

# CHAPTER

# 1

ACARA, RUSSIA

**I**t's time, Lara," Maria said gently from the doorway behind her. "They'll be picking you up in thirty minutes."

Lara didn't look up from the piano keys. "Screw them. I'll be done here soon." She finished the concerto in a final glorious flourish. Then she drew a deep breath and sat there letting the music soothe her, letting its beauty take away the ugliness to come.

"How are you?" Maria walked across the room to stand beside her. "Rachmaninoff's Third. Quite a challenge. But you did it well. Would you like to tell me why you chose it today?"

It was the last thing she wanted to do, Lara thought. There was no use bringing her mother into the situation when she would not be able to do anything but worry. Maria always did anything she could to help her, and she often suffered for it. "I believe it's the most difficult concerto. It demands every technical skill. I wanted to conquer it. I *had* to conquer it. As you say, I wanted to challenge myself." She got to her feet and brushed a kiss on Maria's cheek. Maria's skin was silky soft, her dark hair shining in the firelight. Lara had always thought her mother beautiful, and she was just as

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lovely in maturity as she'd been when Lara was a little girl growing up. "I'm glad you think I did it well. Now I have to go pick up my gear and wait on the steps for them." Her lips twisted. "I know you don't want to invite my kind, loving father into your house."

"It's only my house as long as he permits it to be," Maria said bitterly. "But it won't always be that way, Lara. We'll find a way out."

"I know." She took her in her arms and gave her a quick hug. "It's just difficult right now. As difficult as that Rachmaninoff Third. But I've got a few ideas." She turned to go. "I should be back in a few days. I probably won't be able to call you." She headed for the parlor door. "But don't worry."

"Lara."

Lara looked over her shoulder.

"Why shouldn't I worry?" her mother asked hoarsely. "What weapons?"

Lara froze. It was the one question she wished she hadn't asked her. Lie? No, they never lied to each other. They'd made that promise long ago. There were too many lies surrounding them. She braced herself. "No weapons. Bare hands."

"What?" Maria's eyes were suddenly glittering with anger. "That son of a *bitch*."

"It's okay," Lara said quickly. "I'm ready for them. Volkov warned me six months ago it would be coming."

"How kind of him." She was across the room, her arms enfolding Lara. "I'm sorry," she said huskily. "I should have run away when he set it up. No, I should have run when it first started. I thought I'd be able to fight them. I had no idea they'd use you for their damn games."

"How could you know? You were caught, too." Lara took her by

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the shoulders and shook her gently. “It’s all right. I’ve had the music and I’ve had you.” She grimaced. “And look at all the things I’ve learned. Aren’t I lucky?”

“Don’t even joke about it,” Maria said curtly. “Those bastards. What hell they put you through.”

“I wasn’t joking. I did learn a lot.” Her lips tightened. “And most of the time I won. And if I lost, I learned something from that, too.” Her hands fell away from Maria. “It made me stronger.”

“Yes, it did,” Maria said bitterly. “No one can argue that.”

“And *you* made me stronger, too,” Lara said. “Because you’ve fought them all these years and never stopped.”

“I couldn’t save you,” she whispered. “Not since the day Volkov talked Anton into that damn bet. All I could do was try to make it easier for you. But there’s no way I can make these next days easier.”

“No, I’ll do that,” Lara said. “He won’t win this one. I’m ready for anything that—”

“What are you ready for, Lara?” Anton Balkon asked mockingly as he came into the living room. “I hope it’s to perform better than you did with Oleg a few evenings ago in that barn. He was not impressed.”

She stiffened. “I was trying something new with him. He still didn’t take me down.”

“And Volkov’s men won’t even attempt to take you down. They’ll have permission to make it permanent. Life or death, Lara. Volkov is going to send two of his best men, and they’ll be much more skilled than Oleg and very used to hunting down prey.”

“Stop it, Anton,” Maria hissed as she took a step forward. “You’re going too far. She’s your daughter, for God’s sake.”

“Then she should try to please me. She knows what’s expected of her. Volkov upped the bet on this weekend’s Trial. I’m not going to

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lose.” He leaned forward and stroked Lara’s cheek. “It’s your first real blood challenge. Are you excited?”

“No.” She wanted to step back, but she knew his hand would only tighten and his nails would dig into her cheek. “But I’ll do what you want me to do.”

“Yes, you will.” His hand fell away from her face. Then he whirled and his hand was suddenly on Maria’s throat. “How have you been, Maria? You’re still beautiful, but you’re a little old for my taste these days.” His grip tightened until she began to choke. “I prefer the little girls Volkov keeps me supplied with. So young, so fresh. But I do remember how talented you were. That’s why I kept you around even after you were stupid enough to get yourself pregnant.”

“Let her go,” Lara said with set teeth.

Anton’s grip grew tighter on Maria’s throat. “Please?”

Lara swallowed. “Please.”

He released his grip. “You see, politeness is everything. I’ll even forgive her for forgetting her place in our arrangement . . . as long as you don’t forget yours. I will win, won’t I?”

“You will win.” She was cursing herself for not being outside when he’d arrived. She wasn’t sure if it would have done any good, but the longer she stayed the more dangerous it would be for Maria. She had to get out of here. Say anything, give him anything he wanted. “Is that why you’re here? I promise you I’m ready for anything that Volkov’s men will throw at me.”

“Of course that’s why I’m here.” He smiled. “I thought I’d add a little incentive to the mix. Incentive can often be the final ingredient that makes a masterpiece.” He patted her cheek. “You know about masterpieces, don’t you, Lara?” He pushed her toward the door. “Let’s see if you can create one that will keep our Maria alive.”

“Lara!” Maria started to follow her.

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“No!” Lara quickly put up a hand to stop her. “It will be fine. I promise.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Anton pushed her out the door. “See that you keep that promise.” He followed her out the door and down the stone steps. “I have to win, Lara. Volkov is entirely too sure of himself. Now go over and tell him how ready you are.”

“What?” She froze as she saw her father gesturing down the street. Boris Volkov was leaning against his Mercedes, and he was smiling at her. Her heart skipped a beat. “What’s he doing here? I wasn’t supposed to have to see him until after it was all over.”

Anton shrugged. “He said it was a special trial and he wanted to see if he had anything to worry about. Go over and talk to him so that I can get you to the forest.”

There would be no use arguing with him. Anton always gave in to anything Volkov wanted. She dropped her backpack on the ground and ran down the street to where Volkov was waiting.

*Don’t let him shake you.*

*Look him straight in the eye.*

*He wants you to be afraid so that he’ll have the advantage.*

*Don’t be afraid.*

She stopped in front of him and lifted her chin. “You wanted to see me?”

“For one last time,” he said softly. He reached out and touched her cheek. “I always forget how fragile you look. But you’re not fragile, are you? Between Anton and me, we’ve made you into almost as tough a bitch as your whore of a mother. Maybe even more.” He smiled maliciously. “But you’re not going to be tough enough to survive what I’ve planned for you this time. I’ve been very careful to load the decks against you.”

*Don’t let him see the fear. “May I go now?”*

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If anything, his expression became even more malevolent. “And if by some miracle you do survive, it will only be to face what’s been waiting for you all these years. Are you ready for that?”

She had to keep her face impassive. “I’m ready. It would just be another Trial. I’d win that one, too. May I go now?”

He muttered a curse and for an instant she thought he’d strike her anyway. Then he pushed her away and got into his Mercedes. “By all means, you wouldn’t want to keep my men waiting. They’re primed and eager for you.”

She didn’t wait for him to start his car. She didn’t answer. She turned on her heel and headed back toward where Anton was waiting for her.

*Don’t look back. Don’t be afraid of what’s coming. It will be difficult, but so was Rachmaninoff’s Third Concerto.*

*Close everything out but Rachmaninoff’s Third and the challenge waiting for you in that forest.*

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### CASINO MILAN, ITALY

Josh Mallory stopped Logan Tanner before he got on the elevator to go up to his suite. “There’s something you should know. You have a visitor.”

“I didn’t get a text on my phone. Now I wonder why not?” Tanner gazed at him quizzically. “Particularly since you seem to be getting such a degree of sardonic pleasure from telling me about it. Would you care to tell me why?”

Mallory scowled. “You’ve been in a terrible mood ever since you got here and have been giving my dealers hell. I figure you deserve a little trouble for making me up their salaries just to keep them from

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walking out on me. I have the best dealers in Milan, and I don't want them going to some other casino."

"They're not alert enough." Tanner grinned as he punched the elevator button. "I could have taken them to the cleaners before they took their first break. I'm just looking out for you, Mallory."

"You're just too damn bored," Mallory said, disgusted as he got into the elevator and punched the button for the penthouse. "And I can look out for myself. I run this casino better than any other property you own, and you know it. It wasn't fair to expect them to know you were counting cards when you were so good, you were barred from half the casinos in the world by the time you were sixteen."

"No, I was so *bad*. They wouldn't have caught me if I'd been good enough to keep them from knowing what I was doing. I was always too impatient when I was a kid." He tilted his head. "But I had a good run."

"No, you got bored and took too many chances with the wrong casino boss," Mallory said. "And you had to find a way to get away before you got your throat cut."

"Did I tell you that? I must have been drunk."

Mallory nodded. "Stinking. But it was the first week we were in the special services together, and you thought everyone was your best friend. I even had to keep you from confiding your murky past to the sergeant."

"Which goes to prove that you *were* my best friend," Tanner said lightly. "Because I don't believe I came out of the service with more than one." He shrugged. "And I won't be bored at the poker game tomorrow night. It's high enough stakes to even interest me. Has everyone accepted?"

"Why wouldn't they? You're a target for every player who wants a name for himself among live high stakes poker players. That pot you won last time was higher than most state lotteries."

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They had reached the penthouse floor and the door started to open.

Tanner reached out and pressed the STOP button. “I know you’re anticipating getting some sly pleasure by making me uncomfortable about my ‘guest,’ but that wouldn’t have caused you to come up to the suite with me.” His eyes were narrowed on Mallory’s face. “So I’d bet that you’re a little worried that I might need help in making him feel welcome. Who is it, Mallory?”

Mallory was grinning. “Nikolai.”

Tanner stiffened. “Shit.” He paused. “Kaskov?”

“Not with him.” His smile widened with mischief. “Yes, that’s the expression I wanted to see. It’s almost worth giving those dealers a raise.” His smile faded. “But where Nikolai is, Kaskov is sure to follow. Unless you’ve done something to annoy Kaskov and he just sent Nikolai to take care of you. With you, there’s always that possibility.” He tilted his head. “But I don’t think it’s the way Kaskov would handle you. I thought you’d reached an understanding after you saved my neck in Moscow.”

“I thought I had, too. But Sergai Kaskov is an enigma, and you can never take him for granted.” He smiled wryly. “Not that anyone would take one of the biggest mob bosses in Russia anything but seriously.”

“If it has anything to do with me, I won’t—”

“It won’t have anything to do with you,” Tanner interrupted. “We worked out the payment on that, and Kaskov never breaks his word. It has to be something else.” He smiled faintly. “You were going to face Kaskov to save me? I’m touched, Mallory.”

Mallory snorted. “Asshole. I just didn’t like Nikolai showing up. I remember him too well.”

“Let’s see if he remembers you.” He pressed the button and the door slid open. “But after you say your hellos, I think you should go back downstairs and soothe your dealers.”



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Mallory shook his head. “I’ll stick around. You’ve got a great view of the city from this suite. I’ll go have a drink on the terrace until you’re finished.” He moved toward a giant of a man dressed in a very expensive-looking navy-blue suit. “Hello, Nikolai, I thought I saw you in the lobby. Anything I can do for you?”

Nikolai shook his head. “No, Mr. Kaskov says you’re no longer of interest to me.”

“Thank God,” Mallory murmured. “Then may I ask why you’re here?”

“Mr. Kaskov is going to have a discussion with Mr. Tanner and wanted me to check out the premises.” He turned to Tanner. “Everything seems to be in order. I’ve notified Mr. Kaskov and he’s on his way up. I was just in the kitchen preparing coffee. May I get you a cup?”

“By all means. Thank you. Make yourself at home.” Tanner glanced at Mallory. “I believe it’s time you went out on the terrace and had that drink.”

“You’re certain?”

“Nikolai says you’re not needed. But evidently I am.” He turned back to Nikolai. “And I’m sure you’ve chosen the place where Kaskov would want to have this discussion?”

“The library seems to be comfortable and secure. But Mr. Kaskov said that he’d be happy to accommodate you if you prefer another location.”

“He did? Interesting.” Tanner headed for the library. “The library is fine. I’ll wait there for him. You can show him in when he arrives.”

Nikolai glanced at the elevator. “I’m sure it will be any moment.”

Tanner was certain it would be, too. Kaskov’s schedule usually ran smoothly with absolutely no glitches. Since he was head of one of the most powerful mafia groups in Russia and had any

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number of enemies among the lesser mob hierarchies of the Russian underworld, he wouldn't have lived this long and gained his present dominance if it didn't. Tanner hadn't had any dealings with him since he'd worked out the payment for Mallory's indiscretion, but he was sure that hadn't changed. He'd never met a more intelligent or dangerous man nor one he'd more prefer to keep at a considerable distance.

But none of Nikolai's signals had indicated threat, and Kaskov had ordered those signals. So assume dominance until he knew what the hell the bastard wanted. First, sit down behind the desk in the library and make Kaskov come to him.

He didn't have to wait long. Sergai Kaskov swept into the library only a few minutes later. He was dressed in a faultless tuxedo and tossed his coat on a chair beside the door. "Hello, Tanner. Thank you for seeing me. I meant to be here earlier, but I just flew in from Rome. I had tickets for a concert at the opera and there was an artist I didn't want to miss. Superb. You'll understand, you go there frequently when you're in Italy, don't you?" He dropped down into a chair beside the desk and smiled. "Life can be so tiresome; one must take advantage of every minute of beauty." He looked almost exactly the same as he had when Tanner had last seen him several years ago. He sat there perfectly at ease, powerful, magnetic, totally dominant, gray-streaked dark hair, somewhere in his late fifties. He chuckled as he continued, "But then you know that about me. You investigated everything you could find regarding who I was and how you could get what you wanted from me. I expected it." He leaned back in the chair. "I even admired it."

"I could hardly blame you for not coming earlier when I didn't expect you at all," Tanner said dryly. "I assume you mean Pierre Lazco. He's a wonderful violinist. I saw him last night after I arrived in Rome from New York."

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“I didn’t think you’d miss him. I told Nikolai I’d bet him you’d come in at least a day early for your big game. I thought I might even see you there tonight. I have a box at the opera house, and we could have enjoyed the concert together.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me? You very generously fund both the Bolshoi Ballet and the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow. Why not spread the largesse around to Rome?”

“Why not?” Kaskov repeated with a wry smile. “And you very neatly sidestepped my gracious invitation to share my box. But you’re probably right, you wouldn’t have enjoyed it as much if you’d had to concentrate on outside influences. I saw you at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall one night, and I might have been looking at myself. It was good to know. The dossier I had on you hadn’t mentioned that passion for music. I immediately dismissed the investigator.”

Shit, he didn’t like the idea that Kaskov knew anything but the bare basics about him. “There’s no way you could use that as a weapon. I like all music from Bach to jazz, but it’s not a passion. It was understandable that your man skipped over it.” He shook his head. “And I’m sorry to disappoint you, but you wouldn’t have been that much of a distraction. I could have closed you out.”

“Could you?” Kaskov asked thoughtfully. “Yes, you might have had the willpower, but you would have had to make an effort. Sometimes the smallest things are the ones that take us down. At any rate, as I said, I admire that you researched me so thoroughly. It shows how determined you were to save your friend. You wanted me to use my influence to get Mallory safely out of Moscow before Narzoff took a contract out on him for luring his mistress into bed. But I don’t know many men who would have come to me about it.”

“Neither do I,” Tanner said. “Believe me, I was out of options.”

Kaskov shook his head. “Mallory made a bad choice. Narzoff is a very possessive man, and he wasn’t even one of my family. I’m

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usually careful about not interfering with the members of other families as long as they accord me the same courtesy. You caused me a good deal of trouble before it was over.”

“But you still did it.” Tanner’s lips twisted. “And I paid your price. I extracted that man Putin was after. That makes us even. So why are you here?”

“I did it because I’d heard enough about you that I was intrigued and wanted to know more. I’m always looking for men with the right qualifications, and you were very, very good. I thought I might hire you. That extraction was necessary, but it was still in the nature of an audition.”

“Then I must have failed it. I never got an offer from you.” He sighed. “Too bad.”

“By that time, I’d assessed your capabilities and I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to persuade you to come over to the dark side. You were moving too quickly out of range of either bribery or intimidation. You’d already had your sights set on your first leap into the big leagues. You’d become an extractor after you left special services, but you knew it was only going to be temporary until you earned a big enough stash for your first casino.” He smiled. “So I decided I’d just take advantage of those capabilities on a one-shot deal and then file you away for future notice. But even if it was temporary, you’d made the right contacts and you did my job superbly. And you were smart enough not to want any connection with me after that one extraction.” He lifted his shoulders in a half shrug. “Why should you? You’re quite probably a mathematical genius, and you’ve already bought several casinos in the U.S. as well as here in Milan and Macao. You’re a fantastic gambler—no one’s better at judging the odds than you. Then you started playing the market and you opened an entirely new chapter. I’ve increased my net worth enormously just watching and following.”

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“I’m glad I could be of help,” Tanner said dryly. “Is this going somewhere?”

“Oh, yes.” He took the cup of coffee Nikolai was handing him. “I seldom waste my time on reminiscing. I just wanted you to know that I wasn’t going at this blindly. I’ve studied you and I have faith you can give me what I need.”

“And yet you already know that I don’t want to do another extraction for you. It *is* an extraction?”

Kaskov nodded. “An extremely difficult one that involves a multitude of complications that might suit your talents. So I pulled you out of my file and dusted off all the info I’d gathered about you. You might actually want to do this one. Not only will I promise to give you whatever you wish in return, but it might bring you a certain amount of satisfaction. From what I’ve heard, I think you’re probably restless and bored and ready for a new challenge. Plus, you didn’t have to save Mallory, but you did. Which indicates a softness that may be rather naive but is an integral part of your character. You didn’t like your friend being bullied by Narzoff.” He frowned. “It’s lately been brought to my attention that I don’t like bullies, either.”

“May I point out that your life is devoted to enforcement and criminal activities? One might even call you a bully.”

“Not to my face,” he said softly. “I’d suggest you change your phrasing.”

Nikolai had turned back at the door and was looking at Kaskov.

Kaskov made a motion. “It’s all right, Nikolai. Tanner is feeling a bit pressured. We’ll either come to an agreement or we won’t.”

“We won’t,” Tanner said flatly. “I’m not interested. Who is it? Another scientist you’re trying to get out from under Putin’s thumb?”

“No, though that was a case of bullying in the extreme and would have ended very badly if you’d not gotten him out of Russia.” He

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paused. "This is more personal. Lara has nothing to do with politics. She's just trying to survive." He reached into his coat pocket and drew out a large manila envelope. He opened it and spread a group of passport photos on the desk in front of Tanner. "Lara Balkon." He pointed to a beautiful dark-haired woman with high cheeks and slightly slanted eyes. "She's the one I need you to extract."

"Your mistress?"

"No." He pointed to another photo of an attractive older woman. "Maria Balkon, her mother. She's English, and she and Lara are very close. Lara probably won't consent to be extracted without her." He pointed to a photo of a dark-haired man in his forties. "Anton Balkon, Lara's father. A total son of a bitch. He's head of his own family business in the south Georgia area and does moderately well. Mostly drugs, he's no problem for me. But Boris Volkov might be a different matter. He's boss of a neighboring family and has recently taken over several other syndicates in the area and become a close friend of Balkon." He threw down another photo of a tall, smiling man with sun-streaked brown-gray hair. "Volkov. He now controls the south territory except for a small area he allows Balkon to run. He'd like to move in on me in Moscow if he had the nerve."

"Which he doesn't?"

"No, but he keeps testing me. I think Lara might be part of that test."

"You said she wasn't your mistress."

"But he knows I've stopped by the Balkon house and listened to her play every now and then over the years."

"Play?"

"She's a pianist. Remarkable. I heard her play at a recital in Moscow when she was eleven. She won first prize, which was a grand piano and a scholarship at the Moscow Conservatory. I thought she was a prodigy then. But she never used the scholarship. Her father took

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her back to the country the next week, and she never performed after that.”

Tanner’s eyes were narrowed on Kaskov’s face. “And therein lies the tale,” he said softly. “You couldn’t stand to see a talent wasted.”

“I won’t deny the idea makes me angry. But it’s a bit more involved than that.” He added curtly, “And it’s not been wasted. She’s still brilliant. She practices four or five hours a day when she gets the chance. She’s twenty-one now, and I heard her last year. I’d judge, if allowed another few years, she’ll be one of the top pianists in the world.”

“You’d be a good judge if you weren’t swayed by other factors.” He glanced at the woman in the photo. She wasn’t smiling but there was an intensity, an eagerness, an odd expectancy in those dark eyes that was fascinating. “She’s beautiful. You’re sure she’s not your mistress?”

“No, and I’m not swayed by anything other than her ability.” He thought for a moment. “Or perhaps her courage. Those are the two things that impressed me about her. She reminded me of someone...”

Sentiment? Not likely, Tanner thought. Kaskov’s expression was as hard as ever. “Why don’t you get her out yourself?”

“I told you, it’s not my custom to interfere with the decisions of other families. It’s not good business and sets a bad example.”

“And?”

He didn’t speak for a moment. “I have to get her out right away. She has to totally disappear for a period of time so that I have time to rearrange her circumstances. That disappearance must not be connected with me.”

“You’d rather it be connected with me?”

“If you’re so clumsy that you make that kind of a mistake. I don’t believe you will.”

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“I don’t believe I will, either. Because I have no intention of doing this extraction. Find someone else.”

“If you weren’t perfect, I’d take your advice. But there’s no real reason why you shouldn’t do it. You’re bored, and this would be something to fill in the time until you move on to your next project.”

“I’m *not* bored.”

“You set up one of your poker games for tomorrow night. You usually only do that when you’re—”

“I’m not bored. And the poker game is another good reason why I can’t do it. You said it has to be done right away. The game is tomorrow night.”

“Cancel it.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You have to get her out of there right away,” Kaskov said quietly. “It’s a priority. You can set up another poker game anytime.”

“Priority?” he asked impatiently.

“She might not be alive after this weekend. Volkov’s men are laying bets she won’t be. The odds are against her.”

Tanner went still. “The odds?”

“I told you that Anton Balkon is a son of a bitch.” He shrugged. “Volkov is far worse. He’s a sadistic bastard, and he never forgets an insult. I don’t know the details, but Lara managed to make him furious before she went to that recital in Moscow. It was Volkov who ordered Balkon to bring her back. He had plans for her.”

“Plans?” His hand clenched on his cup. “She was only eleven.”

“Not sexual. At least, not then. He had something more long-range in mind. He came up with a punishment that could amuse both her father and him for years to come.”

“He wouldn’t let her take the scholarship.”

“Oh, that was definitely gone. But he was still going to permit



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her to play the piano as long as she agreed to go along with the rules of the bet he'd made with her father."

"Bet?"

Kaskov smiled bitterly. "I told you this extraction was perfect for you. Volkov and Balkon don't have your talent, but they do have a passion for gambling. Particularly Volkov. So why not set a master gambler to spoil their very dirty games? It seemed Balkon wouldn't have minded having a son, but he was disgusted with not only having a daughter, but having one who could do nothing but pound a piano. Which also caused him trouble with his boss, Volkov, who seemed to be impatient with everything Lara did. He grabbed at the chance to earn his approval when Volkov told him his idea of letting Volkov choose certain goals twice a year for Lara to reach to make her into the kind of person they both wanted her to become. Then they'd make a wager as to whether or not she could meet each goal." His lips tightened. "I don't have to tell you what kind of punishment she'd have to take from her father if she failed him and he lost a bet. I'm sure that Volkov made those goals very difficult for her to reach."

"But you don't know?" Tanner was gazing at him. "And if you don't interfere with other families, how do you know so much about this particular horror story?"

"Word gets around. I didn't hear about it for a few years, but then both Volkov's and Balkon's men started to make their own bets on Lara. It was bound to happen after she started not to lose all the time. You know gamblers will bet on anything. You've made some crazy bets yourself." He was studying Tanner's face. "But I thought this setup would turn you off. You don't like bullies, and a kid isn't exactly fair game."

"I didn't say it turned me off," he said coolly. "Life's not often fair. You've got to accept that and go on." He looked down at the photo again. "She looks . . . fragile. You said she began to win?"

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“So I heard.”

“That’s right, you kept your distance. Which is what I intend to do.”

“Oh, like you did when you and Mallory and a few of your men broke up that dogfighting ring in the backwoods outside your casino in Atlantic City? I understand you inflicted serious and permanent damage.”

Tanner carefully kept his face without expression. “It seemed the thing to do at the time. I like dogs.”

“And you have problems with bullies. As I said, some gamblers will bet on anything. Not you. You have a passion for the game, but it annoys you if the rules are ignored. Or if there are penalties to anyone but the opponents involved.” He shrugged. “But if I’m wrong and you’ve made up your mind, then I suppose I should tell you what you’re turning down so that you can compliment yourself on staying away from it. Lara’s goal this time is basically just keeping herself alive for this weekend. Her father is turning her loose in the forest outside Avgar. Volkov is sending two of his best men after her with orders to take her down. Which means that to live, she’ll have to kill them. No weapons allowed. She’s not as fragile as she looks and she’s trained herself, but what do you think her chances are?”

“I think if Volkov and her father have been enjoying their game, they’ll back off or they’ll lose the mouse they’re toying with.”

“We’ll see. They haven’t backed off before.” He nodded at the manila envelope. “I’ve included the principal hoops that Volkov made her jump through in the past and the results. It might interest you. But the hurdle this weekend is a step beyond. It’s clear that this ‘game’ has become an obsession with Volkov over the years. Yet lately he’s been losing too often, and he might be getting frustrated. He has a reputation for hating to lose. There’s a chance that he’ll want to end it.” He paused. “Or to damage her so badly that it will happen anyway.”

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“But then you’d lose your prodigy, and you don’t like to lose, either,” Tanner said mockingly. “I can’t believe you won’t find someone else to accommodate you.”

“I think I’ll wait for you to change your mind. I hate making do when you’re so perfect, Tanner.” He got to his feet. “If you need my help, I’m at your disposal as long as you keep it confidential. You’ll find additional information in that envelope that may assist you. It’s only fair since I realize it’s short notice and you’ve had no opportunity for preparations.” He took his coat off the chair. “There’s also a copy of the DVD I had taken of Lara Balkon last year so that you can understand what they’re killing.” He headed for the door. “Nikolai will be in the lobby all night. I hope you’ll be in touch.”

“I won’t be. If time is of the essence, I’d suggest you start making a few calls.”

“I rarely take suggestions.” He smiled at him over his shoulder. “I tend to make a decision and then roll the dice. Like you, Tanner.” Then he hesitated as he reached the door. “But you’re being more stubborn than I thought, so it might be wise to give you another incentive to please me.” His gaze narrowed. “How about Antonio Sandrino?”

Tanner stiffened and inhaled sharply. “I’m listening.”

“Your reason for coming to Moscow the first time was because of business, but you sent me a message about six months ago and asked me if I had any information about Sandrino.”

“And you told me you didn’t. It was a lie?”

“No, not at the time. And I had no reason to explore the matter.” He smiled. “But there’s not much that I can’t find out if I go to the trouble. People seem to want to tell me anything I want to know. And I decided I wanted to know when this unfortunate matter of Lara appeared on the horizon. I’m sure I’ll have your information when you’ve finished taking care of her problem.”

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Then he was gone. Tanner heard him speaking to Nikolai in the foyer and then the sound of the elevator.

The next moment Mallory was standing in the doorway. “Am I in trouble?” He came into the library and dropped down in the chair that Kaskov had occupied. “He didn’t stay that long. I hoped that was a good sign.” His gaze was on Tanner’s expression, and he gave a low whistle. “But I gather it wasn’t.”

“He stayed long enough,” Tanner said dryly. “Too long. Kaskov doesn’t know how to take no for an answer.”

“Not many people would dare to tell him no.” He sat forward. “Look, if there was a problem with anything to do with my—”

“It had nothing to do with you,” he said curtly. “I told you I’d taken care of that. He’s crossed it off his books. This was something else.”

Mallory leaned back again with a sigh of relief. “Good. So what’s on his mind? Another extraction? Did you tell him you’d moved on and weren’t interested?”

“Of course I did. He wasn’t listening,” Tanner said through set teeth. “He didn’t care. It’s personal. He *wants* this. He said Nikolai would be downstairs in the lobby waiting if I changed my mind.”

“Oh, shit.”

“That’s not going to happen. He can find someone else to get her out.” He pushed the photos on top of the manila envelope aside. “I don’t take his orders. I have a life. He thinks he can just dangle the damn name in front of me and I’ll jump and do his bidding? He didn’t even care about the game tomorrow.”

“It would have had to be an immediate extraction?” Mallory was picking up the photo of Lara Balkon and gazing at it. “That’s bad news.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m not doing it.”

“Yes, you said that. What name was he dangling in front of you?”

## HIGH STAKES

Tanner didn't answer for a moment. "Sandrino."

"Shit." Mallory inhaled sharply. "He knows something?"

"No, he only said he could find out. And I'm supposed to trust the bastard? Kaskov's one of the biggest crime bosses in the world. If I haven't been able to turn up anything during the last eighteen months, why would he be able to?"

"You tell me. You went to him in the first place. He's powerful as hell." His gaze returned to the photo of Lara Balkon. "Personal? Is she his mistress?"

"No, it's something else. He's hard as nails, but somehow she managed to . . . reach him."

"That could be even worse." Mallory reached over and picked up the manila envelope. "This is the extraction info? Do you mind if I go through it?"

"Be my guest. But it's a waste of time. We aren't going to use it."

"It's my time to waste." Mallory glanced up from going through the documents. "Look, you wouldn't have even been involved with Kaskov in the first place except for me. I put you through a hell of a lot of trouble, and there was a chance I could have gotten you killed. I still feel guilty about it. And now he's pulled Sandrino into it, and that's going to rub you raw and might be even more dangerous for you." He grimaced. "I'd far rather this extraction you've refused was Kaskov's sex object. In my experience, people get more emotional about the 'personal.' I just want to be prepared for anything that comes along." He'd pulled out a DVD. "What's this?"

"I assume it's the DVD that Kaskov ordered me to watch," he said caustically.

"And you're fighting doing it." He tossed the DVD on the desk in front of Tanner. "Because you're pissed off with Kaskov, and you don't want him to pull your strings. Well, it's *me* pulling your

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strings now. *Watch* the damn thing.” He got to his feet. “I’m going to settle in the living room and go through this file. I’ll come back after I’ve finished, and we’ll talk about it.” He suddenly grinned mischievously. “Am I fired yet?”

“Very close,” Tanner growled. He took the disk and slid it into his computer. “It’s still a waste of time.”

“And you’re a stubborn asshole,” Mallory said as he headed for the door. “I don’t know why I’m trying so hard to keep you from getting killed.”

“Because you don’t know if you’re in my will yet.” Tanner waved him out of the room. “Go away. I’ll watch it.”

He settled back in his chair and glared at the computer. It didn’t help that Mallory was right. Too many of the chords Kaskov had struck had made an impact, and he hated being manipulated. He had an idea that Kaskov wouldn’t have included this disk if it wasn’t designed to do the same thing.

“Play it!” Mallory called from the other room.

Tanner muttered a curse and punched the button.

Lara Balkon appeared on the screen, dressed in jeans and sweat-shirt, her long hair in a ponytail. She looked much younger than she had in the passport photo. She was sitting at a piano. Then she started to play Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 2.

Tanner froze. “Holy shit.”

He tried to be objective, to criticize her technique, to stop Kaskov’s words repeating in his mind.

*So you can understand what they’re trying to kill.*

Then that was all gone.

Everything was gone but the music.

## HIGH STAKES

“You’ve played it four times.” Mallory was leaning against the door-jamb. “Not that I blame you. I’m not even a fan of classical music but I can tell she’s something special. How good is she?”

“Phenomenal. No, magical. Kaskov was right, damn him.” Tanner reached out and turned off the DVD. “I can see why she might have had that effect on him. But why the hell didn’t the bastard yank her out of that situation when she was a kid? Why wait until now and leave it up to me?”

“Maybe he didn’t have a choice,” Mallory said quietly. “Or maybe he thought there would be an opening for him to do it down the line somewhere.” He held up the manila envelope. “I could see they kept her pretty busy from the time her father brought her back from that recital in Moscow. Some of it is pretty rough. Are you ready to read it?”

“No.” He got to his feet. “I don’t have time now. Take it with you.” He moved across the room and past him into the foyer. “You don’t have time, either. Call Jordan in London and tell him to get the crew together and be ready to head out for Rome within the next two hours.” He was striding toward the elevator. “I have to go down to the lobby and tell Nikolai what I’m going to need from him.”

Mallory followed him. “I take it that we’re going to Russia?” He smiled with sly malice. “Oh, my, I guess I’ll have to cancel that poker game tomorrow night.”

“Don’t push it,” Tanner said sourly. “I’m pissed off enough that I have to do this, and try to make it happen in the space of a few days.” He got into the elevator. “And if Kaskov thinks he’s going to get off scot-free and not tell me everything I need to know about Sandrino after this is over, he’s very much mistaken.”