you want to do this? I can climb the tree and pull them as tensethat notch and bring them down to you?"

relaxed "Sounds good to me. But can you put them back up there when done?"

"Yes." Nik shed his knapsack, laying it over some damp branch lied. had fallen near the trail. Better to keep it out of mud if he could.

Daria found several limbs on the ground and laid them in a grid ey willwould keep her own knapsack off the wet earth. She opened it, pulling eve if Isquare oilcloth, and then finding her notebook, pen and a small us." camera. She spread the oilcloth across the limbs, creating a waterpro bilities.of sorts. She remembered all the things that a botanist would do on t explorefor an orchid. Pulling a cloth measuring tape from her pocket, she set : wasn'twith her other items. Nik came over to take a look at her equipment. :

his body heat as he neared. The temperature was lower within the k. "I'llshe'd discovered, and was glad for the jacket she wore.

"You are out in this for thirty days at a time?"

"What "Yes. They call it the green hell. But I call it a virus-laden Petrie di slowing "No kidding," she said. "I've done a lot of work in the Amaz nothing like this. It has a dry and rainy season. When its dry? Ther own themud and easy going walking-wise."

em. He "Not in this kind of jungle. It's miserable. You never get dry. Yo pect wewarm up. Everything is always damp. Mold, bacteria and fung tracks, everywhere."

She knelt by her knapsack; her voice low. "I don't know how ld takedone it, Nik. I know I couldn't," and she risked a look up at him. H t dropswith his hands on his hips, mouth set, staring up at the tree where the leaveswere nestled. When she whispered those words, he cocked his head he basedirection and she saw the raw pain in his eyes for a moment.

g off it. "We all do what we must," he rasped, placing his hand against th ressingbark of the tree, testing the strength of the trunk.

The heaviness in his voice, his utter exhaustion from dealing w s. "SeeRussian drug team, weighed on Daria. She wanted to rise to her f simply walk up to Nik, slide her arms around his waist, lay her head g limb,chest and hold him. It wasn't about sex this time. It was about rom thecompassion and caring for someone carrying deep pain. She was disc

that her heart was wide open of its own accord toward him. He was  
out of figure to her, having gone through so much and having lost so much  
that stress was multiplied on him right now with her thrown into the  
we're knew this was her first undercover assignment, a newbie that could easily  
them killed if she screwed up by accident.

Looking around, having picked up her camera and coming over to  
by Nik, she said, "I don't see how anyone could get around in this  
so they without being heard. It's so thick. You'd hear them coming a mile away  
out at He rested his hand on the tree, studying her. "In this area the jungle  
Canon very dense. Further up, near the Highlands, there are wooden vines that  
of table and turning so that only small animals can negotiate and get through  
he hunt Even if Brudin is here, he's on the wrong trail unless he followed us and  
it down we took a different trail. Besides, none of them are good at tracking  
She felt That is why I made some tracks up the wrong trail that were obvious,  
jungle, follow it." Shaking his head, he gave her a warning look. "Let's stick  
script."

*Right.* Daria nodded and stepped away as he hooked his hand around  
ish." lower limb and quickly hefted his lean body up into the tree. In no time  
on, but had gently pried loose the first orchid and carefully handed it down  
e is no There, on the trail, she would measure the longest leaves, then the full  
itself and then photograph it, write her notes and hand it back to him  
u never plop, plop, plop of rain gathering on the leaves far above them and  
gus are dropping earthward and the monkeys screaming off in the distance with  
only sounds. Daria felt as if she had cotton in her ears, all the sounds  
you've She wondered how close Brudin was, if he was here at all. Still, she  
e stood the business at hand and this was how the hours passed for the two  
orchids before they packed up and headed back to town.

l in her "Why don't you come inside?" Daria invited to Nik on the porch  
apartment. It was late afternoon and the cloud cover had cleared  
e damp showing even more light blue sky through above them. The cliffs of the  
bathed Machu Picchu towering above was washed with strong, swift  
with the shafts of light, and the town itself was as bustling, busy and noisy as  
eet and She tilted her head and pleaded with him silently as she saw him cons  
l on his request.

human Nik's heart lurched over at her invitation, seeing the pleading in her  
overing It would give them a chance to talk without being overheard. And to

a tragic potentially followed or listened in on. He looked down at his muddy . All of his cammies as soaked as the shirt he wore. They had long ago taken c nix. He jackets as the temperature rose and combined with the high humidity sily get hair was damp and shining in the sunlight. "I could. It wouldn't be ou norm for our growing relationship," and he gave her a slight smile. N o stand had she caught sight of any of the Russians along the railroad tracks as . jungler returned to Aguas Calientes.

y." Daria gripped Nik's hand. "Good, come on in. And don't worry at ngle is boots. We'll stand on the rug inside and take them off."

wisting She had such long, beautiful fingers, and when they curled arou h them, hand Nik needed no further urging. He stepped inside. Daria took her nd saw the dark-green rug and set her knapsack down on it as well. Everyth . I am. wore or carried was muddy. Nik's throat felt dry as he watched he so he'd down to ease each boot off her feet. There was nothing but grace w k to our movements. Nik shut the door behind him and locked it. The blinc open, allowing a lot of sunlight into the apartment, lifting his spirits.

round a he was alone with her again. They'd played their parts, kept their ime, he within the boundaries of her being a botanist. He took off his boots to her. from Daria on the rug. Then he did another quick sweep of the place l orchid any bugs had been planted in their absence. He gave her a thum m. The indicating that the apartment was still clean and they could relax and id then freely.

ere the "I'm going to take a quick shower," Daria told him, holding he muted. socks in her hand, her feet bare on the wooden floor. "Would you li stuck to too?"

of them "Yes. You go ahead. I'll try to wash some of the mud off my ar hands," and he gave her a warm look. How badly Nik wanted to foll i of her into that bathroom and get into the shower stall with her. He'd seen further, face relax once they were inside the apartment, and felt so much he sun-tension she carried slough away. "I could make us a good cup of coffee

moving "Great idea," she said, walking across the living room toward the h always. The sway of her hips made his lower body tighten with need. F

sidering was mussed, curled thickly from the humidity, her clothes sticking to a second skin. Daria was in top athletic shape, but he'd noticed toda er eyes. climbing several thousand feet up and down the trail, that she had . not belimp. Why? He decided to ask her after she'd taken her shower and th



7 boots, sat down over coffee together.

off their Nik was in the kitchen when Daria emerged later from the bathroom. His eyes narrowed as she padded on bare feet around the corner. She'd t of the her hair and combed it out, the sleek black cape of it with its blue highlights once pouring over her shoulders. It was the white terry cloth towel she wore; they'd her body, the edges of it barely brushing mid-thigh, that anchored him then that, as her legs and the towel moved, he saw several recent, pirouettes just above her knee on her left thigh. Before he could say anything, she was at the entrance to the kitchen.

and his "Your turn. Have you made the coffee yet?"

half of "No. I was gathering things." Did Daria realize she was turning herself inside out with need? That towel hinted that she had small but full breasts bend beneath its material. And she was long in the torso, the fabric hanging with her rounded hips. He already knew she had a fine butt.

ls were "I'm going to pull on a set of clean clothes. When I come out, I'll see you. At last, coffee?"

banter Swallowing, Nik nodded. There was a scent of oranges as he passed across her, wanting to reach out, touch her bare shoulders, thread his fingers through her shining hair. Forcing himself to do nothing of the sort, Nik murmured, "Sounds good. I won't be long." He hesitated fractionally. "You should speak automatically sweep your apartment first thing each time after you enter now on."

r damp "I forgot all about that. Thanks for remembering to do it right and make it a ke one, entered."

"Don't worry," Nik soothed, reaching out, unable to help himself and barely brushed the crown of her head with his fingers. "Undercover work is low her new to you. I don't expect you to remember everything." He saw that Daria's apology in her eyes. "You're doing fine," he added, understanding of that she was probably feeling pretty bad about missing the sweep for bullets. "I had given her the time enough to think about doing it on her own, and she had all. She hadn't."

her hair "Not really," Daria muttered, shaking her head. Her hand tightened on her like front of the towel between her breasts.

y, after He gave her a patient look. "*Moya kotya*, this is a joint effort. We are a slight team. We each bring strengths and weaknesses to this mission. Don't worry on yourself. If I'm fine with your performance, you should relax, eh?"

grazed her cheek with his thumb, forcing himself to back away from her. His before he did anything else. Nik was so close to taking her and yet, he washed that would be wrong. Daria hadn't given him THAT signal. But he didn't miss the highlights melting look in her eyes when he touched her cheek. She LIKED his touch. They no longer had to play act. Whatever was going on now, was real. It was them as far as he was concerned. And it was real.

Nik scars "If you say so," she said, apologetically.

She halted "Look at it this way. If Korsak hasn't ordered bugs to be put in the apartment, it means he's buying that we're a couple. That's a good thing. Besides, he would know I would look for them. And then that would put me in an uncomfortable position with me. I'm the only medic they have. They can't risk me walking out on them." Nik forced himself to breathe over her and walk down the hall to the bathroom.

By the time he'd showered and put on his scruffy, humidly damp clothes, he still felt a hundred percent cleaner. Sweating was an expected part of life in the tropics and it was always refreshing to feel clean, if only for a little while. He'd washed his hair and used her comb to tame it into place. He wished he'd shaved. His beard had only darkened his lower face, giving him a more lethal look. Nik knew he was already not prepared to be handsome in the least. There was Latin music on a radio, low but clear, coming out from the kitchen. Inhaling, he smelled the fresh coffee in the air.

He quickly rolled his long sleeves up to just below the elbow and padded bare feet out into the kitchen. For a moment, he just stood there watching Daria.

She was focused completely on opening up a box of cookies, placing each of them one by one on a small white saucer. Her hands were delicate and long, and he wanted so badly to feel them exploring his face. The guilt back was partially turned toward him and he knew how to walk silently that she'd never hear him coming. Daria wore a bright-yellow capped top that outlined her trim, tight body. The white cotton shorts that hung high outlined her long, long legs. He smiled a little as he saw that she remained barefoot. It brought back the wild woman image he had of her from before. It was on the again.

It was Daria's hair, now slowly drying in the humidity, the strands were aglinting reddish and bluish-black beneath the fluorescent light above her. He'd drawn his gaze back up from her legs. She had left her hair down and it was, and he, made his hands itch to explore its strands, run them through his hair.

om her feel their strength and their silky quality. He knew she had been a l  
e knew saw it in the sleek muscling of her upper arms and the latent strength  
id see ain her lower arms. There were many, many old scars, white and shiny  
s touch, both her arms and he knew she'd probably collected them as a sniper l  
etween hard, unforgiving rocks, lying in wait for her next HVT, high value tar

For just this moment before she discovered him, Nik hungrily al  
Daria. Yes, he saw the Marine in her, each of her movements prec  
in yours smooth. The feminine side of her, however, was equally strong, fr  
l thing. curve of her breasts beneath the yellow material of her blouse, to the  
put him her womanly hips astride those long legs he wanted to explore inch b  
ave and He absorbed her profile, clean, soft and nonthreatening. He wonder  
k away the toll on her in the military had really been all those years. Nik kne  
was always heavy payment for jobs like hers and his. Daria hid  
clothes, Where did it spill out? What would trigger all those emotions she ke  
t of the public scrutiny? He was desperate to know her on a much more i  
e while. level.

ed now “The coffee smells good,” he said quietly, not wanting to startle he  
him, he Daria lifted her head and turned, smiling over at him. “It does, doe  
tty-boy It’s almost ready.” She picked up the plates. “Here, put these on the  
cheery, thought you might like a few cookies. We worked hard out there to  
the air. little reward.”

dded in He took the plates, their fingers briefly touching. Agony of anothe  
atching raked his lower body. Right now, he was seeing Daria relaxed. She  
ies and longer as tense or as on guard as she had been earlier. Understanding  
ls were felt safe in this apartment, Nik knew she shouldn’t feel safe around h  
m. Her was a starving wolf without a mate, lacking the warmth of his woman  
ntly so walked to the table and set the plates down, he heard her open a cupbo  
l sleeve take down two mugs.

ing mid- “Cream? Sugar?” he asked, ambling into the kitchen proper.  
hat she “Yes,” and she pointed to the small refrigerator. “Thank you. How  
er once you?”

“Depends if the coffee is good or not,” he said, opening the fric  
ds of it taking out the small bottle of cream. “If the coffee is good, I like it b  
ier, that it’s made weak or the beans are burnt-tasting, then I will smother  
enticed cream and sugar.” He grinned over at her as she poured their coffee  
fingers, split second, Nik dreamed that they were married, having coffee as a

Marine, simply enjoying one another's company and thoughts. He sadly pushed his hidden dreams away. His was a life destined to be about suffering loss, responsibility, and nonstop service. Daria allowed him to dream. A young dream was so beautiful that Nik almost wanted to cry inwardly, knowing it would never be within his reach. His life was at risk all the time. One misorbed move with Korsak, and he'd have a bullet through his head.

He took the bowl of sugar and carried it to the table. As Daria brought them mugs over, he pulled back the chair for her.

"Thanks," she said, placing a mug to her right.

Nik sat down, their elbows nearly touching. Their knees brushed and whateach other and he reluctantly shifted away so that it gave her room. Now thereall, he didn't want Daria feeling as if he were stalking her. She didn't see it well.mind, but Nik wanted no mixed signals between them. He tasted the coffee and made a sound in his throat. "This is good coffee."

"It is," she agreed.

"Are you feeling better now that we're indoors and away from B's prying eyes?"

She sighed and gave him a look of concern. "Yes, more than you can see. I've decided that I never want to do undercover work again. I'm so tired of being myself. It's hard for me to play a part. I've always been an upfronter of woman. I keep having to self-censor my thoughts, what I was about to say and then splice in what I need to say as a botanist." Her mouth curved in a smile. "I really hate it, Nik. I'd much rather be myself."

"Tell me more? I saw that you were slightly favoring your left leg when you fell. And earlier, when the towel was wrapped around you, I saw a mark. As he looked like fresh new scars on your left thigh?" He saw her eye widen and hooded and felt an instant shield suddenly rise between them. What was he all about? What had he said?

Daria sat her coffee down, her hands sliding around the mug, staring at it for a long moment. "It's a pretty gruesome episode in my life, Nik."

"I know if I'm ready to tell anyone about it yet," and she gave him a small apology.

"No worries," he soothed, nodding. So, it had happened in combat. His senses were well-honed and sometimes, Nik thought he was almost perfect. For aThe anguish that suddenly came to her eyes slammed into him like a wave. He heard an almost imperceptible tremor in her low, strained

And thoseEven more, he felt the terror, the grief and trauma that still lived, all heavywell, within Daria. Nik understood how that all worked because he al And theseo much of it within him as a soldier and medic. He reached out, moving shefingers down her lower arm in a gesture to try and calm some of the wrongstorm he felt swirling invisibly within her. "I'm sorry," he said, "I mean to make you feel bad. What would you like to talk about?"

ight the Daria mustered a weak grimace. "You're right about my legs. pretty observant. The docs gave me an okay to go back into the field today out on that steep trail, I guess it's not as fully healed as I'd wished against "Are you in pain, Daria? I can give you something for it." He was Above medic for nothing. It was his job to not allow her to suffer, if he could seem to "No... it's just stiff... ouchy. I've got aspirin if I need it, but I think coffeebe fine now. The hot water of the shower really helped and sitting resting, I'll be okay."

"If you would allow me?" He lifted his hands. "They looked to me like rudin'sknife wounds. I know what that does to muscle tissue. I could massage that area very gently and I guarantee you that your leg will feel so much better than before. Let me at least do that for you? I'm in medic mode now," Nik used to gave her a faint smile, never wanting anything more than to do this for her. He could see the pain in her eyes now, and he'd noticed it before out on the trail, but he hadn't put both together until just now.

l down. Daria sighed and rolled her eyes. "A massage? I'd love one! It's the best thing I do when I get back off an op! Head for my favorite massage parlor of the lives near our HQ. Are you sure? We could do it after we finish our coffee what "Yes, whatever you are comfortable with." The idea of getting to see her growher even in a healing way, thundered through Nik. His lower body was thatwith possibility. No, this wasn't about sex. It was about helping Daria with some of the stiffness that he knew always occurred from a knife wound. It was one of the worst injuries to heal through because the muscles were sliced and then having to sew them together once more only added to the look of physical trauma. He'd seen his fair share of them because Russian terrorists were knife wielders like the Taliban. He saw Daria yearning to get a massage, but also hesitant about it. "I will be very careful. I promise you about healing, nothing else." Because Nik didn't want her to think it was a rogue way to get his hands on her. His offer had been pure of heart. And he kept his voice. keep it that way. The longing in her expression made him warm, his

ive and opening. “Even the Quechua villagers allow me to work on their  
so held massage. Some of the older men and women have very bad arthritis  
ring his joints, in their hands. I’m able to soothe their pain, get the muscles to  
sudden and coax the painful parts to relax.”

I didn’t Daria regarded him from beneath her lashes. “I’ll bet they love to  
coming into their village, then.”

You’re It was his turn to wince. “They love to see me. They fear the res  
eld, but team I’m with, for good reason,” was all he’d say. Just as Daria didn  
ed.” to discuss her combat wounds, he did not want to get into Korsak’s b  
wasn’t at towards the Indians.

help it. Drawing in a breath he said, “Are you game?” and he held up his  
ink I’ll “See what I can do to maybe get some blood and circulation into the  
; down, One massage can last for days and it’s very helpful to the entire  
process.”

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opening. “Even the Quechua villagers allow me to work on them with massage. Some of the older men and women have very bad arthritis in their joints, in their hands. I’m able to soothe their pain, get the muscles to move, and coax the painful parts to relax.”

Daria regarded him from beneath her lashes. “I’ll bet they love to see you coming into their village, then.”

It was his turn to wince. “They love to see me. They fear the rest of the team I’m with, for good reason,” was all he’d say. Just as Daria didn’t want to discuss her combat wounds, he did not want to get into Korsak’s brutality towards the Indians.

Drawing in a breath he said, “Are you game?” and he held up his hands. “See what I can do to maybe get some blood and circulation into that area? One massage can last for days and it’s very helpful to the entire healing process.”

“You’ve sold me, Nik. Let’s do it.”

## CHAPTER 8

**D**ARIA LAID DOWN on one side of the bed so that Nik could easily work on her left thigh. She hadn't thought about the towel she'd worn earlier since those wounds until he'd mentioned it. He had brought a bottle of massage oil from his medical pack into the bedroom. The light was dim, the window blinds pulled. How she looked forward to his touch as she settled on the bed. Already, her body was anticipating his hands upon her.

Nik set the bottle on the bed stand. He walked around to the other side of the bed and took the second pillow, bringing it back around to where she was. "We need to put this beneath your knees. It takes the stress off your lower back." As she lifted her knees, he slid it in under them. Daria had plenty of ample room on one side of the bed to sit down facing her. He opened the bottle, pouring some of the oil onto the palm of one hand.

"My hands are rough-feeling," he warned her as he rubbed the oil between them.

"That's okay. In our line of work, our hands are always like that."

He smiled a little, sitting down and closely observing the knife scars on her thigh. "You mind if I do a little examination on them? It will help me understand the best way to manipulate the muscles in each area."

Daria shook her head. "No... go ahead."

"I will be very gentle but, if it hurts, let me know?"

"Yes, because that whole area is really tender."

Nodding, he moved his fingers lightly across the three pink scars. The skin on her thigh was shiny, indicating early-stage scar tissue. He felt the solid firmness of her thigh, once again reminding himself she had been a sniper for a long time and was used to hard, physical punishment, hiking through some of the worst possible terrain in order to gain the high ground for her hide. "I'm sorry," he urged her quietly as his fingers grazed each of the scars.

"Sorry, it's just sore."

"Am I hurting you?"

"No... just my reaction. When I was doing physical therapy, when I was hurt, I would react like this. It's just my reaction. When I was doing physical therapy, when I was hurt, I would react like this. It's just my reaction."



brutal and painful, my leg was always bruised-feeling afterward.... i  
an old knee-jerk reaction... excuse the pun.” She saw Nik’s eye  
hooded as he nodded and continued to gently palpate the skin arou  
wound. His contact was amazing to Daria and she found herself s  
relaxing and enjoying the skimming of his long fingers as they be  
slowly probe around each of the old knife wounds.

rk with  
howing  
sage oil  
enetian  
nto her  
“It’s all right. I understand.” Nik frowned, beginning to move the r  
lightly below the first wound, the one highest above her knee. “Fr  
looks of this one, I’d say a curved blade was used. Do you know?”

Mouth flattening, Daria placed her arm across her eyes. “Taliban  
use a curved blade.” She saw his mouth thin a little as he began to inv  
around the scar. Grunting, she stiffened.

side of  
she lay.  
r lower  
eft him  
ned the  
“Sorry,” he murmured, lightening his touch. “Just a little more? I  
know how many layers of muscles are involved.”

“Now you sound like my PT gal. She was always saying the same  
She saw a corner of his mouth lift momentarily. There was utter inter  
face as he leaned over, looking and feeling around that first wound.

the oil  
“Yes, we all say ‘just a little more,’ knowing full well it’s hurtin  
but it’s for a good reason.” Nik moved his thumb in a caressing  
downward from the scar.

rs. “Do  
and the  
“Owww,” Daria muttered, scowling.

“I’m done.” Nik smoothed his hand across the shiny welt. “You’  
got healing to do, Daria. At least on this one,” and he gestured to it. “  
fully restored. I’m perplexed why your doctor would release you for di

Shrugging, Daria muttered, “I had nothing to do with it.”

“But did you tell your doctor how tender your leg was? How r  
stiffened up on you after use?”

rs. The  
irmness  
a long  
e of the  
Relax,”  
“Yes,” she muttered. Daria saw Nik give a slight shake of hi  
absorbing his light, soothing stroke. Instantly, the pain went away an  
place was warmth. And care. She was privy to his compassionate me  
right now. “Honestly? Alex Kazak checked it out and argued passi  
that my muscles weren’t fully healed like they needed to be. He argu  
Jack Driscoll, my boss, that I should be given another two months  
before being put out in the field again.”

Smiling faintly, Nik held her gaze. “My dear friend Alex was righ  
ich was a good medic.”

it's just "So are you."

s grow "How does it feel now? Is the pain less?"

nd each Just the slow, gentle strokes around her wound made her sigh. "Sighing, feels so good right now. Don't stop, Nik..."

egan to "I won't. I can feel the muscles begin to trust my touch. They are relaxing with relief. They were very tight and hard before. I'll do more muscle massage, but first, I want to check out the other wounds. The muscles from the ligaments are different the closer you get to your knee."

"Sure, go ahead." Daria didn't want Nik to ever stop laying his rough hands always fingers upon her flesh.

estigate The second scar was in the middle, the worst-looking one. As he manipulated her thigh carefully, he saw her mouth flex. "Pain?"

need to "Stiffness more than anything else."

"This knife wound went in at an angle opposite of the upper wound. She was blown away by his knowledge. "I wasn't exactly watching it in his was going on when it happened." Daria saw his mouth flex.

"I understand, *moya kotya*," and he followed the damage done along you, muscles beneath. She stiffened and he murmured, "Just a little more..."

motion Daria tried to relax, but his fingers probed. "I swear, you have no vision. How could you know the direction of the blade?"

"I can feel the disturbance to your muscles that were torn open by injury." She blew out a breath of air when he began the soothing strokes as a part of his examination. "Glad you're done poking around."

ity." "This one is very deep," he said, concern in his voice. "Much deeper than the upper one." He saw the pain in her eyes, the memories.

nuch it "The PT gal said the wound closest to my knee is the worst one."

"Well," he said lightly, "let's find out."

s head, Daria was used to his examination routine now and she tried to relax. As he saw Nik's straight eyebrows draw down as he followed the entry of the blade into her leg. His mouth pursed more as he slowly and thoroughly examined the old wound.

ed with "The trajectory of the blade tells me the knife must have sliced near the femoral artery. Did it?"

She managed a grimace, arm resting across her brow. "Pascal, the medic who was first on scene, said it had nicked my femoral artery. I closed her eyes, not wanting to go back there, but knowing she must." "

was filling with blood, swollen, distended and he tied a tourniquet about the knife wounds. God, that hurt. I passed out from the pain.” She felt  
“Yes. His hands move protectively across her wounds, as if to try and soothe her  
experience. It nearly broke Daria because he was excruciatingly gentle and  
sagging and gentle with her. More than anyone had been since she’d been wounded.  
serious Tears jammed up behind her closed eyes and she was surprised by  
ing and reaction. Instantly, she fought them away.

“Yes,” Nik said in a low, rasping tone, “the blade tip just barely nicked  
your femoral artery.” He closed his hands protectively around her  
thigh. “You could have easily bled out, Daria.”

As he “When I came to in the Black Hawk, Pascal was there, watching closely  
like a guard dog. He told me much the same. He’d given me  
morphine to stop the worst of the pain, but I could feel that tourniquet  
l.” into my thigh, but good.”

ing what “He had some fine lines to walk with you, medication-wise.” Nik  
stroking her leg, beginning to massage it from mid-thigh down to, and  
to the below, her knee. “And he saved your life. Pascal is a good man. I  
” could meet him sometime. He sounds a lot like Alex and I.”

the x-ray “You three are clearly good at your job,” Daria whispered, feeling  
lightness of his fingers moving and coaxing her muscles to acquiesce to  
it.” manipulation.

after the “And your partner? How did she fare?” he asked.

Daria tensed. She didn’t want to look at Nik, so close to tears once  
her than “S-she didn’t make it.”

“I’m sorry, Daria. So very sorry...”

His roughened words started to dissolve the shield she’d put up  
from remembering, stop seeing the flashes of the attack, hearing Max  
ax. She screamed, hearing her own scream of rage as the assault came. The  
flame knife the curved blades coming in all directions at them made her wince  
intimidated The first blade struck her level four Kevlar vest, the point breaking  
snapping off, flying away somewhere into the black night. She remembered  
ar your the snarl of the Taliban soldier, saw the hatred gleaming in his eyes  
suddenly realized his knife was broken and his chest blow hadn’t penetrated  
combat With each sliding movement of Nik’s hands across her flesh, Daria  
y.” She felt her muscles truly beginning to sag with utter relief. His hands were  
caressing My leg and rough, but that only made her skin prickle with silent enjoyment

ove the groaned.

t Nik's "Too deep?"

oth her "No," she whispered, "just... feels so good..." She heard him rrturing softened growl of appreciation in his throat.

ounded. "I'll get more circulation into those areas. It will help them heal by the quickly. Massage should have been a part of your healing protocol af arrived home."

nicked Nik was healing *her*. Daria almost blurted it out. With each glide r lower hands, she felt herself melting a little more beneath his careful, s ministrations. At no time did he cause her pain. He only gave l over mere relaxation. And, if but for a moment, the relief from the darkness w enough nightmares came, haunting her of the attack, was a blessing to Dar t biting sense of safety Nik accorded her was dissolving all her boundaries wi

She had never felt as protected as when she was with him.

agreed, Lauren Parker-Kazak had told her how Nik had saved her life, h and just cared for her when she'd been injured. Well, now *she* was at the re wish I end of Nik Morozov's remarkable healing abilities. And it was disr the walls she'd placed around that horrific night. With each stroke ing the hand, she felt an upwelling of emotions pushing from deep with e to the heading toward the surface. It scared her. Daria didn't want to deal v the feelings about the attack that she'd buried. How could Nik massag leg do all that? Panic hit her and she lay there, mouth taut, arm tight e again. Her eyes, feeling tears stinging the backs of their lids, fighting to st everything.

His questions had sliced through and opened up a dam of terror, to stop and grief. Daria knew he hadn't meant to do that. It was just him l elissa's scaring medic, trying to understand the extent and depth of each shes of wounds. Each time his calloused hands moved, coaxed and soothe ernally. Battered, bruised muscles that had absorbed such violence, Daria wa ng and let a scream tear out of her. Nik was giving her a safe place to let ; mbered somewhere in her shorting-out mind, she knew that. *Oh, God...*

s as he "Stop!" she cried out, suddenly sitting up, pushing his hands away trated. saw the shock in his face, the sudden confusion in his eyes. Her aria felt tightened. She sat tensely, hunched over, breathing raggedly. Nik w lloused understand. She hadn't meant to yell at him.

nt. She "Did I hurt you?"

“N-no... it’s just that...,” and Daria struggled and scooted across to the other side. She slid her legs down, the coolness of the tiles hitting her bare feet. Struggling to stop the fist jamming up through her, she gripped the sides of the bed, her knuckles whitening as she fought to shove all the more horror back down into that dark place deep within herself. She was barely minimally aware of the bed shifting as Nik stood, and of sensing him move around to her side of it. She had her eyes scrunched shut, head buried in the pillow, trying to keep from crying.

Nik crouched down on her right side, one hand on her arm, the other coming to rest on her right knee. “What is it?” he intoned, digging into her eyes with his intense stare. “Speak to me, Daria?”

Her chest heaved sharply and rapidly. She lifted her head, holding it with a concerned, warm gaze. Daria wanted to burst into tears, throw herself into his arms and be held. She knew Nik would do that for her. Knew that he would take care of her. How long had it been since she’d had that feeling? He stroked her arm and held her gaze. His face blurred.

With a muffled sound, Daria tore away from him, hurrying out of his bedroom, down the hall, and into the living room. Wrapping her arms around herself, she stood wavering in the middle of the living room, wanting to run with all her might to where? There was no place to go. She was trapped. She felt, muffled, as if she had just heard, Nik approach her from behind. Automatically, she tensed, not wanting to let him touch her because, if he did, she was going to break.

Nik halted inches from Daria. She was shaking, her arms tight around her torso as if to gird herself against something unseen. Something terrible had happened. He raised his hands and they hovered momentarily over her hunched shoulders. The need to help her was overriding. Something had happened in her bedroom. And he thought he had some idea of what it was, but wasn’t sure. He allowed his hands to rest lightly on her shoulders. She stiffened. He wanted to hear her gasp. Did Daria want his help or not? Nik was unsure, but wasn’t going to back off from her unless she told him to. And then, he would.

“Daria,” he whispered, gently pulling her against his body, his lips near her ear. “I’m here. I know I can help you. Please?” Nik felt her shoulders tense. He heard a choking sound in her throat, her hands flying to her face.

She didn’t pull away from him.

Gently, Nik turned her around, keeping her close, allowing her to decide how near or not she wanted to be, his hands back on her shoulders.

the bed the streaks of tears running down her cheeks, her eyes tightly shut, he  
ing her against the sides of her face. He saw how hard she was fighting to s  
ped the tears. She was battling so much, all on her own. It didn't need to be th  
of that They had one another. He felt so on a visceral level. Daria was entrust  
as only vulnerable self to him right now and Nik felt the monumental decisio  
coming just made to allow herself to do so. He felt her struggling with so mu  
bowed, was invisible to him. He understood intuitively that his massaging  
knife wounds had ripped the door open on that whole, sordid momen  
e other life. Gently, he threaded his fingers through her hair.

nto her "Talk to me?" he urged her quietly, watching her eyes open barely  
with tears, agony within them.

ling his Daria reached out, placing her hands against Nik's chest. He conti  
into his stroke her hair as if she were a lost, hurting child so badly in need of ju  
e would Just his healing touch. Hot tears streamed down her drawn cheeks,  
g? Nik explosive sob burst its way unwillingly up and out of her.

"Come here," he rasped, drawing her deeply into his arms, hold  
: of the tight against him. Cupping her head, he held her, feeling her trembli  
around an earthquake was about to erupt from deep within her. How many tim  
to run, he seen this reaction before? Nik closed his eyes, his head resting  
ore than against hers, allowing Daria to sag fully against him, holding he  
wanting holding her while that terrible storm overcame the massive control ne  
contain it. "It's all right, Daria. Let it go? I'm here. I'll hold you thro  
und her *moya kotya...*"

ble. He He felt another giant sob wrack like a tsunami wave up through h  
oulders. Daria slid her arms around his waist, leaning into him, burying h  
in the deeply against his shirt, trying to hide as the sounds unwillingly kept  
i't sure. out of her. Nik knew he needed to remain quiet and strong for her  
e heard shock and sobbed in his arms. He couldn't fix what was wrong with  
going to But he could stroke her hair, move his hand caressingly up and do  
back. He knew the value of touch, of holding. The agony he felt in h  
ps near for her, not wanting to see her so damaged and anguished, lacerated hi  
hudder, wished he could absorb Daria's pain and loss and grief, but he k  
couldn't. All he could do was give her safe harbor to release that tox  
that lived like a prowling monster within her. *Better out, than in.*

o decide Time dissolved, and all Nik was aware of was the warm, brave wo  
He saw held tenderly within his embrace. His shirt quickly became damp w

her handstears and she clung to him as if he were the last anchor in the world for her to grasp before she was forever lost. He understood. How many times had she wished he'd had a pair of loving arms to welcome and hold her when she was hurting so deeply? The scent of oranges from the shampoo she used on her hair complimented the sweeter, spicier scent of her flesh, calmed him in ways he couldn't describe. Just getting to hold Daria, to know that she trusted him with her worst fears and emotions, rocked his world in the quiet of her ways.

If Nik had any questions about their mutual attraction, they were long forgotten, washed away and at rest right now. She was a Marine, as tough as they came from the US military. Nik knew that Daria had probably not cried since that day in the field. It was just the way military personnel were taught and trained. Don't let your emotions box you. Don't cry. Don't feel. Focus on your job. Nothing else matters because, if you get emotional, you can get distracted and get hurt.

Yes, he knew this verbatim. Had heard it a thousand times during boot camp. He was in Spetsnaz so many years ago. They were right, of course. It worked for him as if it were a unit, but the terrible price paid by the individual, by one who had seen and experienced accumulated traumas, terrible human atrocities that he would never, gently should ever see, always came up owing.

For her sake, He pressed a chaste kiss to her hair, the strands tickling his forehead as he dragged in her scent, as if breathing life into him. It was the first time in so many years. Daria's sobs gradually lessened, her tears slowly ebbed, and he could feel a slight loosening of her arms around his waist. The initial storm had expended itself and now, he knew she was tired and needed to feel exhausted in the aftermath of its passing. Easing her away just enough to see her face, he saw that it was pale and drawn. Her eyes were marred as she languished.

"Come with me? I want to lay next to you on the bed and just hold you," he said. "Nothing more. Sometimes," and he nudged the strands of her hair with his heartsticking to her wet cheek away with his fingertips, "the best healing is to be held." Nik to be held afterward.

She lifted her hand, trying to wipe away some of the tears. "Y-yes. I can't." He smiled softly down at her, giving her a look of praise, and he held her.

Opening his arms, Nik allowed her to lean against his side, an arm wrapped around her shoulders as he slowly guided her down the hall to the bedroom. He had no thought of sex in his head right now. Only to continue to hold her.

her to Daria that supporting enclosure she needed most to start healing in had he from the trauma. She was wobbly on her feet and he held her firmly, he was her know silently that he had her. That she could trust him, continue l in her on him.

im, fed Daria felt as if someone had scrubbed the inside of her out with ow she bottle brush. She felt nothing but raw hurt piled upon endless grief best of helped her climb onto the bed. All she wanted right now was him. An

he came and laid his long body next to hers, sliding his arm beneath he laid to his other hand on her hip, drawing her next to him, Daria acquiesced the US hesitation. Laying her head in the crook of his shoulder, nestling h horrific against Nik's neck and jaw, her arm going around his torso, she f d: keep monitoring the strength with which he held her.

ing else Closing her eyes, Daria released a ragged sigh, feeling safe. Feelin : killed and deeply cared for. All those emotions fluttered over the top of the g t camp loss still roiling through her like a savage storm. She placed one leg o for the wanting his solidity, the quiet strength and heat he offered. Care radi en and of him like sunlight, enclosing her, holding her safe. Holding her t no one And that was the last thing Daria remembered thinking before the exha

the toll of the months since the trauma, overwhelmed her. In Nik's ips, his Daria felt utterly protected. She could finally relax as never before, l self for he held her. And somewhere in the tumult of all the sharp-edged er mbling raging through her, she felt his undeniable love and loyalty for her und his wafted into peaceful sleep.

s going Nik closed his eyes, his chin resting against her hair, feeling enough completely surrender into his arms, her body sinking trustinglyagai ed with His heart stirred with such deep feelings for her that it shook his sou

never felt this way about a woman before. Daria was not a helpless v ld you, no bird with a broken wing floundering around. He'd pieced together er hair to understand that four months ago she'd been attacked on an unname simply while setting up a sniper op. Her spotter and her had been attacked

undetected enemy and knives had been used. Most likely as to n .." anyone else in the area by firing off AK-47's against their foe. It odded. Taliban tactic. Stealth. Knives were their favorite weapon and they kne rapped to wield them. He had so many questions about her op. Did they ; droom, perishable intel? Had a Taliban mole pretending to be pro-US set th to give Similar cases had happened in Nik's own experience with Russian sep



ternally way too many times.

letting Sliding his arm gently against her back, fingers splayed out across her hips, keeping her close, Nik felt her soft, moist breath as it shallowly indicated to him that Daria had fallen asleep. Yes, after a storm like this, a wire he'd be exhausted too. Something deep and hurting rose in him as he thought of Dan as Nik ran through all the grief that had occurred in his life. It felt like an endless string of such, and he wondered if it would ever end. If it ever did, it probably meant he was dead. Nik wanted to keep his focus on Dan, on getting him without brother the medical help he needed. Nothing else had mattered. Never before. Daria had stepped unexpectedly into his life. She mattered just as much as he felt him. Nik slid his fingers through her drying hair, felt it sift and slide like silk it was. Daria trusted him. And that stopped him from doing anything loved in inappropriate. His lower body had flared to aching life as she had pressed against him, her hips lightly meeting his. They were only scant inches apart, but he felt her, in height and he marveled at how Daria fit against him, as if they had been meant to be together. She was soft in his arms, luscious, curved, forever feminine. He still had to shake himself sometimes because he knew she was a soldier, a soldier's arms, toughened body was the polar opposite of a hardened soldier. And because he had ever felt so right to him as this moment did. Five years through a notion of no emotions had abruptly come to an end, and he felt nearly overwhelmed as she by the unexpected mission, need and hunger filtering through him.

Nik closed his eyes, allowing himself to truly relax. It wasn't something Daria he was able to do very often. Oh, he knew Brudin was probably still on guard post outside the apartment, but that bastard wasn't going to come but he'd anytime soon either. No, they were as safe as they could hope to be. Daria's body sagged deeply into the mattress as he absorbed Daria's form against him. One of her hands was pillowed between them, its slender fingers curled in sleep. Delicate, beautiful fingers. His heart ached for her, but he knew she carried from that broken and devastating op. It would never be the same without her, and Nik knew that. All he could do is be an island where she could forget it for just a little while, round the vicious emotional edge and give her a healing harbor of reprieve.

get bad His heart and body sang about making love with her. It would be beautiful, he knew. Rich and lavish, because he knew how highly-tuned a sniper was. A sniper lived on the edges of his or her senses. It was something

spoke about but, sure as hell, that highly evolved intuition kept that  
oss her alive.

red out, Nik visualized his fingers skimming across Daria's naked body,  
ke that, her respond, watching the look in her sultry eyes change, watching t  
is mind and arousal rise to a crescendo as he explored her inside and out. He  
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robably luxuriate in the sighs and sounds that he would coax out of her. Nik  
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ot until rare gifts to him. He knew a woman would not orgasm unless sh  
h now. trusted her partner. There had to be some kind of powerful en  
like the connection. And, more than anything, that invisible, yet unsaid, con  
nything was alive and well between them. He felt it every time they were to  
id sunk And now, it throbbed brilliantly with a life of its own, palpable, bre  
es apart wanting, yearning within him.

always Sleep claimed Nik gently as he held the woman in his arms that h  
red and he was falling in love with. Only, he knew he could never speak those  
she was to Daria under these circumstances. But, if he had his way about it,  
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nothing until she fainted with pleasure. There were so many ways to express lo  
a desert woman and Nik wasn't above using all of his experience to do just  
helmed Daria. If anyone deserved love, it was her. It was true, he didn't know

story but, over time, he would coax it out of her. Being black ops, she  
nething one to give up information about herself easily.

1 watch Daria trusted him with her most vulnerable self. She'd shown that  
sting in just now. He would gently shield her, keep that small flame that h  
and his sparked to life between them lit, and continue to give her this sense of  
inst his. A fierceness rose in his heart. It was a mix of euphoria combined with  
slightly They lived on the edge of a scimitar every hour of every day. He'd jus  
for the a woman who endlessly and magically mesmerized him. And, mo  
e gone anything, Nik was desperate to keep her safe and make the most of th  
e Daria together.

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spoke about but, sure as hell, that highly evolved intuition kept that sniper alive.

Nik visualized his fingers skimming across Daria's naked body, feeling her respond, watching the look in her sultry eyes change, watching the heat and arousal rise to a crescendo as he explored her inside and out. He would worship every inch of her, absorb her sweetness, her womanliness, and luxuriate in the sighs and sounds that he would coax out of her. Nik wanted to hear her cry out as he stroked her. Wanted to ask her body to share those rare gifts to him. He knew a woman would not orgasm unless she truly trusted her partner. There had to be some kind of powerful emotional connection. And, more than anything, that invisible, yet unsaid, connection was alive and well between them. He felt it every time they were together. And now, it throbbed brilliantly with a life of its own, palpable, breathing, wanting, yearning within him.

Sleep claimed Nik gently as he held the woman in his arms that he knew he was falling in love with. Only, he knew he could never speak those words to Daria under these circumstances. But, if he had his way about it, he was going to get this woman not only into his arms as she was now, but love her until she fainted with pleasure. There were so many ways to express love to a woman and Nik wasn't above using all of his experience to do just that for Daria. If anyone deserved love, it was her. It was true, he didn't know her full story but, over time, he would coax it out of her. Being black ops, she wasn't one to give up information about herself easily.

Daria trusted him with her most vulnerable self. She'd shown that to him just now. He would gently shield her, keep that small flame that had just sparked to life between them lit, and continue to give her this sense of safety. A fierceness rose in his heart. It was a mix of euphoria combined with terror. They lived on the edge of a scimitar every hour of every day. He'd just found a woman who endlessly and magically mesmerized him. And, more than anything, Nik was desperate to keep her safe and make the most of their time together.

## CHAPTER 9

NIK SLOWLY PULLED himself awake, Daria tucked against him, his arms enfolding her. Strands of her hair grazed his nose and chin. He savored the quiet in the room, alone with her sleeping form, even though he *could* hear the muted pulse of drums and flutes down the hill below the apartment building. Celebration went on day and night in this tourist town, as if they were free of their inhibitions out here in the middle of nowhere, a godforsaken jungle. He noticed a birthmark, shaped like a quarter moon, behind her delicate left ear, something that had been partially hidden just beneath her hairline until now. Nik recalled glimpsing something like that before but, because her hair had hidden it, he'd never fully seen it until now. Moving his fingers lightly across the tiny crimson crescent, he wanted to tell Daria about it. Birthmarks were DNA signatures passed on from parent to child. He had so many questions to ply her with. His soul ached to know her so much better than he currently did. He hungered like a starving man for the food she would share with him about herself.

Patience was the answer. Nik knew this could not be rushed, but for him his patience was shortened considerably. Daria had reached down into him, unplugging that reservoir of restraint, artlessly holding him, her hands skimming his weary soul with her strength, bravery and determination. Daria was a strong woman, no question, but at the same time, she was so vulnerable with him. That shook him more than anything else. What did he see in her that he didn't see in himself? What had made Daria trust him when no other woman had grazed and awakened his heart as she had.

Nik had no explanation for it, but was grateful she'd fallen so unexpectedly into his life. Now, she slept deeply. He had no wish to wake her, and luxuriated in this moment that he had dreamed about but had thought would happen. His five years of monk-like existence had come to an end. Just the feel of her soft, warm body next to his made his heart sing and his lower body flare and flood scaldingly to breathless li

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ife.

He had no idea what time it was until he lifted his arm and squinted at his wrist, looking at the dials on his military watch. It was 2100, nine p.m. He eased his hand down across her shoulder, feeling the inherent strength beneath the fabric, wanting badly to disrobe Daria and feel her velvet skin against his. Yet, Nik knew, because of his age and maturity, that that would be a foolish move on his part. If Daria did not come to him of her own accord, then there was nothing for them to explore. Perhaps all she needed was someone to feel safe with after that brutal op? Nik knew how a mission could play hell on one's psyche. He'd experienced them himself. He'd been through the emotional and mental carnage that had destroyed people for months, even years, afterward. He understood all too clearly why soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan were committing suicide. They'd seen too much, obliterating chunks of their souls, unable to be heard, to entrust themselves to someone who understood the cost. They'd managed to survive up until the point where they'd made that terrible choice.

His fingers slid comfortingly down across Daria's long back, over her womanly hips. She was tall, medium-boned, and he knew she could carry a baby should she want motherhood. Wondering about that, why did she pull her into the Marine Corps? He couldn't stop his curiosity that he would know so much more about her.

Daria stirred. She pulled her hand from between them, barely aware, and made a snuffling noise in her throat, fingers resting against her face.

Nik's heart bounded as he took in the sight of Daria awakening. Her arms. It was a stolen moment, and like the lone wolf he was, he absorbed her on every level. Her cheeks were pink, tendrils of hair against her white forehead as she yawned and stretched, her hips meeting his momentary touch. She remained quiet, allowing her those cherished waking moments, open to him. Her arms so that she could fully move as she desired. And when her lashes opened, revealing those cloudy golden eyes of hers with their exotic tones, he fell helplessly into their molten depths. Her pupils were huge and black, and he saw the vulnerability in them. Again, that sense of trust lingered between them. There was nothing sexual coming from her; merely a beautiful young woman awakening from a long, healing sleep, looking refreshed and even more lovely.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked, turning onto his side, resting his head on his hand.

d at his one elbow, his other arm still beneath her neck. He watched her lips  
m. He gave a smile pulling at the delicious corners of her mouth.

1 of her “Mmmm, like I died and went to heaven...”

et skin *You are heaven.* The words had nearly leaped out of his mouth. I  
t would Nik caressed her cheek with his fingers, pushing strands of stuck hair  
er own here and there, watching the reaction in her opening eyes. Inst  
needed cloudiness, there was now pleasure in them as he grazed her warm  
busted gently with his knuckles, outlining the slope of her high cheekbones  
himself. slid her arm across his ribs, fingers moving slowly up and down his t  
red him was an intimate gesture. Nik soaked it up, starving for each touch she  
o many bestow upon him. As if... as if in this heated exchange, she was ge  
suicide. know him, getting to feel his body beneath her fingertips. How he  
e held, they were naked.

carnage “You slept deeply,” he said, cupping her cheek, holding her clear  
at final, Her lips remained parted and so close that he knew he could lean do  
kiss them. Is that what Daria really wanted? His intuition flagged him  
to her anchored himself, waiting. Sensing. Right now, Daria was trustful in h  
l easily awakening state and he wanted to do nothing to destroy this  
hat had connection growing between them.

need to “I needed it,” she admitted, turning, pressing her face into hi  
giving him a hug. As she eased back, she whispered, “Thank you, Ni  
ke. She has no idea how good it felt to just be held like that...” and Daria s  
his gaze, her voice still husky and slightly hoarse from having cried s  
g in his earlier.

bed her Nodding, he moved his hand lightly across her hair. “Did you e  
inking after that op, Daria? Or did you hold it all inside?” Instantly, Nik sa  
ily. Her return to her eyes. He hadn’t meant to bring it up, but the medic in h  
ing his one who was trained to find infection and root it out, had spoken for hi  
s barely moment was broken, and he already missed it acutely.

ilt, Nik “N-no... I cried on that ridge... holding Melissa. But she was dea  
ack and lips tightened and she looked away for a moment.

sweetly “You need not go there right now. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

autiful Shaking her head, her hand growing still on his torso, Daria mo  
ed. And gaze up to his. “It’s all right. The shrink at Shield Security where I wo  
to get me to let it go but I just couldn’t.”

ting on “Do you feel it’s because of your sniper training? Being in the mili

part, a “Yes... in part...” She wiped her eyes with her fingers, yawning. “You have a way of making me feel safe, Nik. I don’t know why, I do.” She lifted her hand, skimming his stubbled cheek with the back of her fingers. Instead, “You started to massage my leg and, all of a sudden, I felt this upwelling of grief that was so powerful that, no matter what I did, I couldn’t stop breathing.” Her mouth slashed. “I don’t cry.”

in flesh “Sometimes,” he said quietly, moving his thumb across her forehead. Daria frowned, smoothing out those furrows, “we all need someone. I just happened to be here when you were ready to release that pain and grief, is all.”

she would Daria shook her head, closing her eyes as his thumb skimmed her forehead. “No,” she managed in a low, broken tone, “that’s not true, Nik.” As he wished his hand away, she opened her eyes. “There’s something about your trust with my life. I know you meant well about massaging my leg, but it’s not as good as your gaze stretched it a bit. “And it feels so much better now. Usually, even when I’m sleeping all night, it’s stiff in the morning and I have to get up and move around before it loosens up.” She gave him a warm look. “It’s not just about being a person at the right place and time, at all.”

fragile “Wasn’t Alex able to help you? He was there when you came to the hospital, wasn’t he?”

his neck, “Yes, both he and Lauren took me under their wings.” Daria slowly nodded. Nik followed suit, placing several pillows behind him, then leaning his head against the headboard. When he opened his arms in invitation to her, she came to him. Curving into him, resting across his body, feeling his arms wrap around her, holding her gently, Daria laid her head on his shoulder, one hand across his heart.

raw pain Euphoria flowed through Nik. He couldn’t believe it, but laying with her against him, the intimacy strong and unbroken, was building even more between them. He pressed his lips to her matted hair. “Alex has a way of pulling a person’s tooth and they never feel the pain at the time,” he told her in an amused tone. Nik wanted to do so much more than just hold Daria. He wanted to shower her with soft, meaningful kisses from the top of her head down to her small delicate toes. He felt her laugh, her face pressed against his shoulder, the sound muted as she nodded her head.

she tried “You’ve got that right,” Daria murmured, turning, meeting his stare. “Alex tried, but I wasn’t ready, Nik.”

her tary?” “Then we will celebrate the first step in healing your heart and so

again, that event,” he told her in a roughened tone. He smoothed black hair out of her face, tucking it across her forehead. “Tell me about your life. I want to know everything about you. I have hundreds of questions to ask you.” Her eyes turned introspective. Had he accidentally stepped into another part of her life? Automatically for a moment, before Nik realized what he was doing, his arms closed protectively around her, as if to shield her from unbidden unhappy memories.

“I was adopted at six months from a Russian orphanage and taken to Lviv, Ukraine. My new family said, when I was thirteen, they felt I had the blood of ancient Scythian women warriors. Looking back on my life, I believe them, that I inherited that gene, no doubt. Even my eyes are slanted and my skin is not white, but an in-between color, bringing me unknown central Asian heritage with me. The women of my adopted family have always kept records of our family history. I remember being shown a very old parchment by my adopted mother and she was telling me about your two women ancestors, on the maternal side historically speaking, with Kubla Khan. That was in 1350, and that is how far back our family goes. I was mesmerized by that history even though it wasn’t my own. I grew up wanting to be just like them. They were fierce and bravely protected the innocent.”

“And so, you became a Marine Corps sniper.”

“For many years in the Sand Box, yes.” She frowned. “I’m glad you’re out of that line of work, though. I guess I used up that gene. I’m done with my sniper career.”

“A busted op like you had is enough to make anyone think twice about going back into the trade,” he said. “I’m glad you’re out of that MOS with her track.”

“I like the way you and Alex see the world,” Daria admitted softly, her fingers smoothing the coarse dry shirt fabric across his chest.

“What do you mean?”

Her hand stilled on his chest. Daria studied him in the lulling blue of his eyes. “That you both see a person’s heart, their soul. I think it’s very Ukrainian to move deeply into a person, to really want to see them, who they are at the corner of her mouth lifted a little. “Warts and all.”

His mouth curved a bit. “You have no warts, Daria.”

She snorted. “Oh, yes I do, Nik. You just haven’t seen them close enough to see them.”



ir away “No, my Kitten, whatever warts you hide? They would never sc  
ourself. away. You must know that.” His hand rested on her arm. “Nothing yo  
He saw say or do would make me run the other way. Ever.”

painful She closed her eyes, languishing in his arms, absorbing his stren  
he was steadiness and open vulnerability. “I’ve never met a man like you  
om any Nik.”

“How so?”

aken to “You’re able to be who you are. You can let your game face drop.”

had the “Are you aware of this birthmark you carry? The quarter moon?”  
life? I brushed the hair away from her ear.

slightly “Yes. My Mom said it was moon-shaped. I can barely see it myse  
ing my can hold a mirror just so and spy it.” Her voice turned soft. “Sec  
family dreamed it was the sign of a woman warrior within our family, too. I  
hown abadly to be like my Ukrainian family’s wonderful history.”

out her Nik nodded. “You have been a fierce warrior even to this day. I  
no rode feel the Scythian blood is running through you?”

history “In my childhood’s wild imaginings, I always pictured myself as a  
n, and I woman riding this black stallion, clothed in armor, swinging my  
ve and riding with the rest of my horse-mounted women warriors into

Shaking her head, “Dreams of a child, Nik. Reality is a lot harsh  
unforgiving if you’re in the military.”

d that’s He heard the heaviness in Daria’s words, and understood as fe  
er.” would. “Yes,” he mouthed against her hair, squeezing her a little, “  
e about doesn’t realize the brutality, the pain or grief of war. Playing any war  
career whether daydreaming it, or on a game app, is nothing like it is in real  
real life.”

tly, her “We’re both older and wiser.” She lifted her leg a bit. “Wounde  
Permanently.”

He leaned down, moving his hand gently across her wounded thigh  
silence. wounds can be cleansed, Daria, just as you are allowing that to happen  
inian to yourself, right now, to start releasing that grief and horror. It’s part  
e.” On necessary cleansing and healing process and you have bravely walked  
it, not run away from it.”

She studied him as the quiet eddied around them. “Because you g  
me out a safe place to let it go, Nik. You’re a medic, but in truth, you’re a  
Somehow... and I don’t know how, you reached down inside me, r

are memory pain and everything I was holding at bay. I couldn't hold on to it  
you could massaged my thigh. It was as if you had some secret key and unlocked  
and it was like a volcano erupting. It caught me by surprise. I couldn't  
get, his it any longer." Daria turned her gaze over to where her hand rested  
before, chest. "I opened up to you, trusted you and you held me. You  
encouraged me to cry, to get it out, and I did."

"Tears are always cleansing, Kitten. Always," Nik murmured, giving  
a tender look. "You should cry often. It will help you heal faster." He  
and his mouth turned down, as if to reject his words.

"It hurts so much to cry, Nik. I've had enough pain. I don't want to  
let it go, but I again when it comes back up. That's why I try to sit on it. Ignore it."  
rely? I He shook his head. "You must trust me as a medic, Daria, when I  
wanted 'better out, than in'. Any emotion that we have that is negative and  
cuts into us, causing us constant pain, needs to be released. Sometimes  
Do you cannot do it by themselves, but need another person or event to catch  
within them."

a young "Like you did with me," she said, thoughtful.

sword, "We shared a very important moment together," he agreed, his  
battle." suddenly roughened with emotion. "It is a compliment to both of us  
and trusted one another enough to allow it to surface within you and be released."

"I know I caught you off guard," Daria said, apologetic. "I sat up, I  
saw every your hand away from me."

'a child He gave her a wry look. "At first, yes, but I got it, Daria. You are  
the first scene, first person I have touched and then have them break down in tears  
time or Nik slid his fingers through her hair, watching the pleasure come to her  
closed eyes, seeing her lips part. It would be so easy to lean in the  
direction by it, inches and take her mouth gently beneath his own. Resisting, knowing  
was open to him, fully immersed within him, Nik wasn't going to break  
her. "But trust. "I have had many women and children cry in my arms over the years  
within "You have seen so much trauma," Daria agreed, her voice filled  
with concern, searching his eyes.

toward "It is the load that a medic carries, Kitten," and he forced a slight  
smile for her benefit. Nik didn't want her to worry about *him*. He was  
not going to give her a headache about *her*. And he wanted to keep the focus on Daria. "I have  
strong healer shoulders. I've learned to carry all loads very well," he teased her. "I  
want to talk to you more about your growing-up years with your adopted family?"

as you “My Dad is a professor of Archeology at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. My mother is an adjunct professor of archeology at the same university. I grew up at archeological digs in Ukraine and there has always been on Neolithic sites. I grew up surrounded with artifacts and actually many books on history, and I loved it.”

“So? Were you thinking about a life being a historian?”

“Archeology is history,” she said, “and my mother and I were interested in the matriarchal world of Neolithic sites in Ukraine, as well as other surrounding countries that once were part of Scythia. Marija Gaidamoniuk, a woman archeologist and anthropologist from Lithuania, was famous for finding the matriarchal society of the Neolithic people in our area. I was entranced with my family genetics going back to the Neolithic people, that Asian people. I told them I wanted to be a warrior, not carry on the tradition of archeology as they had.”

“Then,” he said, “our backgrounds are very different.” He saw her eyes widen a little in interest, and Nik couldn’t help but give her a playful smile.

“My family grew up on a farm collective in the center of Ukraine where wheat is grown for export. Alex’s family lived close to us, and we were the best of friends growing up. Dan, my younger brother by two years, followed us around. Alex and I would ride the family plow horses. We were pushing tractor, of course, but my father always kept a good team of draft horses in case it broke down, which it did. Alex and I used to steal our horses out of the barn, put bridles on them, leap upon their backs. Dan always rode behind us later.” The three of us would go cantering off along the pathways around the farm and into the woods. We’d find all kinds of things to explore and get lost. “Those were the best days,” he told her thickly.

“They sound wonderful. But I hear sadness in your voice, Nik.”

“It’s my turn to want to run and hide,” he admitted, irony in his voice. “Russian separatists destroyed Alex’s family farm. He and his sister were the only survivors.” His mouth turned down, his voice growing somber. “At that time, Alex was in the Russian army with me and he came home worried his family farm and it was no more. A year later, Kira, who was also in the Russian Army as a nurse, had their field hospital overrun by the separatists. Everyone was killed except the nurses, who were repeatedly raped. Kira was sent to Moscow for a while to be rehabilitated, but that did not work.”

ational left the Army. She moved to Kyiv to try and start to live her life again at the joined Spetsnaz two years later and he also became a medic. It was their focus our farm was raided by Separatists. They killed our entire family.”

ts, read Daria gasped, sitting up. “I’m so sorry, Nik. For you and Alex. He told me any of this.” She laid her hand on his arm, searching his expression.

re very “It’s not something you bring up in social conversation, is it?” Nik well asher hand in his, curling his fingers around hers.

nbutas, “No... you’re right...”

ous for “Alex and I waged war against the Separatists with our Spetsnaz of the We gave no quarter. It was bloody and it was brutal. I lost part of my central during that time. I was torn open by the loss of my entire family family generations, Daria. I couldn’t come to terms with it, with the murder of them at their hands. They’d done nothing to deserve that kind of fate er eyes loved the land; they loved their animals and all they wanted was to be d look. find peace by working the land.”

where “That’s so heart-breaking,” she whispered, rubbing her brow. “I vere the know how you got through it, Nik.”

always He gave her a gentle look. “And I sat here wondering how you s e had at that broken up.” He brought her hand to his lips, kissing the back of rses on then watching pleasure come to her gold eyes once more. Knowing th t to the liked it, Nik was content in that moment to take things no further ind me. wasn’t necessarily on their side. He had only a few more days here in e fields Calientes before he returned to the green hell. Nik silently promise t into,” that he was going to make sure they spent as much time together as po re good He was content to let Daria decide what was appropriate between

But, if he were any judge of her and their growing closeness, the cl between them that was molten, burning and hungry, he was certain is tone. the future, they would become more intimate. Giving her a serious l r, Kira, said, “I feel like I’ve waited my entire life for this moment to occur. ig dim. You’re easy to talk to.” He held her hand a little more firmly, lookin ome to into her eyes. “I’ve only got a few more days here. I know we have o o in the to play. But, in truth? I want to spend every minute I can with you, aratists. tomorrow morning. It will be time for Korsak and his men to thi ira was staying overnight to bed you.”

and she “I want the same thing, Nik,” Daria admitted quietly, holding his

in. Danlook. “I feel as if I’ve been waiting for you all my life. I can’t explain that just feels so good to be around you, to be with you. You make me happy. The happiness I’ve never felt before and I’m so afraid of losing it... I’ll never see you...”

pained “Let’s take this one step at a time? Let’s play our parts for Korsak. It’s true that it will be another four weeks before we can see one another. But I know you took but you have much to fill your time with between now and then.”

Daria nodded. As soon as Korsak’s team left for the jungle again, she already had a time and place set up to meet Sergeant Mace Kilmer and his three-man army Special Forces team. Nik had already given her drawing and any soul info to pass on to Kilmer that he couldn’t otherwise get to the team. She was the only one, the go-between on this mission to capture Korsak.

of all of “You’re right, I do.” she replied.

2. They He eased his hand from hers and looked at his watch. “It’s nearly time. I need to go to keep my cover in place. I have to get back to the hotel whether I want to or not.”

-I don’t Daria nodded and slowly edged off the bed and stood. She pushed the hem of her shorts down into place over her scars once more, threaded her fingers through her mussed hair, taming it. She watched as Nik moved, unwinding with that male grace of his. His shoulders were broad and strong, unlike hers. “Do you have any plans for us tomorrow?”

3. Time “Yes. Tomorrow morning, I’m taking you up to the orphanage with me. When I come into town, I always spend a day up there as a medic. I don’t want to break my normal pattern. I don’t want to arouse his suspicion. Would you like to go with me?”

n them. “Sure, I’d love to,” she said, coming around the bed. Daria slipped into his arms, resting her head against his chest for a moment, feeling his heartbeat. “I’m going to miss you tonight...”

ook, he He snorted. “I’ll miss you more, Kitten.” He kissed her hair and she smiled, Daria back enough to catch her flawless golden eyes that held so much depth. There was a need in them. For him. It made him feel incredibly powerful and heady. His heart was wide open to Daria. He would do anything to start her smile and help her release her painful past. “To go back to the hotel, to thin walls, to noises going on all night long, is not conducive to sleep, believe me.”

somber She gave him a stricken look. “It’s that bad?”

in it. It was worse, but Nik didn't want to stress or burden Daria with a  
e feel amore tonight. "I've been putting up with it for five years, and it hasn'  
losing me yet," he teased her lightly, placing a kiss on her nose. There w  
openness between them that Nik found it tough not to dream of a futu  
ak. It's Daria. He squeezed her. "I have to go..."

r again, "Do you want me to follow you out? Kiss you on the porch for the

He shook his head. "No, not tonight." He gestured to her shorts.  
in, she wear those outside. If any of the team sees your wounded leg,  
and his immediately know you were knifed and then they'll start asking a  
ngs and questions about you."

he was Glumly, Daria said, "I hadn't even thought of that. I'm a  
undercover agent, Nik."

He smiled and kissed her cheek, inhaling her special, spicy scent.  
2200. I be your big, bad guard dog," he promised. Easing away, he wanted  
hether I her, but knew he'd be lost if he did so. Nik was so close to lifting Da  
his arms and carrying her to the bed. And he knew, if he didn't leav  
hed thenow, he'd end up doing just that. His lower body was on fire. Burnin  
ing her hunger for her. Yet, he saw no arousal in Daria's eyes and knew s  
stood, content with where they stood with one another right now. They had to  
strong, they had shared a few chaste kisses. It was enough. He could hope fo  
later, but didn't expect it. Daria had to set the pace.

ith me. "Guard dog," she teased, easing away from him.

Korsak "Every woman needs a man in her life who will protect her from  
rns and time," he told her, walking down the hall with her. "It doesn't me  
aren't capable of defending yourself at all. It's a human thing to v  
ed into protect those you care about."

is arms "Then," Daria said, touching his lower arm as he walked over to  
his ruck, "let me be your guard dog, too. It works both ways, Nik."

leaned He smiled fully, brushed her hair away over her ear and kissed her  
nore in "I will come by for you at 0800. I'll take you to our restaurant down  
owerful plaza to have *desayuno* early and then we'll walk up to the orphanage  
o make that sound like a good day for you?"

t seedy Daria lost her smile, sliding her fingers along the line of his jaw.

icive to With suddenly sad and serious eyes she said, "I can hardly wait, Ni

nything  
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## CHAPTER 10

“I WAS SURPRISED you left that woman’s apartment last night,” sneered as Nik made his way down the stairs to the lobby of their hotel the next morning. The idiot was standing there in a dark green t-shirt and cammos, unshaven, his eyes red-rimmed, reeking of cigarettes and alcohol.

Nik ignored him. He owed this bastard nothing, and walked on lifting his medical pack over his shoulder.

“Where are you going?”

“Why don’t you follow me and find out?”

Brudin glared at him.

Nik walked out of the delapidated hotel that was a cloying mix of cigarette smoke, marijuana, vodka and sour smelling male sweat. It was a place he hated, never spending one more moment in it than he had to visit his team. Pushing out through the doors, the gray skies greeted him through a falling mist of light rain. He lifted his face, allowing the drizzle to wash away the grime from his face and remove the noxious odors he knew already clung to his dirty and cleaned clothes. Nothing stayed fresh or smelled very good in a jungle for very long. Dampness infused everything. He’d had to shake out his t-shirt, dark green cammos, and black waterproof boots to ensure there were no venomous creatures within them who might have taken up residence in the room he’d slept. Not that the sleep hadn’t been great. He’d slept like a dead man with Daria in his arms. Nik had forgotten what real sleep was like and he hungered for more. He walked quickly across the empty plaza. The first train from Cusco would come in at ten a.m., disgorging hundreds of tourists to Aguas Calientes. Most would climb into the red buses that would take them up the switchbacks of a muddy road to the top of Machu Picchu for the day.

His stride picked up, the asphalt gleaming wetly beneath his boots. The morning air was fresher now, cleansed by the rain, taking away the odors from the night’s parties. None of the tourist shops were open at this hour, all were shuttered, their owners probably still sleeping. All was quiet and he al



the silence readily, trying to get the yells, screams and moans out of his head. From the prostitutes working their johns over, a wall away from where he slept. He hated this life. He was so close to getting out of here. It was a matter of time until he could alert the A-team as to where Korsak was next. Or so he hoped.

Halfway up the hill, Nik's heart quickened. In just moments, he would see Daria. Was she all right? How had she fared after he'd left? It was impossible that Brudin had seen him leave the hotel this morning. He took the stairs to Daria's place briskly and, at the top, he knocked on the red door. Daria opened it and smiled up at him. "Hey, look what the jaguar caught today. You're wet!"

He grinned sheepishly, gave her a nod of hello, and eased past her putting down his heavy medical ruck on the rug. "You look beautiful," he murmured, straightening, moving his fingers through the strands of dampened hair. Daria wore a set of loose jeans, but they couldn't hide the length of her gorgeous legs or that fine butt of hers. The pale-peach sweater she had bought earlier, with its feminine cowl neck, only enhanced her natural beauty. Her golden eyes were warm and welcoming. He needed this. He needed her.

"I don't know about beautiful," she murmured, closing the door, "but I'm starving this morning. This is the first time in a long time I've actually been hungry."

Nik itched to take her into his arms. She stood before him and he saw her happiness. "Your eyes are more clear this morning. A good shower would do that. It cleanses you in the best of ways."

Daria wrinkled her nose and went to retrieve her nylon jacket. "I don't know about that either, but I can tell you I slept so soundly and that I didn't wake up until an hour ago."

He inhaled her sweet scent as she moved close, pulling on her jacket. "I wish I could say the same. That hotel is noisy."

"Well, tonight you're staying here. Right?"

"Yes. If nothing else, I'll sleep well," he said, giving her a half grin. He gestured to his ruck. "I'm going to leave my medical gear here. We'll go down to the plaza for *desayuno*. And then we need to go up and catch the bus to the hill. The orphanage is down the slope on the other side of it. The gate won't open until 0900, so we have a good hour to eat and be s

his head. "Korsak's men if they happen to be up and about."

here he "Are they usually asleep at this time of day?" she asked, picking up a black baseball cap and settling it on her head.

ould go "Drunk. Hung over. Drugs. Take your pick. I did run into Brudin, going to tell Korsak I didn't stay with you last night."

e'd see "Good. I'm ready. Don't you want a coat, Nik?"

important "No, I'm fine." He opened the door for her. "I'm used to this place

wooden "I don't think I'd ever get used to it at all. At least, during the An or. dry season, it might be humid, but it's not raining every day like dragged here."

They stepped out and Nik shut the door behind them. Daria locked the key, depositing it into her pocket. She turned, sliding her arms around his shoulders.

of his "For those who spy on us," she whispered as she leaned up, closing her lips across his mouth.

Nik was jolted by her unexpected action, but at the same time, he felt the heat and warmth of her mouth sliding across his. There wasn't an act of seduction on his part as his arms naturally slid around Daria, hauling her against him, kissing her hard and hungrily. She smelled faintly of coffee but he felt her mouth blossom beneath his own, her hips moving suggestively against his. Fire shot through him at her unexpected sensuality, a femaleness shaking him to his core and making him want to take her right there and now. As the kiss deepened, his breathing became more ragged, his hands did hers. Daria pressed wantonly against him, her breasts firm against his straining chest. Daria was all woman. And he'd named her. "I don't know she was like a sensual feline, a female jaguar on the hunt for her mate. I didn't know she wasn't wearing a bra. That stunned him, and he damn near brought his hands up instinctively to cup her breasts. Luckily, what little was left of his functioning brain flagged that instinct down before he actually fell through on it.

Dazed by the passion of her kiss as Daria withdrew from it, he grinned. Hedrowsy, telling him so much, Nik kept his hands around her waist, gripping her firmly, staring intently down at her. A playful glint came over her eyes and he wanted to drag her back into the apartment and follow her. "I'm not a charity on what she'd just ignited in him. His voice was barely a growl. "Tell me, were you doing this for show?"

“I didn’t do it for show. It’s what I wanted to do last night, but I knew if I kissed you, then you wouldn’t leave and we couldn’t continue this charade.” A playful smile came to Daria’s lips. “I didn’t want you to do it for me, so he’s Nik...”

“And I don’t want you doing this because you think you’re doing something,” he rasped, his gaze digging into her widening eyes. The light in her eyes were gold and he could see sienna specks deep within them, making her hazel eyes almost shimmer. Daria felt so alive beneath his hands. He could feel her pulse pulsing, yearning and wanting him just as much as he desired her.

“What you did for me last night is something I’ll never be able to do with you for enough,” she said slowly, fearlessly holding his gaze. “And I’ll never use sex as a ‘thank you’. I value myself way too much for that.”

His lips twitched. “You’re sure?” and he caressed her hips. “There’s a difference between love, sex and thanks. Don’t you think?” An unwilling grin spread across his mouth. “Where did *this* Daria feel the from?”

Shrugging, she slipped out of his grip. “Maybe you released me last night,” she called over her shoulder, laughing, as she headed down the stairs. Still stunned, Nik gave himself an internal shake. This woman knew how to kiss. Not only that, she had moves that made his lower body scintillate with such starvation that he could barely think. If Brudin was watching, he’d be right sure the bastard was, there would be no doubt in the errand boy’s mind as to why he was staying over tonight with Daria.

Kicking himself back into gear mentally, Nik took the stairs correctly: catching up with her, scooping her hand up into his and leading her to the restaurant. She followed him to a nearby restaurant. The soft rain had stopped and the asphalt shimmered in the low light of the morning, the gray clouds thick and crawling over the town. First, breakfast, and then they’d go to the orphanage.

“Tell me more about the orphanage?” Daria urged as they crested the empty hill. They’d had a wonderful breakfast, and then gone back to her apartment afterward so Nik could pick up his medical ruck.

Before her lay the green expanse of the jungle, the railroad tracks cutting through it and, center stage, a squat two-story gray concrete building surrounded by a ten-foot-high cyclone fence surrounding it. Along the top of the fence ran a concertina wire, with sharpened blades all along to discourage anyone from breaking into the place. It was set off to the left side of the compound.

new if the hot spring pools. The whole area, Daria had read, was sitting on a grade of volcanic activity. The hot springs were divided into five long, rectangular swimming-pool-lengths filled with murky green, opaque water. Further they looked far from hot. More like tepid, going on cool. They didn't seem very appealing to Daria at all, but she'd heard that many tourists swam in their lukewarm depths, thinking the water had healing properties. She'd nudged them into what looked like green slime to her. Not willingly.

"Healing Hands is a modest charity in South America," Nik told her, gesturing toward the fenced-in orphanage. "Liz Standsworth, Senator Standsworth's daughter, runs it. She cares very much about third-world countries. Up in the Highlands, she and her volunteer diggers are digging wells for ten villages in this region... ones that have no clean water available to them. There's a forty-percent infant mortality rate because the children drink the dirty water that is filled with parasites, fecal bacteria, or dead animal debris that causes Hepatitis A. In the States, if you get Hepatitis A, you can get medication for it and are quarantined for a few last weeks. Out here, if a child drinks polluted water, he or she will die. There are no medications available. Liz does what she can, where she can. She runs the orphanage with a few women who are widows or volunteers from the U.S., and they run these orphanages in Peru. There is an American here, Megan Cantrell, who is the volunteer who manages this one orphanage. You'll like her a lot. As a matter of fact, when I'm gone for this next month, I know Megan would love to have you help. Do you like young children?"

"I love babies and children." Daria smiled a little, squeezing his hand. Nik was a man who wore his heart on his sleeve, no question. She could see the excitement in his eyes as they drew closer to the gray compound.

He shrugged. "Some women don't for various reasons. I never asked them or do I judge them."

"I do love kids."

"These children will love you."

They walked down the well-trodden muddy path that led off the hill with a road toward the orphanage. Daria could see that the jungle was coiled continually encroaching around the compound was being held back by anyone presumably by a lot of regularly-swung machetes. Everything grew at a rapid and alarming rate around here due to the constant rain. She saw

top of concertina on top of the ten-foot-high fence. “Why the wire, Nik?”  
angular Frowning, he said, “There is a handful of very poor, desperate  
ermore, addicted Quechua Indians around here. They have resorted to steal  
i’t look had to put up the fence with the razor wire. The orphanage was  
in their broken into all the time and the children were at risk by the c  
ever go robberies. She didn’t want anyone getting hurt.” He slowed his pace

came to the main gate. There was a huge rusty padlock on it. Lower  
old her, voice, he said, “Two years ago, Megan was jumped from behind, blind  
r Jacob and then raped by a band of men. I’m not so sure it wasn’t the other I  
l world team who is in this area. Word is, it was by the people who live here, but  
drilling are cautious about talking about it. No one can prove anything. They  
available up and Megan couldn’t identify any of them. It was a brutal attack upon

young “Oh, no,” Daria whispered, struck by the tragedy. “I wouldn’t  
matter, Quechua would do that. They’re a very peaceful people.”

, if you “They are, and yet Korsak keeps telling us it was them, not the  
for six Russian team who had come in for R&R. I didn’t believe him for a  
ere are The other team near where we work are nothing but sick, predatory Ru  
’s got a They sometimes visit Aguas Calientes, and the people who live here  
women hide when they enter the village. They should,” he muttered, his  
manage thinning.

volunteer “And Megan stayed on after that?” The worst thing Daria could think  
of fact, could happen to any woman was rape. It was a violent assault upon her  
ve your pure and simple, meant to disempower her, to control her and put her  
place. It sickened her and she touched her stomach, feeling regret  
s hand. Megan’s plight.

ould see “Yes.” His voice lowered as he opened the padlock with a key from  
pocket. “Megan is a strong, good woman. She comes from a military  
assume, the Trayhern’s, and she served in the Air Force, and was a transport pilot  
six years. When it happened, one of the women came and found her  
unconscious on the floor in her small room where she sleeps. It took her  
get a helicopter in here from Cusco to pick her up.” He opened the padlock  
asphalt which creaked in his hands. “A lesser woman would have left this gate  
growth but she didn’t.”

at bay, “Why not?”

a swift “Because Megan is a woman who commits her passion to her work  
aw the always loved children.” He turned to Daria; his eyes sad. “Now, she

have any because of the brutality of the gang rapes. She went through the drug-extensive surgery and nearly died on the table. She had to undergo a hysterectomy in order to save her life, it was that bad.”

“No,” Daria breathed. She pressed her hand against her mouth, fighting back tears for Megan.

Nik shook his head, pushing open the cranky gate that needed some of his attention. “They cut her face, too, so don’t stare at Megan. She’s been through hell and has redoubled her work efforts here at the orphanage. Russian her sanctuary of sorts, I think. I don’t know. She’s a complex, but she’s a woman.”

“My heart aches for her,” Daria breathed. “Would Russians do that to her?”

He grimaced, shutting the gate but leaving the padlock open. “That’s not my job to think about.”

I know it was the other Russian team. Spetsnaz is handy with knives. I’ve learned how to carve up a person to get them to tell us what we want to know. When I was able to get into Aguas Calientes after it happened, I took a train up to Cusco and visited her in the hospital. By the cut on her forehead and her upper chest, I could tell it was Spetsnaz work. Quechua Indian mouthwork with knives. It’s not a tool they use.”

Rubbing her brow, Daria stood near him, if nothing else but for the sake of the protection he radiated. “I-I didn’t realize this...”

Grimly, Nik cupped her shoulders, giving her a small shake. “Listen to me. This is a very dangerous game we play. I’m surprised Alex didn’t tell you about this.”

“Jack, during the briefing, said the Russian teams were cruel. He went on to explain further into explanation. Alex did say that Korsak and his family routinely raped women at each village. Sometimes... young girls...”

“And if the woman doesn’t do what they want, they use a knife to kill her. They will cut her, bleed her, until she gives in and stops fighting back. They have their methods.” He brushed some hair away from her forehead. “Don’t worry, okay? I’m here. Korsak and his men will leave you alone.”

They know better than to tangle with me. I might be a medic, but I’m highly trained as they are, and I won’t take anything off them. Especially when it comes to you.”

She felt a chill. “Do you think they would come after me?”

through “No. Not unless they suspected you, Daria. And we’re not giving you any reason to go in that direction.” He tried to smile, but failed. “Just like Megan like you would anyone else. All right?”

fighting “Of course,” Daria answered faintly, nausea rising in her throat from Megan’s horrific assault.

some oil Nik patted her shoulder, his hand sliding down and coming to rest on the small of her back, guiding her down the concrete walk to a dark wooden door that said ‘Welcome’ on it.

caring Inside, Daria heard squalling babies, children laughing, and saw the face of a woman with long red hair, in a denim skirt to her ankles, brown sandals and a white peasant blouse, getting all of the kids to sit at a wooden table for breakfast. Daria inhaled the scent of quinoa cereal, the few grains in the world that contains thirty-percent protein. There were another two, older Quechua Indian women in colorful skirts and blouses. Daria still couldn’t tear her gaze away from the American woman who had brought them back to them.

face, on Nik halted at the door and waited. Daria watched his expression as he didn’t see affection for Megan in his eyes. When the woman turned, she had a scar on her face that made Daria want to gasp. A long scar ran from the top of her right cheekbone down that entire side of her face to her jawline and it made Daria want to gasp.

It was a faint scar, but there, forever. A mark of her courage to survive a terrible assault, as far as Daria was concerned.

Don’t tell “Nik!” Megan called, throwing open her arms, rushing toward him.

Daria stood back, watching the tall, willowy woman grab Nik and hug him. She didn’t pull out of him. She had pale blue eyes that had suddenly sparkled with so much warmth and happiness once she’d spotted him. Daria couldn’t help but smile in response, watching the woman hug Nik until he blushed. He was a big man, and Megan probably weighed around a hundred and forty pounds, but there was such an encompassing joy vibrating in her alto voice that it diminished their size difference. He patted her shoulder and smiled back, grinning sheepishly.

alone. “It’s good to see you again, Megan.” Nik turned and held out his hand in the direction of Daria. “I want you to meet Daria McClusky. She’s a botanist on sabbatical to write a book about local orchids. I thought you two might meet. Daria, meet Megan Cantrell.”

“Welcome,” Megan said warmly, stepping toward Daria.

g them Daria held out her hands. Megan had an oval face, high cheekbones, and wide-spaced eyes that spoke of her intelligence. There was such an energy surrounding this woman that Daria was stunned by it. No question, she was a tour-de-force. “Hi,” she said, smiling, “it’s nice to meet you, Daria. Nik said you might like some volunteer help?” Daria released the woman’s hand. “I’m not a licensed child care specialist, but I love children. He thought I might be helpful to you when I need a break from writing my book.”

he back “Oh,” she bubbled, “I’d LOVE to have you help us, Daria! We really need the help we can get around here. I’m missing Maria today. She’s home for a long and Megan looked to her left toward the table where the Indian woman was serving the hot cereal to the noisy, impatient children.

Despite “Well,” Nik murmured, giving Daria a significant look, “why don’t you perform my medical duties around here, and perhaps Megan can sort you out for the day? Get a feel for what it’s like around here, Daria.”

“I’d like that,” Daria murmured to the red-haired woman. Megan was either in her late twenties or early thirties. It was hard to tell because she was so energetic, her face, even with the scar, youthful looking and reminiscent of a young college-aged woman. Still, Daria saw oldness and tiredness in Megan’s eyes, too. Her hands were red and chapped, and she had such a weary expression that the woman didn’t take care of herself. Either that, or she was doing a lot of hard handwork all on her own. “How can I help?”

“Well,” Megan said, giving her a worried look, “you are probably a bit out of your mind, but I need someone to wash the children’s clothes. My washer is broken and I’m trying to get a replacement from Lima down here, with no help but next to impossible. Liz has it in Cusco, but the train owner wants to charge me an arm and leg to transport it down here.” She pulled Daria along to a small room, a smaller one. “And until this situation can be resolved, I’ve been using a washboard and washing all the kids’ clothes by hand.”

pulled Daria saw the washer and dryer. There were two huge service units nearby. Megan walked over to them and picked up a washboard.

hand in “I need you to wet the clothes down, soap them up and scrub them clean. Then, put water in this sink and rinse them out. My dryer still works like to thank God. Nothing dries down here, but it will with this dryer.” She pointed to a pile of children’s clothing piled up in a mound nearly four feet tall. “Do you still have your game?”



ies, and Daria grinned and pushed up her sleeves. It was chilly in the structure, and the walls were a fierce, naked gray concrete and little else. “You bet.”

question, Megan held up her reddened hands. “See these? I’ve been doing this for you, hours a night, every night, for the last two weeks.” She smiled and flexed the arm, pointing to its bicep. “And I’m going to look like a Schwarzenegger pretty soon if Liz doesn’t get that washer down here for me. I’ll be here as soon as possible, ASAP.”

Daria nodded. “You do know there’s a laundry place in town?” Megan’s full mouth twisted. “Yes, I know the owner. He’s a little bit sick, but it’s an unmentionable word in my world. I can’t afford it, anyway. He would give me a discount. We’re on a very tight budget and getting the kids three meals a day is my priority.”

“Okay, I’ll go to work.”

“Don’t over do,” Megan pleaded, touching her shoulder. “And Daria?” “Need me? I’ll be somewhere around here. It’s not that big of a place. I’ll find me.”

Daria smiled and watched Megan hurry away, her denim skirt flapping around her thin ankles. Sadness moved through her. How could Megan be so red-faced and cheery after what had happened to her? She was only four months into telling her trauma and it was obvious that it still affected her heavily whether she wanted to admit it or not. Daria’s admiration and respect for Megan increased exponentially. Obviously, the woman was made of tougher stuff than she was.

Nik was just wrapping up his last examination of the day on a tiny, one-month-old baby girl when Daria moved quietly to the small, cozy examination room. It was the warmest room in the place and she closed the door behind her, watching him gently handle the infant. If he was aware of her, he gave no indication, bending over the cooing baby in his arms, her tiny arms and legs moving energetically, gurgling and smiling. The cloth diaper made her sink a little. The old-fashioned way, with cotton fabric, made for soft diapers. No first-world amenities down here. She watched as Nik rubbed the stethoscope between his hands to warm the metal up before placing it on the baby’s chest. How he cared for the infant made her melt inwardly. The pointed exquisite tenderness in this man as he listened to the infant’s lungs and heart. “Are you?” He picked the baby up, holding her on his knee, bracing the infant with his free arm and hand, listening to her lungs some more.

picture as It was the soft words in Spanish that he spoke to the baby, smiling and tickling her, that made Daria's smile widen. The baby gurgled happily, his four large brown eyes glistening and pinned on Nik, whose face was only inches away. He put his stethoscope away and took the baby's temperature with the Arnold ear monitor. Taking each of her tiny hands, he let the child grasp his long index finger. Nik was testing her strength and coordination. And when he was done with the examination, he hoisted the child up into his arms, pulled a pink alpaca blanket across her tiny body, laying her against his shoulder, gently patting her back. There was a loud burp.

Don't give Daria laughed a little.

square Nik turned, smiling over at her. "You caught me."

She ambled over to the table and she held out her hands. "Can I hold her? Would she want to come to me?"

if you "I don't see why not. Meet Gabriela. Megan found her shortly after your birth, dropped off at the front gate to the orphanage, wrapped in a quilted blanket. Let's get her dressed in her onesie? You can then sit in that rocking chair over there and I'll get her a warm bottle of llama milk and feed her. Megan believe fun?"

s out of It did. Daria found the clean pink onesie and brought it over to the table. Nik was a breeze at putting it on the baby.

creased "You've done this a few times."

can she He smiled and nodded, brushing his fingers across the baby's black hair, patting it down into place. "I come over here every month. I see a lot of sick children who are dropped off here. All malnourished, need a lot of TLC, vitamin and mineral packs, and medical intervention of one kind or another."

he made "Who pays for your supplies to help them?" Daria wondered, looking at Gabriela from him.

he Daria "I do," he said, stuffing everything into his ruck and velcroing it shut. "It's the only allowance I give myself: to buy the medicine these children need at a Cusco pharmacy."

it on the "Korsak wouldn't buy it out of his millions of dollars of drug money," Daria asked, sitting down in the rocker, smiling into Gabriela's hug and heart. The baby gazed up at her.

with his Snorting, Nik said, "No. Stay here and just rock her. She loves to be rocked. I'll get her bottle warmed from the kitchen..."

ing and There was such peace in rocking back and forth with a baby in her arms, her Gabriela's angelic little face was precious to Daria. She watched as the baby's eyes closed, nearly asleep by the time Nik quietly returned with a bottle in his hand.

his own "Cute little thing," he murmured, handing the bottle to Daria.

d when "She's beautiful. So sad her mother gave her up," she said as she held the nipple gently between Gabriela's tiny bow-shaped lips.

inst his Nik crouched down in front of Daria, his hands light on her shoulders, searching her eyes. "There's much love around here," Nik murmured, looking around. "The building is old. It used to be a miner's home, built of heavy concrete. It was abandoned and left to be eaten up and covered by the jungle until Liz came down here and reclaimed it. The Peruvian government gave it to her so she could open up the orphanage. It serves the entire area around Machu Picchu, plus the Highlands area."

uechua "That's a lot of square miles."

rocker "There's a lot of abandoned babies and children here," Nik said, shaking his head.

"Why so many, Nik? What's going on around here?"

e table. "Nothing that isn't going on in every third world country," he said quietly. He rose and brought a chair over, turning it to face her. Sitting down, he crossed his legs, his hands resting in his lap. "How did you do in the laundry room today?"

There's Daria grimaced. "I've got red, chapped hands to prove I worked in the laundry room today. I'm not complaining. At least it's one day's worth of clothes cleaning. Megan won't have to do tonight."

"You did her a great service today," he praised, giving her a look of approval. "She's been without a washer for weeks."

"That's awful. She's so busy, Nik. Does the woman ever get any rest?" Shaking his head, he looked over his shoulder to ensure the door was closed. Turning, he said in a low tone, "Ever since being gang raped, she barely sleeps two or three hours a night. It's pretty bad and it's PTSD. I can understand why..."

e, wide "Why doesn't she go home to the States and get therapy and help?"

"It's not that simple, Daria. If Megan left here, all these children would have to be placed to go. The orphanages in Cusco are overflowing. I know that I sometimes, when I want to get out of here and clear my mind, I take the

er arms into Cusco and go to those orphanages, offering my medical services as the three days at a time.”

with a “So awful,” she whispered, gazing lovingly at Gabriela who was sucking hard on the bottle’s nipple, her eyes closed, her little hands clutching it constantly. “This is horrible.”

He fitted “I’ve pleaded with Megan to go home, get the help she needs, but she won’t leave these children in the lurch. I’ve talked to Liz about it and she agrees Megan should go home, but she refuses to go.”

He frowned, Daria whispered, “But... why?”

built of He shrugged a shoulder. “Humans are all built differently, Kitten. If ten people face the same crisis, there will be ten different responses to it.”

in the area Making an unhappy noise in her throat, Daria nodded. She took the diaper Nik had provided her and wiped the bubbles gathering like little islands from the sides of Gabriela’s mouth. “You’re right. I know you are. She was so bright and cheerful this morning.”

“It’s a game face,” he warned her heavily. “She’s combatting depression. I’m treating her medically, but she needs therapy, preferably from an old-fashioned nurturing mother type of woman therapist. It has to be a woman because she was harmed by men. Women did not break her trust. Men did.”

in the “But you’re a man, Nik. And she was genuinely glad to see you. She almost hugged you to death.”

n there, He smiled shyly. “I don’t know why Megan trusts me so much. I think she senses my Ukrainian heart...,” and his dark eyebrows drifted down.

“What does that mean? You said Megan didn’t know who her attackers were.”

“They spoke Russian to one another during the raping of Megan,” he said wearily. “That’s how I know it was the other team. Megan heard a name. It was Boris.”

ed, she “Do you know him?” she demanded quietly, rocking Gabriela.

But I “Unfortunately, yes. He makes Korsak look like a saint in comparison.”

Boris Golub was a captain in Spetsnaz. He was in some of the most intense fighting. He took no prisoners. Ever. They called him ‘The Butcher’ because he never pushed his fingers through his hair in an aggravated motion. “He’s a name because I’m sure it was he and his team who broke in here and gang raped Megan.”

he train “Does she know that?”

ces for Nik grew grim. “No... not yet...”

Daria pursed her lips, staring at him. “Why not?”

sucking “No one in the Peruvian *policía* is going after Golub. They don’t wavingrape kits down here in this country, Daria. The police here in Aguas Calientes know this Russian predator’s reputation and they quake in fear of him but shewould never try to apprehend him.”

and she “This is unbelievable,” she whispered, frustrated. “Then, maybe as well Megan doesn’t know?”

Mouth twisting, Nik said in a low voice, “I worry about that. It’s . If youMegan a year to come out of the surgery and recover to where she has senses tostrength returning. She’s street smart. She knows there are other mafia drug teams around. I don’t think, given she’s been here for two the softand has the good will of these people in this town, that she couldn’t e pearlsome inquiries and find out about more regarding Boris Golub.”

Megan “And then what?”

He gave her a cool stare. “Megan was in the military, like you, session.She’s trained, armed and lethal. I wouldn’t put it past her, once she fi warm,all out, to go after Boris herself. She’ll take the bastard down, includ cause ithis men.” He flexed his fist, frustration in his tone. “Liz is worried abo too. The last I heard, she was calling Megan’s cousin, Morgan Tr She justHe’s got a security company, Perseus, in Montana. I think he knows a this and promised Liz he’d do something about it.”

Maybe “How long ago was that?”

ward. “Two weeks ago.”

itackers “Wow, this is a really unsettling situation.” She chewed on her l you think Megan would just arbitrarily leave her kids here to go hun he toldGolub?”

a name. “That’s the dicey question, isn’t it? Does she turn vigilante or d stay here and care for her children? No one can do what she does here She’s a one-woman show. The Indian women come and help. She pay arison.what she can, but basically, it’s all on her shoulders.”

t brutal Shaking her head, Daria choked softly, “I feel so sorry for he :.” Niktortured she must be...”

monster.

gan.”

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## CHAPTER 11

**T**HE SKY WAS a druzy blue as Daria emerged with Nik from the orpha 1600, four p.m.

Sunlight struck the western side of Machu Picchu, the bustling st the community below alive with wandering tourists, all the noise ac hill the town sat upon rising into the jungle that surrounded it. She fel of emotions. At their forefront, heart-rending grief for Megan who ap cheery, patient and seemed to have herself together, despite her trau Nik and her walked up and over the hill, she asked him, “You said yo helping Megan medically?”

Nik cut his stride in half, taking her hand to ensure, in case watched them, they looked like a couple falling in love. “Yes, medication. I wanted to give her an anti-anxiety med as well, but she r She thinks she can work through this without such. I understa reasoning, but she is here alone, without any real emotional support : And when we go through terrible things in our life, we all need someon

Daria heard the heaviness, the heartbreak, in his low tone, clearly and worried about Megan Cantrell. She squeezed his hand a little mo he glanced her way. “Did you ever get support after your fami murdered, Nik?” she asked softly. Instantly, Daria knew the ans serrating anguish rose in his face for a moment before he quickly mask real, raw reaction. Daria had to stop herself from pulling Nik to throwing her arms around him and just holding him. Because, as before, she saw what lay beneath Nik’s everyday demeanor. And it she was beginning to suspect: the man did wear his compassionate daily with those he cared for medically.

“No... You are an unexpected joy in my life, Daria,” he said, givin partial smile. “More than you know.”

“I’d like to be there for you, Nik.” She saw him nod, give her a look. It was enough.

He slowed at the top of the hill. To the left was a vegetable

“Tonight,” he said, “I want to make dinner for you. Allow me?”

She raised her eyebrows. “You cook, do you?” and her lips curved into a teasing line.

“I’m not half bad. I end up doing most of the cooking out in the jungle with my team. They can’t stand their own poor attempts. My mother had made the kitchen ever since my head was level with the kitchen counter. She taught me everything she knew, and I liked working with her in the kitchen. It was like I see cooking as a form of chemistry.”

Her heart broke. Daria could imagine a dark-haired little Nik next to his mother, curious, eager, holding her full attention, care and love. And she held up her reddened hands, “I could use some downtime on the job.”

Nik slowed to a stop, taking one of her hands in his, and examined it. “Red and chapped. When we get home, I’ll put some special lotion on them? I always give Megan a bottle when I see her monthly.”

Her body began to melt as he held her hand gently between his own. All of his size and strength, Daria was always shocked by how tender his hands could be. At the same time, it was juxtaposed because she knew Special Forces operators were black ops like herself. There was no tougher breed of women in the world than them. The roughness of the thick callouses on his hands and fingers attested to such, her skin arcing with tiny tingles of pleasure as he skimmed his fingers across her chapped skin. “Yes, that would be great... thank you.”

He smiled warmly at her. “Now, come with me. Juanita, the old woman who runs this vegetable stand, is a good person. I always buy my fresh vegetables from her when I get into town. She will love meeting you. This is where you should come to buy vegetables in this town when I leave.”

Nik led her over to the small wooden stall that canted somewhat to the side, poorly constructed and sagging with age as it was. It had a yellow, dilapidated rainproof tarp over the top of it. Under the tarp, Daria spotted a gray-haired, plump Quechua woman with a brown bowler hat perched jauntily on her head. Her steel-gray braids hung tight and over her ample breasts. Daria loved that the Indian women all wore colorful, hand-woven tops, and matching skirts that brushed around their ankles of their brown, bare feet.

Juanita rose slowly as she saw Nik approach. When she smiled, Daria



front teeth were missing. She waddled slowly around the edge of her covered in vegetables, her arms wide open.

Nik rushed forward, cutting the distance quickly, leaning down, single forefolding the old woman in his arms. She patted him heartily on his cheek in the returning his huge hug of welcome. They spoke in Quechua with one another. Daria smiled, feeling more and more yearning for this man, who was fun, unlike the other men he was forced to be with. She decided, as Nik returned to her, that he was hurting equally, if not more than herself. Perhaps it was his suffering as deeply as Megan Cantrell. Life wasn't easy down here and she knew that in spades now.

Juanita, that he was hurting equally, if not more than herself. Perhaps it was his suffering as deeply as Megan Cantrell. Life wasn't easy down here and she knew that in spades now.

truth," Megan pushed on, idealistic, believing in the good in life, helping these destitute innocent children who had no one else to protect them. Finding it could at least protect them, even if no one had come to her aid when that land and his men had raped her.

Nik pushed on because of his fierce love and loyalty for his brother. Focus on getting Dan the latest medical expertise that might help him recover Nik from his TBI.

And what was she doing? Mouth flexing, Daria didn't want to get too closely at that answer. She needed to start the healing process. No one had ever said it didn't take guts to do so, as she was beginning to fully realize the truth of "Come meet Juanita," Nik urged, holding out his hand toward Daria.

She met the brown-eyed woman whose toothless smile infected her with happiness. Daria knew this woman had probably suffered horribly without proper dental care, through the aching pain of infected teeth. Then someone, probably a fellow villager, pulled out the tooth with a pair of pliers to relieve her of her suffering, without any pain killers available. Juanita's hands were large, calloused, her fingers delicate as they held the alpaca sweater she was knitting. Daria smiled warmly and gave her a gentle hug of hello.

Juanita waddled back to her old, dilapidated metal chair, setting her knitting project down on the seat of it. Then she turned and came back by the boxes of fresh produce, excitedly chattering away in broken Spanish, shining peppered liberally with the Quechua language, talking about each other.

Daria stood back, listening and watching Nik politely chatting with the woman. Juanita wasn't surprised at all when the Ukrainian spoke

language, and so they switched away from Spanish and into pure Quechua. As they conversed, Juanita picked up an ear of corn and peeled it.

rates of green leaves, showing Nik huge kernels, each the size of nickels, all down the length of it, telling him this was good corn that had just come from the high mountain valley, two thousand feet above their current location. And then she laid out long, healthy-looking green beans, breaking off one, giving it to another. Daria had no defense against Nik at this point. He was fully involved in the moment with the charismatic Juanita who was more like the ringmaster of a circus than a simple villager, who patted and pinched his cheek like a probably much-beloved son of hers who had come for a visit. Daria watched and she chewed the green bean thoughtfully and nodded and praised Juanita for the taste and juiciness of the vegetable. And then he bought a pound of them from the market. This process went on for at least ten minutes until Daria was satisfied. But she was there with a number of brown paper sacks of fresh produce gathered in her arms. She saw Nik give Juanita many more Peruvian Soles than what she had asked for and saw the old woman's eyes tear up as she saw how much he cared for her, his she held. Nik was generous, no question. He cared deeply for the babies and the elders of this world. Earlier, she had seen him give Megan a huge sum of US dollars wrapped in a rubber band right in her hand just before they had to look left the orphanage. There had been tears of gratitude in her eyes. Juanita had pinched his cheek one last time and hugged him when they were ready to leave. It was enough for their meal. She came over to Daria, pinched her cheek and touched her shoulder, saying something in Quechua to her that she didn't understand. She saw Nik grin broadly as he came up to place his hand against her back with no guiding her down the hill.

me one, "What did Juanita just say?"

relieve "Oh," he murmured, "that you and I looked more like a husband and wife than just friends. I told her I had just met you."

she was Feeling heat rush up from her neck and into her face, Daria stared at him. Nik had pulled a large cloth bag out of his medical ruck and put the latest sacks of food into it, carrying it easily in his other hand as he walked back over her. "Oh..."

Spanish "Does that upset you?"

f them. She cleared her throat and smiled a little. "No... not really. It's just a native soon?"

like her He chuckled indulgently and took her across the street to the local Quechua shop. "Didn't I tell you? Juanita is a medicine woman? She has visited me and she sees things in the future."

own the “How accurate is she?” Daria asked warily, halting at the open-air Sacredshop.

brought “Very,” Nik said with assuredness. “Stay here, I’ll get us a very nice chicken for dinner...”

rested in Unsettled, Daria looked up the street toward the vendor booth. The butcher was sitting down again, knitting intently on her colorful alpaca sweater. He was turned her attention back down the street, looking for any Russian soldiers like Korsak’s team who might be watching them. Seeing no one, and yet trusting that someone wasn’t watching, she looked over at Nik haggling with her. A freshly-killed chicken that had just been plucked and gutted. The standing fresh blood cloyed her nostrils. Daria was a meat eater, but didn’t like the smell of blood or carcasses. All kinds of parts of slaughtered cows, chickens, and hogs hung down from the ceiling of the shop like bulbs hanging from a Christmas tree. The smell and sight of blood bothered her, and she turned away, frowning. It reminded her starkly of that fateful night, and she moved out to the center of the street, allowing the thick, heavy crowd of tourists to flow around her.

Nik came and found her minutes later, the chicken wrapped in newspaper and string in his shopping bag. He gave her a concerned look, then patted her shoulder, running his hand across it.

understand. “Too much?”

turned back, “Yes,” she choked, shaking her head. “I-I couldn’t stand the smell of the blood...”

“I understand, *moya kotya*. I’m sorry we had to get it there. It’s the only butcher shop in town.” He gave her a sharpened look. “You’re pale.”

“I’ll be okay,” she said rallying beneath his care, glad that he enveloped her over at beneath his left arm as they walked toward the apartment halfway down the hill.

stood beside “That’s what they always say,” Nik said grimly. “We all say that because we have no place to offload the terrible feelings or images that come from the war that we carry.” He squeezed her and gave her a tender look. “I will catch up to you tonight. You can just rest. It has been a long and emotionally stressful day for you, Daria.”

butcher “And yet,” she muttered defiantly, “it’s been the same for you. A soldier should take it with such grace, Nik. What’s your secret? Because I’m not doing as well as I wished I could.”

butcher He laughed a little as they halted at the bottom of the steps apartment. "That's easy. I ignore it. Come," he said, urging her up the nice fat "let's leave the world of suffering behind us? Let's get to your home close the door and make our world better? Maybe a little laughter? A s Juanita home when there is no more home anywhere for people like us? r. Daria enjoy the evening, enjoy the company of one another?"

n from "Sounds great to me," Daria agreed fervently, taking the stairs, or t never on the damp, rusting metal rail. Her heart and body responded to h ng over guttural voice, that yearning for her once more in his eyes as he search mell of gaze. He was a man on a tightrope that could break at any moment like there realized as she reached the door. Nik came and stood behind her as she hickens out the key from her pocket.

g off a "When we get inside, let me sweep for bugs again," he told her qui turned "Okay," she said, pushing the door open. To Daria the place l Daria untouched. She closed the door behind Nik as he came in and made a wds off for the small kitchen, setting the sack of goods on the counter. The ch

him startled her. His face, a moment ago so relaxed and open, was no brown The emotions, just before so clearly visible on it, were gone. Now, he ouching black ops mode as he quickly and efficiently swept every room of the

He found a bug placed in the lamp that hung over one end of the couch it up to her and then placed it on the floor, smashing it with the hee ght and combat boot. The angry, dark look in his face as he straightened tol that, more than anything, he was a warrior, not just any soldier. Th he only coming to his darkening blue eyes put her on notice. She was privil see the softer side of Nik, not his hardened Spetsnaz side.

ded her He made a second sweep, intensity in his gaze, his mouth purse c own the lean hands skimmed every surface along every window sill, runn fingers under the lights set beneath the cupboards over the kitchen c because looking up behind the opened blinds. Daria watched him work and l with it, She would have to do this every time she returned to her apartment. ook for could be trusted now. Her home had been breached.

tressful

NIK HEARD DARIA groan with pleasure after finishing the meal he'd fi nd you them. The sun was setting, near 1800, six p.m., the day gone, growing oing as as night silently crept across this jungle town. He smiled at her, sipp

to her coffee after clearing the plates and placing them in the sink. Her hands were still red, but less so since he'd given her the lotion to soothe their hands and flesh. Her hands were toughened by years of being a sniper in some of the worst climate conditions in the world, but they had no defense against hours in soapy, hot water scrubbing children's clothes on a washboard fashion way.

He handed her the mug. "Satisfied, Little Cat?" he teased. He saw the gold in her eyes and his low, amused.

She held her hand. Running her hand lightly across her stomach, she said, "I feel satisfied, Dariastuffed turkey. I was actually hungry tonight. This is the most food I've ever fished in a long time."

Nodding, Nik asked, "Since four months ago? Your appetite fully returned? Yes?"

She looked at him. "Yes." Daria shrugged. "Alex was always inviting me over to eat his homemade borscht and other Ukrainian food, trying to get me to put back on some of my lost weight. Lauren makes terrific desserts and she was always tempting me to eat. I just couldn't eat..."

Nik was in the kitchen. "But if you ate, you became nauseous?"

She looked at him. "Yes." She studied him intently. "Is that why you're so lean, Nik?" He held the mug between his hands, and she saw his mouth curve ruefully as he held the mug between his hands, and she saw the glint of his lips.

Daria said, "You're a very astute observer of the human condition, my Kitten."

She looked at him. "Like you aren't?"

He smiled. "Oh," he said lightly, "I feel we complement one another very well."

You're highly intelligent, but anyone who is a sniper is far beyond the normal human being in some very unique ways. You miss nothing because you're always looking for the details that can either make or break the op." He sipped his coffee, then placed the mug on the table. "And, you care, Daria. That is something you've earned, you can't train into a person. They either have a heart or they don't. You have a very large, giving one."

She eyed him. "And you don't? Isn't this the pot calling the kettle black?"

She saw his lips lift away from his teeth; his gaze bemused.

He smiled. "Caught. Once again. Remind me not to play chess with you?"

Daria loved chess and had the game on her computer tablet she'd been playing with her. She'd been goading Nik into playing it with her because he loved chess, also, but kept resisting her. "People interest me. They

ds were chess pieces. You never know what moves they will make, sometimes. worked He leaned back in his chair, pushing it away from the table and st e of the “Yes, like this morning when you suddenly kissed me out on th inst six porch.”

the old “Caught you off guard, did I?” and Daria chuckled, standing.

“Yes, but I liked it.”

s grow Becoming serious, she said, “Do you think Korsak has bought couple getting to know one another?”

l like a “Up to a point.” He pushed the chair back in against the table. ‘ re eaten probably placed that bug in here. He can pick any lock. That bothers m

“That Korsak’s not buying us?” She went to one corner of the cou has not sat down, slipping off her sandals, tucking one leg beneath her and back against the leather.

for his “He’s wily. He’s a Russian fox. Always alert. Always thinking. ack the why,” he said, sitting down in the center of the couch, hands clasped b ing me, his opened legs, “that we must carefully cultivate our image and relati

Plus, he has never fully trusted me. Why would he now? I’m nothi them. I’ve never been,” and his mouth turned into a slash, his brow c c?” She downward as he stared at the door in front of them.

close to Daria reached out, her hand smoothing down the dark hair sprink forearm. “I’m so glad you’re not.”

” He twisted a look in her direction. “Me too. I’d never have met you

Nik stopped himself from saying any more. It would be inappropriate well. was a secret dream of his. That’s all this was: a beautiful dream in the normal world he lived and survived within. Daria was like a bright, shining u know of what he’d always wanted: a woman who was strong, intelligent, car fee and loving. And he wouldn’t take a prostitute when what he desired was nething honest relationship with a woman. He craved Daria with his heart ar ou have The look in her half-closed eyes, that gold and sienna gaze of hers fill such care and concern for him. And understanding. She had the inc black?” capacity to realize the depth of the pressures upon him. It felt good cared for. To be understood and appreciated.

“You’ve been the nicest surprise of this whole op, Nik.” Daria a brought her hand to fall away, tucking it back into her lap, studying him said hesitance.

’re like “I’ve done nothing out of the ordinary since coming here,” N

.” darkly. He wasn’t about to go where Daria had. She was more than a s  
anding.to him. She was a dream come into reality, and that grabbed his hear  
e frontletting go of it, feeding his yearning, aching dreams. How he wa  
pursue a relationship with her. A real one, where there was no life-an  
dance around them. But an honest, genuine partnership. The k  
exploration and deep, wonderful intimacy he intuitively knew could  
us as abetween the two of them. He ached for it. The depth of his losses, the  
and yearning for something purely uplifting and beautiful, gnawed at N

‘Brudin “Have you seen Korsak much since arriving?”

ie.” “A few times. I had *desayuno* with the team a few days ago to tal  
ich andpulse.”

leaning She frowned. “Why would Korsak order a bug *NOW*, Nik?” She se  
his pensive features as he thought through her question.

This is “Fedor said something at *desayuno*, in their abbreviated double s  
etweenkeep me out of their conversation,” he muttered, rubbing his face. “I  
onship.something like that things were going to get interesting toward the enc  
ng liketime here in Aguas Calientes.”

lrawing “What do you think that meant?” Daria asked, worried.

Shrugging, he sat up, rolling his shoulders to get rid of the accur  
ling histension in them. “I have *NO* idea. Korsak doesn’t trust me. He won’t e  
me his plans ahead of time. Obviously, something is up and they al  
1.” Andwhat it is, but as usual, I don’t.”

e and it “Maybe we should rethink our pattern? Would it be helpful if yo  
e insaneback to the hotel instead? Maybe nose around? You said the walls wa  
symbolover there. Maybe you could pick up some intel?”

ing and “No,” and he cut her a glance. “It’s better I stay here tonight.” He  
; a real,his hands down his hard thighs. “Sometimes, we receive shipments o  
id soul.beneath crates of vegetables that are being sent to us by train.  
ed withGoncharov and Brudin go to the train station and pick them up. They  
redibleheavy lifting on things like this. We’re always needing resupply. The I  
d to behelicopter at the local airport is flown by undercover KGB and S  
trained pilots. They usually fly in what we need. But sometimes, the  
allowedare bad and they can’t take off and transport us or our supplies to ar  
in theCusco. We’re constantly in need of food resupply. And my medicine  
order in.”

lik said “So Rolan Pavlovich, the latest Russian mafia boss from New Y

surpriseworking with active Russian Spetsnaz spies presently? And the I t, nevergovernment knows this?” She saw the wry look he gave her.

nted to “Of course. It’s Russia wanting her piece of the pie in the wor d-deathtrade, too. He was in Spetsnaz at one time. He was the hero. He ha kind ofhigh government ties.”

happen “I didn’t realize any of this,” Daria whispered, sitting up, scowling stressesis so much more complicated and twisted than I first thought.”

Nik. “That is why,” Nik said wearily, rubbing his face, “that the CIA v capture Korsak and take him to the US. He had very strong tie ke theirAlexandrov, Petrov and now, Pavlovich. The CIA knows he has a information that can help them because they were all together as S earchedsoldiers or officers. That’s why those three Army Special Forces thr hunter-killer teams are hanging around this area. Pavlovich is a treasu peak tojust waiting to be opened.”

He said She wiped her mouth and gave Nik a concerned look. “I wasn’t l of ouron the larger picture.”

He snorted. “I’m sure you weren’t. This is need-to-know basi Daria. But you need to know, and I don’t give a damn what your CIA nulatedDriscoll at Shield Security thinks about it. I’m not leaving you in the ver tellYou need to understand the commitment Russia has to South Amer l knowthem, it is a lush continent with third world countries that are hun money, power and opportunity. Russia is slowly infiltrating all of then ou wenthave control of Venezuela. They are at war in Columbia throug ere thinmilitias who want a piece of the drug cartels, and the child sex trade, a

“And now they have five ex-Spetsnaz teams operating here in Peru rubbed “Yes, all in this region.” He gestured around with his hand. “Thi of armscradle of the cocaine-growing area. That, and the area the north of u Fedorthat’s why the new Russian Mafia leader, Rolan Pavolvich, is gettin r do thespeed to learn everything he can about the operations down here. l Russianelevated to that position, I believe, by the Russian government, alth petsnazcan’t prove it, after Yerik Alexandrov was killed.”

e winds Daria gave him a dark look. “It was Sergeant Mace Kilmer who id fromthat sick bastard,” she whispered harshly. “He kidnapped Cal’s fianc s that ILambert, and Shield Security created a mission and went and track down in South America, to northern Costa Rica, to rescue her. S 7ork, ispregnant with Cal’s child at the time, Nik. He worked for Shield v



Russian happened.”

Drawing air between his teeth, Nik rasped, “That is tragic. Is she the drug was the baby miscarried?”

She closed, “No, thank goodness. It had a happy ending. Someday I hope you meet Cal and Sky. They live in a cabin just outside Alexandria, Virginia. “This is home for good. He’s a father and husband now. He is one of the planners at Shield.”

She wants to “He’s a brave man going into the lion’s den of Alexandrov’s drug deals with Nik said.

She had a lot of “Cal didn’t have a choice. I’d have gone on that op if my fiancée had been kidnapped, too.”

She sees a man Nik sat back on the couch, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I need to think this through. I can’t make rash decisions based upon my emotions.”

She sees Daria. I want to stay with you tonight, more than anything.” He dropped his hand, reaching out, stroking her left thigh lightly. “You know that?”

She asks “Yes, I know that.” She swallowed hard. “But something is going to happen tonight, Nik, and we don’t know what it is? Is that what you’re sensing?”

She feels a lurch. “It could be ammo or weapons shipments coming in by train, is all. I’m not sure. To “My gut says it’s more than that. Doesn’t yours?” and she dug in for a hooded stare.

She says to them. They “Unfortunately, you are right, *moya kotya*.”

She asks the local “Could you be receiving a new member to your team?”

She says “Iso.” “Korsak likes what we have. The men are healthy. They do their jobs.” “no reason for a replacement or addition to the team right now.”

She says to him “What if he’s getting rid of you?” Daria saw the shock come to his face. And his mouth tighten. “Wouldn’t that explain the secretiveness of the team?” “giving up to comment? If they had a combat medic coming in to replace you—”

He was “Then,” he said thickly, his voice lined with steel, “it would mean that Korsak is going to get rid of me in the jungle. He’ll find a time and place to shoot me in the head, leave my body where it lays, and let the local militia find it and carry it off.”

She sees Sky Daria shivered, wrapping her arms around herself, staring blankly at him “Wouldn’t he just say you’re fired and let you walk away?”

She says to him he was Grimacing, Nik said, “I know too much. They’d never let me walk away when it Daria.” He saw something raw, something startling, come to her eyes.

her reaction and it rocked him. What was going on between them? The  
e okay? a sense of shattering terror washing across him from Daria. And so  
else that he dared not ever hope for: a feeling of love. It was there in h  
rou canin her facial expression, unspoken, but damn, it was *there*.

ria. Cal Nik sat very still, digesting what he felt and saw. Was it possible  
mission misreading Daria? Oh, yes, because he wanted her so very damn muc  
glistening look in her eyes, the worry, terror and fear for him  
world,” overriding. He watched her as she fought the tears that suddenly threat  
jam into her eyes and as she swallowed convulsively several times  
ée had winning the battle. His heart beat harder in his chest, and the love he  
her tripled in those stolen, silent moments as they stared at one another  
need to Not only was he falling in love with Daria. Was *she* falling in lo  
otions, him? Was that possible? It was the wrong time.  
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He felt

her reaction and it rocked him. What was going on between them? There was a sense of shattering terror washing across him from Daria. And something else that he dared not ever hope for: a feeling of love. It was there in her eyes, in her facial expression, unspoken, but damn, it was *there*.

Nik sat very still, digesting what he felt and saw. Was it possible he was misreading Daria? Oh, yes, because he wanted her so very damn much? The glistening look in her eyes, the worry, terror and fear for him, were overriding. He watched her as she fought the tears that suddenly threatened to jam into her eyes and as she swallowed convulsively several times before winning the battle. His heart beat harder in his chest, and the love he felt for her tripled in those stolen, silent moments as they stared at one another.

Not only was he falling in love with Daria. Was *she* falling in love with him? Was that possible? It was the wrong time.

## CHAPTER 12

**A** LOUD, HARSH banging at the door made Daria tense up. Instantly, Nik sprang on his feet, his gaze focused on the door.

“Stay where you are,” he said to Daria under his breath. Moving toward the door quickly, he opened it.

“Korsak wants you now,” Brudin snarled. He made a quick, sharp gesture with his hand.

Nik nodded. He turned and gave Daria a meaningful glance as he reached for his medical ruck. “I’ll see you later.” Something was very wrong. The blackness in Brudin’s eyes made him go on full internal guard. He saw the look of terror in Daria’s eyes as he held out his spread hand, indicating for her to remain on the couch. Under no circumstance did he want to give Brudin any choice of action from her even starting to stand up to do something. The Russian would lose it. Nik saw her quickly nod, her jaw growing hard as she stared at the door. She couldn’t see Brudin standing on the porch from her angle and he was glad. He didn’t want the Russian anywhere near her.

Moving out the door, Nik shut it behind him. He heard the last train of the day pulling into the station beyond the town, its whistle blowing sharply, announcing its arrival. Brudin glared at him.

“Korsak wants us all at the train station,” he growled, dashing down the stairs quickly. “Right now!”

“Okay, why?” Nik demanded, catching up with him. Brudin was running quickly down the hill, cutting across the crowded roadway, pushing people out of his way.

Once they were out of the main part of Aguas Calientes, Nik caught up with him on the red, muddy soil underfoot there. He looked up and saw the train had already pulled into the station, its bright red and yellow stark against the green tin roof high above it. “Why?” Nik demanded, easily keeping up with Brudin, who reeked of alcohol.

“Korsak just got word that the New York Russian Mafia leader

Pavlovich, is making a surprise visit to our team.”

So, that was what this was all about! Nik nodded, remaining following Brudin down the hill to the small bridge that crossed the rushing tributary that cut through between the town and the station, downstream into the mighty Urubamba River. The bridge route took them out of their way but it was better than to try and cross the river via that option. If anyone tried to get across those cold, icy glacier waters from the Andes and slipped off one of the wet rocks the local children often hauled tourists’ luggage across, they’d be hurled down over the cliff below and fed into the mighty Urubamba River which was at least four times more violent. Most who fell into it, drowned. Pretty much no one had been saved, Nik had heard, except for an American woman a long time ago who had been rescued and made it out alive. She had been damned lucky.

His mind spun with questions. His boots thumping hollowly across the wooden bridge. There was another steep hill after the bridge, leading to the station. The evening light was upon the area of cleared jungle in the town huddled. Nik saw the clouds begin to close in, blot out the pale sky, and begin to descend as they did every twilight in the wintertime. Nik’s eyes looked upset. Maybe Korsak had known Pavlovich was coming? Being nothing until he was sure he’d arrive? If that was the case, then he trusted no one on his team. Not really. But then, Pavlovich was the boss. Was he coming to meet them? Give them new rules and regulations? Demand more cocaine be made and transported? Test their loyalty now that Alexandrov was out of the picture? Nik had never heard of that Russian, so he knew as little about him as Brudin did.

They reached the station, and Nik wasn’t at all surprised as the train began to disgorge around fifty people each, all of many, many nationalities. Korsak was waiting by the expensive parlor car in which the rich traveling tourists saw the rest of Korsak’s team, Kravec and Duboff, standing off to one side. They had dressed in their cleanest clothes, were shaven and clean looking. Hmmm... so only Brudin and he hadn’t known? Brudin was wearing a sweaty green t-shirt, soiled cammies, was unshaven and bleary-eyed drunk. Nik was glad that he looked halfway decent in comparison. He tightened on the strap of his ruck as they slowed to a stop. Korsak turned and nodded to them, his face expressionless. He looked away again; he focused on the opening train door in front of him.

Nik was breathing easily, but Brudin was huffing, leaning over, his face grim, on his knees, head down. He was probably going to vomit. Would someone be violent, bastard right. Nik moved around to stand on the other side of Korsak, feeding the way of any potential spraying.

There wasn't a long wait. Only four couples left that rich car. The other man that stepped off behind them was dressed in a cream-colored shirt and dark brown slacks with a matching corduroy blazer. He was at least six-foot chain-feet tall, well-built like a swimmer, with an oval face and high cheekbones. Nik saw the man had light-brown eyes, with an amber cast in their depths. He sported a fashionably-short cut for his black hair. He spotted a gold Rolex watch on the man's thick wrist and several gold rings on the fingers across his hands. The collar of his silk shirt was open, revealing the top of a white shirt, also of silk, beneath it. His leather loafers looked expensive, probably from Italy. The aura of the man was all about power. Pavlovich traveled alone, but the energy around him hit Nik palpably. He was surprised at first that such a man had no bodyguards with him, until a blue uniform emerged from another train car further down. Both were hard-looking. Brudin most likely ex-Spetsnaz, or maybe even Russian GRU security itself, but Nik knew?

Korsak instantly moved forward, extending his hand, a jovial smile on his new face. Nik watched the introductions carefully. Ustin did not know Rolan, vice-versa. It felt as if they were two male jaguars circling, sizing one another up. For once, Nik was glad to be only a soldier in the team, not the leader. The two security guards kept sharp watch. Although Nik couldn't see any weapons on them, he would bet they both had Glockes slid into the holsters on their belts, hidden beneath the black nylon jackets they wore.

After introductions were over with, Korsak turned. He gave a sharp order to Kravec and Duboff to pick up Pavlovich's luggage from the baggage car halfway down the long train.

"I've got a splitting headache, Ustin," Pavlovich said. "Which of you has the aspirin in your medic?"

"That would be him, Morozov," Korsak pointed toward Nik. "Which of you is the hand here!"

Nik ignored the violent gesture by Korsak, stepping calmly forward at a steady pace. He held out his hand toward Pavlovich.

"Nik Morozov, sir. How may I be of help?" he asked him in Russian.

s hands     Pavlovich gave him an amused look and shook his hand. “Maybe the Ibuprofen? My maid forgot to pack my medications.”

, out of     Nik shrugged out of his pack and set it on the ground, opening it c

He pulled a small bottle of 800 mg. Ibuprofen from a pocket and the lasthanding it to the man with the soft, manicured fingers. “I have some lk shirtsir...”

east six     Pavlovich halted and nodded, giving him a look of praise. “Yes.”

kbones.     As Nik found a small bottle of water, he heard Korsak say, “He’s rths and medic. Damned trouble, otherwise. Too righteous. I keep him around l olex on he saves our lives.”

oth his     Mouth thinning, Nik said nothing, opening the bottle of p white t-Pavlovich and placing it into his outstretched hand. The Mafia leader to Nik, his thanks, a curious glint in his eyes as he met Nik’s own, and studi

Rolan for a moment, sizing him up like he had Korsak.

He was     The light was low, and Nik stood waiting, knowing if he didn’t t til two his feet and give Korsak what he wanted, that, like yesterday, the mar ig men, try to beat the shit out of him. He could try, but Nik knew without a d f. Who would best him. They’d never come to blows, but that didn’t mean so

that they wouldn’t. Korsak had already broken Kravec’s large nose, bu e on his Brudin’s left cheekbone and broken Duboff’s hard jaw. So far, he’d a an, and Korsak’s fists. Squinting a little, Nik’s heart suddenly stuttered. As Pa another tipped his head back, swallowing water to wash the Ibuprofen down, h leader. birthmark exactly like Daria’s! Stunned, he gawked for a moment. C see any himself, he saw Pavlovich notice his reaction. *Damn.*

back of     As he brought the bottle away from his mouth Pavlovich smiled and capped it. “You see my birthmark, Morozov? You’re pretty ale rapping tossed the bottle to one of his security men, who easily caught it.

raggage     “I thought,” Nik stumbled, “it might be an old wound or somethin was wondering if it was causing the headache.” It was a complete lie, man is couldn’t get caught like this.

Pavlovich grew thoughtful, rubbed the area where the quarte ‘Get up crescent lay on the left side of his neck, behind his ear. “Very observation, Morozov.” He smiled. “I like you. I’m going to need at his medications once we get to the hotel. Follow me and my men up? If yo the meds I need, that will be good. If not, I can have Korsak call Cus an. they’ll be on the next train tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir,” Nik said, relief washing through him. That had been so  
*Too close.* Korsak glared out at him from behind Pavlovich.

“But you said you wanted to talk to *me*,” Korsak protested, stepping  
back, Pavlovich.

Waving his manicured hand at the team leader, he said, “I’m tired  
Get me to the hotel. I want my medications and I want to rest. I’ll see  
tomorrow morning. We’ll have our meeting then. Morozov? A  
a goodcoming?” and he took off down the hill, leaving the team to scramble  
becausewake.

Nik saw Korsak grow livid, saying nothing, but his eyes  
glared murderously with the rage he kept to himself. Brudin hung back.  
Pavlovich hadn’t even bothered introducing the slovenly Russian who was drunk  
and smelled sour from not bathing for the last couple of days. Nik had  
asked which hotel to head for, but there was a very nice one at the top of the  
hill. Knowing better than to ask Korsak anything for fear of making  
himself embarrassed, Nik saw him walk quickly across the bridge to get  
about, hePavlovich.

“You’ll be at the finest hotel, Don Pavlovich.”

“Five star?”

“Er... I don’t know... they say it’s the best.”

Pavlovich snapped him a disappointed look. “And where are you  
a

“Oh, at the other end of the town. Down at the bottom of the hill.  
watchingplaza.”

Nik was content to remain behind them, not wanting to get on  
a little radar. The look that Pavlovich shot Korsak interested him. Unlike  
Alexandrov, whom he had met, this man conducted himself as if he  
was

the military. What was Pavlovich’s background? An ex-Spetsnaz  
officer, sir. Isomeone who had been of high rank? Maybe he could get Daria to  
talk to him, but hecontact later with Shield Security and get the goods on him. In the me

Nik felt as if he were stepping on fragile eggs with the unknown, new  
moonleader from New York City. He was brisk, a man of few words, but  
he didn’t sense he wasn’t brutal like Korsak. Maybe he was, but showed it only  
when necessary? Nik was unsure. Korsak was floundering. He’d showed his  
mouth already, and that didn’t seem to sit well with Pavlovich. He’d be  
careful himself. With Korsak not trusting him, and already badmouthing  
him in front of Pavlovich, he desperately needed to make a good impres



o close.the new don.

As they made it into town, Pavlovich halted abruptly. They stood  
ing up to busy square, the Catholic church at the other end of it.

“Korsak, meet me in the lobby of my hotel at 0900 tomorrow m  
, Ustin.Sharp.”

see you “Of course, Don Pavlovich. Is there anything else—”

re you “No.” Pavlovich turned to Nik. “Do you know where this hotel is?”

e in his “Yes sir, I do.”

Pavlovich looked relieved. “At least one of you knows something  
flashed with us.”

Korsak Kravec and Duboff brought up the rear, suitcases in both hands,  
ink and earshot, staying well out of the don’s way.

no idea “Yes, sir,” Nik murmured, falling in behind them. He felt glee, b  
town’s his face carefully arranged as Korsak’s mouth fell open. So, it seem  
ng him Pavlovich rewarded those who were intelligent. If that was the case,  
reast of the smartest of the five of them. It could bode well in his favor.

looked confused and angry, but said nothing.

As they moved up the street, Pavlovich snapped his fingers, order  
to walk at his side. “Do YOU know what star rating this hotel is, Moro

“Yes, sir. It’s a four star.”

t?” Pavlovich gave him a long, appraising look. “I thought you might  
On the You have intelligence, Morozov. I like men who think and are educate

“Yes, sir.” He saw the man’s expression beginning to ease.  
yone’s headache receding, Don Pavlovich?” It was a bold move on Nik’s part  
e Yerik felt the Russian respected his medical expertise.

were in “You’re astute, too.” Smiling a little, Pavlovich murmured, “Y  
officer? going away. Does anyone else on your team have your brains?”

o make “No, sir.”

antime, Pavlovich burst out laughing. His guards laughed along.

v mafia Nik didn’t know what to think of their reaction.

out Nik “Well, at least I can rely on you for an honest answer, Morozov.  
y when very refreshing.”

lack of They entered the hotel and Nik guided Don Pavlovich to the regi  
etter bedesk where he was quickly taken care of. He had the penthouse  
ing him Pavlovich gestured for Nik to follow him into the same elevator,  
sion on baggage elevator that Kravec and Duboff were ordered to take. One

Don's guards went with them and another guard remained with the blond on them.

"I'm in need of some Vicodin. Do you have any in your ruck, Morozov?" "Yes, sir, I always carry it."

Pavlovich gave him an amused look as the elevator zoomed upward. "To sell as a drug, I hope?"

"No, sir. Never. It's for pain relief only."

"I have a touchy back. Just got out of an operation six months ago. Comedoctor is slowly weaning me off the damned stuff but, if I don't get it, I'm going to be screaming with pain."

"You won't," Nik assured him. "I have enough to tide you over."

Pavlovich looked him slowly up and down. "How long you been out kept Korsak?"

"Two years, sir. Before that, three years with Yerik Alexandrov when he was Vlad."

"You've been down here for a long time."

Nik nodded, saying nothing. He didn't know where Pavlovich was taking him with this conversation. The doors opened and they walked directly into a sumptuous suite. Nik didn't gawk, having been in rich places before, but one was palatial and thoughtfully designed. Pavlovich looked around and pleasure came to his face.

"Very nice. Tell Korsak he did good, will you, Morozov?"

"Is the" "Yes, sir, I will."

The guard gestured for Nik to move to the kitchen table and

Moments later, Kravec and Duboff arrived with the suitcases. They gave him an odd look, not knowing why he was being preferentially treated by Don. He ignored them, and heard the guard snarl at them to get up immediately. The guard came over to the table where he opened his ruck and pulled out a list and handed it to Nik.

"My name is Oleg Laskin. I'm the head of Don Pavlovich's security detail. This is a list of all the medications he needs. If you don't have them, don't cross them off the list. I'll make the call myself to the Cusco hospital where we need replacements."

"Of course," Nik said, taking the list. There was a hardness to Laskin's face. He had dark green eyes, a square face and short black hair. He was easily two-hundred pounds, heavily muscled, with a face marred by scars. Ni

baggage he had to be ex-Spetsnaz. The guard left him alone to attend the Don was taking off his blazer. In no time, Nik had set out the medications on the table. Laskin came back.

“Only two I don’t have,” Nik said, handing the list back to the guard. “Not Giving a brisk nod, Laskin said gruffly, “The Don wants to talk. Say nothing. Speak when spoken to. Don’t ask questions unless he urges you to do so.”

Nik nodded, closing up his medical pack and hefting it across his shoulder. The Don was standing by the huge window six stories above the hill that overlooked the small town. He had a finely-cut glass in hand and thought that might be whiskey in it.

“Morozov reporting, sir,” he said, coming to a halt, at attention, in front of Don Pavlovich.

“Relax,” he murmured, taking a sip of his drink. He turned, looking at Nik in the eye. “I want you to join me for dinner in two hours. Up here in the penthouse.”

Shock rooted him. Nik nodded. “Of course, sir.”

“I’ll see you then.”

Nik nodded and turned on his heels, reeling and stunned. What was he doing here? He was only a drug soldier, not the leader of this team. His stomach churned as he left the penthouse. First, he’d best tell Korsak what was going on or the man would be furious with him, feeling left out of the proceedings, then, go see Daria. He wanted to do the reverse, but knew better under the circumstances. Don Pavlovich had invited him up for dinner, not Korsak. Nik’s stomach tightened. The last thing Nik needed right now was to be put under the spotlight. He wanted to stay a shadow like always, seen, but never named. Hurrying out of the hotel, he strode down the street, urgent to get home. Daria who, he was sure, was worried. After dinner, he would drop by to see her.

security

DARIA WAITED, BUT not well. As a sniper, she was patient, but this was different. Pacing, it was nearly 2300, eleven p.m., when there was a knock at her apartment door. She hurried over, opening it. Nik gave her a tired smile and stepped in. He took off his medical pack, setting it down on the floor by the door as she closed and locked it.

Nik knew

on who “What a night,” Daria murmured, going over to him, her hand on his forehead, worriedly assessing him. There were slight shadows beneath his eyes that looked worn. “What can I do to help you, Nik?”

rd. He turned, sliding his arm around her waist, drawing her to him, his face in her hair, their cheeks touching one another. “Nothing but things you growled, inhaling the fragrance of her hair, the scent of her.

Daria relaxed in his arm, folding against him, overjoyed he was here once again. “I couldn’t sit still all night. My mind was jumping around over the one bad scenario to another.”

and Nik “Did you contact Shield Security?” he asked, drawing away, slicing his fingers across her hair, smoothing it back into place.

in front Nodding, she eased out of his arms. “I got intel. Jack is going crazy in Virginia. I used my sniper scope and got photos of the men coming in from Niktrain. Don Pavlovich showing up here unannounced has thrown a wrench into everyone’s plans, the CIA’s, ours, and the Army Special Forces A-Team. Everyone is scrambling. I guess they knew nothing that he was going to show up down here.”

Reluctantly, he released Daria. “We didn’t either. Good that you got those photos and sent them. I need a lot of intel on him. I smell coffee. Is it good?” and he looked hopefully toward the kitchen.

s going “Sure, come on. I just made a new pot. I’ve been drinking and pacing. And A thin smile stretched his mouth. “And worrying. You are a worrier.”

ak. His “Guilty as charged,” she agreed, moving into the kitchen. “Did you get it in the kitchen?” Nik took down the mugs and she poured the coffee. “Yes. I was in the kitchen for dinner with Rolan Pavlovich. It was a nice meal but my stomach was upset and I didn’t eat much,” he admitted.

and see Daria gave him a worried look. “What did he want?”

“Information about the team, how much cocaine was being processed, how many pounds were yielded, and anything doing with the team,” he said, sitting down at the table.

as way Daria sat at his left elbow. She stirred cream and sugar into her coffee. “Anything else?”

own by Rubbing his brow, he muttered, “No, but I felt him fishing. I think he’s trying to get a fix on Korsak. I don’t think Pavlovich is impressed with the team.”

his arm, “No. I was sweating that. Because, top on my list is that Korsak and these other men to rape women and young girls. I know nothing about Pavlovich’s sexual needs and, for all I know, he may do the same thing burying praying he wouldn’t ask because I didn’t want to go there.”

his,” he Daria drew in a deep breath. “That would have marked you with for sure.”

s home “Yes.” Grimly, Nik looked away and shook his head. “This is bad and over our top away, Daria. We can’t continue like we did before. I don’t know how long Pavlovich will be down here. Or what he really wants.”

ling his “Don’t you think he needs to touch base with Alexandrov’s team to let them to know he’s the boss now, and to know his men leading these guys up in Make peace with them of a sort? Make sure they will be loyal to him?”

off the “Sure, I thought so, too. I also thought that he’s down here to establish into each team and, if he doesn’t like some or all of them, to dispatch the teams’. bring in his own teams and leaders who will be completely loyal to him so come

Daria grew quiet, eyes lowered.

Nik drank the coffee. He set the mug down and reached out, brushing your fingers. “How are you doing? I was worried for you.”

Is there “Oh, I’m fine. Right now, frankly, I’m no longer center stage. Pa is, and that’s good for us and our cover.”

ng.” “I wonder how long he’ll be around here?”

rywart, “Yes, that’s what has me going. Can we capture Korsak under his not? That’s what Jack is talking to the CIA about tonight. He’s mission on hold until we can clear channels up and down the line.”

vited to “Wise move,” Nik muttered, sliding his fingers wearily through his tied in “What about Korsak?”

“A loose cannon. He’s pissed that Pavlovich asked me to dinner of him. Korsak peppered me with questions.” Mouth turning to a smile picked, added darkly, “I didn’t have answers for most of them. There’s no way with that putting myself between him and Pavlovich. I just want to fade back into shadows again. Right now, I’m a golden boy to Pavlovich. He needs my intelligence. It’s the last position I want to be in, Daria.”

She reached out, tangling her fingers among his. “I understand. I think he’s it went down like this.”

him.” Nik lifted his head. “I want to stay here tonight. With you. I can’t couch. I just don’t want any more of the noise, the smells of that ho

allows maxed-out.”

ing of Daria studied him as the silence strung out between them. “Do you g. I was that’s a good move under the circumstances?”

“I don’t know,” Nik said irritably. Getting up, he walked slowly Korsak the living room. “Our mission, as we knew it, is gone. Pavlovich is v thank for that. Korsak’s no longer focused on me and you. He’s worr plowing the new Don is going to demote him.”

ow how “Closer to the truth,” Daria said, watching him pace, “is he’s p worried about a bullet in the head.”

ms, get “I’d volunteer to do it.”

groups? She tucked her lower lip between her teeth because there was not ’ say. “You’re pushed to your limit, Nik.”

valuate Her quiet words were like a salve across his screaming nerves. em and guess I am. I feel stretched, as if I’m being skinned alive, Daria. n.” tightrope to walk before. Now, that rope has not only gotten thinner, it fragile. All I wanted, my only focus, was to give Korsak to the / ing her collect the promise from the CIA to provide Dan, both of us, political in your country. Now,” and he opened his hands, his voice flood vlovich exhaustion, “we have Pavlovich to contend with. Another chess Another big player who could change up everything. It’s become dimensional chess...”

nose or She stood and walked over to him. Sliding her arms around his wa put the brought her hips against his and stood quietly. “Look at me?”

Nik slid his arms around her shoulders. “Daria, I’m beyond sex to s hair. that’s what you want. I’m stressed out.”

Giving him a soft look, she whispered, “So am I. But that doesn’t instead we can’t hold one another Nik. Give each other comfort. It will ke ash, he cover solid, anyway.” She saw the anguish in his eyes as he lifted his h

ay I’m “I have no condoms, Daria. I never thought... well, you know. into the thought we’d be really going to bed with one another.” Nik gave respects a pologetic look. “And all I’ve thought of since meeting you was to that: make love to you all night long.” The corners of his mouth n sorry inward. He caressed her hair. “I can offer you so little, *moya kotya*.”

“Well,” she murmured, skimming his shoulder, “I’m old enough ake the big girl about this, Nik. I want you beside me. I want to hold you li tel. I’m held me the other night when I fell apart. It’s your turn now.” Lift

chin, Daria met and held his dark eyes. "Okay?"

ou think "Yes," he rasped, cupping her cheek, "It's more than enough. Mor  
ever dreamed of having with you..."

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who we  
ied that

robably

hing to

"Yes, I  
I had a  
's more  
A-team,  
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chin, Daria met and held his dark eyes. “Okay?”

“Yes,” he rasped, cupping her cheek, “It’s more than enough. More than I ever dreamed of having with you...”



## CHAPTER 13

**D**ARIA WAITED PATIENTLY as Nik left the bathroom after his shower and barefoot down the hall to the bedroom where she sat. His eyes were closed with exhaustion. She understood the toll the day had taken on Nik. Nik was driven like no one she'd ever met, even more so than herself. He was naked except for the white towel wrapped around his hips. His skin glistened in the low light from the hall, his hair mussed and only partially dried. She felt a wave of exhaustion in his soul tonight, she thought, as she moved around the bed pulling back the sheet and light cover for him as she went.

Nik gave her a grateful look and lay on his stomach, stretching long, lean frame. He gripped the pillow with both hands, closing his eyes. "I left you some hot water," he said.

She heard the slur in his voice as she drew the sheet up over his waist. It was impossible to ignore his utter maleness, the lean, rosy muscles tensing and moving across his back. "Thanks. Are you okay?" and she leaned forward, moving her hand lightly across his shoulder, still moist from his shower. She felt his muscles tense slightly beneath the tracing of her fingertips. Just getting to touch him like this, to see him without clothes excited her. Daria felt a little guilty, the pleasure of seeing Nik like this was overwhelming to her feminine senses. Even in the low light, she saw small scars across his shoulders and scattered across his long, broad back. "Fine," he mumbled.

"Go to sleep. I'll be back in a bit." She saw his short, spiky lashes and his tightened mouth begin to relax. Nik was already asleep. Daria stood there wanting to touch him, wanting to give him some care. The man was beautiful, his clothes had hid so much of him. Her heart twinged with worry because, even in sleep, she saw the tension around his eyes and the corner of his mouth. They were in a changing operation and it could spell disaster. Death... for either or both of them. Wanting to placate his worry, she ran her palm across his shoulders, trying to soothe away some of that awful tension. She silently carried on them.

Then she went and showered. By the time she came back to the bed it was midnight. The revelry and merry-makers down below had died greatly, but she could still hear the drums being banged further down the street. It wouldn't stop until two or so in the morning and she was grateful the sounds were mostly muted. Only a small nightlight in the bedroom she had slipped grayness into it. She had washed her hair, and it lay around her shoulders still slightly damp. Wearing a flannel, knee-length nightgown, because there was no heat at night in the apartment and it got chilly, she padded back into the bedroom.

Nik was still on his stomach, face partially buried in the pillow, breathing softly. He was sleeping deeply and Daria knew he needed it. Today would have been a special hell. Standing over him, she saw that he'd pushed the sheet and blanket off his body. Only the towel was still partly clinging to his waist. He had long legs with knotted calves, telling her how much he had walked out in the jungle. Right now, the stubble of his beard darkened his rugged looks, calling to her, making her desire amp up. Nik looked like a young boy in his sleep, so much of the tension he carried dissolving, leaving him vulnerable.

The lotion he had massaged her with was still on the bedstand. Doing something to help him, she decided to massage his shoulders and neck. She wasn't trained in massage, but Daria had been under the hand of many masseuses over the years that she felt she could do a reasonable enough job on Nik's back. Knowing he was Spetsnaz trained, she knew of his violent memory reactions. To suddenly start to massage him could startle him into waking, and he'd react without thinking, possibly injuring her. That was something Daria took seriously.

Taking the bottle in her hand, she carefully sat down on the edge of the bed, placing her hand gently on his left shoulder. She leaned close to his ear. "Nik? I want to massage your back. Are you all right with that?" His mouth moved and his brow wrinkled. "Nik? It's Daria. May I massage your back for you?" She watched him slowly come up from deep sleep beneath a husky voice. His fingers flexed on the pillow and he made a low noise from his throat.

Daria took that as a yes. Some part of his mind was aware of her presence now. Most importantly, his mind registered that she was not a threat. He stood, hiked her nightgown up, and straddled the backs of his thighs.

bedroom, care not to put weight on them. The folds of her nightgown settled around her creased knees as she put the lotion in her palms and then rubbed them together. It was something she was looking forward to: touching Nik. And right now, with her heart beating a little in anticipation, Daria spread her hands wide across his shoulders, slathering the unscented oil across his magnificent body.

His back gleamed in the low light as she followed Nik's long, powerful spine. She heard him groan softly. His eyes remained shut and he was quietly relaxed. Her lower body flexed and heated up as she thought about the

love to this man who provided care, with his life on the line, for so many others. Fingers digging in just enough to make those tight muscles begin to release along his vertebrae, she watched his sleeping features. A soft smile pulled at her lips as she continued her ministrations, following the line of his curves of the powerful muscles across his back. Her hands were not like his—rather calloused and strong. With each stroke of them, however, she felt his saw Nik's body begin to truly relax. The amount of stress he carried like a heavy burden had not been obvious until just now. He was a man caught between two worlds, and one of them was deadly to him.

The moments melted away as Daria focused her sniper intensity upon his hands gliding across his back. Here and there, her fingers ran into ridges of old flesh she knew were from old injuries. The oil gleamed and she saw the shadows of scars in stark relief beneath it. His back told so many stories, and she didn't want to hear every one of them. Nik intrigued her, and they hadn't had much muscle-time to plumb the depths of one another hardly at all.

But her body wanted him without reservation. She could feel the dampness between her thighs as she leaned her weight downward, pressing

the heels of her hands across his muscles. This was like making love to him without the act itself, but he'd helped her in much the same way last time. Nik's compassion ran through his heart, his life. Daria couldn't even conceive of him not being in the medical world in some capacity. She always wanted to have some quality time with him, but knew it wouldn't happen anytime soon. Probably never, what with Pavlovich here. Their job was broken. They were in hison their own, scrambling, unsure what direction their lives were taking.

Oddly, Daria didn't feel the danger. Maybe because Nik's protective nature was shielding her. She didn't know. There was a trust between them. She'd given this man who smiled and played with babies. Who had so gently taken care of her. Who had understood the impact of the knife wounds she'd gotten

and her Who had held her while the storm that had built inside her for t  
er. This months since that attack had raged on, and who had scoured her clea  
ow, her trauma. Nik was healing to anyone he touched, especially her. She s  
ross his dried strands of his black hair across his brow, giving him a boyish lo  
urge to sift her fingers through his hair, to ease it back into place, w  
powerful Daria resisted, absorbing the warmth of his flesh, the relaxation  
utterly muscles, as she coaxed the stress out of him.

making She had lost track of time until she looked at the clock on the beds  
o many was one a.m. Leaning down, she placed a kiss against the nape of his e  
egin to neck. Nik snored off and on, telling her he was deep in his sleep, tell  
ft smile how badly he'd needed this healing downtime. His skin had a wo  
nes and fragrance to it and, as her lips lifted away, she dragged his male sce  
ot soft, into her body. Straightening, she lifted her gown and eased off him as  
felt and as she could, not wanting to disturb him.

l within Nik mumbled something she couldn't make out as she pulled th  
een two and blanket across his body, tucking him in. The room was damp and  
now. She went and washed her hands off in the bathroom, dried the  
pon her came back to the bedroom. He had moved to his right side, face still b  
dges of the pillow.

e white She climbed in her side of the bed. Her body was throbbing. It c  
l Daria happen. He had no condoms and she didn't want to accidentally get pr  
had the Being a mother wasn't part of her world-view right now. As Da  
beneath the covers, bringing them up, she couldn't stop herself. She  
eel the the front of her body against his back, settling into it like well-matche  
guiding that had long missed one another. She was almost as tall as he was a  
to him helped Daria curl herself against Nik. He didn't even move, his exh  
t night, clearly making him unaware of her nearness. It didn't matter. She  
ive the warmth, his quiet strength, the slow, shallow in-and-out of his brea  
ched to breasts rested lightly against his back, her hips nestled against his b  
ie soon, her legs lay parallel to his.

y were Closing her eyes, contentment Daria had never known before  
taking, through her like a new, pink dawn appearing on the darkened hor  
fierce herself. The scent of Nik made her relax, his bulk and size made her f  
st she'd while their situation was anything but. She eased her hand up al  
y care dribs cage, her fingers flowing across it, coming to rest above his slowly-  
rnered heart. The sprinkling of dark hair across his massive chest tick

he four slightly-curved fingers as she utterly surrendered herself over to Nik. The last thought Daria had was that she wished she could wake up in the morning with him, make slow, exploratory love with this man, and give him the pleasure he so richly deserved for all the sacrifices he'd made as real many. He was the most selfless man Daria had ever met. The desire of his back to him was fierce within her. She ordered herself to sleep. Tomorrow would come all too quickly, and it was going to be an explosive day to stand. It didn't know how she knew that. She just did.

exposed

ing her NIK SLOWLY AWOKE, the drowsiness bone-deep within him. He felt wonderful swimmer who was far below the surface, struggling to rise up without deep finding each effort almost impossible to make. His mind was offline, quietly senses were fully open and he inhaled the subtle scent of woman, of fragrance, and she was in his arms, her body curved against his own. It felt like a dream, a torrid one. He'd had so many over the years just like this one, and this time, it seemed so damned real that, as he slowly moved his head, the silken strands of her hair against his cheek and nose. What was worried in? What was not? There was a languidness that invaded his slowly-awakened body, a sense of calm as he savored her warm curves resting against his. Where they met, his lower body eagerly consumed her contact. She wouldn't be rounded and, as he moved his hand down her long back, feeling Daria slide softly against the flannel material beneath his calloused fingertips, his senses sluggishly came back online.

ed parts Nik barely opened his eyes. Gray light was invading the room around the closed blinds. It was quiet on the street. No sounds. *Thar* His vision was blurred and he fought waking up because this dream felt his dissolve like the others always did. Only... she sighed and he felt her breath against his bare chest, her head tucked beneath his jaw. And then, his senses enlarged and he felt sleep being torn from him fully as he realized it was real. It wasn't a dream.

washed For a moment, Nik was groggy with confusion. Daria's hair was against his jaw and chin. She was trustingly curled against him, his hands around his waist, holding him even in sleep. He knew now that the feeling of her softness he'd felt in his half-dream had been the material of her nightgown. He lightly moved his fingers down her spine. She stirred. He stopped and led her

his hand. Realizing he'd awaken Daria if he moved too much, Nik g  
p in the softly and closed his eyes, saturated with her fragrance, her slende  
ive him form against his, her breath moist and slow against his chest. Slow  
for sore remembered yesterday, the pressures and stress, and then, coming h  
to give Daria. He'd gotten a shower and stumbled into bed. She had covere  
narrow and that was the last he remembered.

7. Daria Or was it? His brow furrowed as he lay there absorbing her again  
One of Daria's legs was laying across his, almost in a possessive way,  
liked that about her. She was, after all, military. She had coura  
like a confidence and he liked that she boldly asked from him what she need  
rd, but was more than willing to give her everything. His mind gyrated as  
but his there with her sleeping innocently in his arms. Never mind that his e  
a spicy was far more awake than he was presently. He'd awakened with  
t had to throbbing becoming insistent, sending fire up through him, fueling his  
is. And for her, wanting her body and soul.

, he felt Was it his imagination? Had Daria massaged his back last night  
is real? couldn't remember exactly, only as fragments that had drifted down  
akening drowsy senses. He vaguely recalled she had said something close to  
st him. He acutely recalled her breath flowing across his ear, the moisture, a  
as soft, sparks of heat radiated powerfully from his ear straight down to his  
fleecy body. What had she said? With no clear memory of it, Nik still recal  
s mind he'd been so damned relaxed, that he'd groaned. Or had he? He s  
open his eyes, the grayness of the ceiling staring back at him. He ac  
n from Daria. He had no condoms. He wouldn't put her at risk. Not in this  
nk God. fluid, changing situation. Above where her hips met his, his erecti  
t would nestled sweetly against her rounded belly. It made him feel potent.  
r moist Hungry.

hen his A pounding knock rattled through the apartment.

zed this Instantly, Nik jerked up, releasing Daria. He threw off the  
grabbing the towel that had come undone, wrapping it around his wa  
was soft pounding at the door didn't stop. He heard Daria moan and move.

ier arm "Stay here," he told her thickly, jerking open the bedroom door a  
e-ce-like as quickly closing it behind him.

own as Nik answered the front door. Brudin was standing there, glaring at

moving "Korsak wants us to meet in fifteen minutes. Get your ass down  
hotel."

groaned “All right.” Nik slammed the door in his face and locked it. Anger, firm with terror. He turned and saw Daria coming down the hallway, hair wildly bedrowsy, her hair mussed, making her look incredibly fetching. She looked like a young, innocent college-aged woman and his erection twitched behind him, the towel he held together with his hand.

“It was Brudin,” he told her roughly, meeting her halfway across the living room. He grazed her cheek. “I have to be down at the hotel in ten minutes. Korsak’s calling a meeting.”

Daria groaned, wiping the sleep from her eyes. “What does it lead to, Nik?”

Grimly, he answered, “I have no idea. I have to go, and I don’t want to see you in the bedroom.” He kissed her brow and released her, heading to the bedroom to change into a dress.

Daria made an unhappy noise, wrinkled her nose, and followed him into the hall. She stood in the bedroom doorway, hand against the jamb, waiting for him to dress. “What can I do to help, Nik?”

“Nothing,” he told her tightly, pulling a black t-shirt over his head and staying here. The meeting can’t last too long. Pavlovich wants all of us in the penthouse at 0900.” He sat on the bed, hauling on his socks and then his combat boots. “Stay out of sight, Daria. Stay here until I can get everything led that all together? I’ll come back and see you as soon as I can.” He rose, running his fingers through his dark hair, trying to tame the strands into a semblance of order.

“Okay,” she said, moving aside as he stood. “I need groceries tomorrow. I’ll wait until I see you, first. I’ll stay out of sight.”

Nik halted at the door, sliding his hands around her face, looking into her eyes. “I want you safe, Kitten. Korsak’s going crazy thinking I’m being demoted by Pavlovich. He sees me as a direct threat to his leadership. It’s a tense situation.”

She reached up, sliding her palm along his stubbled jaw. “Just go home. I’ll wait here for you,” she promised gravely, holding his worried hand.

Nik leaned down, taking her mouth, taking her hotly and sensually. He slid his mouth against her lips, feeling her open to him, her body move sensually against his, her arms going around his shoulders, drawing him tightly against her. There was no time. He had to get to the hotel. Tearing his mouth from her wet, lush lips filled with such pronounced

warred caressed her hair. "There's so much I need to say to you, Kitten. And  
er face Not yet..."

looked Daria gave him a sad look of understanding. "It will wait. Get goin  
beneath

IT WAS 0830 when Nik entered the apartment once more. Daria had she  
oss the climbed into twill hiking pants and boots, and a warm alpaca swe  
fifteen many colors that complemented the rest of her outfit. She was sitting  
table eating breakfast when he entered.

mean, Daria saw the tension in his face as he shut and locked the door  
him. "There's coffee in the kitchen," she said.

ant to." "Good, I need a cup."

quickly She watched him stride across the living room. "What happened, N

He poured the coffee, sitting with her. "Korsak is ordering us to ge  
n down to leave. He's rabid and angry. He doesn't know what to think of t  
atching Don." Nik gratefully sipped the coffee.

"Did he take it out on you?"

d. "Just "No. But now, the team is wary of me. I was worried that would l  
to meet They call me the 'Golden Boy', now. They know Pavlovich favors m  
cks and mouth quirked. "Hell of a position to be put in. I've lost my shadow p  
put this in the team."

running Daria reached out and took his hand, her fingers enclosing his.  
some didn't beat you up."

"They don't dare. Korsak knows Pavlovich favors what I say, n  
lay, but asked me what the Don wanted at dinner last night and I told him

Korsak is ranting that the Don is trying to see if he's skimming money  
ig deep top of this operation."

ng he's "Is he?"

lership. "I don't know for sure. It wouldn't surprise me if he was, but he'  
admit it to the rest of the team," Nik growled. He picked up a piece o

o. Stay from her plate. "May I?"

gaze. "Sure. You haven't eaten?"

without He shook his head. "No. It was like stepping into a room of  
feeling hornets. No coffee. No food. Just a lot of confusion, anger and distrust

oulders, "Damn," she muttered, pushing her plate toward him. "Eat this, Ni  
t to the make myself more after you leave for that other meeting."

nise, he



I can't. He glanced at his watch and then gave her a grateful look. "Thank you, and he sat down and hungrily dug into her fluffy scrambled eggs, ate a couple of pieces of bacon and two pieces of nearby toast slathered with strawberry jam."

Daria stood and walked away, into the kitchen. She saw Nik was stressed. Stress made a person extra hungry, and she quickly whipped up four more eggs in a bowl and put them into the skillet for him. Dropping two pieces of bread into the toaster, she felt his worry in the very air around her. "What else can I do?"

"Report this to Jack and the CIA. Keep them in the loop. It's not just me, but this is an ongoing train wreck as far as I'm concerned. I don't know what the Don has up his sleeve, or what his real objectives are. Those two security guards with him are a lot more than just security. They run different branches of the Don's operations from what I understand. And they both worked for Yerik Alexandrov before that. They are high-up in the chain-of-command."

Daria stirred the cooking eggs in the skillet. "I need to go out for a moment. Nik. What's a good time?"

"After the meeting gets started. I don't want you seen by any of the others." His eyes were pleading.

"A little late for that," Daria teased, one corner of her mouth curving upward. She brought the skillet over, ladling out the steaming eggs into a

"They cleaned plate. Nik was starved, and her heart went out to him. She heard the toast pop up on the counter. Turning, she went to butter the browned slices."

"Probably, but I don't want the Don to see you, either." Because he bore the same birth mark Pavlovich did. Nik had tried to find a space to tell her what he'd see on the man's neck but things were moving so fast that he couldn't. And Nik didn't want to just blurt it out. He wanted to talk with Daria, to prepare her emotionally for it. He knew it would come as a jarring, life-changing shock. She had been a Russian orphan, later adopted by a loving Ukrainian couple. Two people would never have the exact same birthmark, but in a family, as he knew from his extensive training in genetics, a birthmark could go from one generation to another. Sometimes in the same shape, and same area of the body. But he'd never seen one like this.

"It's damn near identical to the one Daria bore on her neck. Nik grimly prepared her silently that he would pick the time, have the time, to tell her the most upsetting news. And then, Nik would hold her afterward because he knew it was a twisted conundrum."

"I can't. He glanced at his watch and then gave her a grateful look. "Thank you, and he sat down and hungrily dug into her fluffy scrambled eggs, ate a couple of pieces of bacon and two pieces of nearby toast slathered with strawberry jam."

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Thank you,” That information was going to shake Daria’s world apart.  
the six And his, too. *What a mess.* He quickly ate the eggs and the extra to  
ry jam. put on his plate. Thanking her between bites, he glanced at his watch  
starved.0845. He had fifteen minutes. Jamming the food down, he gave her a  
ir more regret.

o more “I’m sorry I have to leave you.” Because he didn’t want to.  
nd him. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of things around here while you  
the meeting. *YOU* just be safe, all right?” and she reached out, touch  
t much, hand curled around the mug of coffee.

w what “I’ll be fine.”  
security “What does it mean when Korsak calls you ‘Golden Boy’?”  
ranches “It means I’m favored. It’s status. Power.”  
ked for “Then he’s afraid you’ll usurp him and his position as leader  
and.” team?”

or food, “That’s what he thinks, but I don’t have a clue as to what the Don t  
Shaking her head, she gave him a longing look. “Last night...  
them. I wonderful sleeping beside you, Nik.”

“Yes,” he rasped gruffly, pushing the emptied plate aside. “I w  
moving with you in my arms.” He traded an intent look with her. “You  
on his heaven. This,” and he gestured all around himself, “is my hell.”

ard the “I know,” Daria said gently, seeing the stress and regret in his e  
lices. have your back. You know that.”

e Daria “I do.” He stood, leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “I  
e to tell back here as soon as I can.”

that he The apartment became silent and empty after Nik hurriedly left. D  
ty time there sipping her cold coffee, frowning. Hell, she’d rather have a snip  
ne as ain her hand than do this damned undercover work. She wasn’t goo  
pted by didn’t know the rules and conventions of it. That left Nik carrying h  
t same responsibility, too. The man’s shoulders were going to break. She  
enetics, much in his turbulent blue eyes as he left. He desired her. Wanted h  
ie same the activity level around them had shot through the roof, and there  
. It was time for anything else right now.

omised Getting up, Daria went to the kitchen and cleaned up. She would  
her the her sat phone in a few minutes and check in with Jack Driscoll at  
knew it Security. There was no use bitching about being undercover. It was  
deal. Maybe he had some information for her. She had the sat phone

of Sergeant Mace Kilmer, but wouldn't contact him unless ordered by  
past she Everything ran through her boss to her.

. It was Chewing on her lower lip, Daria washed the dishes and put them  
look of drainer in the other sink to air dry after rinsing them off. What was

Pavlovich going to tell Korsak's team? How brutal a murderer was  
Pavlovich hadn't risen to the top of the Mafia to become boss unless  
you're at least as ruthless as Korsak. He might be more polished, smoother  
but his monster lurked beneath his skin, too.

of the

hinks.”

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oke up  
are my

eyes. “I

will be

aria sat  
her rifle  
id at it,  
ier as a  
saw so  
er. Yet,  
was no

retrieve  
Shield  
a done  
number

of Sergeant Mace Kilmer, but wouldn't contact him unless ordered by Jack. Everything ran through her boss to her.

Chewing on her lower lip, Daria washed the dishes and put them in the drainer in the other sink to air dry after rinsing them off. What was Don Pavlovich going to tell Korsak's team? How brutal a murderer was he? Pavlovich hadn't risen to the top of the Mafia to become boss unless he was just as ruthless as Korsak. He might be more polished, smoother, but a monster lurked beneath his skin, too.

## CHAPTER 14

**D**ARIA'S BREATH CAUGHT as Nik opened the apartment door mid-air without knocking first. She met his dark, hard gaze as he nodded hello in that direction, shutting and locking the door behind him. Standing in the hallway, she said, "What's going on?"

Nik laid his medical ruck on the floor near the door and came in the kitchen, rolling his shoulders. Leaning his hips against the counter, he watched her peel purple-skinned potatoes over the sink. "Bottom line, Pavlovich and his two security guards who are actually much more than they are cracked the hell out of Korsak on the drug numbers. He was sweating it out never seen him so subservient before." Pushing strands of hair off his forehead, Nik lowered his voice. "I don't think Pavlovich likes him personally very much, but as long as Korsak gets the numbers he's wanting, he'll continue to run the team." He gave her an apologetic look. "And tomorrow morning, we're taking off for the jungle. Korsak didn't mention which way we're going to, dammit."

She put the potatoes aside, rinsed her hands and dried them on a towel. Turning, Daria crossed her arms. "You're still trying to get me kidnapped?"

Grimly, he nodded. "Unless the CIA or Sergeant Kilmer tell me otherwise, yes. Pavlovich changes nothing as far as I'm concerned. Kilmer and his marauders, as they call themselves, are ghosts. They're good at snatching people."

"But under Pavlovich's nose?"

He heard the rising concern in her husky voice. "Yes."

Rubbing her brow, she said, "We need to sit down, Nik. Tell me about everything? I had a sat phone call with Jack earlier today and I need to get that Intel."

They moved to the couch, sitting down close to one another. Daria sat up in one corner, a leg beneath her. "Langley thinks Pavlovich is asserting his rights to the territory, making sure the five teams in this area remain loyal."

him. They still want Korsak to be taken. They don't want Pavlovich because he's too high on the food chain and it would alert those above him, they don't want to happen."

"Makes sense," Nik muttered, leaning his elbows on his thighs, from the kitchen. "These two guards, Oleg Laskin and Pyotr Lukin, are Pavlovich's right and left hands. They hide their power, what they do, and how much they do in her kitchen. But it became very clear to me, during the interrogation of Korsak, that he knew everything about the operation down here."

"What does Pavlovich want?"

He snorted. "More production of coke, of course."

"Can Korsak pull it off?"

Shrugging, he muttered, "It's complicated, Daria. Korsak was surprised by the bullets, telling them that, to raise the production to that new level, more plants had to be planted by local farmers. It would take at least five years for those bushes to get big enough to start picking enough leaves off to fulfill the kind of quota Pavlovich wants to achieve."

"What did Pavlovich say to that?"

"He said 'fine'... that Rome wasn't built in a day." Rubbing his jaw, he said, "But I think Pavlovich is testing him. I'll give him this: he asked how the Quechua Indians who are doing the work raising the coca plants are being treated."

"That must have gone well," Daria said drily.

"Korsak lied," he snarled under his breath, his fists curling for a moment. "I kept quiet. There's no sense in bringing up any of this in that meeting. I wanted to be a fly on the wall, not the center of attention."

"Still, he's inquiring about the Indians? Does that mean he cares how they're treated?"

"I don't know, Daria. In my heart, I pray it's so. Pavlovich seems more a manager of people than a brutal despot like Yerik Alexandrov. I don't know what went over Korsak's head or not."

"And what about you? Are you still Pavlovich's Golden Boy?" Daria asked, smiling a little, holding his worried gaze.

Nik groaned. "I have no idea. He said nothing to me. His whole focus is on Korsak, the logistics issues with the team, getting supplies in, the need in the field, equipment, and armory issues. We are continuing

because fight the two other Latino drug lords for the same territory. Korsak killed them, which stuff, and I think Pavlovich was impressed with that part of him.”

“Pavlovich isn’t a brute, then?”

owning. He straightened. “That remains to be seen.” He gave her a sad look and needed to talk to Jack Driscoll, and fill him in on all the details.”

“I know. Daria rose. “Yes, I think they’re all a little uptight over that development. Hold on, my sat phone’s in the bedroom. I’ll go get it.”

And she went and did so, and then came back.

Daria pattered around the kitchen, putting a roast chicken together with the potatoes while she kept one ear on Nik’s end of the long, one-sided conversation with her boss, Jack. She felt unsettled, but didn’t know what was wrong. Nik seemed consumed with some other issue that he wasn’t talking about. Every once in a while, she’d see him lift his head and look over at her with a concern in his gaze. She felt as if a scimitar were hanging over her head, invisible, but dangling by a thread just the same. She turned on the stove, placing the meat and vegetables into the roaster. They would eat at five.

At least they had tonight together and she wasn’t sure what would happen between them, if anything.

It was nearly an hour before Nik ended the sat phone call. He set the phone on the table and they sat on the couch. “You heard everything?” she asked.

“Yes.” He looked distracted. She’d known him for only a short time, but there was clearly an invisible line strung between them. Daria reached out, allowing her fingers to trail down his arm. “What else, Nik? You’re acting... harried? Distracted? Something’s bothering you. What is it?” “I didn’t need to be lambasted with more issues right now. She saw his eyes how her a stressed look, his mouth tucked in at the corners.

He moved the sat phone over onto the coffee table. “Come over here, I want to be hugged, moving to the opposite corner of the couch from her and opening his arms. “Come sit with me?”

Perplexed, hearing veiled torment in his low tone, she unworriedly scooted over to him. It was so easy to fold herself up against Nik, just as she had last night. His arm came around her and she rested her head on his shoulder, studying him, seeing the play of emotions alive and turbulent in his blue eyes. “Tell me?” she urged huskily, resting her hand over his heart. “My heart was pounding harder than usual. “What can I do to help you, Nik?”

He brushed his hand across her jaw, looking deeply into her eyes

new his are the most unselfish woman I've ever known." He slid his other hand across hers that rested over his heart, the living connection between them. "I'm about to cause you great pain, Daria," he warned her, his voice low and filled with regret.

"What do you mean?"

Nik took a deep, roughened breath. "When I saw Rolan Pavlovich off the train, the light wasn't very good. But I noticed something dark on the left side of his neck. When we got to the hotel... Under better lighting, I couldn't believe what I saw." Tensing, he held her uplifted gaze. "He detailed looked so damned innocent. So undeserving of what he was about to do to you. Nik knew it would shake her world and everything would change forever about the result. He rasped, "It was a birthmark, Daria. Exactly like yours, but with a deeper, slight change." He saw her eyes widen as the information sunk in. "You're kidding!" she said, suddenly sitting up, staring at him in disbelief. "No way, Nik. Are you *SURE*?"

Miserably, he lowered his head and nodded. "I'm *VERY* sure, Katerina. I've happen looked at it all morning and into the early afternoon today." Her face was a confusion in her face. Shock. As if a bombshell had just gone off. He saw her mind moving at the speed of light. "I'm a combat corpsman. I took combat medicine, genomics, as well," he began heavily. "Birthmarks are a genetic marker, but some families," and his hand tightened around hers, not allowing her to pull away from him. He saw the denial come to her expression. "Birthmarks usually occur from one generation to another in a family. And usually, they aren't exactly alike, but often, they appear on the same side of the body. I sometimes give sometimes on the same part of the anatomy. I've seen many birthmarks in my career as a corpsman."

His heart ached for Daria as he saw the denial fade and a lost expression of horror replace it. "Pavlovich has black hair, the same shade as your eyes are gold and brown, too, but yours are more gold than his. He has a round and oval face and, honestly, Daria? I could see the stamp of him in you. It's just like every apparent." Wincing internally, Nik saw her lips part, her eyes widened on his enormously. Releasing his hand, she slipped off the couch, her arms wrapped around herself, staring down at him.

Hollowly, he said, "I'm sorry, Daria. I didn't want to tell you this, but I knew I must. If Pavlovich ever sees you in town while you're here, you know without a doubt that you're somehow related to him. His birth-



er handnearly exactly like yours. And what then?"

n them. "No..." Daria whispered unsteadily, "I don't want to believe this  
ce taut,Are you *SURE*?"

A wall of pain hit him. Daria's pain. "Yes. There is no doubt in my  
I know what I see. If I could have taken a photo of him, I would have.  
h comeallows no pictures of himself."

on the Daria shook her head, desperate, looking around the room, as if  
ght... away from the conversation. "This is crazy! *Crazy*, Nik! What the hell  
. Dariaodds I'd meet an unknown relative out here in this green hell?" a  
tell her.glares at him. Spinning around, she paced the room, head down, or  
ver as aagainst her mouth, the ramifications closing in on her.

with just Nik allowed her the time to adjust. "I worry, Daria. If he sees yo  
that birthmark, I wonder what he'll do? Does he even know you exist  
him instood and stopped her from pacing, enfolding her into his arms to g  
some kind of comfort. Nik knew it was too little, but he couldn't st  
itten. languish in her eyes. Holding Daria gently against him, his arms arou  
le sawwaist, he said, "You heard me on the sat phone ask Driscoll for ph  
saw herPavlovich's two sons?"

urses in "Well," she stumbled, "yes, but I didn't know why."

arker in "Because Jack was able to get into the computer system at Lang  
o pull itaccess them. I asked him if there was any identifying marks on ei  
hmarksthem." His voice grew weary. "Both sons, now dead, had that id  
ly, theybirthmark on the left side of their necks. I asked Driscoll to describe it  
e body,said it looked like a quarter moon."

ks over "No," Daria whispered, choking, wanting to deny all of it. "What e

"Jack will get permission from Langley to send those photos  
look ofcomputer, which is encrypted. You need to see them for yourself. I  
rs. Hislook at them, too."

has an "And if the two sons had this birthmark?"

. It was "Then it tells me it's a predominant genetic marker of the Pa  
; widenfamily."

rapped "But... what happens, then?" she asked in a strained tone.

"Driscoll said Pavlovich has only two children on record being  
s, but IMoscow by his wife. His two sons. No daughters."

e, he'd Daria sank against Nik, pressing her face against his chest, holdi  
mark istightly. "Then, how are we possibly related?"

“I have no idea, Kitten, I’m not into genetics to that degree,”  
is, Nik!kissed her hair, massaging her tight shoulders, feeling a subtle tremor  
through her. She was shaking. He would be too, given such devastating  
y mind.He continued to stroke her shoulders and back. “My gut? I remember  
But hegenomics professor telling the class that birthmarks could skip generations  
for whatever reason, and then return. Not everyone gets them, and it comes  
to runthat some far-off cousin in your family is related to a far-off cousin  
are thefamily.” He sighed heavily, sliding his arms tightly around her. “None  
and sheis your fault, *moya kotya*. You are the innocent in this sordid dance  
ie handhard to keep up with.”

Tears squeezed out of her tightly-shut eyes, a shudder working through  
ou, seeshes. Nik’s arms felt incredibly comforting and Daria desperately needed  
st?” Hethe kindness and love he was feeding her right now. “This is awful, Nik  
ive herreally *is* my relative, he’s a global drug lord.” She buried her face  
and thehim, struggling to grasp it all.

and her “You’re the light to his dark,” Nik said unsteadily, battling to hold  
otos ofemotions in check. His natural protectiveness rose up in him. He  
desperately to shield Daria from the Don. He could feel Daria fighting  
cry, and he wished she’d just let it go, but she was strong. And there  
ley andmuch for her to think through. Her arms were tight around him, as if slithering  
ither ofclinging to him during a wild storm that might yank her away from him  
denticalshe would drown.

and he “Come? I want to go to the bedroom and lay down with you. How  
for a little while? It might help?” Because it was all he knew to do  
lse?” moment. There was no intent of sex. She was hurting deeply  
to yourinformation was going to change her life forever. Daria had discovered  
want topossibly, a long-lost relative who was also a drug lord. And not just a  
lord. Pavlovich was high up on the global ladder of the Russian trafficking  
world. He was a king in his own right, power-wise. Nik shook his head  
vlovichwondering why some people like he and Daria were given so much  
Others bore so very few loads in life. Life itself wasn’t fair, and he knew  
firsthand.

born in “Yes, I’d like that,” Daria choked out in a small voice. She sniffled  
pulled out of his arms, quickly wiping her eyes.

ng him She wasn’t going to cry. Nik could see that resolve in the way she  
her chin. But he could feel her mind racing, feel the agony radiating from

and he heart, could feel her wanting to deny all of it. Who wouldn't? He was not runbadly to insulate her, but there was no way he could. Pavlovich had good news. how long he'd be in Aguas Calientes. Daria was here for the duration. maybe they could capture Korsak. He caught her hand, giving it a gentle tug. They walked her down the hall to the bedroom.

could be Nik laid down in the middle of the bed and gestured for her to climb in with him. Daria sat down on its edge, nudged off her sandals, and slipped into his arms. Groaning as she fit so well against him, Nik slid his arm beneath her back, curling it around her shoulders, holding her close, but not too tight. Her

head came to rest in the crook of his shoulder, Nik sighed and closed his eyes. "Last night, I dreamed I was holding you. And then, when I woke up this morning in the grayness of dawn, you really were in my arms. If my mouth drew into a faint smile. "You have no idea how good it felt against you, Daria." Perhaps distracting her was the better choice? She needed

to absorb the deep shock from the revelations of their talk. Besides, he could protect her, give her a sense of safety, and care for her while she dealt with the deep shock of this unwanted discovery.

She slid her arm across his belly, absorbing his strength and comfort. "You massaged my back last night. Do you remember that?"

"No... I fell off a cliff. I was gone." Nik raised his head, meeting her gaze. "I'm sorry I missed that."

"You were exhausted from yesterday, Nik."

"So were you, Kitten." He threaded his fingers through her long hair, feeling the beat of her heart against his chest. The rounded firmness of her breasts teased his senses and he stopped his mind from going there. He wanted to get her to talk, maybe cry. Nik wanted to do so much more for her than any drug

"I wish there was a way to get a DNA test down here," she murmured against his chest.

"There is," he said. "Pavlovich sneezed and threw the tissues into a basket. One time, when we took a break from the meeting for bathroom breaks and such, I was able to rescue the soiled tissues and hid them in my pocket."

Daria lifted away, surprise in her expression. "Seriously? You did?"

"Yes, I put them in a small plastic baggie in my pocket. I transferred them to a sterile bottle when I left the hotel, and it's now in my medical ruck. I'm going to need you to take the train into Cusco tomorrow."

nted so and get the sample analyzed by the hospital. I'm sure they at least n't said gene services unit down in Lima. It could be overnighted by courier until Cusco to Lima, if needed. It's not the best quality specimen, but I dug, and there's enough of his DNA on those tissues to find out what we know."

come to "Oh, Nik!" Daria cried, throwing herself into his arms, hugging him over her woman's strength.

er neck, He smiled brokenly. "It was the least I could do, Kitten."

hen her "Don't let there be a match..."

sed his "We must get that evidence from either the Cusco or Lima hospital. I need to buy you a roundtrip ticket by tonight. There is an agricultural station." His coming into the station at 0800 and you'll be on it."

to hold Nodding, Daria gave him a grateful look. "You are incredible, Nik. Thank you for doing this for me. I'll be on that train."

is way, He frowned, brushing strands of hair away from her cheek. "I don't want to leave you alone in Cusco, Daria. A lone woman, especially an American one, is vulnerable. There are gangs who kidnap and ransom American women. I'm not going to let that happen to you."

"I can take care of myself," she said firmly, sliding her fingers across her jaw. "You just focus on what's going on with your team, okay? I'll have a lot more about you. I won't have contact..."

"You'll have the paper notes I pass to my Indian women friends. They'll take care of you. Move through that particular village, though."

is of her Shaking her head, she closed her eyes, absorbing Nik's strength and his plan. "So much is going on for both of us in different ways. It's upsetting."

er. "I know," he soothed. Nik looked at his watch. "How long before dinner?"

"Around 5:00 p.m. tonight," Daria said against his black hair, smoothing some of the wrinkles away across it. "Why?"

through Nik eased Daria onto her back. He lay above her, stroking her cheek with his thumb, looking deep into her eyes. "I don't want to leave here without making love to you, Daria. But it has to be mutual. And if you say no, I'll understand and respect your wishes. You touched my heart, *moya koty*."

Then "The moment I met you. I can't explain what happened at Mass between us, but something good and wonderful did." His voice grew low with emotion as he searched her widening gaze. "I've only known you less than a week."

have aI've been looking for you all my life. And I know you're upset over er fromjust told you right now. And loving me is probably the last thing you v believeHe saw her eyes grow soft, saw yearning in them and he knew... h need towithout her saying a word.

Daria felt heat flow through her, dissolving her shock. She felt it im withher from her opening heart and pool languidly with promise into her body. He was offering her a distraction, but it was just the one she wanting from him. She absorbed his tender look, saw his arousal, s need. But her need matched his own. "I have a confession to make," si tal. Weamusement in her tone. Daria had the ability to suppress anything al trainsniper, she did it all the time. Until that DNA sample came back to pr was Pavlovich's relative, she wasn't going to allow it to color her li . Thankhad wanted to love Nik for so long that it was easy to put this othe aside. At least, for the time being.

n't like "What?"

merican "After I bought my vegetables and fruit from Juanita, I went next ans forthe Pharmacia and picked up some condoms." She didn't know how I going to react to her boldness. She felt her face flush. This wasn't sor ross hisshe'd ever done before in her life. There was nothing straightforv worry acommon about her relationship with Nik. It was a whole new playin

So, she took the risk because she felt he was worth it, felt he wanted s as weher as much as she needed to love him. Daria saw sudden amusemen in his eyes, a half-grin tugging at his mouth as he considered her confe d calm. "You're not a kitten. You're a sleek, assertive female jaguar," he ra

Daria matched his grin, losing herself in the powerful look of l we eatwarmed her heart. "I've never done something like this before, Nik."

"I'm glad you did." He lifted his chin and looked over at the bec t-shirt, "In the drawer over there?"

"Yes. There's quite a few of them. Ready to use, if you want?" sl ek withand heard a chuckle rise in his throat.

without "I like a woman with expectations." Nik leaned over, trailing smal no, I'llalong her hairline, feeling her relax and enjoy his ministrations. "Yo a, fromvery brave and resourceful." He studied her in the lulling silence. "I een us, had sex in five years. You need to know that."

otion as "Because of your commitment here, to help your brother?"

ek, but "Yes." Nik looked past her for a moment, brows dipping. He cares

what Icheek. “I’m not the kind of man who lays with prostitutes like the rest of the team, Daria. I couldn’t develop a decent, ongoing relationship with a woman here in Peru under the circumstances. Sometimes, sacrifices are made for the greater good.” His mouth curved a little. “There’s nothing more in this world that I want, Daria, than to make love with you. I’ll try to control myself with you, but...”

“I understand,” she whispered, leaning up, taking his mouth, sliding her hand around his neck, drawing Nik down upon her. Daria knew how he said, that admission had cost him. He was worried about coming too soon. As a being able to fully please her first. They had all night. And she was sure she would be more than ready to make love more than once with her. She felt Nik groan as she nudged open his lips with her own, grazing his lower lip with her tongue, teasing him, getting his mind off his worries and focusing on their mutual pleasure instead.

Nik pulled away, giving her a feral look. “I’m not going to last for the first time. Let me get undressed, and get that condom pack open. A condom was open two.”

Laughing and nodding, Daria released him and sat up. In minutes, they were undressed and she felt the scorching intensity of his gaze sweeping over her naked body, hungrily absorbing her. She felt her breasts tighten in response to his predatory look, regaled in it, felt her entire lower body clench and relax in a dance with possibility. As he stood naked before her, her gaze fell to his erection. He was not a small man at all. Heat pooled in her, anticipating, wanting. She saw his need for her, but saw his worry, too. There was such tension in his body that reflected in his erection as he rolled on the condom.

“Come here,” she coaxed, taking his hand, guiding him onto the bed beside her. She was going to be the assertive one right now. Daria saw how he was almost afraid to touch her out of fear of coming too soon. He said, come, but she would ensure he’d be within her when it happened. “Come with me?” she asked as he lay on his back and she spanned his hips, her lips kissing coming to rest on either side of his. Her body was a bare inch away from his powerful erection and she felt her juices flowing, felt the need in her haven’t upward within her as she settled her hands in a frame on either side of his head.

“With my life, Kitten.”

“Then, let me love you first. Let’s break the ice, get through this to

t of myand then you can relax and we can take our time and enjoy one another  
ith anysecond, or perhaps even on a third session?” She brushed her body aga  
e madeerection in one, slow pass.

e in this Instantly, he gritted his teeth, his hands closing hard and gripp  
myselfhips.

“Daria...”

ing her “Shhhhh,” she whispered against his lips, rubbing against him, fee  
v muchwarm, steel-hard erection rise, stroking it lightly with her wet, w  
on, notentrance. “Let me take you into myself... I’m more than ready fi  
sure heNik...” and she closed her eyes, skimming against his taut, thick leng  
e heardmouth hungrily took hers and she grazed her breasts along the broad e  
wer lipof his chest. Every glide, every contact, sent wild flames licking fr  
used onhardening nipples, cascading down through her, pooling in her cc

began to ache as she fitted him fully against her entrance, allowing  
ong thefeel her warmth, her coaxing, sensuous movements. A deep growl ro  
ctually,through his chest, his hips thrusting upward, wanting her. All of h

smiled against his mouth, holding him right where he was, not allowi  
es, theyto do anything but savor her, feel her, and allow that heat that had  
oing upbeen between them to explode.

beneath His large, calloused hands were not still. He gripped her hips, b  
respondher close to the tip of his erection, and she relaxed, allowing him to gu  
rection.His breathing was ragged. She became enflamed as he slowly mov  
ng. Sheher, testing her, seeing if she was wet enough. Oh, yes, she was. No  
in him,there, and Daria played her tongue boldly against his, emulating the

rhythm, urging him to move deeper into her. Nik was a medic. He  
he bedwanted to give anyone pain, rather to relieve it, and Daria knew his n  
nsed heShe felt his fractional hesitation and she settled down on him, swai  
wouldhim into herself, feeling her channel swelling along his width and

“Trustmoaning with pleasure over the exquisite, unfolding sensations. The  
: thighsnothing like wonderful sex and she knew they would be good together

om that With slow, rocking movements, in and out, Daria felt Nik ter  
ess arcfingers digging sporadically into her hips. She lifted her mouth awa  
e of hishis, seeing his eyes tightly shut, his teeth clenched as he thrust deeply

several times before a guttural growl rolled through him. She felt the  
of his release, urging him on with a smooth, unbroken flow of her unc  
ogether,hips. She was nowhere near orgasm level herself, but that didn’t matte

r on themattered was Nik needed this more than she did this first time arou  
inst histhe way he held onto her, how long the release throbbled throughout h  
her everything. Sometimes, a man needed to come first, and this was  
ing herthose times.

Nik suddenly collapsed, breathing hard, sweat beading his  
furrowed brow as he flew on the singed wings of pleasure still thi  
ling histhrough his lean, hard frame. Daria felt like her entire body was a sac  
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mattered was Nik needed this more than she did this first time around. Just the way he held onto her, how long the release throbbed throughout her, told her everything. Sometimes, a man needed to come first, and this was one of those times.

Nik suddenly collapsed, breathing hard, sweat beading his deeply-furrowed brow as he flew on the singed wings of pleasure still throbbing through his lean, hard frame. Daria felt like her entire body was a sacred cup surrounding him, supporting him, holding him, and loving him as he floated in that beautiful netherworld of scalding, releasing climax. His fingers eventually began to ease from her flesh and Daria smiled, kissed his damp brow, his nose and finally, worshipping his mouth, letting him know she was equally satisfied, be it in a different way. Love had many angles and turns. Daria wasn't some ingénue who was guileless or innocent about sex. She had loved deeply and well with Luke. He'd taught her love had many levels and many different expressions. Daria used that knowledge to help heal Nik. Gathering him up in the aftermath, her arms curving around his shoulders, she lay there stretched out across his torso, head resting on his shoulder, brow against his jaw, holding him. Just holding him... Because that is what this man had needed for so long and hadn't received. With her in his life, Daria silently promised Nik that was going to change.

## CHAPTER 15

**“YOU ARE A generous woman,”** Nik told Daria in a roughened voice removed the condom and come back to bed, laying with her tucked his body.

Daria lay with her eyes closed, her fingers moving slowly across damp-haired chest. “So are you, Nik. But I don’t think you see that.”

He made a sound of disagreement, wiping the sweat off his brow. His whole body was still vibrating from the powerful, climatic release. It was a relief to relieve himself when needed, but it was instead wholly and completely loose himself after five years inside a woman’s body. The difference was night and day. Now, with Daria, he felt emotionally satisfied, desired and fulfilled. Nik couldn’t ever recall feeling like he felt right now. “I don’t, Kitten. I’m not much on introspection.” He heard her laugh and he caress his chest with her lips.

“Men aren’t known for it.”

He grinned a little, savoring Daria. “No argument. But you are introspective. I’ve seen you go there often. It’s in your eyes.”

“I’m a sniper by trade,” she agreed, her hand stilling over his chest. “Details make a life-and-death difference to me, and I can take that skill and apply it to anything. Even you. People interest me, Nik. I’m forever wondering about why they do or say the things they do. I always wonder what is behind their actions and decisions. What sent them in that direction?”

“You would be a good police detective,” he grumped good-naturedly, opening his eyes, sliding his hand through her hair, feeling its silkiness like a whisper between his fingers.

“Maybe...” Daria looked up, folding her hands on his chest and resting her chin on them, holding his hooded stare. “But you fascinate me. You have from the moment I saw you.”

“A bug under your microscope?” he teased, his lips lifting wryly.

Her smile blossomed. “Not hardly, Morozov. When I saw you at the church, I knew you were my contact because I’d been given a photo

But the difference between the photo and seeing you in person? My  
caught in my throat.”

“Now, that’s an American slang I haven’t heard before. What  
mean?” He liked the sparkle in her eyes. Nik saw the desire pent up in  
As soon as he recovered, he would take her, love her, and make her feel  
the way he’d dreamed of doing. His five-year drought had ended and  
e. He’d positive he could control himself the next time around to give Daria  
against pleasure she deserved. The gift she’d just given him earlier had shattered  
emotionally in a new way. She’d selflessly given herself to him without  
oss his expectation of reward. He would never forget her generosity. It told him  
powerful the connection that was alive and growing between them even  
ow. His truly was.

“It means you rock my world,” Daria whispered, smiling into his ear  
other to “And so, you felt this connection between us, too?”  
ce was “Did I ever. I felt euphoric, Nik. I couldn’t control my body, my  
l, loved for you. It was the craziest response I’ve ever had to a man. It was as if  
‘No... I in animal mating heat.”

nd then “Confession time,” he admitted, smoothing her hair aside, running  
fingers lightly across her the sensitive nape of her neck. “I was having  
very same reaction to you. It surprised the hell out of me. I didn’t know  
deeply to think. I didn’t know what was going on.”

“Amazing,” Daria agreed in a confused tone. She shook her head  
s heart, baffled by the reaction they’d initially had with one another in that church  
kill and

There was so much Nik couldn’t put into words. He enjoyed diving  
curious, into Ukrainian, his first language, with Daria. His heart swelled as he  
behind his fingers slowly across her long, firm back. Nik didn’t want to think  
the future beyond kidnapping Korsak. But he dreamed of so much more  
turedly, meeting Daria. His hand drew to a halt on her back. “I don’t know what  
ess slip have, except that it was strong from the beginning. I’m paralyzed in  
some ways because I have no experience with how I feel toward you, I

settling “It’s the same for me,” she admitted softly, caressing his chest, feeling  
ou have skin tighten wherever her fingertips traced his flesh.

“I wish,” he said thickly, “that I had met you at any other time than  
now, Kitten. We live in chaos. Neither of us has control over anything.

in the She pressed her hips against him suggestively. “We have control  
of you. ourselves and that has to be enough, Nik. At least, for now.” Daria lit

breathhead and looked at the clock on the bedstand. "It's nearly five p.m. The chicken should be done. Are you ready to eat? Get your strength back. I'll do it." She gave him a wicked, teasing look.

There was no sense in diving down the rabbit hole of uncertainty. They were in a room where their lives were at risk. Wisely, Nik nodded. "Yes, let me take a quick shower? Would you join me?" He saw her eyes light up.

"If I did, I'm afraid we'd get otherwise engaged and that chicken would catch fire in the oven." Daria rose to her knees, sweeping her hand out from his neck, down his torso, her fingers wrapping around his semi-erection. "Let's eat. Then we have energy to last through the night?"

Her warm fingers wrapping around him instantly made him tense. He took a sharp intake of breath. He liked what he saw in her gold eyes, the heat simmering in them, and knew she was more than ready. "Keep them close." She growled, gently easing her fingers away from himself, "and we're leaving this room."

She laughed lightly and climbed off the bed. Holding out her hand, she smiled and coaxed, "Come on, let's go get some fuel?"

AS THEY ATE the chicken, the sweet green beans and tasty potatoes, Daria wanted to imagine that she and Nik were in their own home, enjoying each other. Her military experience hovered in the halls of her mind, reminding her of all kinds of danger surrounding them. Her heart, however, was clapping on Nik. He ate voraciously, complimenting her cooking. The man sat back, relaxed, except for a towel wrapped around his waist and his lean, hard body. Daria couldn't imagine a five-year drought of no sex.

Did she dare to dream of a time when they were past this point in their lives, beyond their random crashing together on this op? The last two years of her life had been a desert. She'd felt herself dying little by little through them. Humans weren't meant to live alone as solitary monks. Daria looked through her lashes at Nik as he ate with relish. That ache centered in her lower body, a promise of things to come.

"I hope Brudin doesn't come knocking at our door later," she grumbled. "Doubtful," Nik murmured, pushing the empty plate away and wiping his mouth.

m. Themouth with a paper napkin. “Korsak has all of them getting whipp  
k?” andshape at the hotel. He’s ordered them all to stop drinking and whoring.

cleaned up, showered, shaved and look presentable.” He thumbed tow  
y aboutmedical ruck near the door. “I have everything I need right here.”

ie get a “So? That means Brudin won’t be around to harass us tonight?”

“No. I’m to meet them at the hotel at 0600 tomorrow morning.” N  
i wouldand held her gaze. “Tonight is just for us, Daria.”

ward in She rose from the table. “I need to get a shower first.”

rapping “Go. I’ll clean up here in the kitchen.”

ugh the “You’re easily house-trained, Morozov,” she teased, grinning d  
him. Her heart mushroomed as Nik gave her a heated look, his gaze  
up withpredatory upon her.

yes, the “My mother trained us early on to help out,” he assured her, rising  
at up,” can’t come from a farm family and not start working shortly after  
e aren’tlearned how to walk.” Picking up the plates, he said, “I’ll meet you  
bedroom when you’re done.”

l, Daria Daria didn’t waste their precious time to wash her hair. She fixed i  
top of her head to keep it dry, scrubbing the rest of herself clean, ur  
calm the clamoring heat that rested within her. Twenty minutes lat

, Daria wrapped herself in a pink towel and left the bathroom. The rest  
a mealapartment was in the dark except for a bare light shining in the hall o

. There the opened bedroom door. Her heart sped up. Daria wanted this so  
entered wanted to love Nik, to give back to him in so many large and smal

t naked Already, as she padded barefoot on the cool tiles, she felt anticipation  
dy was through her veins. Rounding the doorframe, she saw him lying naked

shouted bed, waiting for her. Nik reminded her of a male jaguar at languid r  
she knew better. There was an air of dangerous arousal exuding off

in their and she smiled a little, seeing he was powerfully erect once more. F  
years of For them. He held out his hand in her direction.

ughout The room was dark except for the night light in the hall. Daria ope  
stole a towel and hung it over a nearby chair. Slipping across the cool she

d again tangled her fingers with his, allowing him to draw her in beside h  
maneuvered her onto her back so she lay parallel to him. Drowning

iped. intense, turbulent blue gaze, she shivered beneath it as he brought her  
ing his his lips, slowly kissing each of her fingers, then opening her pal

moment his tongue brushed that sensitive area, she sighed and clo

ed into eyes, her lips parting.

To get There was no need for words. Nik communicated wonderfully toward her as he licked her palm, sending tingles of delight all across her hand. He lay propped above her, and brought her arm up behind where her head rested on the pillow, the long fingers of his other hand capturing her wrist. Nik met was something primal about his imprisoning of her, leaving her bare to his burning inspection. Her breasts grew firm, pleading for his touch, her nipples tightening with eager expectancy. As he slid his long, muscular hand across hers, gently opening her thighs, she shuddered with need. His own calloused hand slipped around her breast, her skin on fire from the contact. A moan came from within her as he leaned over, his lips teasing the skin. He sipping upon it, lingering, driving her into a frenzy. As she lifted her head, his response, his hand left her breast, gliding downward, caressing her abdomen. His fingers closing across her mound of soft curls, lingering once more, and then he moved in the Daria to feel the heat of his connection with her.

She felt her whole lower body turn wet and crampy as he slowly entered her, his fingers sliding through her damp folds. A cry jammed into her throat as he thrust her hips toward the pleasure he was giving her. She heard a low groan, a gasp of satisfaction in his chest as his mouth trailed a series of slow, soft kisses from her breast upward to find her mouth.

“You are a fiery woman, *moya kotya*,” he breathed against her neck, his hands moving to her breasts, caressing them, opening her more to him. “Wild, untamed, and I like you in all ways. Sleek and wet you are for me...”

Mind shorting out, she cried out as his fingers sought and found the swollen knot just inside her. His mouth, but plundered her lips and she felt the full force of his maleness, a hot breath of him claiming her, and wanting her. As his tongue played with hers, emulating her slow, seductive rhythm, she arched against his fingers, a cry in her throat.

she felt her entire lower body explode inwardly. The intensity of the orgasm caught her by total surprise, roaring through her in an undulating rhythm. She fell into a vat of molten, scalding fire as she felt the gush of fluids. A near-violent set of contractions within her tunnel as he milked her. He allowed her no escape from his skills, lavishing that knot, stroking her hand, urging her body to continue flowing powerfully beneath his command.

As he lifted his mouth from hers, Daria gasped, her eyes flying open. She clung to his slitted blue gaze as he continued to give her excru-

pleasure. She'd never had such a long, hard orgasm in her life and without beneath Nik's talented fingers, her body was receptive and giving. And how her heart flew open and rested, panting, her heart racing, her body quivering from the unexpected explosiveness of her release. And yet, nothing... nothing, had ever felt so good, to Daria. She saw a very pleased male smile shadowing his well-shaped lips, saw the glitter of satisfaction in his narrowed eyes. Her leg watched her come for him, gifting him in the most intimate of ways.

His hand. Her body suddenly collapsed and he eased his fingers from her contact. Agliding his hands upward, fingers spreading out across her damp belly to a point, went. She closed her eyes, sinking into that wonderful radiant light. His hips unconsciously consumed and embraced her as the orgasm continued to ripple like a storm, waves throughout her. Nik allowed her time to absorb it all, kissing her jawline, nibbling on her earlobe, and then moving his tongue to the

her neck, nipping lightly, teasing her, reminding her she had so much to explore left to give him. She felt as if her whole body were suddenly his to roam and play with. She felt his erection pressing insistently against her hip, forcing him to control himself for her sake as she languished in the aftermath of that kiss. A ground-zero blast, a satisfied smile pulling at her lips.

And, just as she came down off that delicious precipice, he moved her lips, body over hers, his knee opening her thighs wider to him, settling between her legs, his hands smoothing her flanks, skating upward, enclosing her breasts, teasing her nipples and sending her to another level of pleasure. Daria fell into his hands, felt his erection pressing against her entrance and she moaned a low sound of need, inviting him into her. This time... this time was going to be so good for both of them. He rolled on a condom. Nik took her, building her up with him, stroking slowly near that knot, engaging her throat as more, teasing it, and then he leaned forward, pushing deeper, and that orgasm flared to life once more within Daria.

She brought her hands to his hips, sliding her legs around his, catching him so she could rise and drink him fully into her welcoming body. He growled and the sound reverberated through her. He gripped her hair, holding her in place, kissing her hungrily, allowing her to know the depths of his desire for her. She smiled beneath his searching mouth, lifting her legs, creating a gap open, letting him know how close she was to coming once more. She felt her clitoris contracting, tight and wet around his girth and length as he plunged a

nd yet, he could feel her. The scalding sensation, the building of her next  
ng him tripled, and in moments, as he thrust quickly and deeply into her, her  
n! She drug into his bunched, damp shoulders as it swept through her. It wa  
xpected explosive as the last had been, but the utter pleasure it left in its wake t  
felt some kind from its moorings, hurling her, held deep within Nik's arms, ou  
v Nik's bright, bursting universe filled with her wild cries of satiation.

s as he She was lost, tumbling, and she heard Nik call her name, felt him  
felt him paralyzed with his own climax so deep within her. The wo  
depths, composed of light, fire, and floating and she smiled as he suddenly co  
as they on top of her, holding her tightly to him, their sweaty bodies entangle  
ght that than anything for Daria, this was the most beautiful moment for her  
moltenslid her arms around Nik's trembling shoulders, holding him, loving hi  
ing her all of her body, heart and soul.

nape of

h more NIK SLEPT WITH Daria snuggled deep in his arms, her body warm a  
wn and against him. He awoke at some point during the night, thin me  
elt him peeking around the blinds, so as to ease away just enough to stu  
of the sleeping face on the pillow beside him. Her hair was mussed, loose  
framed her face. Her lashes lay long and thick against her cheeks. Fo  
ved his the clean line of her nose, his gaze lingered on those lush lips of hers  
etween own had worshipped against earlier. The lips that had sent him  
breasts, cauldron of pleasurable oblivion. In sleep, she looked like an innocer  
arched and a fierce protectiveness for her rose again within him. He knew Da  
made a fully capable of taking care of herself, far more than most women, l  
going to didn't matter any longer to Nik. She was his woman. That made him  
is time safeguard her and always shield her from any menace. They had th  
it once around them. Worse, it wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

he heat Nik reached out, carefully extending his index finger to slip a few  
strands of hair away from her face. Her cheeks were flushed and the  
pturing of her soft mouth were relaxed. Being able to please this woman m  
ly. Nik chest expand with euphoria. Her cries had been so sweet and fille  
holding satisfaction. His own body hummed at the low frequency of the pleas  
his need continuing to thrum through him. To be able to love Daria, to slide i  
hythm, welcoming body, was more than he'd even dreamed could ever happ  
er walls studied her shadowed face in the silence of the world around the  
s far as



orgasm bedstand clock read 0300. He had three more hours with her. Despite v  
fingersto slowly awaken her with an onslaught of kisses and touches, Nik he  
asn't asHe wasn't a small man and Daria hadn't had sex in two years. She ha  
tore herfeeling tenderness physically because they hadn't exactly gone at it  
it into aMore like two animals in mating heat. Nik felt his body stir with the  
her, just thinking about it, his mind replaying those first two times  
stiffen,been with one another.

rd was His fingers smoothed more of her mussed hair, lightly, not war  
illapseddisturb her sleep. He saw the shallow curve of her breasts rise a  
d. Moreindicating deep slumber. Exhaustion of another type flowed through  
as shehe absorbed her relaxed features. The light revealed the curve of her  
im withshoulders, and he could see the firmness of her biceps and the tight m  
throughout her forearms. She was in top athletic condition, even  
military standpoint. Even after four months of downtime due to th  
nd softwounds in her left thigh, she was athletically trim. He wanted to do  
onlighthelp Daria get past her trauma and knew that he could, but time was  
idy herthem right now. Leaning over, Nik allowed his lips to linger lightly  
, and ither smooth, warm, velvet cheek for just a moment, and flared his no  
llowinginhale her spicy, feminine scent.

that his "Sleep the sleep of angels, beloved," he whispered to her.

into a Nik eased himself back down, sliding his arm beneath her neck, h  
it angelhand coming to rest across her blanketed hip. Daria stirred momentar  
ria wasthen sank back into that sweet abyss of healing sleep. He laid ther  
out thatclosed, hungrily imprinting her breath, her warmth, and the way he  
want to melted against his, into his mind. Nik had no idea where he and the res  
reat allteam were heading out to at dawn, nor how long they would be out o  
from village to village. With Pavlovich in the mix, all bets were off

v errantwould he see Daria again? The only relief he felt was that she would  
cornerssafe in Aguas Calientes with the Russians gone and no longer a threat

ade his His heart desperately wanted to leap ahead to his future with Da  
ed withunanswered dreams, but Nik wouldn't allow it to. And yet, as he  
ure stillmoved his hand across Daria's hip, his heart cried out for some p  
nto herneeds. Was it selfish to dream of her in his life after this op? Had fiv  
en. Nikof loneliness made him illogical, wanting and idealistic? His fingers l  
m. Theon the curve of her hip and then moved lightly down across her oute  
So much stood in the way of him reaching out to bring her into his ar

wanting into his life. There was no assurance that would ever even happen. And what did Daria dream of? Nik felt pain zigzag through his chest. He frowned. His roaming hand paused once more on her hip. *Time*. Time to have time. Time together. Time to explore and talk with one another. Time he had never rushed into any relationship. He'd seen so many young women and men fall in love and yet, within a few months, they were walking away from one another, after finding the other's many faults. His relationships, though few, had each been meaningful and fulfilling. He'd taken his time and learned, listened and communicated with each of the women in his life because he cared deeply for them.

Death had taken his first love, and then him leaving to go into Siberia had scared the second woman in his life away. She'd tearfully admitted she feared so much for his life, that she would lose him to death, that she couldn't handle the stress of it. Nik had understood and he'd sadly let her go. He'd learned more to away, his heart torn in half. That had been seven years ago. It seemed like a lifetime away to him.

The corners of his mouth flexed inward. Only Daria's soft, breathless words soothed the serrated emotions that clamored brightly across the surface of his mind. How badly he wanted the freedom to pursue her. How much he wanted to know all that they would ever be able to share? Nik took nothing for granted. He'd learned that the hard way. It was always a bullet's whisper away. Even if Korsak didn't shoot him, the guards could do so, too. Nothing was certain for him. How could he promise Daria anything? He couldn't. Bitterness flowed through his heart. But, as soon as that feeling left, his chest filled throbbingly with hope of a future with her. What was her favorite color? What made her sigh? Laugh? What brought her to tears? What creative skills did she possess? What kind of house did she live in now? What was her favorite color? He had thousands of questions for her and few answers up to this point.

Sleep stole in upon Nik and he surrendered to it, the woman he loved more than his own life in his arms, where she should be.

DARIA WATCHED NIK get dressed, shave and prepare to leave. It was 0500, gray dawn chasing away the night through the kitchen window. She'd woken up at 0500 and made him coffee, along with several thick chicken sandwiches and

and tucked them into Zip Lock baggies so he would have some de-  
rest and to eat out on the trail today. He was internalized, his brows knitted, eyes  
had mouth a slash, as if he were holding back a lot of things he wanted to  
er. Nikher. She sat at the kitchen table, watching him open his ruck across from  
and rapidly assessing all the bottles of medication and anchoring the more  
ay from them down securely into small canvas pockets. She kept her hands around  
a, while warm mug of coffee.

He'd "I'm going to miss you," she whispered, meeting his hooded stare.

his life "I'm going to miss you more, Kitten." He pressed the Velcro  
making sure it was tightly sealed so that medications could not fall out  
petsnaz the trail. "You look beautiful when you're just waking up."

ted that Her lips pulled faintly upward. Daria knew he was gearing up for  
hat she and emotionally to be with that hard, predatory team of his. No  
walked understood, more than ever, the psychological cost to him of remainin  
emed at that savage group. "I'll be looking for those notes," she offered. He

lightened momentarily. Nik wore jungle-green cammos, Russian-m  
shallow Spetsnaz. His weapons were stowed in a compartment in his ruck. Th  
oss these men carried, all AK-47's, were in a weapons bag at the hotel,  
. Is this from Peru *policia*'s eyes. Her heart yearned for him to stay, but that  
. Death reality.

in the "I'll have to be extra careful now," he muttered, his hands sliding t  
as ever on his huge ruck, studying her. "Now, I have three more sets of eye  
; and with us and they are all very observant."

is heart "I know." Daria frowned. "I wish there was an easier way we cou  
rite ice in contact, Nik. It's going to be hell not knowing where you are, not k  
? What when you might come back here to Aguas Calientes."

? Were He gave her an understanding look, moving his fingers along one s  
and very his ruck. "Welcome to my world. That's why it's been so hard to  
coordinate with Kilmer and his men."

e loved "Understood." She roused herself, wanting time to slow down. I  
out of her chair, she walked over to him. Nik turned toward her. He  
came around her waist and he gazed down at her. Daria leaned u  
;30, the moving her mouth against his, feeling him start to melt, beginning to  
l gotten some of the tension within him dissolving. She hungered to make  
twiches fourth time with him before he left. Her body was still glowing from  
third session at 0400 this morning.

nt food She'd awoken and begun a slow, sensual assault upon him as he :  
es dark,hadn't taken much to awaken and arouse him. The third time ha  
o say togentler, more intimate and caring, making her want Nik one more time  
om her,more before he left.

vital of His hands lifted, cupping her breasts beneath the nightgown she w  
und herthumbs caressing her tightened nipples. She moaned into his mouth  
kissed her hungrily, unable to get enough of her.

Daria wanted that kiss to go on forever, wanting his large ha  
closed,continue their slow, teasing exploration of her as they stood togeth  
it alongheard Nik groan as he reluctantly eased them apart, a fierce, burning  
his raptor-like eyes. She was breathing raggedly, her breasts begging  
mentallyexpert touch to continue. Her lower body glowed and throbbed, hu  
w, shesatiate itself again with Nik. She rubbed her hips against his suggestiv  
ng witherection once more hard and thick, straining against his cammos. "W  
is gazefifteen minutes," she said breathily, smiling at him.

ade for "You tempt me," he growled, settling his hands on her hips, pull  
ie riflesaway from him. "You've had enough of me. You have to be very ten  
hiddensore, Kitten."

wasn't Shrugging, she said, "I don't care. There's other parts of my bo  
heart, that need you even more, Nik. In time, the soreness will go aw  
o a haltnot a big deal." But she could see it bothered him. Nik didn't like c  
s alongpain in another person. Not ever. It wasn't in his DNA to do so. Pouti  
murmured, "At least you know what is waiting for you when you get h  
ild stay He caressed her cheeks with his thumbs. "Home. You know that  
nowingso good?"

"Well," she murmured, placing her hands on the backs of his  
seam offramed her face, "consider me your new home?" and she gave him a  
ying tolook, meaning it. There was a flare of hope in his blue eyes, and she  
words land with powerful meaning on Nik,

pushing "I would like nothing more than to create a home with you, Kitten.  
is armshome."

ipward, "Then, let's hold that dream together, Nik?" Longing to say so  
o relax,more, Daria knew it was too soon. She wanted to leave Nik with sor  
love apositive. Something filled with hope. "I live in a two-story cabin ou  
m theirtown. Why don't you think about what kind of house you would li  
think about it, too. We'll build the rooms in our minds? Each room's

slept. It the kind of furniture we'd like to see in it? That will be something for  
I'd been looking forward to when you return? It will be something wonderful  
we all share with one another."

He dragged in a ragged breath. "Dream for us, Daria. I can't dream  
more, his now. I don't dare, Kitten," and he gave her an apologetic look.

and he Her heart broke a little more, understanding why he couldn't. She  
back out of his arms, she took his hands in her own. "Okay, I'll dream  
for both of us. Stay safe out there for me, Nik?"

er. She He squeezed her fingers. "That's a promise I can give you," and  
looked intently. Reluctantly, he released her fingers and shrugged on the  
for his ruck across his shoulders. He picked up his black baseball cap, settling  
it on his head. "I'll see you as soon as possible," he said. The words, *I love  
you*, he wanted to tear out of his mouth. Deep sadness coursed through Nik's  
veins. He knew it was too soon to say those words. Not to mention that the

both on a slippery slope, and there was no guarantee either of them  
making it to the bottom of it. He swallowed hard and gave her a  
fierce, tender look of the love he held for her in his heart. Her  
eyes glisten with love in return. Unspoken. But there. It was enough.

Daria nodded, watching him turn and leave the apartment. Silence  
fell around her after he left. The room was barren of his larger-than-life presence  
and her heart shattered. She knew she had fallen helplessly in love with  
a brave, self-sacrificing soldier. And it hurt that she couldn't gift Nik with  
"I love you" words she held tightly in her heart for him and him alone. There was  
no time, space, or anything else left for them now. Daria turned and

down the hall to their bedroom. She would worry about Nik, but  
as he survived out here for five years on his wits and intelligence alone. What  
she had to do was pull together her own life and her part in this mission. Jack  
felt her ordered her to continue the mission, despite the unexpected drug  
showing up.

Looking at the clock on the bedstand, Daria knew  
. A real clandestine meeting with the Special Forces A-Team outside of town  
was rapidly approaching. The meeting that had been scheduled even  
before she'd arrived here in Aguas Calientes. She'd find out a lot more  
nothing Sergeant Kilmer then.

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## CHAPTER 16

**A**T ELEVEN A.M., the low-hanging clouds were beginning to shred and drift through a light blue sky above the tranquil area as Daria moved to a spot in a small clearing deep within in the jungle. She wore her knapsack, a baseball cap and retained her cover as a botanist. Glancing at her watch, she crouched partially behind a huge old tree, she had a clear view of the clearing. With the photos from the Army Special Forces A-team in the back of her mind, she waited patiently. She'd worked with A-teams before, in particular, hunter-killer three-man teams, in Afghanistan. She shifted slightly, her hearing keyed, her focus on the coming meeting.

Eyes narrowed; she spotted movement across the ten-foot-wide clearing. It was nothing obvious, but a trained sniper like herself would catch it. She expected to see such subtle movements. For anyone else, they'd have noticed the wind had ruffled that leaf, or turned those blades of grass, but there was no wind right now to do either such thing.

Slowly rising to her feet, hand on the bark of the tree, Daria turned right, well back within the line of scrub, and waited for the men's appearance. It wasn't long in coming. She first saw Sergeant Mace, a thirty-two years old, intelligent with shaggy black hair and a half-inch beard lining his face, melt out of the surrounding greenery, his light green camo narrowed. He wore jungle-patterned cammos and carried an AK-47 across his chest, its silencer-fitted muzzle pointed down. The floppy hat on his head was dark with dampness. It was the lethal look in his narrowed eyes that told Daria this man knew his business. She saw two more men, all about the height of Kilmer's six-foot height, following without a sound. This team was good, Daria expected that from them. She knew they'd probably had six or seven years to perfect their shadowy movement through this green hell. She wondered what drove them, but it wasn't a topic to be brought up right now.

Kilmer's gaze never left hers as he eased into the thick foliage behind which she stood. He smiled a little, thrusting out his hand. "Mace, Daria McClusky?"

She gripped his gloved hand. "Yes." Releasing his firm grip, she greetings to the two other bearded soldiers who stood casually alert on side of Kilmer. "How do you want to handle this briefing?" she asked a quiet voice, her gaze never still, always watching the jungle surround them. She was an operator on equal standing with them.

"This way," Kilmer said, flicking his hand toward the small trail. "Come in on. "Follow me."

*Man of few words.* But then again, Daria mused, as she fell in behind him with the other two soldiers bringing up the rear, living in a for God knew how long, wouldn't exactly make one chatty. Beside whole demeanor was stealth, and silence was their greatest asset moved onto a wild pig feeder trail about a quarter of a mile from the main and, in It twisted and wound for another mile before it opened up into another clearing. Kilmer came to a halt within the tree line and turned to her.

"Welcome to Camp Alpha," he said with a slight grin. Looking around with her sniper's eye, Daria saw a few hints that this only be a sleeping place for the team. She could read that they slept in hammocks above the ground. merely from the nicks here and there in the were looking at.

She saw Kilmer lean down and pull over a wooden box. "Have a seat," he grunted, pointing at a partially-rotted log that had a long time ago. "We'll have coffee and talk."

Sitting, Daria watched the three men go to work quietly, no between them. She saw their earpieces, and the mics they wore near their They were each armed with a knife sheath on one leg, a drop holster .45 pistol in it, and their AK-47s. Each man wore a ruck that was part their mobile home and, by the looks of them, weighed close to one-hundred and twenty pounds. She knew a hunter-killer team never remained stationary any given area for long, unless they were setting up an op to kidnap or HVT: a high value target.

She slipped out of her own ruck, itself around forty pounds. Open she pulled out a bunch of items and sat them at her feet. She saw Kilmer's straight brown eyebrows rise.

"Seriously?" he grunted, rising and coming over to where she "Fritos?"



nodded Daria grinned. "I found out from Nik that you guys have junk food either cravings." She'd bought Fritos, potato chips and Cheetos for the tent for him in them. And three jars; one with salsa and two others of jalapeno bean dip. Nik knew their habits well from their many, many meetings over the past years. He'd taken her to several stores in Aguas Calientes to acquire food for them. She'd packed packages of the junk food that they loved, but never got out in this jungle.

She saw delight dissolve Kilmer's hard features as he crouched, picking up the bean dip into a step bag, a grin widening his thinned lips. He grabbed one of the bean dip packages and a jungle pleasure wreathing his face.

"Morozov is one hell of a man," he muttered, lifting the package. They nodded to her. "He's one righteous dude. Thank him for this. And thank the lead for bringing it to us. We appreciate it."

Daria smiled and saw the other two men come over, eagerly looking through the goodies she'd laid out for them.

Mace turned as they crouched beside him, eyeing the snack foods. "This is my friend Nate Cunningham," he said, introducing the man to Daria. "He's here in 18 Delta medic."

"Hi," Daria murmured, shaking the twenty-nine-year-old man's hand. "I got Cheetos for you and that other jar of bean dip. Nik said you really like them."

Nate grinned widely and released her hand. "Yes, ma'am, there's nothing like 'em out here. Resupplies the salt I sweat out by the hour around here."

He took the package from Daria, holding it like a rare prize he'd just found. He talked along with the bean dip.

"And this dude," Mace said dryly, "is our communications sergeant with a Merrill."

Daria met the other man's large, intelligent blue gaze as Cale offered her a hundred big hand to her. Merrill was at least six foot tall. He had a hard, deep-lined, sun-tanned face. There was a chilling energy about the soldier, as if he'd seen and witnessed atrocities. Daria saw the tiredness deep in his eyes. It came from the time and the wear on a soldier's soul in this kind of work, and she understood it, well.

Daria released his hand and gave him the bag of Lay's potato chips and Kilmer's along with the jar of hot Salsa. She saw sudden warmth and gratitude come into his eyes, but he never smiled. Of the three, he felt the most wounded to her.

The one who had seen too much, and it was laying heavily on his heart and soul. She understood, as few others ever could.

ilk food “Nik said you guys have a love of candy,” and she swept her hair  
three of the choices at her feet. “Mars Bars for Kilmer, Butterfingers for Cunn  
bean dip, and Kit-Kats for you, Sergeant Merrill.”

last two “Man,” Nate murmured, grabbing his stash, “this *is* unexpected. I  
for themma’am.”

jungle. “Call me Daria,” she insisted, looking around at all of them. She  
ng up at that, in the military, people were called by their surname rather than th  
lip jars, name. But this was not exactly the military.

“Daria’s a pretty name,” Mace drawled, getting up and placing h  
ckages, into his opened ruck. He went back to fixing the coffee in a  
ank *you* percolator over a wire grate, the blinding light and heat of a magnesiu  
under it heating the water to boiling point.

looking Daria watched each man go back to his ruck to stow Nik’s thought  
priceless gifts in them. Her heart expanded with a fierce love of him  
s. “This bought these men the snacks out of his own pocket. It spoke to her  
e’s our regard and respect for them. She understood they were more like friend  
mere fellow black ops partners. She missed Nik, feeling that bl  
offered loneliness score her heart. She worried about him, out as he was with  
aid you and, now, Pavlovich, the man who might be her as-of-yet unknown r

Not wanting to focus on all that now, she shoved it deep down within l  
nothing In no time, Kilmer had the coffee made. Daria was given a rusted,  
l here.” tin cup with the steaming brew in it. The three men sat on other logs,  
ist won semi-triangular formation, across from her. Although they never h  
relaxed, they did get rid of their bucket hats and set their AKs asi  
nt Cale within reach. Daria could tell they really appreciated the hot coffee. I  
also bought them a large pack of Oreo cookies which she opened and  
ered his between them to have with their coffee. The mirrored appreciation i  
y lined, men’s faces melted her heart. Daria knew what it was like to no  
if he’d familiar comfort food from back home for months on end.

ne with “What do you have for us?” Kilmer asked finally, in a gap between  
knew it and bean dip.

o chips Daria told them everything, leaving nothing out. The three l  
come to attentively, never taking notes. Hunter-killer teams consisted of tho  
Daria, the highest intelligence and skills of anyone in the US Army, w  
part and possible exceptions of CAG or Delta Force. They focused especial  
when she told them about Nik’s info on Pavlovich. The only thing she

and overwas her birthmark, the one matching the drug lord's own. She'd g  
ngham,Cusco yesterday and delivered the evidence to the hospital. The b  
tissues was then overnighted to Lima for analysis at the large hospital  
Thanks,their DNA testing lab. She'd also supplied a small vial of her own  
along with the package, praying that there was no match. She'd not  
e knewtime to sift through her violent reactions and terror over possibly be  
eir firstunknown Russian relative of Pavlovich.

Mace finished his coffee, munching thoughtfully on his sixth  
is stashcookie, two more ready in his hand. "Pavlovich showing up unexp  
beat-upthrows a grenade into this kidnapping op of ours," he grumbled, scr  
n tablethis beard in thought.

"He's an unknown," she agreed.

ful and "Morozov got along with him," Merrill said, giving his teamr  
n. He'dglance. "I don't think that's bad news. It sounds more like he's gun  
r of hisdemote Korsak."

ids than "Yeah," Nate said, munching with delight over his eighth Oreo, "  
lade ofas Pavlovich focuses on Korsak, Nik can remain the shadow he is."

Korsak Mouth quirking, Daria studied Kilmer across from her. "How bac  
relative.going to screw up a possible kidnapping of Korsak?"

erself. Shrugging, finishing off the last cookie and rubbing his hands do  
beat-uphard, curved thighs, Mace muttered, "Depends. First, we have to know  
set in avillage they're at. That's been the one, single biggest FUBAR in all  
onestlyKorsak doesn't trust Nik any further than he can throw him. But may  
de, butmaybe, with Pavlovich in the mix, Nik can get more intel out of him so

Nik had "Do you have a fix on where they went?" she wondered. Bec  
placedsatellites could penetrate the triple canopy with any reasonable de  
n theseaccuracy, or precisely identify body heat signatures via infrared. Any c  
ot haved blobs could be Quechua Indians, wild pigs, or even a jaguar fan  
for a stroll on those trails winding deep through the thick jungle, an  
n FritosRussian team at all. A satellite wouldn't be able tell the difference du  
dispersion of frequencies through the triple canopy leaves.

listened "They're headed in the direction of Flor," Mace provided. He sh  
se withhis broad shoulders, adding, "But the trail they're on presently forks i  
with thedifferent directions and there's three village choice possibilities fro  
ly hardpoint on."

left out "Needle in a haystack," Daria agreed grimly, seeing the men

gone to reflect her own frustration.

“We never tail them too closely,” Nate told her, wiping off his hand there in “Good, because Nik wanted to warn you about those two so-called bloodwith Pavlovich. They’re ex-Spetsnaz, and they’re a lot smarter than yet had average bodyguard types,” Daria told them.

“Means we really go into stealth mode,” Mace said unhappily.

“It means,” Merrill growled, “that we’re going to rely even more on Oreon those notes Morozov passes to us.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Daria agreed, giving them all a sympathetic look.

The mood shifted and Nate gathered up the empty Oreon pack, stuffing it into one of his cargo pockets. “How are you doing down here, Daria?” he teased. “A Peru suit you?”

She warmed to the 18 Delta medic. In many ways, Nate was the most open and vulnerable of the three men. But he was a medic, too, and so long with the territory. She liked his moss-green eyes that always held a spark, like he was an elf in disguise. Especially because he was the shortest of the three, leaner, but wiry. He had a more readable face, but maybe that was due to his brownish-red hair and the boyish freckles across his nose that gave him a look younger. Maybe more approachable than Kilmer and Merrill, who’d done a lot of ops in Brazil, but the jungle’s different in the Amazon than in Peru,” she told him.

“Your voice changes when you speak about Nik,” he noted. “He grows on everyone over time,” and Nate grinned mischievously.

She felt heat flood her face. Daria didn’t want these men to know anything of their budding relationship. It didn’t have a place here at the table. “Of those nice guys, but you all know that,” she said lightly, smiling over at Nate. “I really out was care in this man’s eyes, just like she’d seen in Nik’s. “Are you a good one?” she asked, putting the conversation back on them, away from her.

Nate’s smile widened. “Yeah, he’s almost like a brother to me. Teases the hell out of me whenever we get to meet up, which isn’t too often. He’s got a rugged good heart, and it’s in the right place. Did you find that out about him?” Daria about choked but kept a poker face. “I found him to be very good.” “He took me over to the Healing Hands Charity orphanage for a day.”

“Yeah,” Nate murmured, “Morozov does a lot of work over there. He’s the only lifeline for these ten villages. There is no medicine here.”

out here for any of those poor Indians.”

ds. “Well,” Daria said, changing topics and pinning Kilmer with her  
guards “To continue to build my cover as a botanist, I’m going to be ranging  
an the all those villages Korsak holds sway over. I’ll gather orchid specimens  
each of them. I know Nik’s contact in each one, as well. We have  
with one another and I wanted to give you my schedule for the next  
heavily She pulled out a piece of paper, handing it to Mace.

He studied it. “Nik made this out for you?”

pathetic “Yes. He’s guessing, of course, where Korsak might go, but he  
this based upon past patterns. It’s a bit of a shot in the dark.”

iffing it “Always is,” Kilmer grunted, folding the paper and placing it  
? Does cammo pocket. “You need to be careful out there, Daria.”

“Oh, the jaguars?”

ie most Merrill snorted. “No. If you happen to walk into a village  
it came knowing that Korsak and his team are there, that could prove to be a p  
arkle in for you.” His eyes grew to slits as he studied Daria. “Korsak rapes any  
rtest of girls and women he wants. You need to be real cautious because he c  
hat was after you.”

making Her mouth flexed. “They know I’m Nik’s woman. At least, it appe  
l. “I’ve way and Nik is banking on that to make his team accept me as off-limi  
an here

Nate grunted, “Don’t bet on it, Daria. You need to keep your guard

“I don’t think, with Pavlovich along,” Merrill said, “that Korsak is  
kind of enough to go after an American woman. That would bring all k  
attention their way they don’t want. An American woman who is  
v about would bring the US embassy ambassador from Lima up into the ar  
“He’s a Marines’ diplomat guards, and the CIA. Korsak knows that.”

. There “I don’t think he’s that bright,” Mace muttered, shaking his he  
close to peered at Daria. “Let’s hope, for your sake, that your visits to these  
rself. do NOT coincide with Korsak and his team coming into them. I don’t

ases the “Understood,” Daria said. “But Nik will be there, and we’ve h  
’s got adays to cement our cover. The team thinks he’s in a relationship for t  
”

time in five years and they’ve bought it from what Nik could see. Be  
caring, and she opened her hands, “with Pavlovich showing up out of th  
Korsak’s entire focus is on his new boss now, no longer on us.”

re. And “All of the Alexandrov old teams,” Mace told her, “are little mo  
al help sociopaths. Nik is one of the few who isn’t like them.”

“Him and Alex Kazak,” Nate reminded him. “Alex was a med  
r gaze, Alexandrov’s team for years. He and Nik worked together there.”

g out to “I know Alex well,” Daria said, her voice growing warm. “He  
nens at married and happy up in Alexandria, Virginia.”

comms “Lucky bastard,” Mace said, grinning around at his cohorts. “V  
month.” Lauren Parker when she and Alex Kazak were down here on a missi  
was a good, strong woman and Alex is a damn fine soldier,” Mac  
getting serious. “Nice to know Alex and Lauren got a happy ending.”

created “Unlike us,” Nate said cheerfully, standing and brushing off the  
seat of his pants. “We’re going to be just like Kilmer: not fit for  
in his anymore, covered with fungus and mold, and no happy endings. We  
of the Petrie dish down here,” and all three of the other soldiers l  
quietly, nodding their heads almost simultaneously.

without Daria’s heart went out to this team. She knew their sacrifices, kn  
problem none of them had any real, lasting relationship with a woman. The  
7 young three month stretches out in the jungle, with a few weeks in Cusco t  
ould goup on badly needed downtime, before going back in to hunt their

HVT, high value target. “I always hold out hope for the hopeless,” s  
ars that them gently, giving them all a caring look. “I know you lose a lot  
ts.” social veneer out here, but from where I’m sitting, you’re all great  
l up.” Heroes, in my eyes.” She saw all of them suddenly perk up, turn sl  
s stupid avoid her gaze, eyes downcast and mouths pursed to hold back all the  
inds of unspoken emotions. They all needed a little TLC, just as Nik did. The  
s raped human. And Daria knew the aching loneliness out on an op for mon  
rea, the little or no human contact. It was a brutal existence, hard on anyone, v  
they admitted it or not. She was silently grateful Nik had walked into l  
ad. Henever regretting any of this. Not ever.

villages “Where are you off to now?” Nate asked.

like it.” “Back to Aguas Calientes, after I find a few orchids to put in my  
ad fiveshe said drily.

he first “Bet you’re learning more about orchids than you ever wanted to  
esides,” he chuckled, peeling open a packet of Butterfingers.

ie blue, Daria figured all the junk food would be gone by the end of this c  
guys stuffing themselves with it. She made a mental note to try and  
re than bring them more whenever she had a chance to meet up with them

Teams tended to stay away from civilization in general, operating un

ic with the jungle during those three-month stints. This meeting was a rare one  
could say that, but I love flowers, so it's not too much of a stretch."

's safe, Merrill unwound his tall, hard body. "Watch for snakes. Fer-de-la  
deadly and, in this area, in big-time abundance. They are one big,  
Ve metaggressive snake."

on. She "Oh," Daria replied, standing, "I've seen photos of the damage th  
e said, do." She lifted one of her legs. "These are Gortex snake guards."

"Fer-de-Lance go for the boot you're wearing, first," Nate warn  
e damp your guards have the tops of your boots protected. That's a good thing  
society "Where are your snake guards, then?" she asked them. None c  
're part were wearing any.

ughed Kilmer shook his head, taking the now cool grate and stowing bac  
old, dilapidated wooden box. It was a fruit and vegetable box with  
ew that writing nearly faded away on one end. "We wear 'em out and orde  
y spent again, and they never come. The jungle rot is hard on them. I put  
o catch request for them in three months ago and they still aren't here.

current Nate, said, "Hey, maybe we'll get lucky in Lima. You never kn  
he told might find some women who'll fall hopelessly in love with one of us d  
of your Mace snorted. "You're a damned idealist and a certified foc  
it guys. romantic. It ain't gonna happen for any of us sorry sons-of-bitche  
hy, and reading those romance books."

sudden, Daria smiled a little, hefting her ruck up over her shoulders, unt  
ey were the straps that had bunched up across them. This was normal milita  
th with talk. "Well, when you finally leave the Army, there's some ver  
whether looking, single women at Shield security, all ex-military," she su  
her life, lightly. "Maybe you guys ought to check it out, and the three of you  
meet someone nice."

"Lauren Parker was one of them," Nate informed them archly wi  
r sack," told-you-so look in his expression. "She and Alex fell in love. If th  
Why can't we?"

know," "Yeah, and Kilmer wanted her around our team like the black p  
Cale reminded him darkly. "He wanted nothing to do with her early  
lay, the that mission."

always "Mace is a Neanderthal throwback, just like all of us down here,"  
i again, grouched, hefting on his own ruck. And then he gave Daria an ap  
seen glance. "Present company excluded."

e. “You “No insult taken,” she murmured, tightening the belt around her  
She picked up her cloth sack that held two orchids she’d found along t  
nce areon her way to this meeting spot.

, mean, “Well,” Nate said, belting up, “Nik got a helluva deal with you b  
the mix. He’s got to be in heaven because you’re intelligent and, mi  
rey canyou bring a lot to our table. Lucky bastard.”

Daria’s lips twitched as she settled the baseball cap on her head.  
d, “andshe’d braided her long, dark hair to keep it out of the way while tra  
.” the jungle. “I wouldn’t know. You’d have to ask him.”

of them Kilmer chuckled darkly, throwing on his own hat and snapping h  
47 into the chest sling position across the front of his body. “You’d p  
k in itsheartbeat for a pretty Quechua Indian girl, Daria. Good cover. We’  
Spanishtouch.”

er them “Right,” she murmured.

another Nate said, “Come here. You need a hug.”

Surprised, Daria was suddenly enclosed within the medic’s long a  
ow, wehe gently embraced and then released her. How much like Nik he was  
ludes.” brought tears to her eyes that she quickly forced back. Smiling, she r  
ol of aout, touching Nate’s arm. “Thanks. But if anyone needs a hug, it’s yo  
s. Quitnot me.” She saw Nate give her an intense look, as if he had x-ray vis

could look right through her and know that she was already in a relat  
wistingwith Nik. That look shook her. She knew 18 Delta medics were the  
ry trashthe world, renowned for their high intuition and remarkable brave  
y nice-compassion out on the field of battle. Nate was like that and, uneasily  
ggestedwondered if he sensed something between her and Nik. From the loo  
1 mightdancing green eyes, she bet he suspected something, but she wasn’t g  
add fuel to that particular fire.

th an I- Kilmer came up, towering over her. “Take care of yourself, okay’  
ey can?ever get cornered by Korsak. He means business.”

“I’ll do that,” Daria promised him somberly, seeing the care burnin  
lague,”in his eyes. This man was badly wounded, like herself. It took one t  
on intoone, and she saw herself reflected in hardcore Mace. The shields he  
around himself were insurmountable. She doubted he would ever le  
Merrillhis guard, nor let go of all of the horror he carried alive and well  
logetichimself. He would never be vulnerable. To her, he seemed a tragic

“Thanks,” she whispered, reaching out, only grazing his sleeve as s



her waist, he girded himself against her full touch. As if to physically connect with the trail would shatter him in some way. He was in a worse place than she was. Her heart ached for this brave, hardened soldier.

Being in Kilmer looked her dead in the eyes. "Don't screw with Korsak. Literally, happen to end up at the same vill with him, get the hell out as soon as you can. Dump your plans. Run. Okay?" he gritted out, heavy warning in his earlier voice.

versing "I read you loud and clear, Mace." She saw concern in his eyes, his mouth going soft for a moment.

his AK- "If Korsak goes after you, Nik has to protect you. You know that, right? He's putting himself at risk at that point. Korsak has already pulled two of his other soldiers into the head of two of his other soldiers who defied his authority in the past. And they aren't alive anymore." His mouth tightened as he intently looked at her. "He won't hesitate to kill Nik. You're going to have to protect him if that situation arises."

arms as "I'll try very hard to ensure that never happens," Daria promised, and it thus kily. "I have no reason to put Nik in the crosshairs."

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“I read you loud and clear, Mace.” She saw concern in his eyes, his mouth going soft for a moment.

“If Korsak goes after you, Nik has to protect you. You know that, don’t you? He’s putting himself at risk at that point. Korsak has already put a gun to the head of two of his other soldiers who defied his authority in the past. And they aren’t alive anymore.” His mouth tightened as he intently studied her. “He won’t hesitate to kill Nik. You’re going to have to protect him, too, if that situation arises.”

“I’ll try very hard to ensure that never happens,” Daria promised him huskily. “I have no reason to put Nik in the crosshairs.”

## CHAPTER 17

**D**ARIA STARED AT the results of the DNA comparison between hers and Rolan Pavlovich. Two weeks had passed since she'd turned in his "sample" and her own blood. Every day, she'd felt the tension creeping as she worried over her lineage. She stood in the lobby of the Cusco hospital. The results had been given by a doctor in a private meeting in his office. Now, she knew for sure.

She WAS Pavlovich's distant relative on the Mongol side of the family. It wasn't completely unknown for Russians and Mongols to intermarry, but it was at least a century ago that such a bonding was an even semi-common practice. The doctor had said that a birthmark would show up now and then, but not on every descendant. The best news was that she was not related to the mob boss. Leaning against the white wall in the hall of the hospital, nurses and doctors hurrying by her, Daria closed her eyes. The results gripped tightly in her hand. A multitude of dark, different emotions sifted through her. How badly she wanted Nik here beside her, to give her comfort, to say something... anything... that would take this monstrous pain away from her chest. She felt ashamed deep down inside her. If Rolan Pavlovich was the dark side of her family tree, then she was the light. How crazy genetic mess this was. One thing for sure, she had to ensure the birthmark was hidden while he was down here in Peru. She couldn't trust any of his goons, seeing it. No telling what would happen next if she was spotted, and she didn't want to go there—at all.

She touched the birthmark on the base of her neck beneath the hair she'd worn down loose to cover it for the train ride here into Cusco. Closing her eyes, Daria stared down through blurred vision at the paper tremor in her hand. The geneticist had told her that her distant relative had been part Mongolian and part Russian. That would explain the color of her skin; she was neither white, nor tan, but with a heavy suntan. It also explained the slight tilt of her eyes and their gold-brown color; both traits strongly associate with Mongolian heritage. Nik had made more than one comment about her

able to pass as a Quechua Indian woman. He was closer than anyone had been to the truth of her genes.

She was related to a major global drug dealer. And she was sure had ties to the Russian government, including the black ops branch been part of for nearly twenty years. Dragging in a deep breath, smell antiseptic combined with a faint odor of bleach lingering in the lobby, she pushed away from the wall.

Nik... How she wished he was here for her! She knew he would help. Every day without him, without word from him, worried her couldn't help it. As she slowly walked toward the glass exit doors, like her whole life had been torn apart. The only constancy in it was her shoulder bag she carried the sat phone. She dreaded making the

Jack Driscoll to let him know about the DNA results. What would Yank her off the op? Was she a liability to Shield now? To everyone who worked there? Daria knew she was in a compromised position, but she asked for this. She was a victim in this whole unexpected situation, too

Mouth quirking as she pushed through the doors and out into the noontime sunlight, she wasn't in any kind of mood to appreciate the beauty above Cusco. She took a taxi to the station, wanting to catch the next train down to Aguas Calientes. Once she arrived, she walked away from the crowds to make the sat phone call. She stood by the corner of the white building, overlooking the ceaseless car and bicycle traffic teaming along the ancient Incan cobblestoned streets surrounding the large square plaza

“Jack here. Daria?”

“Yeah, it's me, Jack. I got the results on the DNA.” She took a deep breath and told him what the test had revealed. Her fingers tightened on the phone as a strung-out silence met her ear.

“How are you feeling about this?” he finally asked her quietly.

“I don't honestly know, Jack. It's too early to tell. I'm not happy about that's for sure.”

“I can't even begin to imagine,” he agreed. “So? Does this compromise the op you're on? Do you want to be taken off it and have someone else run it?”

Her heart leaped. “You're not ordering me back?”

“No. Why should I? Only if you want to. You're developing a good rapport down there. I got a call from Sergeant Kilmer last week. He's pleased

before your professionalism. They feel you're very good at your job."

Relief simmered through her. Daria almost didn't dare believe he still "Then... you're not taking me off this op unless I want off it?"

he had "Yes. Look, you're a known quantity to us, Daria. You had no idea of this development. It's a genetic FUBAR and not your fault. If anything, you're the real victim in all of this mess. What I'm more concerned about is that, if Pavlovich ever lays eyes on that birthmark of yours, all hell will break loose. He's astute enough to put all the pieces together."

Daria She tucked her lower lip between her teeth for a moment, staring at the ground. "I can hide it with a neckerchief, Jack. No one will see it. I'm going out into the village of Orilla tomorrow and I'll routinely wear it and call it out into the jungle. If I ever run into Pavlovich out there, he won't have the birthmark."

Jack "Okay, that sounds workable. Kilmer said they're setting up an operation in the area. Has Nik been able to find out the name of the next village yet?"

Daria "Yes. Orilla. I'm going out there tomorrow to meet with Señora Vega. She's the wife of the chief of that village. Korsak and his team are supposed to show up there the next day."

Jack "You need to get out of there before they arrive," Jack warned her.

Daria "I will," Daria promised. She had a Glock and she carried a knife. She had been provided the legal permit to carry a firearm in Peru, although it was concealed so that no one could see it was on her person.

Jack "In this country, if she was found with a military firearm, she could be thrown in prison. Only the *policia* was allowed to carry weapons, as well as

SWAT teams. The coolness of a sudden breeze lifted strands of hair around her face and she pulled them away. Keeping alert, wanting no passerby to

overhear the call, Daria ended it, feeling more than a little relieved. Driscoll would allow her to see this mission through. And that meant

about it, wasn't a detriment to Shield, which gave her all the relief she so desperately needed right now.

How much she missed Nik! Tucking the phone into a plastic bag and sealing it, she wandered down the long portico filled with tourists waiting for

the next train to the jungle area at the base of Machu Picchu. Above her, the sun shone down brightly and she had on her sunglasses and baseball cap to

shield herself against its heat. She stopped at a vendor, a Quechua man with a brown felt bowler hat set jauntily on her head, and bought two

green neckerchiefs. Paying a lot more Peruvian soles than the asked-for ears. Daria slipped one of the scarves around her neck. She made her way to the ticketed gate of the train station, found the bathroom and washed. Studying herself critically in a mirror, she saw the neckerchief did nothing to hide her birthmark. Patting the soft cotton material, Daria could see it remain in place even if it shifted around on her neck. The birthmark could remain hidden to the world at large. She couldn't even allow herself to think about Pavlovich's reaction if he ever found out about it.

Daria boarded ten minutes later and sat in the first-class car. During the ride up, the gentle rocking motion of the train soothed some of the emotions loose and howling within her. She sat alone at her table, a freshly-brewed coffee in front of her. The train was climbing up and over the dark-brown bowl of the valley in which Cusco sat, and heading up to the twelve-thousand-foot point where it crested the mountains, dropping down again to sixty-five hundred feet below into Aguas Calientes an hour ahead. She rested her head back against the dark-green leather seat and closed her eyes. *Nik...* Daria knew he would hold her. Give her a sense that her world was going to be all right, even if it lay shattered around her feet right now. Never before had she felt that kind of warm living protection that he invisibly bestowed upon her. If only she could hear Nik, hear his voice once more, feel his strong, cherishing mouth upon her. In this At some point during that thought, Daria dozed off.

As their NIK'S HEART LEAPED in his chest as his team walked into Orilla in the morning and he saw her.

The clouds were lifting over the jungle, the birds singing, merrily howling and hooting. There, near Chief Vega's hut, was Daria, sitting under a small tarp with several samples of orchids lying around her, an open notebook in her hands. What was she doing here? His heart thudded

in terror as he looked over his shoulder to see Pavlovich suddenly alert, glaring at her as well. Daria was dressed in her normal jungle attire, her hair hanging in one long braid between her shoulder blades. What was new was that she wore a neckerchief around her neck as she sorted through the orchids. Many children also crowded around her, watching intently what she was doing.

He saw the sudden fear in the faces of the village's Indians as he

or price, team appeared from out of the jungle trail. Orilla was the largest vil-  
through Korsak's circuit. It had around two-hundred inhabitants, and sat abo-  
vent in hundred feet above the banks of the small river flowing by it. The lon-  
indeed shaped village was smooth and flat. A number of metal tripods dot-  
t would clearing with blackened kettles hung suspended over fires below the  
t would could smell the Quinoa cereal on the air. The nutlike flavor always  
to think sweet fragrance to it. It hurt him to see the children suddenly start run

his team moved into the village proper, dashing behind their mother:  
ing the colorful skirts. Dogs didn't even bark. They ran and hid, too.

re wild What was Daria doing here? She'd known they were arriving so  
cup of they were a day early. Korsak had decided to push on and get to the vi-  
l out of rest up overnight in comfort instead of camping out and coming in to  
toward morning. He saw Daria lift her head, her eyes widening with surprise  
before her gaze locked on his, he could do or say nothing. His team knew s-  
lientes, his woman, and that should protect her. But Pavlovich and his me-  
r of the another question mark. If only Daria weren't here! She was at risk! H-  
e her at tightened around the shoulder straps of his ruck. He saw so much  
ered all expression for that fleeting second. This was a hot mess.

ith: that Turning, he looked at Korsak behind him. "My woman is here.  
uld see you have other things for me to do right now, I'm going to see h-  
hers... couldn't just peel off and leave without an explanation. Korsak made  
final decisions.

Ustin grinned. "Well, well, this is new, Morozov." He shrugged  
the late know where your hut is at. Invite her in with you. I'm sure we w-  
seeing much of either of you."

ionkeys Relief tunneled through Nik. He nodded and walked to the right, l-  
ig on a to where Daria was standing, her gaze never leaving his. He heard  
opened snickering and ignored the bastard. Korsak had his hands full with Pa-  
ed with and his men, and was probably glad to be rid of him for a while, anyv-  
focused he strode toward Daria, he saw questions in her widening gold-brow  
ranging saw welcome and wariness in them, as she looked past him at the t-  
e green Russians entering the village.

curious She wiped her hands down the sides of her green trousers  
ig. approached.

and his Nik knew his team was watching. He halted a foot away fro-  
keeping his boots off the tarp where the orchids sat. "Why are you he

lage ondemanded in low voice, speaking Ukrainian. The children were not a out fivehim, and came running to his side, touching his pants, his hands, tugging oval-him, pleading for him to give them the candy that he always carried tted thepockets.

m. Nik “I didn’t know you were coming in today,” she said, frowning. “I s had ayou were supposed to arrive tomorrow morning?”

ning as “Korsak changed his mind.” He looked over his shoulder and s s’ long,men heading down one side of the village. They had huts at the oth

empty and waiting for them. Turning, he reached out, sliding his hand on, buther jaw. “Make this look good?” and he stepped forward, leaning

llage totaking her mouth before she could reply. The moment his mouth r narrowwarm, lush lips, all the terror dissolved and his world anchored hotly

. WhenDaria. He felt her arms go around his neck, drawing him close, she waskissing him in return. This wasn’t play-acting, this was real, and he g

n werein pleasure as she hungrily returned his kiss. For just this stolen mome is handinhaled the fragrance of the orchids she’d gathered, and the scents clin

in herher black, shining hair. Her fingers caressed the nape of his neck, h tingling wildly there, recalling its memory of her scalding, teasing

UnlessFinally, he eased back from her wet lips, studying her from beneath hi er.” Hethick lashes. The love he saw shining in her eyes was real.

e all the “The last two weeks have been a special hell,” he growled, caress hair, her shoulder, and finally sliding his fingers down her arm to he

l. “Youholding it. He glanced toward the team. Nik saw the women hurrying on’t beyoung daughters inside their thatched huts, afraid that one of Korsak

would grab one and rape her. He saw Pavlovich standing, hands o readinglooking imperiously around, as if he owned this village and its in

Brudininhabitants. vlovich “I know,” she whispered unsteadily, placing her free hand on hi

vay. Assearching his eyes. “I’m sorry I’m here. I didn’t know. Should I leave? n eyes, He shook his head. “No. That will rouse their suspicions.” He slid

roop ofaround her waist, bringing her against him as he pointed to a lone hu other end of the village from where the team stayed. “Señora Veg,

as hespecial hut for me over there. I hold a medical clinic there when I’m i and it’s larger than the others. That’s where we’ll stay.” He gave her a

m her,look. “Tonight, you’re mine.” re?” he Daria leaned into Nik, absorbing the feel of his arm around her sh



fraid of drawing her against him. She felt his worry, felt his protectiveness, clinging onstood together. “What should I do in the meantime?”

l in his “I’ll take you to meet Pavlovich to dispel any issues that might c later regarding you. I’m sure Korsak has told him you’re my woma thoughtmouth thinned as he studied her. “What’s wrong?” He saw sudden pai eyes and her soft mouth pursing up.

saw the “Nik,” she choked out quietly, holding his gaze, “the DNA test er end,came back. I’m a long-lost relative of his.”

d along Feeling as if someone had slammed him in the chest, Nik’s arm ti down,around her. “God... I’m so sorry, Kitten...,” and he leaned over, pre net herkiss to her hair, wanting somehow to take away the anguish and sh aroundsaw in her face.

eagerly “That’s why I’m wearing this neckerchief. It hides my birthmark.” groaned “Good plan,” he said, relieved. He turned and smiled weakly nt, Nikchildren surrounding him, begging him in Quechua for sweets. “List ing tostay here for a moment? I want to give the children their candy.” He s is flesheyeyes grow tender and she nodded.

, touch. It gave Nik time to think as he dug into his cargo pants’ thigh poc s short,drew out a handful of hard candy all wrapped in bright, colorful f knew the children were deathly afraid of their team and with good ing herBut these five boys and two little girls were braving the situation, th r hand,hands held upward toward him, their faces smiling because he was ti ng theirone they trusted out of the team.

’s men Daria stood back, collecting her orchids and putting them delicat n hips,paper sacks. Picking up the tarp, she shook it out and carefully fold mcentpacked it into her open ruck. After he gave the kids their candy, they their respective huts, their treasures clenched in their tiny fists.

s chest, “Come,” he urged Daria, picking up her ruck and shouldering it :” He slid his arm around her waist and brought her in step with him, hea his armthe opposite direction from the Russian team.

it at the Daria moved out with him, her legs long and almost able to keep a has ahis stride. She saw the tension in Nik’s face, the worry deep in his n town,they walked. “Listen, Kilmer and his men are here, around the village heatedplace, in case they can nab Korsak.”

“That’s good,” Nik said, taking in a ragged breath. “Do you oulderswhere?”

as they “Yes, near where the Russians stay. That end of the village. V received the note you left at Flor last week with Señora Chavez, I come upKilmer’s team on the sat phone. They’ve been scouting out this villa n.” Histhe surrounding area since then. They need egress routes because, if n in herable to snatch Korsak, they’re gonna have to get the hell out of D don’t know how Pavlovich will react. Or what his guards will do.”

results Eyes hardening, Nik drew her to the left where a large thatched apart from the rest of the village. He slowed, releasing her. “Let’s get ghtenedKorsak isn’t going to expect me to introduce you immediately. We ssing aquietly inside.”

ame he They slipped into the airy hut. There were three large windows wi lids propped open to allow sluggish jungle breezes entry. Removing he baseball cap, Daria saw that the interior of the rough structure consi at thethree large rooms. The largest one had a rusted gurney in one corne en, justwas where Nik probably saw his patients.

saw her “In here,” Nik murmured, motioning down the short hall to a room right. He pushed the door open, revealing a room where fresh leaves h ket andbrought in, and a blanket thrown over them, to create a makeshift t oil. Heslipped in, dropping her ruck on one side of the doorway, and settin; reason.his own right up against it.

eir tiny Daria stood, looking around for egress points. The windows wei he onlyenough to slip out of, if necessary. She saw the grimness in Nik’s fac sure Mace Kilmer is probably stressing out over this FUBAR too.”

ely into “More than likely,” he muttered. “What is their plan?”

led and “They’re going to wait to see which hut Korsak is in. If he goes o / ran tohis business in the jungle, they’ll be waiting for him. They’re going to hope for a break, Nik.”

for her. “With Pavlovich here, he’s a good distraction.” He rubbed h iding inthinking. “It’s going to be dicey, Daria. No matter what happens.”

“What do you think Pavlovich and his men will do if Korsak su up withdisappears?”

eyes as “I don’t know. They know nothing of this area. They are unfamili e and init.”

“Who’s second in command of the team? Brudin?”

I know Making a sour face, Nik nodded. “Yes. He’s a loose cannon. He think clearly when things go wrong. He starts screaming and shouting.

When I      “That’s good for Mace and his team.”

I called     “Precisely. Brudin is a distraction.”

age and     “Do we need to go make introductions?” She saw his face go h  
they’reeyes flash with concern. Reaching out, she slid her fingers down h  
odge. IHe’d rolled up the sleeves of his dark-green shirt to just below his c

His lean forearms gleamed with the sweat that highlighted the  
hut satmuscles, hinting at the strength he possessed.

inside.     “Yes, unfortunately.” He peered intently at her. Nik touched her  
e’ll talkwith his thumb. “Are you SURE you can handle meeting your relative’

“I have to,” she said. “Let’s just get it over with? I want to get as fa  
th theirfrom that sick bastard as I can.”

er black    A slight smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. “Tonight, we a  
isted ofalone. With one another. That is the gift I am waiting for, *moya kotya.*’

r. That     She stepped up to Nik, framing his face with her hands, feel

stubble of beard against her palms. She knew, when they were out  
i on thejungle, men allowed their beards to grow out. On Nik, the short,  
ad beenshadow made his face look even more rugged. She met his mouth, che  
oed. Heit with her lips, wanting to give something back to him, knowing the p  
g downhe was under. She wanted to whisper, “*I love you*”, but the words stuc

throat as she broke away from the kiss. His eyes had darkened and she  
e largehis urgent need for her. Fire ignited in her lower body and her  
e. “I’mtightened beneath his intent inspection. There was a predatory look  
eyes, one that sent heated signals throughout her. She knew that look  
what it meant. And her lips parted.

ut to do    Nik groaned. “Come, if we don’t leave soon, I am going to take y  
to haveand now...”

“Let’s go,” she urged softly, pushing him out the doorway, giving  
is jaw,teasing look. Following Nik out of the hut, she settled her cap back o  
head. He caught her hand, keeping her close, cutting his stride as he t  
iddenlydown the center of the village.

When Daria had first arrived, it had been an active village with do  
iar withand mothers out and about. The men had been sitting by their huts, si  
or cleaning their hunting gear, readying themselves to go out into the  
to hunt wild pig. Now, it was practically a ghost town. The cooking po  
doesn’twith no one in attendance. The dogs had disappeared along with the c  
”  
and women. Her heart squeezed over the terror that this team had l

down upon these otherwise happy, hardworking people. They had welcomed her with open arms. Now, it was eerily quiet and she felt the palpable dread, his surround her.

his arm. Daria tried to brace herself to meet her relative. Nervously, she tucked her elbows under her neckerchief, wanting to make sure it was in place to hide her birthmark. Her copy was. Up ahead, she saw Pavlovich talking with Korsak. The drug guards were nowhere to be seen and neither was the rest of the team. Her cheeks were probably in their huts, resting up, drinking water and grabbing food from their rucks. She took a deep breath as Nik slowed their approach away the pair.

When Pavlovich raised his head, his eyes narrowing upon Daria, she felt her stomach twist and tighten. It shocked her how much they had in common from their gold-brown eyes to their black hair and same general shape of the faces. Her heart felt as if someone were ripping it open. Daria didn't breathe in the mouth, which was thin, or that jutting chin that spoke clearly of his prickly demeanor. His eyes were not wide-set like hers were, either. There was a slight slant to his eyes, unlike the definitive tilt of her own. He pressed his chin, surveying her, and she felt like a prize horse beneath his inspection. Worse, as Nik halted in front of them to introduce her, she felt a cold sense of wrapping around her. His eyes, although her color, were flat. Lifeless. She had no soul. A frisson of fear jagged through Daria as she forced her smile in his give them both a weak smile.

Don Knew "Don Pavlovich, please meet Daria McClusky. She's an orchid brought down here to do research and write a book about them."

Don Rolan smiled warmly and offered his hand. "This is quite a nice smile, Ms. McClusky. It's an honor to meet you," and she shook his hand.

Don Daria nodded. "Thank you, Don Pavlovich." She looked up toward him. "I don't know who was more surprised, me or Nik. I hadn't expected to see you here for goodness-knows how long. He told me that your team was looking for minerals, and he wasn't sure when he'd get back to Aguas Calientes with the kids."

Don "Hmmm, rightly so," Rolan murmured, giving Korsak an amused look. "Well, we must take advantage of your beautiful presence. I'm sure my jungle boss can find room to invite you to dinner with us tonight."

Don Daria shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I've got a touch of something wrong, maybe food poisoning, and I'd like to just rest in my hut. If you don't mind, I'll be brought back later." Rolan frowned. "Are you leaving, then?"

“No,” Daria said. “I’m hoping by morning I feel better. And leaving after breakfast with my new orchids. I’ll be heading back to Calientes with them. Once there, I will create botanical drawings of them.”

“Well,” Rolan said smoothly, “perhaps when I return there, I will see you?” And then he stared over at Nik. “Merely a social courtesy. They course.”

Daria slipped her hand into Nik’s. “Of course. I’m open for lunch to happen to be in town.”

Pavlovich arched an eyebrow. A silence spun out before he finally spoke. “I hope you feel better. You do know that Morozov is a medic?”

“Yes. I’ve already asked him for something to help my symptoms. He gestured down the village toward their hut. “Now that we’re done with his introductions, I’m going back to lay down. If you’ll excuse me?”

Nik released her hand and watched her walk away. Turning, he saw only Pavlovich watching Daria closely and he wanted to step over and tell her that she wasn’t to be pursued by him. But Nik said nothing. It had become clear to him that the new mafia leader wanted to understand the patterns of the village, the stops, and get to know the Indians and meet the chief of the village. Pavlovich was initiating a very different campaign to the one he had been running. He always sat at dinner with each chief and their

and through his own interpretation skills, promised them he was a botanist, them food, aid and more medicine. Korsak had sat through those conversations, grim and unresponsive, but Nik had felt the rage vibrating through the air, surprise, ops soldier. His days of raping were over, it appeared. Nik almost

Pavlovich because of that alone, but he couldn’t say anything to anyone and Nik. “Go and be with your lady,” Rolan said equitably. “You’re very lucky to see have snagged her, Morozov.”

“I think so, too,” he told the Don. He turned to Korsak and said, “I’m going to hold a clinic later after she’s bedded down and resting. Is that all right with you?”

“I don’t care,” Korsak muttered. “Do what you want.”

Pavlovich smiled a little, appearing thoughtful. “You’ve done something, work here in the last five years with the villagers, Morozov. I saw the children around you earlier when we first came into the village. It’s a good sign.”

“The team bringing good will to the village is always a good sign. The team bringing good will to the village is always

I'll be plus. Makes them want to help us even more."

Aguas "I always have candy on me," Nik said, grinning. "They know it, to each of "I like your style of getting the villagers to trust you. I believe in v hearts and minds because they'll work for us, not against us. These ill look need medicine and you're here doing just that. You've held a clinic i esy, of other village we were at, and I can see how the people love and respect

And then he grimaced. "At least they don't run away from you, M ich if I They run toward you." He frowned, looking pointedly over at Korsak.

"Have you noticed, Korsak? Everyone is hiding when your team r gave a into a village? Even the dogs go running away. They won't even bark

The inhabitants have done this at every village we have come to. "

Daria afraid of your team, with the exception of Morozov, here. When I re ie with Aguas Calientes, I'm going to create a protocol for you and your t

follow that is very different from the way you've been dealing in t

he saw with these Indians. We need not only their goodwill, but I want their

he Don bent on collecting the cocoa leaves and making cocaine from them

become Give them more food, health and medical services. Kindness, not threa

of this Korsak lifted his upper lip and said, "You'll make them laz, f every Pavlovich."

Korsak "What do you think, Morozov? Is he right?"

family, The last thing Nik wanted to do is get between these two men. "I k

ringing the people of the villages could use a dentist out here. An eye doctor,

dinner you could pay for someone to come from Cusco, meet us at the villag

e black come in once a month to help, that would go a long way toward gett

st liked Quechua to appreciate your generosity. They are a hardworking peop

e. giving them back their health would be a very positive step."

ucky to Nik wasn't about to speak up and damn Korsak. He wasn't so s

angry Russian wouldn't take out his pistol and put a bullet in his hea

d, "I'm though Pavlovich was standing right there next to him. Better

that all diplomatic. But he saw something in the mafia leader's expression, a

in his eyes that told Nik the man was onto Korsak's violent, abusiv

with the villagers. If nothing else, if the tense, distrustful enviro

ie good between the teams and villages changed under Pavlovich's reign, that

he little come as a huge relief to Nik. No more little girls or young women w

That's raped by these predatory bastards. That was a miracle Nik had

always expected, and his opinion of the mafia leader grew greatly as a result.

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## CHAPTER 18

**D**ARIA WAS WALKING down the center of the village toward their hut when shots suddenly rang out through the air. She gasped, automatically crouching. She had no weapons on her! She turned in Nik's direction, terror on her expression. He was running toward her, his face hard.

Nik cursed, gripping her arm, yanking her toward the hut.

Screams of women and children filled the air.

Curses in Russian exploded along with AK-47 fire as Korsakov rallied against the attack, firing back down the path leading into the village.

"Diego Valdez's men!" Nik yelled, shoving Daria into the hut. He reached for the weapons beside his medical ruck.

Daria let out an 'ooooff' as she hit the dirt floor. She heard bullets whizzing through their hut, barely above her head. "Give me my pistol," she yelled, holding out her hand.

Nik crouched low, AK-47 in his right hand, jerking open the ruck, pulling out her Glock.

"It's loaded, bullet in the chamber. Stay here!" he yelled, twisting to look back, then leaving the hut and disappearing.

Coolness flowed through Daria. She was a sniper in full control of her emotions as she took the safety off the Glock and rolled back on her stomach. She heard shouts, screams and terror among the villagers. Breathing hard, she scrambled forward on her stomach toward the door. More bullets ripped through the hut, the dried reeds that made up its walls exploding, creating clouds of dust, making it hard for her to see. She had no Kevlar vest on to protect her. She elbow-crawled out through the doorway, and toward the corner of the hut to try and get a bead on the rival drug soldiers.

How many of them were there? Daria had no answer, not familiar with the two Latin drug lords who were actively fighting this Russian invasion into their cocaine territory. She had no idea how large a force was at the village. Her mind narrowed and focused as she saw at least thirty



jungle cammo, armed with AK-47s, pouring into the clearing, firing and indiscriminately. That was too bad for them she thought, her flexing, her eyes slits as she placed both hands on the Glock and to pick her targets.

Daria knew the ex-Spetsnaz black ops soldiers would be as lethal as was. They never sprayed and prayed. They picked a target and fired in concentrated bursts. She heard the deep chatter of AK-47s behind her, knowing it was the Russians returning fire. They were out in the vulnerable, with nowhere to hide. Thatched huts provided absolute protection at all. In a small corner of her mind, she was grateful Nik's team had a Kevlar vest on. It wasn't a Level 4, only a Level 2, but it would give some protection. It was better than nothing. She didn't see Pavlovich wearing one at all, although his two guards did. How she wished she had hers c now!

The Latin soldiers were all dressed differently from one another. There was no single, focused plan of attack as they ran helter-skelter through the village. The air was alive with the singing and humming of bullets being all around her. Her mind worked like a trap snapping shut, her full focus on the nearest man, who'd spotted her on her belly near the hut, lunging toward her, firing at her.

She heard screams behind her. *Men. Russians?* Daria didn't know around, wasn't going to risk turning to find out. God, don't let it be Nik! A throb of her slow-beating heart cringed. *Please, don't die! Don't die! I just want you, Nik!* Sweat ran down her face, stinging her eyes and she continued to fire, her hand bucking savagely from the massive kick of the peeling Glock. It was a pistol that took humans down with one shot, which is why many operators used the weapon. She had one herself, but it was in a locker in Virginia, in the Shield armory locker.

All other sounds were blotted out. Daria winced as a bullet exploded in front of her, six inches from her face. She closed her eyes, dirt flying into her. That was close! Mouth set tight; she opened her eyes. They were filled with dust from the explosion. Making a frustrated sound, she jerked her hand away, wiping them quickly, before returning it to grip the butt of the pistol.

More bullets peppered her position. She felt a sting and then numbness in her upper right arm, ignoring it. Firing, the roar of the Glock blowing her hearing, she saw her attacker

wildly fired back. In one shot, he was down and out of the fight. Daria realized her mouth was at the point of the spear. Her and Nik's hut was the nearest to what began to jungle path opened out into the village behind her. She saw more and more soldiers begin to spot her and send a hail of fire into her position.

As she heard Russian boots thudding up behind her. And then, the soldiers in brief, landed on their bellies on either side of her, slow-firing their AK-47's, and her, her support. Daria didn't look to see who they were. Rather, she remained open, concentrated on slowing down the hoard of Latin soldiers trying to completely no her position. The man who fell next to her grunted. She was peripherally aware of his AK-47 flying out of his hands, a bullet taking him out. Before she gave him a look, she saw it was Korsak. Blood was streaming from his chest. He was gasping, his arms flailing. Next to him was Brudin, who was firing. Next to him was Nik. They were all wounded, some more so than herself included.

There Glancing quickly at her right arm, Daria saw blood was running down it and dripping off into the soil. Ignoring it, feeling no pain, Daria knew her firing nerves had been cut or her fingers wouldn't be working so well. She only gripped down on the Glock and kept firing it. She heard movement racing right, but did not look. She sensed that Nik had gotten up and raced for the medical ruck. She knew he was going to try and save Korsak now and the bleeding Russian leader was now gasping like a fish out of water nearby. There was nothing she could do to help him. If she and Brudin continued to fire, the force closing in on their position would overrun them. There wasn't a choice. Her hand bucked again and again.

Powerful Daria sensed Nik drop back down beside her and crouch over her. She saw around a dozen of Valdez's soldiers suddenly halt as orders came back in out in Spanish from somewhere out of sight beyond the curve in the path led into the village. Suddenly, the men turned on their heels and ran, spread out for cover, ducking and weaving every which way from rounds still striking around them, before disappearing around the bend.

He blurry "They're gone!" Brudin snarled, getting to his feet, glaring down the empty path. "Yellow, cowardly bastards!"

Daria stood and turned, seeing the carnage left behind in the wake of the firefight. At her feet, Nik worked frantically to stop the bleeding from Korsak's chest. It was a sucking chest wound through the man's lung and she knew it could kill him. Nik placed a square patch of adhesive fabric

zed she the bullet wound and Korsak stopped gasping as much. Her heart beat  
ere the slow and steady. There, fallen in the midst of the barren land betwe  
d more village and the jungle, lay Rolan Pavlovich and his two guards. None  
moved where they lay crumpled in a heap. Each had been riddled with  
soldiers and through. A lump formed in her throat. She saw Duboff lying on  
, giving near another hut, wounded but alive. Kravec lay unmoving nearby, dead  
mained “Nik? Pavlovich is down,” she managed in a torn whisper.

overrun “They’re dead,” he said in low, guttural tone, focused on Korsak  
herally sorry...”

working a “Are you sure?” she demanded, starting to run toward them, Glock  
He lay hand.

g back. Daria didn’t wait to hear Nik’s grunted rejoinder. She was aware  
others, villagers cautiously peeking out of their huts, their eyes all wide with  
and locked on that bend in the path. Would the drug soldiers come  
down it around it and attack the village again? She didn’t know. Tucking the  
new no into the waist of her jeans, she leaned down over the mafia boss. He  
as she was twisted and he lay on his back, his eyes open and unseeing. He  
t to her protective vest, the red blossoms of four bullet holes stitched across h  
past her and stomach. Swallowing hard, Daria knelt down, and pressed her tre  
κ’s life. fingers against the exposed column of his neck. Flashes of her ov  
beside overrode her eyes and she shut them, feeling no pulse on Pavlovich’  
n didn’t She winced, reopened her eyes, and saw the half-moon birthmark on t  
and kill of it.

He was dead, just as Nik had said.

Korsak. Tears trailing down her dirty cheeks, she went over to the two s  
; roared guards. Both had died of head wounds. Someone in that drug team ha  
ath that either a lucky or damned good shot.

printing Next, she went over to Duboff who was slowly sitting up, gripp  
rapping arm, blood leaking out between his fingers. He stared darkly up at h  
said nothing. Daria saw the question in his eyes as she approached him  
wn the was she really? How did a botanist know how to shoot that well?

“Morozov will be here when he can,” she told him.

e of the Duboff nodded, his gaze following her as she picked up the two  
g from from Pavlovich’s dead guards and slung them over her shoulders. Sh  
ng, and into the hut and dug through the men’s packs, grabbing a heavy leather  
oil over AK-47 magazines out of one of them. They might need these fully

eat was magazines, should Valdez's group decide to come back and finish them off. Glancing warily at the still empty path, she didn't know what to expect from Valdez's soldiers. Would they regroup and then attack again? Through her head, she saw Nik and Brudin working as a team over Korsak. She was sure if the Russian would make it or not.

Walking quickly back over, she positioned herself near them, keeping focus and attention on the path. "Duboff has an arm wound. He's okay. You need your help when you can give it to him."

Nik nodded. "In a minute. Kravec?"

"Dead. So are the two guards with Pavlovich."

Nik nodded, working quickly, rummaging around in his medical supplies.

"Will they come back? Do you know?" she asked Nik in a low voice.

"They might," he grunted. "Brudin, get the sat phone. Make a call to the Russian helo in Aguas Calientes. Get it up here right now. If we don't get Korsak to the Cusco hospital within the next two hours, he's going to die. Brudin, for once, didn't argue with him and got up, jogging quickly toward his hut.

"Nik?"

"Yes?"

She heard the hard, clipped tone in his voice. Her gaze moved around the path's opening in the jungle wall, looking for any movement that could mean a second attack from Valdez's men. "What are we going to do now?"

"Get the hell out of here as soon as possible. Korsak is stable for now. What's Valdez's MO? What is he likely to do next?"

Snorting, Nik growled, "We've taken out twelve of his men. This is the heaviest pitched battle we've had with them in five years. I don't think he wants to waste his soldiers against us again. He's probably gone, but back down that path to a fork that can lead either up to the Highline or further down another jungle trail."

"He won't attack again?"

"No. Highly unlikely."

The men scattered motionless across the ground in front of them. Daria knew that when black ops soldiers got into a battle, they went for head or center-mass shots and they did not miss. And when they were loaded was to kill, not maim or wound. She quickly and thoroughly perused

hem all the soldiers lying like broken rag dolls between them and the jungle w  
expect one of them moved. She would bet they were all dead, but didn't want  
Lifting that risk. She rose slowly to her feet, taking an AK-47 with her along w  
wasn't tucked-in Glock.

"Where are you going?" Nik demanded, suddenly reaching out, g  
ing her her wrist, stopping her.

kay but Daria looked down at Nik. His face was a hard mask, his blue  
pale they almost had no color. "Checking the bodies. I don't want  
them to rise up and shoot one of us in the back later."

He released her. Quickly, he jerked the vest off himself, handing it  
ick. "Put it on?"

ce. Grateful, she nodded, set her weapons down and slipped into the  
l to that large vest. It hung on her much roomier than she was used to, but s  
on't get glad to have it all the same. Daria saw so much in Nik's eyes, but  
lie." nothing else, returning to sliding an IV into Korsak's arm. She  
ly back anguish and worry for her. No one was left unwounded. Nik's face wa  
bloody, and she also saw blood on his left forearm where he'd t  
grazing bullet. As Brudin had limped away, she'd seen blood sp  
slowly down his left calf, staining through his cammos. Her gaze  
slowly Korsak, now unconscious. Picking up the weapons, keeping an eye  
ent that path, silence settled around her. Daria was vaguely aware of the sob  
g to do some women far behind her as she checked every dead soldier th  
and carefully, removing weapons and any identification she could  
ow."

feel the high from the adrenaline that had punched her system into hig  
s is the Somewhere down the road, she knew she'd crash from it. But not right

hink he After making sure all twelve men were dead, she walked silently  
running the path. Taking the AK-47 off her shoulder, she held it at the re  
ands or selector on semi-auto. She saw the muddy imprints of many boots dc  
path as she warily followed it around the bend, not knowing what to

The silence was as heavy as the humidity that drenched her body, dan  
her clothes, making them stick to her. Above her, she heard the plo  
did not plop of water condensing at the highest peaks of the jungle cano  
y went slowly dripping downward from one leaf to another.

fired, it Wanting to make sure Valdez and his men weren't coming back  
each of followed the path for more than half a mile until the point where it

all. NotShe saw a lot of muddy boot imprints leading downward, toward the to takePicchu area. By the time she'd turned back a mile further down th with theprinted trail and returned to the village, lot of the natives had begun to come out of their huts. They had to be scared out of their minds rabbingwondered if any of them were wounded. She saw Brudin kneeling unconscious Korsak, the butt of his AK-47 planted on his thigh, his se eyes soher.

one of "They've left," she told Brudin.

He eyed her, distrust in his expression. Daria could see him to her. questioning who the hell she really was. She carried her own AK-47 against her hip, muzzle up. The position told Brudin a whole lot, overly-looked confused by her. To carry a rifle in that position meant she e: he wastrouble. Only a black ops soldier would know that. And she was supp he saidbe a botanist. Daria wasn't going to fill in the missing pieces for him a felt hissoon. Her gaze dropped to Korsak.

is dirty, "How he is doing?" she demanded of Brudin.

taken a "Stable. Morozov just checked him." Brudin hitched a thumb bel readingshoulder. "He's taking care of Duboff right now."

fell to "What about the rest of the villagers?" she demanded, lifting her ci on thegaze moving across the people standing shaken by the attack.

bing of "I don't know," he grunted. "I don't care."

roughly Daria nodded, seeing Nik working over Duboff, creating a sling find onwounded arm. She was more worried about the villagers and headed uld stillthe chief's house. Placing the AK-47 in the chest harness she'd pic gh gear.from one of the dead security guards, Daria safed it and pointed the : now. downward, meaning she didn't expect an attack. The terror in the eye towardIndians tore at her as she walked through their folds. The children hid ady, itstheir mothers' skirts, eyes huge and afraid. The men were grim. The own thewere badly shaken, some of them still sobbing. She quickly found expect.Vega. He had his arms around his two young sons. Speaking to ppeningSpanish, she asked him if there were casualties.

, plop, He shook his head.

py and That was a miracle in itself, Daria thought, trying to manage a sr the children who clung to her, their thin arms grasping at her hips ar ;, DariaShe grazed her hand across their shining black hair and murmured t forked.that everything was going to be all right. It wasn't. But the children

Machuthat calming support. None of the Indians looked at all well. e boot-understood their fear as never before. There were two major South Ar slowlyfactions warring for the cocaine in Peru's Highlands. Two drug lords: . Dariafrom La Paz, Bolivia, and his nemeses, Marco Suero from Lima, Pe by theruled this region long before the Russians had intruded in on their t owl onfive years earlier. Both were billionaires. Both had raised mercenary to take over the cocaine trade in this region. Until the Russian invas come along. And, according to her brief from Jack Driscoll, these silentlywere always being captured or recaptured. Either by the Latin drug lo plantedin this case, Korsak and his Russian team. Now, the tables had been and heonce again.

pected Daria held the six children who clung to her within her arm osed tounderstood the grip of utter fear that these Indians lived with daily. Th mytimechewed coca leaves before climbs up into the Highlands for centur stop the altitude sickness that always came with such high elevatio now that cocaine was a thing, their whole world had been turned upsid mind hisinto an ongoing nightmare that had no end. As Daria lifted her chin, h fixed on Nik helping Duboff stand and make it over to where Kors hin, herBrudin were recuperating, she felt deeply for the village's endless How any of them had escaped being killed by the massive wave of fired into the area by Valdez's men, she didn't know. One thing fo for hisValdez's soldiers were intent on killing everyone on the Russian team. toward She wondered where Killmer and his men were hiding. Having r ked upand understanding they did not want to reveal themselves to this l muzzleteam, Daria assumed that they had probably faded away into the emb s of thethe jungle, never seen, never detected. Mace and his team were proba behindas surprised by the attack as they had been. Daria didn't know the full womenof the various drug lords' war with each other. She squeezed the chi l Chiefshoulders, murmuring words of comfort, placed a kiss on each of thei him inand urged them to go back to their parents. Turning, she apologized chief and his wife Elisa, asking if they would bury the dead. The ch they would. Daria thanked them and left.

nile for As she walked by Pavlovich, his skin now graying, her heart tu; id legs.her chest. Tears burned in her eyes. Halting, Daria stared down at th o themeyes focused again on the quarter-moon birthmark on the side of hi neededShe felt numb inside, not grief-stricken. And maybe, she supposed, tha

Daria way it should be. Taking out her cell phone, she took a picture of her American and then one of the birthmark. This was a part of her family history and Valdez she wanted it to be or not. A heaviness entered her chest and she tucked her phone away, slowly walking over toward Nik and the remnants of his territory. Brudin looked up at her, his eyes feral. "Who are you?" he growled.

Nik, having just sat Duboff down, lifted his head, his gaze pinned on the villages. "Just a botanist," Daria replied coolly, stepping out in front of the words or, band. She studied the path, never dropping her guard. Valdez could not turn change his mind and come back.

"Like hell you are," Brudin snarled.

Nik got up from Duboff's side, stepped over, and knelt down by Daria. He pulled the stethoscope from around his neck and listened to the heart and lungs in turn.

Daria ignored the shaken Brudin, saying nothing. Her hands were on the downsides, but the Glock was in her waistband, and the AK-47 hung from her chest harness, each ready to use if necessary.

Nik looked at his watch. "That helo should arrive in another five minutes. Let's get the wounded to the tree line over there," and he pointed toward it. "The helo has enough room to land there, just outside the village or sure,

Daria watched Brudin get up. He limped, his mouth tight, eyes burning with rage as he and Nik carried Korsak to the impromptu LZ. The idea, back and Brudin hauled Duboff upright, helping his teammate to his feet. Nik stood, hands on hips, his gaze on Brudin and Duboff in the distance. Turning, he looked over at Daria. "You've got a graze on your arm," he said, his fingers gently moving around the bloody area. "Let me take care of it now?"

His touch was calming. Daria nodded. "Triage! Stat!" and she gave him a lopsided smile.

"Yes," he murmured, helping her sit down next to his ruck. He donned a new pair of latex gloves, producing a bottle of sterile water and a large white gauze pad, quickly cleaning the area around the wound with it. Daria sat positioning herself so that she could keep one eye on the patient, the other on the Russians.

She absorbed Nik's nearness, his quiet, calming strength as he cleaned the wound. It stung and she grimaced, but didn't flinch away from it.



is face, ministrations. "What now?" she asked him in a low voice.

Whether "I'm going to get Korsak to the Cusco hospital. They'll take him  
ked the surgery," he said grimly.

team. "Will he live?"

wled in "I hope so. It's going to be close."

"If he does?" and she lifted her head, studying his blood-speckle  
on her. his features dirty and sweaty.

re little "Then," he rasped, quickly patching up the graze and pla  
always waterproof bandage around her arm, "we have to move quickly. I ne

once we get to the hospital, to peel off and make a call on your sat p

Jack. This is our chance to snatch Korsak right out of that hospita  
Korsak. makes it through surgery. A US Nightstalker medevac helo that I k

man's based down in Lima could get him out of here and into CIA hands. W  
get him to the States. Peru allows the US to have a few military

e at her within their sovereign territory. I know there's a medevac on standb  
om her there because of the Special Forces teams in this area. I'm sure Jack

the CIA to release it to us to fly Korsak out of here and back stateside.

fifteen Daria saw the grim determination in Nik's features and replied,  
pointed lives, and we can get him out of here, Dan and you will have p

lage." asylum." She saw his gaze falter for a moment, saw the wash of er  
blazing clearly in his eyes, his game face slipping. They'd been through so mu

y came Daria recognized the reaction for what it was: adrenaline crash. It exha  
ret. person suddenly, without warning. It allowed all the withheld emot

istance. vomit up like a volcano through them and release. It totaled them phy  
he said, mentally and emotionally, and only a good night's sleep would hel

of you recover their previous strength the next day.

"Yes." He released her arm. "Do you want a sling?"

e him a Shaking her head, she said, "No, I want my hands free and ava

Her voice lowered. "Brudin's suspicious."

anned a "I know he is," Nik agreed wearily, repacking his ruck and closin  
e, clean stood, pulling it over his shoulders. He held his hand out down to her

1 them. took it and he pulled her to her feet.

ath and "What do you think he'll do?" she asked.

"I don't know. He's the wild card." Nik gave her a concerned loo  
leansed maintain our cover."

om his She smiled a little, sliding her arm around his waist for a mom

Daria wanted to do was move into his arms and feel safe. None of that was possible right now. “Well, one thing he does know,” she said with a smile as they began to walk toward the treeline.

“What’s that?”

“That I’m on your side. I wasn’t firing at the Russian team,” and she smiled at him, giving him an enigmatic look, grinning.

Nik gave her a tired grin in return. “Yes, he’ll figure that much out no matter what you do? Once we land at the Cusco hospital? Get away from here, go home, go make that call. I’ll meet you in the ER unit downstairs, after the surgery on that leg of his. He’s probably gotten one of the bones fractured and that means they’ll keep him in the hospital.”

“You and I can leave the hospital,” Daria agreed.

“Duboff will be staying in the hospital as well.” Nik studied her face. “We can use the Russian apartment that Korsak leased. No one else can get there but us. We can talk and make further plans there.” His mouth flared, his eyes growing anxious. “Korsak *has* to survive.”

Daria wanted to hold Nik in that moment, to give him assurance, but she could do neither. “He’ll live. He has you as his medic. You’re the best,” she meant those words as never before. Now that she’d seen Nik in combat, she knew how able he still was to help save lives. This knowledge did nothing but make her love him even more. Starting to climb down off her adrenaline high, too, her emotions rumbled, more on tap.

“God,” he muttered, shaking his head, “I hope so. Everything hangs on Korsak living...”

Daria felt sorry for Nik, saw the angst in his stormy blue eyes, his thick emotions in his lowered voice. How badly she wanted to hold him, to give him a sense of safety he’d never known ever since Dan had been with him. She found his hand, dirty and bloody as it was, and gave it a quick squeeze.

“Look, let’s just take this an hour at a time,” she counseled him, looking into his exhausted gaze. “Together. I’m here for you, Nik.”

He gave her a warm, intense look. “You are so very brave, *moya* Daria. Today, you showed your jaguar side. I watched you in combat. I want to see something I ever want to see again because I feared for your life.” He

hat was out, grazing her cheek briefly. “We have so much to talk with one chuckle about after things calm down and get sorted out.”

Swallowing hard, Daria felt her fierce love for Nik suddenly r flood her chest, making her heart pound with yearning only for him. he gave worried for you, not myself.”

He snorted and gave a rueful shake of his head. “You really are a out. But at heart.”

n all of Daria couldn't say anything else as they walked within earshot erward. Russian team. In the distance, she could hear the thick chopping noi robably helicopter coming their way. Soon, they would be out of here, flying in the and the rest of the wounded team back to Cusco. She stood near Ni

Brudin studied her beneath his drawn brow, his eyes hard with distru was glad she had weapons on her, although, right now, she didn' briefly. Brudin was going to do much of anything. Korsak was his friend and will be been with him for two years, so his main focus was on him, not he attended, Daria did not trust the Russian bastard at all. There were equal meas malevolence, censure and suspicion in the man's eyes, all aimed at but she and Nik.

st,” and Glad that she had the sat phone the Russian team didn't know operate Daria was going to make sure that she was the first one off that l e lives. helicopter once it landed. If Brudin thought he could capture or accost he was his own brand of interrogation, even given his leg wound, she wasn't g aw and allow him the opportunity. She would leave her weapons on board th

To walk even a single step with them on civilized Peruvian soil wa thing... foolhardy. The *policia* would descend upon her and throw her in permanently. She knew the Russians would also leave their weapons ard the once they landed in Cusco. That gave her an opportunity to escape n. Give once and for all. If she never saw his pig-like face again, it would ounded soon. All Daria wanted was to see Korsak live through all of this.

k, firm Stealing a quick glance over at Nik, who monitored Korsak, kne his side, she saw the set of his mouth. His expression was one of worry holding if Korsak didn't make it? What then, for Nik?

*1 kotya.*

It's not reached

out, grazing her cheek briefly. “We have so much to talk with one another about after things calm down and get sorted out.”

Swallowing hard, Daria felt her fierce love for Nik suddenly rise and flood her chest, making her heart pound with yearning only for him. “I was worried for you, not myself.”

He snorted and gave a rueful shake of his head. “You really are a sniper at heart.”

Daria couldn't say anything else as they walked within earshot of the Russian team. In the distance, she could hear the thick chopping noise of a helicopter coming their way. Soon, they would be out of here, flying Korsak and the rest of the wounded team back to Cusco. She stood near Nik while Brudin studied her beneath his drawn brow, his eyes hard with distrust. She was glad she had weapons on her, although, right now, she didn't think Brudin was going to do much of anything. Korsak was his friend and he'd been with him for two years, so his main focus was on him, not her. Still, Daria did not trust the Russian bastard at all. There were equal measures of malevolence, censure and suspicion in the man's eyes, all aimed at herself and Nik.

Glad that she had the sat phone the Russian team didn't know about, Daria was going to make sure that she was the first one off that Russian helicopter once it landed. If Brudin thought he could capture or accost her for his own brand of interrogation, even given his leg wound, she wasn't going to allow him the opportunity. She would leave her weapons on board the helo. To walk even a single step with them on civilized Peruvian soil would be foolhardy. The *policia* would descend upon her and throw her in prison, permanently. She knew the Russians would also leave their weapons behind once they landed in Cusco. That gave her an opportunity to escape Brudin once and for all. If she never saw his pig-like face again, it would be too soon. All Daria wanted was to see Korsak live through all of this.

Stealing a quick glance over at Nik, who monitored Korsak, kneeling at his side, she saw the set of his mouth. His expression was one of worry. What if Korsak didn't make it? What then, for Nik?

## CHAPTER 19

NIK SAT TENSELY in the lobby of the surgical ward. Exhaustion gripped him but his heart, his soul, was focused on Korsak who was presently in surgery under the knife. He heard a noise and looked up. Daria was there; her face unreadable. She was as dirty, bloodied and as grim looking as his. She carried her ruck over her shoulder. The tiredness in her gold-brown eyes was directed at him. He could have lost her out there today. It had been so close...

She sat down near him, placing her ruck on the floor. "Anything you want to ask me?" she asked him quietly.

"No... nothing... too soon. It's going to take hours. I just don't want to dump and his heart stop."

She pushed tendrils of hair back off her face, grimacing from the pain she felt beneath her fingertips. "What about Brudin and Kravec?"

"Both in surgery, too. I found out from the surgery nurse that Brudin has a fractured tibia in his lower leg. Kravec has a torn artery. Both need short surgeries and they'll live, no problem." His mouth flattened and he slowly rubbed his sweaty, dirty face.

"Why don't you go back to the safe house and get cleaned up?" Daria suggested quietly, laying her hand on his shoulder. "I'll stand here for you."

He pulled in a deep breath and his hands fell to his thighs. "First, what was your sat phone call yielded. Did you talk to Jack?"

"Yes. He patched through a call to the CIA and I talked to all of them once. They're just as shaken up by Valdez attacking out of nowhere as we were."

"They shouldn't be," he said grimly, scowling. "It's always been a power game between the Russians and those two Latin drug lords. It's just that Valdez caught us off guard. That's never happened before. The more I think about it, the more I feel that he's been planning this for a while. He never knows where we're going next, either. Wrong place, right time and his soldiers to take us on."

Daria nodded, moving her hand gently across his tight shoulder. She managed to get a hold of Kilmer and his men, too.”

“Bet they were as surprised as we were.”

“Yes. They backed off. But, because they have silencers on their weapons, they were shooting in from back behind the tree line on our left.”

ed him, Nik nodded. “I thought they might. They just needed to stay out of the way.”

n there “Right. And they’re all okay, no injuries.”

er face He studied her as he placed his elbows on his opened thighs. “Did anything change with the CIA regarding Korsak?”

m. She “They want him alive, Nik. I pinned them down on their promise to bring you and Dan, to bring you into the country, giving both of you political asylum.”

yes tore and Dan, to bring you into the country, giving both of you political asylum. Provided Korsak was delivered alive to them. They’re initiating a C-130 flight as soon as we know if Korsak is going to survive. It will take them six hours to reach Lima, Peru. They’ll authorize a Nightstalker or a Black Hawk down there to fly up here to Cusco during the daylight hours to pick up Korsak as soon as he can be moved. If that all goes according to plan, once they have him on US soil, then you and I are going to take a flight to Lima on a commercial jet and go home.” Daria gave him a searching look.

at?” she “I know,” she said softly, seeking and holding his worried gaze. I’ll watch you any good to stay here. Go get cleaned up? Come back, and then we’ll go over to the apartment and do the same.”

ant him Black Hawk down there to fly up here to Cusco during the daylight hours to pick up Korsak as soon as he can be moved. If that all goes according to plan, once they have him on US soil, then you and I are going to take a flight to Lima on a commercial jet and go home.” Daria gave him a searching look.

grit she “I know,” she said softly, seeking and holding his worried gaze. I’ll watch you any good to stay here. Go get cleaned up? Come back, and then we’ll go over to the apartment and do the same.”

din has her hand coming to rest on his broken shoulder. “Home.”

ould be Shaking his head, Nik muttered darkly, “So much could go wrong here. I could be stuck down here if Korsak dies on the surgery table.”

and he “I know,” she said softly, seeking and holding his worried gaze. I’ll watch you any good to stay here. Go get cleaned up? Come back, and then we’ll go over to the apartment and do the same.”

then?” “I know,” she said softly, seeking and holding his worried gaze. I’ll watch you any good to stay here. Go get cleaned up? Come back, and then we’ll go over to the apartment and do the same.”

l watch “I know,” she said softly, seeking and holding his worried gaze. I’ll watch you any good to stay here. Go get cleaned up? Come back, and then we’ll go over to the apartment and do the same.”

tell me Stiffly, he rose and offered his hand to her. “Come here,” he said, pulling her into the circle of his open arms.

them at. Daria rose just as stiffly, her joints starting to lock up on her. She stepped into the circle of his open arms.

as we Nik groaned as she fitted herself against him, her head resting on his shoulder, her strong arms enclosing his waist. His future dangled in the scales of the precarious balance he’d worked years for to build. Korsak was on a surgery table fighting for his life. He nuzzled Daria’s neck, inhaling her scent, kissing her softly here and there. “How are you doing? How does your relative gunned down in front of you?” He felt her quiver and knew she had to be tearing her up inside. Daria had certainly not envisioned a day like this for a relative.

a chess his time more I vile. He for him, had to be tearing her up inside. Daria had certainly not envisioned a day like this for a relative.

lers. “I “I’m numb right now,” she muffled against his neck. “Exhausted you. It’s going to take me... weeks... months... years... to sort out Pa and the fact that we’re on the same family tree.”

n their He held her tightly, his chin resting against her mussed, dusty behalf.”know... I know, *moya kotya*. But I’m here for you. All right?” and h sight.”her away from him just enough to study her darkened gold eyes swi with tears.

s. “Has Daria wasn’t numb. She was struggling with so much internally a knew this wasn’t the place or time to let it all out. She needed to cry.

to you Nik wanted to be the one who held her and soothed her while she asylum,her way through all this unexpected shock and grief. He knew she w 130 Aircry now. He’d seen her in action during the recent fire and knew s ill takecapable of brutally crushing her emotions in order to meet the end ob edevacIn this case, he understood she was being brave for *him*. He was walk urs andedge of the sword. His whole life was up for grabs. And Nik had no to plan,which side of the blade he was going to land. He saw all of his t downturnmoil understood in, underlying, the expression in her eyes as she st ig look,his own.

“Thank you for being here,” Daria whispered, leaning upward, her , Daria.finding his.

The moment her lips slid across his, inducing warmth, chasing av Movingicy fear in his gut, Nik groaned, and his mouth crushed down on h t doingwanted to impart so much in that kiss with Daria. She could have d . I’ll gothere today. That destabilized him in equal part, as Dan not hav received the medical help he deserved. Daria had stolen his heart ickly. gently, and now the fierce love he felt for her blossomed throughout hi steppedmouth opened eagerly beneath his, alive, denying the death they dodged today. Her very breath affirmed life. That special spicy scent on hissimplly her infused him with hope against the brutal reality that dog on theheels. And, when Daria moved her hips against his, the fire that had sak wasbarely smoldering coals within him, flared to life in his lower body. ling herDaria was like getting an IV infusing him with life against his death s aving ahere in Peru. He was so grateful she was in his life. There was so muc 7 that ither, to share with Daria, but this wasn’t the time or place to do it.

ug lord Reluctantly, he parted from her mouth, staring down into her ex eyes. “The apartment is nearby,” he rasped, sliding his fingers acr

ed, likedusty cheek. "I'll be back as soon as possible..."  
vlovich

THE CHANGE IN Nik upon his return was like night and day to Daria. He was clean and shaven, his hair combed, and was wearing a set of ivory slacks and a red polo shirt that showed off his well-sprung chest. He looked better to her as she penetrated his garments with her sniper's gaze, finding nothing. Standing, she met him at the door.

and she "No change. No one's come out to say anything about Korsak. They brought out Brudin and he's in recovery right now. The nurse said he's doing fine, but he will be kept here for two days under observation."

couldn't Nik halted, cupping her jaw, placing a light kiss on her brow. "Kravec?"

jective. "Already out and in recovery, too. He's going to be here for three days before they release him."

idea on "Good," he murmured, his gaze centered on her. "All good news."

internal "Yeah," she muttered, taking his hand, kissing and releasing it. "I searched about Korsak, but the surgery nurse said they were still working on him."

"She's not going to tell you anything," Nik murmured. He picked up his ruck, settling it on her shoulders. Handing her a piece of paper, he said, "This is the safe house. The digital combination for the front door and the back door to the apartment are here."

ers. He "Okay," she said, "I'll be back as soon as possible." Daria wanted to remain in contact with Nik, but knew she couldn't. The light burning in his blue eyes, the care, the love he held for her, was clearly there despite his fatigue. And it was love and Daria knew it. She gripped his hand, squeezing them. "I'll be back..."

'd both She found the three-story ivory stucco apartment building four blocks from the hospital. It was early evening, quitting time in Cusco, and the streets were jammed with cars trying to get home. Square plazas, all busy with people, lined the streets, intermingled throughout the ancient pre-Inca city. Daria was worried over the potential spies Valdez could have in Cusco. Did they know about the Russian's safe house in the city? She wasn't about to disclose it to anyone. She missed her firearms, and wished she still had them on her person.

knife in her ruck was her only defense should they find her and try to kill her. Daria's senses were on full sniper alert, taking nothing for granted. She was exhausted, but she would not let anything happen to her.



for granted.

She worried over Nik at the hospital. If Valdez and his men had him there, they could go after him, too. There was no safe ground right now. Her mind gyrated back and forth between her mafia relative's recent actions and the outcome of Nik's dilemma with Korsak, balanced as it was between a thin blade of a scalpel, and his brother Dan's future, bound by fate to the hands of that scalpel-wielding surgeon. How badly she ached for Nik to come home to the US. She wanted him in Alexandria, Virginia, with her. She loved him, but her heart felt squeezed by an invisible fist, twisted, and the pain was almost unbearable. Somehow, she had to stuff all her escaping energy into a box and slam the lid shut. As she crossed a busy street, the sound of a gasoline exhaust in the air, the sun sending orange shafts through the windows of a metropolis of buildings as it slanted in the west, Daria forced herself to remain alert.

She had just changed into some dry, clean clothes, a set of jeans, a white t-shirt, and a black jacket, when her sat phone rang. Hurrying to her ruck on the table, she punched the button, seeing that the call was from Jack Driscoll. "We just got word Korsak is going to make it," he told her. Jagged relief plunged through Daria. "Thank, God," she whispered, her hands tightening around the sat phone. She sat down in a chair. "How do you find out?"

"Got an undercover mole in the hospital," was all he said. "Nik was told shortly by the surgery nurse."

Grinning, she said, "What next?"

"The CIA is initiating that C-130 to fly down two days from now. In the meantime, we want you and Nik to play guard dog for Korsak. We don't want Valdez at all. We're sure he and the other drug lord, Suero, have set up shop in Cusco. You're going to have to stand guard in shifts. I've already coordinated with the *policia* and they are going to provide protection as well, but for all we know, they aren't someone I'd trust with my grandmother, much less with someone like Korsak in the mix. There's too much graft and corruption in the system here, and I wouldn't be surprised if Valdez and Suero had their own moles in the police department."

"I agree," she said grimly. "What about the CIA giving Nik and anyone else political asylum? Have you heard anything on that front, Jack?"

"Yeah, the State Department is moving on it right now. When I know more, I'll let you know."

call you.”

“What if Korsak suddenly dies?”

“I talked to a woman at the State Department who’s tasked with bringing Dan out of Ukraine to the US. I asked her the same question. She said on the green light on this, that Dan is going to be on a US flight out of Ukraine tonight, Virginia time, regardless if Korsak dies in transit or not.”

She swallowed; her voice suddenly emotional. “Seriously? They’re willing to give Nik and Dan what they want even if Korsak suddenly goes belly up?”

“Yes. The woman said that Nik has been exemplary in his position as a mole. He’s gotten Kilmer and his men a lot of valuable intel over the past few years. It’s a go, Daria. And,” he chuckled a little, “given your relationship, I think there’s a little something between you and this medic?”

She placed her hand over her eyes, shutting them, pushing back tears. “Yes... just a little.”

“You know,” Jack said, irony in his tone, “Alex said it would happen.”

“What would happen?”

“That you’d fall in love with Nik. He said it was inevitable. That’s the kind of man any woman in her right mind would fall for.”

She managed a choked laugh, wiping tears from her eyes. “You’re extraordinary, Jack. One of a kind.”

“Well, if he’s Alex’s stature, then I want to speak to him about a job offer. I’ll be behind him on a job with us.”

She frowned. “He’s really exhausted, Jack. This undercover work has torn him apart. It’s been five years of unrelenting pressure and hell on wheels. In the mean time, I don’t know what he’ll do or say to you about a job offer. Please don’t trust me to push him right away on that angle? He needs serious decompression first.”

“Well, I kinda thought, given the circumstances, he could come and live with you, live with you at your place and rest up. And, when he feels better, if he’s interested in Shield Security, we might talk. I could use a Peruvian in our planning section. He’d do well there.”

Daria knew Nik had his eyes set on getting his paramedic license in the US. “We’ll see,” was all she’d say.

“Listen, I’ll be in touch as things fall into place. Don’t let down Danguard. Valdez and Suero have spies in that city. The *policia* in Cusco has been sent approvals by our State Department, asking that you and I be fully armed while you provide security for Korsak. They’ve given

permission and the Assistant Chief of Police will give you the identification and approval by the President of Peru to open carry while you are traveling through this country.”

she has “That is such good news. I was worried about that. I’m going off to Kyiv, now, as soon as we check out, to meet with Nik.”

ot.” “Yes, tell him everything. Are you okay?”

he going “I’m fine. Don’t worry, I’ll stay on top of things. And we’ll work around-the-clock guard schedule regarding Korsak. We’re not leaving on as *apolicia* to guard him. No way.”

last two

ction, I A CIA REPRESENTATIVE, Jeffrey Luminos, was already in the mix when she walked into the surgery lobby. She saw the Peruvian case officer smiling with Nik. It made her smile a little to herself as Nik sensed her presence and stopped the conversation, and he walked over to her.

en.” “Korsak is going to make it,” he told her, gripping her hand, smiling with relief.

that Nik is “I know,” and she quickly explained some of Jack’s call to him.

that Nik looked ten years younger was an understatement. Before, he had been a turgid blue, shadowed and filled with anxiety. Now, they glowed with undeniable joy and Daria smiled with him. The tension he had been offering carried dissolved away, his shoulders thrown back and proud once more. The weight this man had carried on his shoulders was something no one could ever imagine. But Daria knew it.

1 him. I “Luminos,” Nik said, turning toward the case officer, “is paving the way for us. He’s already spoken to hospital officials. The Assistant Police Chief was here earlier and handed us our identification badges, paperwork, and home approval to open carry. We’re going to be granted a pistol each on our trip, like it, while we stand guard over Korsak’s room, so we’re in good stead with the country’s laws.”

“Wonderful,” Daria said, shaking the case officer’s hand as she continued to look aside at Nik. “How are you doing?”

Nik grinned tiredly. “Right now, I feel numb inside, Daria. I’m afraid it isn’t real. That I’m imagining all of it.”

to have “You’ve been dreaming of this moment for the last five years, Nik,” he offered him gently, with a sympathetic look. There were shadows beneath their

eyes, and his skin stretched tautly across his high cheekbones, telling her in the toll this had taken.

“And now that it’s here,” and he shrugged, “it doesn’t really matter right now, Kitten.” He leaned down, kissing her cheek. “Only you feel me.”

“It will slowly sink into you, Nik. You need time to decompress. I’ll be out anon, introduce me to this case officer? I need to be brought up to speed. I’ll be there in five minutes.” Daria listened intently to the forty-year-old Peruvian CIA contact who actually turned out to be an American citizen, born in the USA, and had been assigned to work in Peru, his parents’ home country. Luminos was a disciplined and organized man. They sat huddled together at one end of the waiting room, speaking in English in quiet tones. Luminos was going to continue on and coordinate everything further, now that their operational approval was official. He’d already slipped them pistols, a Glock 19 and a Glock 17, which they both hid down the back of their waistbands, along with magazines filled with bullets which they stowed away in their rucksacks. To say already felt safer just having the pistol on her. He gave them his cell number. Right now, he wanted them to use the CIA safe house in the city. Like her, Luminos didn’t trust the Russian safe house, thinking it had already been compromised by Valdez or Suero’s local spies. He gave them the key card and intel on the other safe house, telling them to go there and sleep, clean up and eat.

A nurse came into the lobby, calling for Nik. He excused himself and rose, walking over to the petite Peruvian nurse in her white uniform.

Daria turned to Luminos. “Does Korsak know what’s going to happen to him yet?”

“No, but I’ll be the one who lets him know. Right now, he’s coming out from under anesthesia and is in recovery. I’m going down there right now. I’ll remain with him. I want you two to decide who’s standing watch first. I’ll want you conversing with Korsak. You’re to stay outside his room at all times. I’ll be the one to answer his questions.”

“Will he even know we’re there?”

“Not if I can help it. I’ve got the hospital staff up on that floor and brought up to speed. They know he’s a political prisoner of the USA and that’s all. And that you and Nik are the USA security guards at the main door. The *policia* will also be sending men.”

g her of “What if the Cusco *policia* are moles? What if Suero or Valc bought them off?” She saw the man’s face grow tight.

y seem “It’s up to you two to always be on guard when they send over an real toto stand guard with you. I couldn’t get the *policia* to back down on th police chief knows what is going on. Him, I trust. But I don’t trust t . Comeunder him. Too much graft and corruption.”

” Daria grimaced. “A way of life in Central and South Americ act. Heafraid.”

ad been “Yes,” he grunted, getting up. He smoothed his dark blue pinstripe sharp,with his hand. “Here comes Nik. Fill him in? I need to get down e lobbyKorsak.”

oing to Daria nodded, watching Luminos stride out of the waiting room n carryowned the place. Clearly, he was a case officer with a lot of powe 8 each,disposal. She was grateful the CIA had sent someone like him to coc h threeeverything. Right now, all she wanted to do was get the hell out of Do s. Darialong as they were in Peru, Suero or Valdez could reach out and taq l phoneWorse, infiltrate the hospital and kill Korsak. She held Nik’s gaze he city.walked over and sat down next to her.

t could “What did the nurse want?”

them a “Just to bring me up to speed,” he murmured. “Korsak’s coming to live,recovery in about twenty minutes. His vitals are stable, thank God.”

She reached out, sliding her fingers down his bare arm. His r elf andresponded beneath her fingertips and she wanted to just hold Nik, giv safe place for once. “He’s tough.”

ppen to “He’s Spetsnaz,” Nik agreed quietly, opening his fingers, entanglir with hers. “You look beautiful, did you know that?” Her hair was dr ing outcovering her shoulders like a cape. “I wish... I wish we were anywh now tohere right now.”

I don’t “Makes two of us,” she agreed, watching the entrance out of habit.

n at all “Listen,” he said, holding her gaze, “when this is over? When Ko safely taken to the US? What are your plans, Daria? I need to know.”

She warmed beneath his intense, burning look. “When you’re f alreadywith the State Department, I’d like you to drive to Alexandria, Vir 5A, butwant you to stay with me, Nik. At my home.” Her heart beat a little h Korsak’s her chest. “Would you?” Never had Daria wanted anything more. She

“Alex and Lauren live nearby. About five miles away from me. I kno

lez hasis dying to see you again. Hug you. Make lots of good, hearty Ukrainian food to put all that lost weight back on you,” and she smiled a little, seeing the officer come to his eyes.

is. The For five years, Nik had been starved emotionally and spiritually. He knew the toll that could take on a person. She'd been out on ops for more than six months, alone in a rugged desert, without the things in her life she needed to sustain her soul. She understood better than anyone that Nik was starving on empty emotionally. His soul was dying a little at a time. She wanted to be a jacketlike life-giving water and sustain Nik on every level, bringing him back to the real world of the living. Back to a normal existence.

“I'd like that very much,” he told her, his voice thick with feeling. Daria didn't want to talk about Jack's job offer. She knew Nik wanted to get into the medical field. It was where his heart and soul resided. “It would give you a chance to decompress. Alex is like a big brother to me. As I think between him and Lauren, eating good Ukrainian food and hugging them, your real home, you'll recover more quickly.”

He lifted his hand, sliding his finger across the slope of her cheek. “I want, Daria, is you. Everything else is less important to me. I do love you like a brother. We have saved one another's lives many times over throughout our lives here. But my heart is focused on us. On you. I know we haven't had enough time to properly get to know one another. I have so many questions, so many conversations I want to have with you, Daria.”

She closed her eyes, resting her cheek in his opened palm, his hand squeezing with so much love for this man that she couldn't speak. She felt his mouth on her other cheek, grazing her flesh, making her breasts ache for his knowing touch, her lower body flaring with desire but remembering the ecstasy he'd given her already. And would again. Closing

her eyes, she lifted her cheek from his palm and held his narrowed, intense gaze. “Yes, I want the same thing. We'll sort things out over time, Nik. Your plane will be flown to the U.S., to Colorado Springs. That's where the neurosurgeon and his technical team are located. We're going to be finished by then. Your focus will be on him, where it needs to be, after he arrives. He's in Virginia. I've been to the U.S., and Dan's going to need a personal support team. You'll be in Alex's company. Good friends.”

“That's all true,” he murmured, holding her gaze, “I was told by Lauren earlier that the State Department has already put things in motion to

an foodDan to Colorado. Until then, I will be decompressing with you at your  
ing hopeI'm coming home to you, Daria. We *WILL* spend quality time to

Kitten, that's a promise. I will devote my time and love to Dan, but  
Dariaequally important to me, to my heart..."

three to The words, *I love you*, nearly tore from her lips. Daria saw the road  
neededof them, saw the responsibilities once more, heaped upon Nik's shoulders  
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your bed, holding you, loving you, Kitten. And I will hold you after we  
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oul lay. "And laugh," Daria reminded him, her lips hitching upward. "The  
to you.will be gone, Nik. We'll be safe, finally. It's going to be a whole  
aving awonderful world for you and I."

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Dan to Colorado. Until then, I will be decompressing with you at your home. I'm coming home to you, Daria. We *WILL* spend quality time together, Kitten, that's a promise. I will devote my time and love to Dan, but you are equally important to me, to my heart..."

The words, *I love you*, nearly tore from her lips. Daria saw the road ahead of them, saw the responsibilities once more, heaped upon Nik's shoulders as he cared for his brother daily once he arrived in Colorado. "We'll find the time."

He caressed her hair, smoothing some strands into place, "Oh," he promised her huskily, "no matter what I do during the day, at night? I am in your bed, holding you, loving you, Kitten. And I will hold you afterward and we will talk."

"And laugh," Daria reminded him, her lips hitching upward. "The danger will be gone, Nik. We'll be safe, finally. It's going to be a whole new, wonderful world for you and I."



## CHAPTER 20

UPON THE COUPLE'S landing at Reagan International Airport, the immediately took Nik away to question him. Daria had been pulled as driven to her home outside of Alexandria, Virginia, by another CIA. Nik went through three days of long hours giving the CIA the information wanted from him. He'd been isolated at a posh D.C. hotel, although he had a daily connection with Daria by ZOOM on his laptop. Afterward, he'd rented a car and had driven up to Daria's place.

He parked the rental outside her two-story cabin hidden out in the woods and she met him at the gate of its white picket fence. The strong scent of dried pine needles entered his flaring nostrils as he allowed her to tug at his hand as she pulled the gate open, beckoning, pulling him down the path into her home. She was wearing a pair of white shorts and a red and white sleeveless top that outlined her breasts. Her black hair swung loosely around her shoulders, shining, making him hunger for her as never before. Even better, she was barefoot! Truly, she looked the wild female jaguar.

Even though his gaze was centered on her, as a black ops soldier he automatically began to absorb his surroundings. There was a profusion of colorful flowers, poppies, yellow Black-Eyed Susan's and purple Cone Flowers ranged along the length inside the picket fence, their heads waving slowly in the humid mid-summer breeze. The cabin stood towering over them, its picket fence shining a dull gold in the sunlight. The grass was neatly cut and enclosed on three sides of the home. He liked the porch that wrapped around it, with two rocking chairs on the deck. Nik wondered if Daria sat out there sometimes to watch the sun come up in the east. He'd like to be beside her and share it with her if she did.

"Are you tired?" Daria asked, releasing his hand and closing the door behind him.

"Part of me is. Other parts aren't," and he saw her give him a look, her gaze drifting downward. Yes, he had an erection. He'd dreamed of being here with her. *Coming home.*

“I can see that,” Daria murmured, giving him a mischievous look. “You thirsty?”

He allowed his black ruck to slide off his shoulder and drop on the butterscotch leather couch and followed her into the L-shaped kitchen. “For you,” he didn’t say it.

“A beer?”

Nik shook his head. “No, water is fine,” he said, following her to the kitchen sink, his eyes never leaving her shapely legs. Only when Daria turned and he saw the angry, puckered scars of the knife wounds on her left hand did some of his ardor dissolve. She had suffered greatly, in so many ways he’d had, just as he had.

As she pulled a glass from the cupboard, he looked around. There was an open-concept layout, the kitchen and living room large and flowing into one another. He liked the sparseness of the area, neat and clean. There was a butterscotch-color leather couch and two overstuffed burnt-umber colored chairs with a large crimson and gold cedar coffee table as a centerpiece between the whole ensemble. In another corner was a high-back chair with a quilted pillow on its seat. The red brick fireplace against the northern side of the cabin completed it. There was a homey warmth to the place. He could feel it and he started realizing they were safe. Really safe, no interruptions by Brudin. No staying on guard twenty-four hours a day. He felt as if he were a snake shedding the heavy, armored skin he’d had for so long. The lamps on the end tables were antique, Eighteenth Century. He liked that Daria had created rooms that reflected her taste, not mindless lazy, out of some must-have home interior magazine. It was a hodgepodge of furniture, but most importantly, it was inviting and a metaphor-like comfort embraced his exhausted spirit that fed him in the best of ways. He liked that she’d picked some of the wildflowers from around her fence and placed them in a bright red glass vase on the round, oak table that sat at one end of the area.

“Your home is as beautiful as you are,” he murmured.

“Thanks. It has taken me nearly three years to get it decorated,” she glanced at him and said, “Not that I’m a designer. I wanted furniture that reflected me when I can get some downtime between missions.”

“I can see that. I like it,” and he met her gaze, feeling his entire body relax from tiredness to anticipation. Nik saw her wanting him, felt it in his

k. “Areand had never wanted anything more than Daria.

“I love rocking chairs, as you can see,” and she placed the glass on the spigot.

hen. “I “You are a woman who is always in motion,” he teased, “either mind or physically speaking.”

“You’re right, I am,” Daria assured him, handing the glass of water to the him. She rested her hips against the counter, studying him as he turned thirstily, his Adam’s apple bobbing repeatedly.

Wiping his mouth, Nik set the glass on the swirled red, brown and gray ways, granite counter. The cupboards were made of cherry wood, darker than pine logs, a reddish hint tinging the beautifully crafted wood. He reached

the cabinsliding his fingers through her hair, “It’s done, Daria. I’m officially flowing the U.S. Dan will arrive a week from now. He already has his medication. Therein place and the State Department is going to handle everything for him.

She nodded, giving him a caring look as she leaned into his arms, exploring through her hair, her scalp leaping with pleasure. “You’ve got me rockingrelieved.” She moved away from the counter and into his arms, resting her hands against his chest. “Korsak is talking?”

“Yes, to both questions. The CIA is very pleased. He’s angling for Witness Protection, asking to stay in America and getting a new name. Nik knows the Russian mafia will try and find him and hunt him down to where doesn’t. They may, anyway. I don’t really care if that monster lives or dies.

She moved her fingers across the expanse of the gray t-shirt he wore, micked an outsider, Nik would probably look like a young man in his late twenties or early thirties, and might be mistaken for a fitness consultant. She could feel the thick biceps move beneath the material of his sleeves and she wanted to touch his body, absorb him, and capture him deep within her mind. It had been nearly five days since parting from the Lima airport in Peru that she had been in physical contact with one another.

She lifted her gaze, seeing the joy banked up in his eyes. The change in Nik were stunning. The stress around his eyes and mouth were gone. “I feel like I’m finally free of a five year past he’d carried like a millstone around his neck.”

She slid her fingers slowly across the material of his shirt, feeling his muscles tense beneath her grazing, exploring touch.

“The people at the State Department have been very forthcoming

told her, hope in his deep voice as he slid his fingers through her hair, enjoying the sensation of its cool silkiness against them. “Dan will be coming to the USA. There had been a last-minute red tape issue, and it has taken longer than either of us wanted. They are going to call me and let me know specifics when everything is in place. The team in Colorado is alert and expecting him. And, because this ongoing brain sync takes months, the Defense Department has leased him an apartment nearby. He will be kept busy, but they said he would have a lot of free time to do what he wants and gold, within the limits of the TBI issues. I will fly out to be with him for a while, longer than the other two, and then come home to you. I want to make sure he’s doing well and that he knows we’re close and will help in any way we can here he recovers.”

She smiled a little. “That’s wonderful. And yes, we’ll be there to support him, for sure. You look so much younger right now, Nik. I’ve got to touch your fingers because that green hell marathon is over?”

He dragged in a deep breath, resting against the counter, allowing her to lean up against him, their hips meeting, melting hotly against one another. He moved thick strands of hair across her proud shoulders. “Yes.” And she gave him a wry look. “I haven’t looked at myself lately in any mirrors, Nik. My mind... heart... were on getting through the mass of paperwork, running interviews, and making sure Dan would be allowed into this country, and he doesn’t die.” He leaned down, taking her mouth gently, his lips barely against hers, “dreaming of the day that I would be right here with you in my arms, touching you, kissing you...,” and he nudged her lips open more, feeling them bloom under his tongue. He saw her beneath his with barely constrained eagerness. He could feel Daria trying to control herself for his sake. She wanted to give him time to come down from the demands on his time, the intense briefings that would last hours of their time. The truth was, he needed to be here, with her. He needed to hear her voice, feel her tender touch, absorb the joy shining in her wide, flawless eyes for him alone.

His face Her mouth opened like the petals of a fragrant orchid beneath his caress. He was Her hair swirled around his face, her arms locking behind his neck, she pressed herself wantonly against him, her hips sensuous, sliding tentacles against him. Nik groaned, taking her mouth with primal hunger, his head exploding as he tasted her and smelled that spicy female scent of honey. “He drove me crazy.”

se hair, Tearing his mouth from hers, breathing unsteadily, Nik picked her e flownhis arms in one smooth, unbroken motion. “Guide me to your bedrocs taken growled thickly, already carrying her across the living room toward t e know Society and niceties be damned. He wanted his woman more than he ted and oxygen to breath. Daria gave him a sultry smile filled with promise, h ie Statesettling around his shoulders, relaxing fully in his embrace.

isy to a “Second door on the left, and the door is already open,” she sa vants to voice wispy. “Welcome home, Nik. That is *OUR* bedroom from now o a week Nik’s whole world centered on Daria. He barely noticed the heav all right brocade drapes open at the large window, the outside air flowing in b 1 as he their flutterings, giving the room a woodsy scent. He could smell it skin and hair as well. Taking her over to the king-sized bed of red a support cedar, he deposited her on the dark green bedspread, watching how l ink it’s haloed out around her head and across the pillow.

“I need you,” he rasped, unbuckling his belt, unsnapping his jea g her to gaze locked on hers.

her. He “I need you more.” She nodded and sat up, pulling her red t then here revealing that she wore no bra.

Kitten. Heat shot through his throbbing lower body as he watched her ed tape, beautiful breasts revealed. He smiled.

nd,” he “I like that you don’t wear a bra.” Nik divested himself of his eaming jeans, and boxer shorts. He saw Daria stare appreciatively at his erecti ig you, eyes were heavy-lidden, filled with arousal, lips parting as if she coul d n hotly wait to savor him.

ying to “I hate bras,” she muttered, laying down, lifting her legs and pul n from her shorts.

urs at a As he hauled the gray t-shirt off his head, his eyes widened consid ear her “You’re not even wearing... panties...” and he chuckled, shaking hi ss gold “Don’t tell me you wore neither down in Peru?” He rolled on a condor

Daria gave him a playful pout and knelt in the center of the bed oaxing. only because I had to. From now on? You’ll just have to keep my secr as she don’t wear a bra or panties, generally speaking.”

asingly He felt his erection throb in celebration of that reply as he joined sense the bed, matching her wicked grin. “I was right after all,” he said ers that laying down and bringing her beside him. “You are more wild jagu human. I like that.”

up into “And you,” Daria whispered, dragging her nipples through the hair on his chest, pushing her hips against his erection, “are more jagged than the hall. I’ve always known that about you,” she whispered, framing his cheeks. She wanted her hand, looking deep into his eyes, suddenly serious. “We never have armstime to really know one another, Nik. Starting right now, that changes.

“Alex texted me. He wants to meet me today, but I told him I’d be here sometime tomorrow would do, instead.” He skimmed her flank, running his fingers across her hip, bringing his strength to bear, silently asking her to give him a goldnestle hotly against him.

Between Daria whispered back, “He and Lauren are coming over for dinner on her tomorrow night at seven. We have the rest of this day and all of tonight and gold with no interruptions. Let’s make the most of it...”

Her hair He gave her a feral smile, drowning in her half-closed eyes. “You’re leaving this bed,” he growled. Her lips lifted, amusement in her eyes. He ran his hands, his smoothed her hand across his chest, appreciation in her gaze.

“Check that one. I’m starving for you and I want you now. I’m not kidding off, ready...”

In some ways, Nik felt as if he were in an unfolding vision he’d dreamed of so small, so many times while away from Daria. They’d spent hours on Zoom, talking and learning so much about one another when he had to work with them in his boots, but in his dreams at night? She was in his arms and he was exploring her on. Here as he was doing right now, his lips caressing her tight nipples, slipping his hand hardly around that curved flesh, hearing a sharp intake of her breath, her press urgently against his hips, wanting him, wanting the pleasure he knew he would give her.

The languid warmth of the afternoon and the semi-darkness of the bedroom surrounded him along with her aphrodisiac-like scent, coating his head with the subtle woodland fragrances drifting through the nearby window. Nik moved his hand downward across her rounded belly, feeling her tense as his fingers moved across those black curls, sliding downward, testing her open, testing her, seeing if she was ready. And she was, his fingers touching her slickness, the scent touching his nostrils, making him growl at her on animal need. As he stroked her folds and entrance, she quivered in his thickly, soft sounds emitting from her throat, letting him know she liked what he was doing. He was going to do so much more. Capturing the nipple, he pulled her strongly, easing a finger into her entrance. Daria tensed, her hips thrusting

r across upward, wanting more of his lavish, teasing touch. He felt that swollen man awash with her thick fluids and knew without a doubt that she was more than ready.

got the He became lost, wrapped within her scent, the soft curves of her body. He focused on her. More than anything, Nik wanted Daria to come from him that knew that a month without having her would make it incredibly tempting to lose his control himself as completely as he might want. Her body was damp, tight, and turning as he eased a second finger within her, sliding deeper, finding that second spot within her that was so connected with that budding entrance. She gave a sharpened cry, her back arching upward, her head hitting Nik, digging into his shoulder as he teased that inner flesh of hers, feeling it begin to constrict around him. Taking his lips to her other nipple, and when he wasn't rasping his teeth against it, she suddenly cried out, her entire body tensing as she pressed against him. He smiled, continuing to stroke that sweet spot with his fingers, feeling her entire tunnel contract tightly around his fingers. Her cries were more than hoarse, her fingers opening and closing frantically against his shoulder as her orgasm burst through her like an overflowing dam.

reamed Daria pressed her face against the column of Nik's strong neck, still talking and clinging to him as he continued to milk her sensitive body, trusting her heart swelled with love for her as he felt the convulsions seizing around her just from his fingers over and over again. His chest flooded with such joy that he was almost wishing his heart might truly die from happiness. The sweet, gasping sounds tearing from between her lips was music, bathing his heart and his soul. This was the sure she utterly trusted him. Without question. She had already put her life on the line for him, protecting him in that firefight. There was never any question of the Nik's mind that Daria didn't love him just as fiercely as he loved her. Combined this afternoon, he was going to show her just how much he did. She opened a living feast, a beautiful banquet before him, sweet, ripe, and ready to be felt here, eaten, savored and worshipped by him.

, easing  
; coated DARIA FLOATED BETWEEN heaven and unknown, colorful galaxies around her that she saw behind the lids of her closed eyes. Her body was glowing, satiated. Nik held her in his arms, his long, hard body curving protectively around hers, holding her in the aftermath of their second round of suckled making. The clock read four p.m. Sex with Nik was mind blowing and trusting

len budShe had never had a lover as skilled as he was. And he was more thanwelcoming of her wild woman ways and needs, smiling, urging her pleasure herself with his body. To say they were sensual and earthy today, aswas an understatement. Her body hummed with a level of satisfaction first. Henever known.

ough to His skin was still damp as he lay with her in his arms, his long, hawistingacross hers, holding her flush against his hips. Daria could feel him be findingharder, longer, her belly resting against his erection. And she smiled, at herher fingers against his powerful neck and broad shoulders in the aft fingersNik was still breathing raggedly, his heart pounding beneath her paining herhand moved in a caressing gesture across her shoulder and down h lightlyspine, memorizing her. She nuzzled against his neck and jaw, placinguckingkisses along it, hearing a low growl of satisfaction in his chest in her,reverberated through her. Everything about this man was pure, unadorned as werepleasure. And they'd only just begun to explore the sexual landscape as theone another. Daria was glad he was remaining here, with her, to decide what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

obbing, Nik eased her onto her back. Daria gazed up at him. His hair, a dim. Hismilitary short, was mussed and she smiled, sliding her fingers through und hisstrands, taming them back into place. She saw the stormy look in his thoughtknowing Nik was aroused once more. So was she as his fingers slid ting outhet wet, slick folds, gently teasing her entrance once more. "Who' womanhungry?" she asked, her voice husky, her hand stilling against his the linewatching that predatory look come to his eyes as he felt how wet sensation inbecome once more.

r. And, "Mating heat between two jaguars," he growled, stroking that but e was amore. "Did you know they mate for life?"

y to be "Mmmm... whatever we have between us... I like it... don't Nik..."

and herNIK SLOWLY AWOKE, aware of Daria in his arms, her body against his ing andtime was it? He barely lifted his head, looking at the clock on the ectivelyopposite the bed where they lay tangled against one another. It was ni of love-They had fallen asleep in one another's arms. Delicious, stolen hours for her.each other. His body was utterly sated and he greedily absorbed Daria



re than him, her breasts pressed against his chest, her arm languid and relaxed  
r on to his torso, her one leg crossed over his. She was sleeping deeply and  
ogether there cherishing this moment with her as the full moon sent shafts of  
n it had around the edges and the opening of the curtains at the window.

Nik inhaled her sexual fragrance, the scent of her skin, and felt the  
airy legsilk of her hair against his neck and shoulder. He loved this woman  
coming life. They'd been through so much in such a short, concentrated and  
sliding time. There was no question she loved him even though neither had  
ermath. the words to one another... yet. Nik felt he knew Daria well enough  
lm. His understand why she hadn't. They'd known each other less than three  
er long Both of them were mature and knew the value of waiting. As he  
ng soft grazed her shoulder, feeling the cool velvet of her flesh beneath  
st that fingertips, he was more than content to wait. They had silently shown  
lterated another through their love making that they did, indeed, cherish one  
pe with Daria had already given him her heart, her body and her beautiful  
rest, to Russian and Mongol soul.

The joy that filtered through his heart were feelings he had never  
lthough possible. This woman had walked into his life a stranger, on a misadventure  
h those contact. And she'd sat down in that church next to him and he'd  
is eyes, whole life altering in those brief minutes she'd spent with him. He  
through amazed and stunned by that singular event. Nik had never thought  
s more ever meet a woman that he would feel like this about. Daria's  
cheek, soul, fed his starving heart, sent him spinning into unparalleled  
she had with her just being herself. He knew this was love. *Real love*. Unquantifiable  
unmeasurable because their hearts would have the time now to lead  
id once explore one another fully and completely. His hand curled protectively  
around her shoulder as he felt his way through all of the bright, glowing  
't stop, feelings now quietly consuming him.

Daria stirred, made a happy sound in her throat, stretching languidly  
against him, nuzzling him. He opened his eyes, staring up at the dark  
s. What white plaster ceiling, enjoying her awakening beside him. A smile  
dresser across his mouth as he felt her hand move languidly across his chest  
ne p.m. as if silently delighting in touching him with such intimacy. Slowly  
rs with propped himself up on his elbow, watching her awaken, her eyes bare  
against their gold depths drowsy and cloudy. His mouth stretched in welcome  
lifted his hand, easing the curtain of hair away that had fallen across his

l acrossso he could see her expression fully. She was like a mysterious, bl  
l he layorchid whose petals were shyly opening before him. Nik once more t  
of lighthe was in some incredible dream that he never wanted to end.

“When I first met you, *moya kotya*,” he began in a low, dark ton  
he coolshook my world apart. I didn’t know what to think about you. All I c  
with hiswhen you sat down next to me in church, was feel emotions I never  
ount ofhad until you awakened them with your nearness.” He saw her eyes v  
spokenlittle, a bit more of awareness in them as he spoke in Ukrainian to h  
ugh tovoice was gravely with remnants of sleep. “For whatever reason, you  
nonths.me from the beginning. I could feel it, Daria,” and he brushed his  
lightlyacross her pink cheek, savoring her growing more and more aware c  
ath hishere together, the sleep slowly dissolving from the depths of those g  
wn onejaguar-gold eyes of hers. “I felt like a man starving in a desert until yo  
mother.and fed me the richness of your love, from your heart. You fed me i  
il, fierythat I’m going to share with you from now on. I want to show you i  
and large ways how much you mean to me, Daria. I never realized ju  
thoughtstarved and dying I was until you entered my life. That five-year nig  
sion. Aof being with that drug team, had taken me down.”

felt his She sighed softly and caught his hand, taking it and nestling it b  
vas stillher breasts, studying him in the lulling silence. “You carried your bro  
at he’dyour shoulders for those five years, darling. It was one of the first t  
ned hisrealized about you, the many loads you wore on these broad shoul  
ppinessyours. I know you don’t see yourself, Nik, your strength, your heart a  
tifiable,for Dan. You were more than willing to sacrifice yourself for him l  
isurelyyou loved him. I know he didn’t ask that of you. You willingly gave it  
activelybecause he is your brother. It says something so incredible about y  
glowingwarrior, that it leaves me breathless just thinking about what  
accomplished.” Daria brought his hand to her hip, released it and s  
nguidlyfingers through his hair, watching his eyes change, grow darker with a  
rkenedwith wanting her again.

drifted “You were worth pursuing, Nik. And I didn’t go down to Peru w  
nd ribs,thought of a relationship with you. It just happened.” Daria cares  
vly, hecheek, the stubble making her fingertips tingle. “You walked into r  
y open,and I’m forever grateful...”

ie as he He took her hand, placing a wet kiss in her palm. “I’m not the o  
ier facecarrying wounds, Kitten. You have your own, and I want to help to he

beautiful as you're healing mine."

felt like She relaxed in Nik's arms, content to be devoured by his warm, gaze that embraced her in the quiet of their bedroom. Somewhere outside, "you opened window, Daria heard an owl in the darkness, hooting, a count could do perhaps to their deep, searching and offered heart thoughts they were knew I with one another. Nothing was more important to Daria than this.

widen a Nik was vulnerable with her, open, without ego or defense. Her pier. His hungered for such honest talk, bathing her with the intimacy that he trusted nothing but grow stronger and deeper with every minute spent with the thumb Her warrior. Her wounded soldier. Her heart. The deepest scars Nik of them were mostly invisible, the ones that really counted. And Daria could glorify them.

you came "We're both wounded and shattered in different ways," she in ways agreed, stroking his jaw, allowing her fingers to trail down his neck in small nape. "We have all the time in the world now, Nik. I don't waste how anywhere but living here with me. We've earned the time to get to know each other fully, without danger surrounding us."

"I agree," he growled, kissing her parting lips, her nose and the bridge between brow. "But what do you want, my beautiful jaguar mate?"

other on She frowned and then shook her head. "My life changed when I met you, Nik. I didn't know it was going to be like this at the time, but I see that now."

orders of "Your leg?" and he reached down, caressing the puckered wounds and love "You still have healing to do. You shouldn't be going out on another mission because Daria."

to him "I hear you and I don't disagree." She slowly eased out of his embrace, sitting up, crossing her legs, remaining in physical contact with you've "You've shown me things I've never had before, Nik and I want... to digest all of them. I want to appreciate all of you, in every arousal, don't want to be running off around the world on another mission right now."

Her brows fell and she said, "I'm twenty-nine years old. My body has taken a lot of physical stress and punishment as a sniper over the years. Meeting you has made me realize what I want out of my life. Every day of my life, think of having to leave you here and take off on an op, my heart crumpled in my chest, Nik. It cries. I want to cry." Daria gave him a pleading look. "Maybe I'm in love for the first time in my life and I never knew what it was until I met you?"

His heart leapt from her softly spoken words. Giving her an adoring, loving rasp, “I didn’t know what love was until I met you, my sweet side the woman. I really didn’t.”

Daria reached out, stroking his torso, feeling each rib beneath her fingertips. “I think we’re both asking for time alone and at home with another?”

“Yes, and frankly? I’m glad you won’t go out on another mission, and done Nik gazed into her half-closed eyes. “Perhaps we have earned the right to have a life with one another, instead? Happiness has eluded both of us. Perhaps it’s our turn to have it now? With one another?” And he carried his lower lip with his thumb, watching her gold eyes grow dark with need.

To be wanted, to be loved were two things he never thought he would quietly ever have in this lifetime. His had been a life of sacrifice, not largesse. She caught his hand, slowly opening it with her fingers, kissing his calloused palm, her gaze never leaving his as she did so. Lifting his hand away, folding his large hand between her own two smaller ones.

“I love you Nik. I did from the beginning. I tried to tell you when I was crazy. That it couldn’t be so. How could I fall in love with a stranger I didn’t know? And yet, as I sat next to you in church, there was such a wealth of feelings exploding from my heart toward you that it left me

breathless, my mind blown by what was going on between us. I had never before gently felt anything like I was feeling, but the emotions, the sensations, the mission, swept through me, dragging me along and I couldn’t fight it.” Daria gave

a rueful look. “The truth? I didn’t want to fight it, Nik. I didn’t know I would embrace what was at first, but I wanted to find out. I was sexually drawn to you by him. question. But there was so much, much more and we were in a hurry in a kitchen where it was impossible to explore what we had.”

“I felt the same way, *moya kotya*,” and Nik shook his head, giving her a “I don’t know what to do now.” look of wonder. “What I want to do now that I’m here? I want to explore what nobody has universities and colleges in Virginia, and find the best paramedic programs they have available. Once I accomplish that, I’m going to go for three years as a physician’s assistant. I can have my own office; patients and I can be a couple. I know I’m a good combat medic, but now, I want to turn my back on the war and look toward a peaceful landscape. I will always want to help people, especially those who are suffering, and ease their pain. It’s who I am.”

She whispered Nik’s name, rising to her knees and sliding her hands

ing look, around his shoulders, holding him tightly against herself. “That is the  
: jaguar fell in love with,” she whispered brokenly against his ear. “Don  
change, Nik. You are healing me, too, whether you know it or not.”

ath her He rasped Daria’s name, taking and easing her on top of him as  
with one down on his back. He felt her softness, her body giving here and there  
his, felt the heat explode where their hips met and fused naturally with  
Daria.” another. Daria gripped him with her woman’s strength, her brow against  
right to jaw, clinging to him in the best of ways, as if trying to absorb him fully  
of us herself. It was a stunning, beautiful feeling and he savored it, his hand  
used her moving up and down her strong, capable back. He could feel how tight  
of him firm her body was beneath his exploring fingers. He absorbed her  
light he’d moist breath against his neck and chest, celebrating how well they  
another, like lost pieces that had finally been found, fitted back together  
ing his come home to one another.

her lips “We,” he told her huskily against her hair, “are going to have a be  
es, she blossoming life with one another, my woman. We’ll have ups and downs  
myself I sure. But we’ll have one another and that is more than most people can  
anger I blessed to have in a lifetime.”

1 a rich  
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er arms

around his shoulders, holding him tightly against herself. “That is the man I fell in love with,” she whispered brokenly against his ear. “Don’t ever change, Nik. You are healing me, too, whether you know it or not.”

He rasped Daria’s name, taking and easing her on top of him as he laid down on his back. He felt her softness, her body giving here and there against his, felt the heat explode where their hips met and fused naturally with one another. Daria gripped him with her woman’s strength, her brow against his jaw, clinging to him in the best of ways, as if trying to absorb him fully into herself. It was a stunning, beautiful feeling and he savored it, his hand slowly moving up and down her strong, capable back. He could feel how tight and firm her body was beneath his exploring fingers. He absorbed her warm, moist breath against his neck and chest, celebrating how well they fit one another, like lost pieces that had finally been found, fitted back together and come home to one another.

“We,” he told her huskily against her hair, “are going to have a beautiful, blossoming life with one another, my woman. We’ll have ups and downs, I’m sure. But we’ll have one another and that is more than most people are ever blessed to have in a lifetime.”

## CHAPTER 21

**T**HE FOLLOWING EVENING, Daria felt tears stinging her eyes as she stood beside Lauren Parker-Kazak as Alex surged through the opened door and bear-hugged his dear friend, Nik. She quickly wiped the tears from her face as Lauren drew a few steps closer, smiling.

“This is a meeting that’s been a long time coming,” Lauren told Daria, sliding her arm around her shoulders.

Daria hugged her sniper instructor friend. “Nik was so excited seeing Alex once more,” and she watched the two men in the hall. They were speaking in Ukrainian, their voices thick with emotion. Alex Kazak worked for three years with Nik in the same Russian drug team in Peru. Alex was the size of a massive Ukrainian bear, six foot three inches tall, heavily muscled, with black hair and hazel eyes. In comparison, Nik was six foot one and a lot leaner. Ropy-muscled. When Alex threw his arms around his boyhood friend, the medic just about disappeared within his thick branch arms. They slapped each other heartily on the back, repeatedly hugging one another.

Daria saw tears streaming down Alex’s face. Nik’s expression was similar to her. She could only see his heaving back, indicating a similar reaction. Tears leaked from her own eyes. Lauren gave her a soft look, wiping away, too.

The sum of emotions pouring out of them all was palpable and wonderful. Daria absorbed the ecstatic happiness that embraced all of them. More important was that the two men could cry in one another’s arms. Deep sobs filled the hall. Her heart clenched as she watched the two embrace, each head bowed against the other, their shoulders shaking. Hardened soldiers become emotional through their mutual trust in one another, allowing that awful backlog of grief and horror pour out, emptying Daria’s soul. Daria didn’t know many American soldiers or Marines who would display such in front of anyone. But these two friends, who had survived so much anguish and danger together – and survived it, could and did.

were real men in her eyes. Real men cried. It was such an important their healing individually, and for each other. They'd seen too much. they'd never forget. Daria and, she was sure, Lauren knew just ge offload the emotions, even though the images of horror would never b was a huge, healing step in each of their lives.

There were no dry eyes in the hall, or in the living room and Dari. to hold Nik as she heard the animal-like sobs ripping out of him. Al him, patted him on the back, his face ravaged with pain, tears for his friend glistening in runnels unashamedly down his cheeks. Daria hop someday she could hold Nik when he was hurting like this. The bond with Alex was special and she understood that and felt so glad that here for his partner of so many years.

Nik had endured two more years of hell than Alex had. Daria kr concern Alex had always held about Nik being on the front lines as mole, always worried he'd be found out by Korsak, and then slowly t to death. She'd seen the distress in Alex's eyes often and knew intuiti was thinking about his friend who was laying his life on the line injured brother every day, without rest.

Finally, the men broke apart, gave each other silly grins as they wi last of the tears from their faces.

"Welcome home, brother," Alex rumbled, gripping Nik's shoul giving it a good shake. "It is about time."

Nik gave him a strained smile, gripping Alex's meaty shoulde "Yes, more than due time. I'm just glad it's over." He turned toward and Lauren. His gaze centered on the woman he loved. Seeing her fa her eyes dark with emotion, he released Alex's shoulder and walked her, taking her gently into his arms, kissing her hair, holding her again He saw Lauren move around him and walk over to her husband, con him as well.

"It's all right," Nik rasped against Daria's hair. "This is a happy n Seeing Tears of joy. Okay?" and he eased her back to hold her glistening ga held so much love for him in its depths. He saw her wet lips part, th one trembling slightly, as she raised her hand to cup his cheek.

"We're crying for both of you," she whispered unsteadily, trying to but failing. "It's wonderful to see men being able to hold one anothe go, and cry."



part of His mouth stretched ruefully. “We are brothers in spirit, *moya koty* Things has saved my life so many times...”

ting to “And you have saved my sorry ass, too,” Alex growled, his arm e gone, Lauren as he moved, bringing her with him to stand before the other c

Nik nodded; his expression serious. “It’s over, Alex. That’s all a ached about. Dan will be coming to the US in about six days. He’ll be fre ex held he’s already scheduled for that brain scan technique.”

closest Clapping him on the back, Alex said, “Come, it is time to cele ed that have been cooking for two days straight, wanting to give you a good, he had meal that will make you think of our farm life in Ukraine.” He looked he was Lauren, his face growing tender with love for his wife. “Shall we b bring in the banquet?”

ew the Lauren grinned. “Yeah, let’s haul in that food. I’m hungry.”

a CIA “Let me help?” Daria asked, her arm around Nik’s waist.

ortured “No, no,” Alex said, waving his hand at them. “All you need do is vely etable for four people. Lauren and I have this.”

for his Daria gave Nik a warm look. He looked ravaged and relieved surface of his expression, but so many other emotions surfaced from l ped their. “We can do that.” She tugged at his waist. “Come on,” she coaxed giving him a tender smile. Daria didn’t feel like eating, and she was s

der and probably wanted to wait, but he would put himself out for his beloved Alex Kazak. The closeness of their bond was beautiful to behold, an r back. was so glad that Nik had Alex to talk to. No one could understa d Daria pressure, the terror and suffering he’d gone through more than Alex. ce wet, shared them those unrelenting hellish years together. She was grate over to life had given each of them another chance after a time of such da 1st him. time where the knife-edged balance of life-and-death had swirled rele rforting around them daily.

Daria watched Nik begin to recover throughout their evening me eeting. laughter, the spattering of Ukrainian mixed with English, the jok ize that stories that Alex and Nik told, had them all laughing. Lauren e lower understand Ukrainian, so they would stop and translate for her when

The meal they ate was huge but, to Daria’s surprise, she was hungri o smile, she had thought at first. Nik seemed to recover fully, eager to sup the l er let it soup. Alex knew Nik’s tastes and had been in the kitchen preparin courses for him for days. Lauren helped as a sous chef while Alex, wh

a. Alex true chef at heart, had made this wonderful meal of Beef Stroganoff, salad and yeast-risen rolls that they were all eagerly consuming.

around Lauren and Daria removed the dishes afterward. Alex had made a couple of honey Babka, a sweet, moist apple cake with a cream cheese top. I care Lauren placed it on the table. Daria made them thick, strong Ukrainian. And coffee. Once they were all seated back at the table, cups full, everyone in to taste the luscious dessert.

brate. I “So?” Alex said in English to Nik, “Will you meet Dan in Chicago, hearty Springs, when they fly him in from Ukraine?”

over at “Yes, I will.”

egin to “I’m going too,” Daria said, holding his gaze.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Nik told her, giving her a warning.

“The CIA will want to debrief him at some point?” Alex asked.

“After his initial round of brain syncing. Whenever the red tape is set the worked through.”

“The CIA will be happy to speak with him at length.”

on the “I know,” Nik sighed. “I’m working with the State Department to get beneath that to another time, giving him time to recuperate. His TBI affected gently, speech and thought patterns, and the CIA realizes that until, or even before Nik cutting-edge technique works, they aren’t going to have a friendly communication between them,” Nik said, spooning the dessert into Daria’s mouth.

and the Alex raised his eyebrows. “What shape is Dan in, Nik?”

They’d “He’s mobile and he has no problem walking. It’s his speech centerful that brain that was affected. When he speaks, he’ll hesitate mid-sentence longer. Amight take him thirty seconds to finish it. At least his speech is coherentlessly has a beginning, middle and end. I talked with one of the technicians morning and he felt Dan had a chance at nearly full recovery.”

al. The “I remember,” Alex said, “that Dan was Spetsnaz like you. A medic and medic.”

didn’t “Yes, he was, Alex. And he was a super soldier. He’s earned all kinds of medals for bravery. He had a reputation in the ranks as one of the fiercer than medics. He used his field surgeon skills continuously, and he saved soldiers’ lives.”

g these Lauren asked, “Do you think if this technique is successful that Dan would want to go back into the military in some capacity? Or does he want to stay out?”

, potato remain a civilian?”

Shrugging, Nik said, “I don’t know. I don’t know much of what is in his heart and mind. I’m hoping he will want to remain in medicine in the long term, but we’ll see.”

“Well,” Alex said, smiling a little over at Nik, “you will find out soon enough. Once he finishes the brain sync sessions, will you get him back to Virginia? What is your plan?”

Nik looked across the table at Daria. “We’ve talked it over, and I think it’s all right with Dan taking up residence in the spare bedroom of her home at least, short-termed. I’m sure Dan will need some adjustment time, but we want to give it to him. The CIA is willing to lease him an apartment on a short-term basis close by where they’ll debrief him. I’m not sure what the best place for him is right now. I feel he’ll need some downtime just to get his life together and get used to American ways of living. Daria and I could give him family support and stability if he stayed with us. Good luck, love, care and guidance.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” Alex agreed. He grinned. “And we’ll schedule his plan on all of you coming over for dinner at least once a week for some time, if this, solid Ukrainian food.”

Daria smiled, her heart singing with so many good emotions. She noticed how the stormy look in Nik’s gaze was dissolving. His eyes were rimmed and she knew how much that crying had taken out of him. In any way, it was healing because he was starting to discharge that fear in his backlog of trauma, getting all that darkness out of himself. All she wanted and it did right now was hold her brave warrior who had paid such a terrible price for his brother. Dan, she was sure, would never know the extent of Nik’s efforts. She was also sure Nik would never speak of them to him either, not wanting his brother to feel any guilt over his sacrifices.

“Are you okay with Dan being here?” Lauren asked her.

Daria cleaned her plate and placed it aside with the fork. “Yes. Dan and his friends will use the house and us as kind of a launch pad. Nik is in touch with the best neurologist who is going to perform the brain syncing sessions with him. He’s asking where the best place is here in Virginia, for where his long-term recovery should be located, because Dan is going to need that kind of support when he gets here at first.”

“Good to know this,” Alex agreed, giving Nik a look of pride. “I

families stick together like glue.”

“Come here,” Nik rasped, pulling Daria into his arms after they had showered together. He gathered her into his arms, pulling up the sheet over her waists as they lay naked against one another. He kissed her forehead and then her cheeks here and there. Alex and Lauren had left two hours earlier at nine p.m., giving them time to themselves. He heard Daria sigh softly as her lips pressed against his neck, brow resting against his jaw as he lay down behind her on his back.

“What a day,” Daria whispered, moving her hand across his chest and up his torso until her palm rested over his heart. “How are you doing?” His mouth quirked as he stared up at the darkened ceiling. Only the light from a small night light in the hall flowed weakly through their open doorway. “I feel ravaged inside, like someone has clawed my guts apart.”

Her arm around his torso tightened. “That’s what I thought.”  
“Couldn’t be helped, Kitten. I knew meeting Alex was going to bring up a lot of old, stored emotions.”

“I’m glad you two could cry with one another. That was so important, it’s healing for both of you.”

“Maybe, as combat medics, we understood it was healing to cry out pain and terror.” He moved his fingers across her upper arm, still wrapped around her. “Too many soldiers learn to deal with pain alone, where no one can hear them.”

“Having Alex is healing for both of you, going forward, Nik. I know people from Ukraine are a lot smarter than their Russian counterparts?”

“Yes,” he said in a hushed tone, kissing her temple, “but having Alex on my side is more important.”

“I want to hold you when you want to cry, Nik.”

His heart twinged and he slowly rolled onto his side, holding her close. “You will, I promise,” he choked. “But I want to hold you, too, Daria. You have much stored from that time in Afghanistan when you were wounded.” He trailed his finger across her forehead, pushing strands of hair aside. Looking deeply into her wounded eyes, he said, “I love you. You must know that by now. I know time will mature our relationship with one another, but as I sat there at the table and saw how much grief you held, I didn’t want one more day to go by without letting you know how I feel about you.” He kissed her brow, i

her scent, allowing it to stir his lower body to vibrant life once again. He couldn't be around Daria and not want to make slow, delicious love to their wild, natural woman. He saw tears glimmer in her eyes as he spoke, still words to her. Felt a surge of powerful emotions radiate from her to him. "I love you, too, Nik," Daria whispered, her voice low and urgent, her searching his gaze. She touched his lower lip with her fingers, her own mustering a faint smile. "Like you, I was going to wait, too. But this evening when Alex held you so tightly, the love between you so strong, unbreakable, I just knew that I couldn't keep it from you any longer, either?" "We're so much alike, Kitten," and he leaned over, caressing her lips. He felt her response, her arms wrapping around his neck, drawing him closer. "Upon her. The streak of fire where her nipples brushed his chest, her opening eagerly to his, her scent unraveling him, told him of her love in unspoken ways. Nik languished against her lips, tasting her fully, their tongues moving against one another, heightening the throbbing erection now pressing insistently against her belly. Never had he loved so much. It loved this woman who bravely opened her heart fully to him. Daria didn't demand anything upon him, was content to be given what he could, and asked for nothing more. Slowly, kissing each corner of her mouth, he eased away, her head up, drowning in her starlit gaze that caressed him. "You are my life, my heart and soul, Daria. Never question that."

She nodded, tenderly stroking his cheek. "There's so much hope for us, Nik. A lifetime filled with happiness, good things instead of suffering. The past is behind you now."

He laid down on his back, urging her up against his side once more. She laid her head on his chest and contentment flowed powerfully through her.

"I'm mulling over what we talked about at the table tonight. When she suggested instead of me going for a paramedic's license, to get serious and betake the years to become a P.A., a physician's assistant. That is one step below a medical doctor here in the USA. If I could pass and get that under my belt, then I could bring in a far better income than as a paramedic."

She smoothed her hand across his chest, the heavy thud of his heart beneath her palm. "It's a good idea. Alex has studied the US medical system earlier. He knows just how skilled you are. And I think he's right that you go by already far beyond the paramedic level right now."

"We are taught combat field surgery, Kitten. We are both very

ain. He trained. Most medical doctors cannot perform battlefield surgery and  
e to his their patient survive.”

e those “How do you feel about working under a doctor’s direction once  
1. your PA’s license?”

isteady, Shrugging, he said, “I think I would like that a lot. I love children,  
briefly, have. I was thinking of perhaps applying to a woman doctor w  
vening, pediatrician, and seeing if she needed a PA’s help. I know that possi  
ng and at least two years away, but it is the direction I would like to take.” Ni  
ither.” His head to the right, catching a glimpse of her gaze up at him. “I hav  
ps. Nik hundred thousand dollars in a Bermuda bank account. Three-h  
1 down thousand of it is for Dan’s recovery. I have two-hundred thousand  
mouth know I can support us with that, plus pay my university costs to be  
for him PA.”

deeply, “I’m bringing in good money, also, Nik.”

in his He frowned, looking deep into her half-closed eyes as she conti  
d as he stroked his flesh with her fingertips. His skin skittered and tighten  
ade no pleasure wherever her fingers drifted across his chest. “We need to tal  
ked for you.”

ay from Daria eased away from him, her head coming to rest on his upp  
ife, my fingers still on his torso. “My full recovery, by any chance?”

“Yes, that first,” he murmured, propping himself up on his elb  
in front palm of his free hand ranging slowly up and down the curves of her to  
o much and thigh. “I want you to get a different doctor. I want to be part of  
what he or she will say about those four wounds. I want to cont  
re. She massage that area nightly.”

gh him. “I can do that,” she said. “When I go to see Jack tomorrow, I have  
n Alex discuss with him, Nik.” Daria’s brow moved downward for a momen  
ous and considered her next words. “I talked to Lauren. I asked her how sh  
ie run running the sniper school at Shield Security, instead of being out on o  
license, said she was ready to stop being a sniper, that she loved Alex, and she  
to be home to have a life with him.” She searched his rugged featu  
s heart eyes narrowing as she spoke. “I’ve made a decision, Nik. I’m going in  
system, my boss, Gage, that I’m no longer available for missions.”

you’re “Thank God,” he uttered, caressing her cheek. “I was going to talk  
about that, Daria.”

highly “I’m already there,” she assured him quietly. “You made me reali

id have much trauma I have over that op when Melissa was murdered. I need  
and I need some therapy help. I'll work with our shrink at Shield but  
you get she's a trusted person, a woman, and I think I'll be able to open up to  
lot more than to a man." And then she said, "With the exception  
always Beloved. I feel like you will hold me when I start falling apart from  
no is emotions that I'm still holding inside myself over that busted op."

bility is Nik's voice grew low with emotion. "I will ALWAYS hold you,  
k rolled You can come to me as a safe harbor in your life at any moment of any  
ve five-will always protect you, my Kitten."

undred "I know that." She sighed. "I'm hoping that Jack will be okay with  
l left. I decision. Lauren said she needs two more sniper teachers because the  
come a course has become so popular that she must hire other field-expe  
people to help her with the growing program. Foreign countries with  
democratic, are sending their people over to get this training. I'm hopi  
nued to will let me make a lateral move over to Lauren's school and then I can  
ed with what I know, be safe, and come home every night to you." Daria reac  
k about lightly touching his full lower lip. "I love you, Nik. I don't want to  
apart from you. I want my life bound daily with yours."

er arm, "Sweet words, my Kitten," he said, nodding and remaining silent  
"We've earned this time together, you and I." He picked up a few str  
ow, the her dark, shining hair.

rso, hip "I want to continue my therapy," she agreed, her voice scratchy. "I  
hearing a lot to work through. If Jack will approve my lateral move, and I believe  
inue to will, then I'll have your love to hold me on bad days after I get done with

hour's worth of therapy. I can come home, talk with you, cry, and if necessary  
a lot to you'll hold me." Daria gave him a searching look, seeking his approval  
t as she

"I'll do so much more than that," Nik promised her, his voice ragged  
ie liked draw feelings and understanding. "I will listen closely. And if you ever  
ps. She scream, I will listen to those cries from your wounded soul, *moya koty*  
wanted I'll always be there to hold you. No matter what." He kissed her forehead  
res, his lips lingering against her temple, and then trailing down the slope  
n to tell cheek. "But I worry," he admitted, lifting his head, holding her tender

"I worry that if Dan stays with us and you are feeling raw, that it will  
to you against you."

"I don't know," Daria admitted. "We don't know what shape Dan  
ze how emotionally, either, so it's a big unknown. A question mark for all of us."

ed timenow.”

because “My protectiveness is extended to you first, Daria. I want to give you a place where you can heal, not be upset by the intrusion of my brother. I want you to feel safe when you come home because I know how vulnerable you will be feeling, my Kitten.”

“But he needs a place to feel safe too, Nik. Remember, he’s coming from a foreign country he doesn’t know anything about except what he’s heard every day. He doesn’t speak good English and that makes communication hard for him. I really think we need to give him our home, our hearts, for a little while so he at least gets his feet under himself.”

“We’ll see,” Nik murmured. “You are my first priority in my life. If you have a better plan, then we will go that direction. I just want to protect you and the home that you love so much, to be a place of healing and safety for me.”

Daria made a soft sound in her throat as she leaned into Nik, claiming his mouth. As she finished the kiss, she whispered, “We have so much to be torn forward to.”

“Then,” he grated, his lips near her ear, “at some point, my woman, I will talk of marriage because it is on my mind and in my heart. I want to know if the time is right? I will come to you with a set of rings, Daria. All you need to do is tell me when and I will ask for your hand, your heart...”

She nuzzled him, her lips resting against his, feeling his love flow through her like warm honey, wrapping sweetly around her heart, and then he moved downward, enclosing her aching lower body that wanted him so badly now. “We’re going to live together, explore one another, Nik. We’ve waited a long time, and finally our dreams have collided with one another. And yes, I need to let you know. I need to get through some serious healing first, and I want to know I’ll be ready to look forward with you. Until then, I need to continue to work through my past.”

“I know you do, and I’m here to support you every step of the way,” he promised, taking her mouth gently, absorbing her into his soul and his yearning heart that opened with her love for him.

ll work

## THE END

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us right

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*Territory.*

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## Excerpt from Hostile Territory

**M**ACE KILLMER REMAINED hidden just inside the Highlands tree line for the Night Stalker Black Hawk helo bearing his new sniper, to arrive *year, new sniper*. They were in the dry season of Peru and even at thousand feet, it was cold an hour before sunset. A hundred yards either side of his position were his other two special forces sergeants, M4's with M16's in their chambers, watching and keeping an eye out for Volkov and his team of killers. They had run hard through the jungle, climbing from lowland to highland, from thousand feet to the present elevation, keeping the local Russian team at a safe distance. Volkov had no idea they were in the area, stalking the Killmer wanted to keep it that way. Still, he was uneasy with the ex-Soviet Russian who was known as The Butcher. The Russian team had five men, a Spetsnaz soldier in it. His team only had three.

It was always a cat-and-mouse game that Killmer had to play with the Russian mafia drug teams. A radio call came in and he pressed the mic, letting the pilot know he was in position at the correct GPS in order to land. His gray gaze swept out in the open area. To his right sat La Paloma village, a mile away. He saw the men slowly moving around in that clearing, getting ready to end the day's work. Thin wisps of smoke rose from the fires with kettles beneath them, the thatched hut village surrounding the forest. The smoke from the fires spiraled into the air, moving down toward the valley at an altitude far below them.

He heard the thunking of the blades of the Black Hawk. Lifting his binocular spotter scope, he saw the dark green, unmarked Black Hawk, climbing the steep face of the Highlands. The altitude they flew in made it tough on the helicopter machine. Restless, he stood up, remaining hidden for the most part, behind the wide trunk of a hundred foot tree towering above him. The light was getting better. He and his men had cleared the landing area of any loose rocks and twigs so they wouldn't be swooped up by the blades as the Hawk landed.

His CIA handler, Tad Jorgensen, had spoken highly of the sniper. He was a former Army Special Forces, that was coming in to assist them in finding and

Volkov. He snorted. The last damned sniper sent down to them woman. Lauren Parker had promptly gotten herself kidnapped by which threw their entire team into chaos. Instead of going after Petrov now needed to search and find her before Petrov killed her. Luck managed to locate and rescue her and Nik Morozov, who helped her

waiting Rubbing his stubbled jaw, Killmer scowled heavily. He'd told his har  
re. New wanted no more women snipers. He didn't give a damn how good the  
eleven One was fucking enough for a lifetime.

er side The Black Hawk became more and more sharpened and crisp look  
bullets closer it go to where they were located. Mace called his men, lettin  
is band know the Hawk was landing. The sniper on board had orders to clear t  
t seven and head directly into the tree line. There was no way Mace and his m  
am at a going to stroll out in the open. Not with Russian mafia teams aroun  
m, and they knew without any doubt, that the Army Special Forces teams v  
petsnaz the ground, in their back yard and hunting their asses. They we  
ive ex-watchful, more so than usual.

Mace slipped his M4 off his shoulder, snapping off the safety, ho  
h these tensely, his gaze ranging widely. He wanted no surprises when this  
c once, landed. He needed that damned sniper alive and hungry for a kill. He v  
to land, the Hawk lower quickly, the Night Stalker pilots bringing the bird  
loma, a They were most vulnerable at take-off and landing, so it was going  
village, swift egress. He'd been told by his handler that S. Chastain was a  
tripods Corps trained sniper. That was good. They were the best trained in the  
od area. Bar none. He might be Army, but he would at least acknowledged the  
e lower Corps did SOME things right. And well.

The gusts of out flow wind as the Black Hawk's nose came u  
ing his ninety-mile an hour gusts in all directions. Mace told the helo to lar  
; up the copilot acknowledged his order and he saw the nose level out, the  
on the wheels touching the earth. Huge clouds of dust rose around the bird  
behind crouched, rifle in place, watching to the right and left, like his me  
ght was doing. They were responsible to keep that Black Hawk and the pilots s  
e rocks The noise was deafening, the whine of the engines on top  
landed. helicopter familiar to Mace. He couldn't see the bird land because  
er from swallowed up in the thick, roiling dust that was lifting twenty to thi  
killing skyward into the sky. The puncturing of the blades buffeted his body  
leaned into the side of a tree for balance, so it wouldn't send him ass e

was a tea kettle. It had happened more than once.

Petrov, The copilot notified him that the passenger has egressed and the  
iv, they now lifting off. Mace rogered the radio transmission. The Black Hawk  
ily, the straight up like an arrow shot out of a bow. It banked and then slid down  
escape. the side of the harsh, rugged cliff face where they had come from. Ma  
idler hea breath of relief, standing to his full height, watching the clouds  
y were. intently. Any moment, that sniper would appear out of the dust.

His gray eyes narrowed as he saw someone with a rifle in one hand  
ing the heavy ruck on their back, trotting out of the billowing dust. He saw t  
g them legs, the cammos the sniper wore, his face and shoulders hidden  
he helo roiling clouds. He was pleased the dude was humping his gear wi  
en were problem, heading straight for where Mace was standing. As the fig  
id. And clear of most of the dust, Mace's black brows dove downward. **WT**  
were one eyes stung and watered from the dust being sent like a storm into t  
re very line. Wiping his watering eyes, he blinked several times. He HAI  
seeing things!

lding it Mace's mouth dropped open. He promptly snapped it shut, rage tu  
; Hawk through him. The figure materializing out of the dust was a wom  
atched clearly saw her face, those long black braids she wore down the fron  
in fast. cammie jacket. She was tall and medium boned, her shoulders wi  
to be a capable. She was carrying her ruck which he knew easily weighed  
Marine sixty pounds. She was in good shape.

world. Mace didn't want to stare at her face, but he did. It was oval, a  
Marine color and she had high cheekbones, her face wide, brow broad. He sw  
was Native American because the black hair framed those fearless l  
ip, sent green eyes that reminded him of the swamp oaks where he grew up in  
id. The Carolina. And damned if his lower body didn't take off like it had sn  
tricycle woman in heat! Damn it! Grimly, he moved out and just in front of the  
l. Mace she could spot him. And spot him she did, making a quick, trotting co  
n were toward him.

afe. Mace didn't want to be influenced by the fact he thought she  
of the damned hot looking woman. She couldn't be more than in her late twe  
it was was her wide green eyes, framed by thick black lashes, that grab  
rty feet immediate attention. Big black pupils surrounded by that rich green  
and he thin black ring around her iris. The look of an eagle. She didn't miss  
nd over Mace saw, as she aimed herself at a steady trot right up to where

standing.

He saw the calm look in her face and he couldn't tell what she was thinking as they silently sized one another up. She moved her XM175 over rifle, enclosed in a rain proof sheath to her left hand. Thrusting out her right hand toward him, he heard her say, "I'm Chastain. Sergeant Killmer?"

Mace stared down at her offered hand. She had long, tapered fingers, a graceful woman's hand. He quickly saw a number of old, white scars and a deep crease at the base of her hand. A part of him wanted to grip her hand and feel the long flesh, feel her feminine fingers. Another part reared back in anger. He wanted to take her hand, glaring down at her. Mace saw her full lips purse, her eyes hardening as she dropped her hand.

"I'm Killmer. Shield was supposed to send a man," he snarled. "What the hell happened?"

"They decided a man couldn't handle this assignment, Sergeant. They sent a woman instead."

He reared back at her droll reply, her gaze unwavering and never flinching, challenging him. Mace would have respected her if she'd been a man! He never mind that he could see the soft fullness of her breasts even beneath her thick cammie jacket she wore. Chastain was tall. Maybe five ten or eleven. And she sure as hell wasn't afraid of HIM, her face giving nothing away except the fact she was pissed off at his poor manners.

"This is a mistake," he growled. He called in his men, ordering them to meet them. They had to make tracks or they could run into Volkov's more she blood thirsty team.

"Sure is," she said in a growl that matched his own. "Let's get this done on the road. I want Volkov sooner, not later." And then she added acidly, "I can get the hell away from the likes of you as soon as possible."

Mace almost laughed. Almost. Well, he could see she was nothing like Lauren Parker insofar as personality went. "What'd you do, Sugar? Did you drink a quart of vinegar this morning for breakfast?"

Her fine nostrils quivered and her eyes went narrow as she considered his reply. "I don't like bullies, Sergeant." She jammed her index finger down at the damp floor of the jungle. "Let's settle this right now before you change color, I don't want to spend one more minute in this team energy of yours with your attitude. I'M NOT YOUR ENEMY. Volkov is. So get your head straight and stop this sniping at me because I'm sure as hell

taking it from anyone. Especially you.”

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