

Chapter Two

A curl of cigarette smoke drifted on the night air as Kostya stood on the roof of the high-rise and watched the city slowly slide into darkness. He felt the heat moving ever closer to his fingers as the unsmoked cigarette burned from the tip to the filter.

He'd lit and wasted four so far. Still not in the mood for a smoke, he dropped the fifth and crushed it with the toe of his boot. He bent down, picked up the butt and slipped it into his pocket to dispose of later. There wasn't much chance of anyone discovering his stakeout spot or combing the rooftop for evidence but old habits like these were ingrained.

Clean it.

Burn it.

Destroy it.

There must never be a trace of evidence left behind.

Ever.

He projected cool disinterest, but the pit of his stomach was a mess of knots and tangles. His mind raced with the bits and pieces of intelligence and recon that his little spiders had been gathering and reporting back to him all day. He checked his watch. Ninety-four minutes—and the whole damn city would erupt in chaos and violence.

His stomach pitched violently as a streak of anger and despair zipped through him. All that work! All those years of planning and scheming and setting up his intel network! All that money spent and all those favors traded to turn snitches inside the Guzman organization had been wasted.

Tonight, Hector Salas would lead a bloody coup, taking out the power players standing between him and the cartel throne. Come sunrise, a new man would be in charge south of the border—and that intricate web Kostya’s spiders crawled would have to be redesigned and woven all over again.

Blowing out a resigned breath, Kostya wiped a hand down his face. This wasn’t the first time he’d been forced to start over from scratch. His entire life seemed to be an endless cycle of hastily wiped slates and new starts. When the dust settled, he would have to take stock of which informants had survived the power shift and begin the tedious process of rebuilding his network.

The cell phone tucked into the back pocket of his dirty overalls vibrated. He withdrew it and swiped at the screen. One of the knots in his stomach relaxed and unwound as he read the message from Fox.

It’s time.

He tapped out his short one-word reply—*coming*—and slipped his phone back into his pocket.

Adrenaline surged through his system as he pulled on the baseball cap emblazoned with a plumbing company’s logo and hopped behind the wheel of the van he’d borrowed from the owner who owed the family a favor. After a quick glance in the rear-view mirror to check the fake moustache he’d applied earlier, he pushed a pair of thick-rimmed glasses into place. Nobody paid attention to tradesmen, especially not the ones who looked like someone’s creepy fucking uncle, and that was the way he liked it.

As he left the parking garage, he ran through the plans in place for the night. Nikolai wouldn’t let Vivian out of his sight, as usual. The boss had ensured that all his captains knew to keep their soldiers in public tonight. They would be seen in bars and restaurants and clubs. Everyone needed a solid alibi. There wasn’t to be a whisper of Russian involvement in the Mexican-on-Mexican violence that was going down tonight.

Certain the rest of the family would be safe, he was focused solely on protecting Holly. It hadn’t been that hard to convince one of the coffee shop baristas working next door to Holly’s salon to sabotage the plumbing in exchange for the promise of a new start in a new city.

Fox, one of the street kids he had saved years earlier and now employed, had been hacking into the salon’s security system repeatedly. It was imperative that Holly

grow so frustrated with her current security service that she come to him for help. After tonight, he needed to have his eyes on her at all times. Setting off the alarm randomly during the day and having Fox hijack security tech support phone line would push Holly over the edge and force her to look for outside help. *From me.*

Guilt soured his gut when he thought of all the ways he was manipulating Holly's life. He was doing it to keep her alive but that didn't lessen the uneasy feeling twisting his stomach. Their friendship had been the truest of his life, and now he was abusing it and gas-lighting her in ways that would have made his instructors back at the Centre so very proud.

From a very young age, he had been conditioned and trained by his parents, both covert Soviet operatives based out of East Germany, not to feel guilt. He'd been taught never to get involved, to build walls, to never trust. He'd taken those lessons to heart, especially after his mother and father had been betrayed and murdered. Their deaths had taught him the most painful lesson of all, and he'd promised himself that someday he would revenge their deaths.

Someday? *Blyad.* Never.

All these years later and he was no closer to solving the mystery of his parents' gruesome deaths. It had been an inside job. Of that, he was certain. The KGB had been in turmoil at the time his parents had been killed. As members of the inner circle, they had been high value targets. Their deaths had signaled the end of an era and the beginning of a newer, leaner and even more corrupt intelligence agency.

Kostya had wasted no time in pledging himself to the FSB, the KGB's successor agency. He had been just a boy, but he'd been determined to prove himself. It hadn't taken him any time at all to get out into the field where he had excelled in a specific kind of covert work. *Mokroye delo.* Wet work. Assassinations. Cleanings.

But he'd never been good at playing the kinds of games that were necessary to stay alive inside the agency. He didn't like politics, and he sure as shit wasn't going to lick boots to climb the ranks and move from the field into a cushy foreign post on an official diplomatic mission.

So when the rumor of his impending demise had reached his ears, Kostya had quickly pivoted and sought employment with Maksim. Moscow's most ruthless criminal

godfather had been in need of a man with Kostya's skillset, and he'd jumped at the chance to leave the country and leave it fast.

A clean identity and a fresh start in the United States.

He had made a good life for himself here in Houston. But he had a gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach that wouldn't go away. It was a foreboding sensation he couldn't escape. He had a bad, bad feeling that his good days in Houston were numbered.

And the countdown was starting tonight.

For weeks, there had been rumors circling the Houston underworld of a retaliatory cartel hit planned for someone close to Nikolai. Kostya had feared the hit might be meant for Vivian, now pregnant with the boss's heir, but the truth had been even more earth shattering for him.

The intended target for tonight's hit was Holly Phillips.

His fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

His jaw clenched.

My Holly.

He wasn't an easily surprised man, not after all that he had seen, but his knees had gone wobbly and his stomach had lurched painfully when he'd read the information in the file Finn Connolly had handed him during their earlier rendezvous.

The middle Connolly brother was neck deep in hot water after taking out a cartel hitman with a perfectly placed sniper shot during a shootout earlier in the summer. Now Finn was being blackmailed into helping the cartel with their Russian problem. Someone out there had informed the cartel that Holly and Nikolai shared the same father—Maksim Prokhorov. Now the cartel wanted to send a message to Nikolai and the big boss back in Moscow by killing her: No one is safe.

If what the file said was true, if Holly and Nikolai were half-siblings, her life was about to get very complicated. She had grown up in a tangle of secrets and lies. Once the truth came out—and it would—she would be devastated. The thought of Holly hurting made his chest ache. He rubbed at his sternum and tried to play out all the different angles, but he couldn't find an outcome that saved her from pain and heartache.

And you're part of those lies...

Still loathing himself for adding to the pain and betrayal she would someday experience, Kostya pulled up to the coffee shop and backed into the space closest to the door. He surveyed the surrounding area while pretending to start a work order. He quickly noted the locations of the various vehicles in the mostly empty parking lot and then glanced at the darkened storefronts surrounding Holly's salon.

Metal clipboard in hand, he exited the van and moved around to the rear doors. Hidden from view, he tucked an almost invisible ear bud into place and cleared his throat to make sure the tiny microphone embedded in the ID tag clipped onto his uniform overalls picked up the sound. Two short clicks echoed in his ear. Fox, his tech goddess, signaled that she could read him loud and clear from the van she had parked in a nearby big box store lot. She was handling all the surveillance for tonight.

Carrying a toolbox, Kostya entered the coffee shop and found the employee Lobo had bribed earlier that morning. The shift manager led him to the rear of the building where a pair of clogged kitchen sinks were overflowing and spilling murky water all over the tile floor. He cast a cursory glance at the problem. It would be easy enough to clear the sabotaged drain after he had taken care of his more illicit business.

He plunked down the toolbox on the stainless steel counter, opened it and lifted up the expandable top tray to reveal the inner compartment. He placed his left hand on the pistol with a silencer attached and used the right to grab the five fat envelopes stuffed with hundred dollar bills. He tossed the money at the shift manager. The envelopes hit the counter with a loud *thwap*.

The younger man swallowed hard and stared at all that money. He reached into his pocket with slightly shaking fingers and withdrew the keys to the shop. He placed them on the counter. "I've closed up the registers and done all the paperwork for the night."

"I'll lock up when I'm done."

The man nodded and reached for the money. "This is more than I was expecting."

"Consider it an incentive to get the hell out of this city. Tomorrow," Kostya added with a steel edge to his voice.

"Tomorrow?" He hesitated before taking the money. "I can't just leave like that."

Kostya wrapped his fingers around the handgun but didn't bring it out of the toolbox just yet. Holding the manager's gaze, he intoned levelly, "I can just as easily clean up two bodies tonight."

The manager paled and licked his lips. "I'll be out of here before sunrise."

"Good decision." Kostya kept his grip on the Grach pistol and watched the manager take the money—all fifty grand of it from his personal stash—and leave the shop.

Alone in the building, he walked to the front door and hopped up into back of the plumbing van to get the tools he would need to fix the clogged drain. If anyone had eyes on the building—and he was sure the cartel hitman did—they would see him doing his job and nothing else. Back in the kitchen, he left the plumbing tools on the floor next to the sink before closing up the toolbox and taking it with him to the supply room that shared a wall with Holly's salon. He found the small closet housing the breaker box and security alarm and located a drywall panel with a small access door already cut into it. It was going to be a tight squeeze but it was the only way into the salon without using the front or rear entrance.

After pulling on a pair of black leather gloves, he opened the access panel and flicked on his flashlight. The panel on the other side of the wall had already been removed. He saw a blur of movement before a familiar face peered back at him. Brown eyes, dark hair and that young, innocent face—Lobo.

For a brief moment, he felt another stab of guilt when he considered what a girl of her age should be doing right now. Hanging out with her friends? Finishing up homework? Watching some sappy teenage shit while painting her toenails? *But not this*, he thought, *definitely not this*.

Lobo slipped into the tunnel and reached out to him. "Give me your toolbox."

He pushed the toolbox through to her and shimmied through the access tunnel between shops. On the other side, he climbed to his feet and scanned the supply closet they were standing in now. The space was lit by their flashlights and a few glow sticks, all easily extinguished light sources. He noticed that Lobo had put together a small pallet of towels along one wall.

"Black Swan is working in the front of the salon. Her outfit isn't a perfect match for Odette's, but it's close enough. No one watching her sweep or stock shelves through

the windows will be able to tell the difference between them, not with the lights dimmed. Fox has control of the cameras. We can see everything happening inside and outside the salon. Sunny is tailing Jarhead. He hasn't left the hospital yet."

Black Swan. Lana.

Odette. Holly.

Jarhead. Finn Connolly.

A perfect little protégé, Lobo had complete control of the job. He would do the dangerous work tonight, but she was running this show. It was time for Lobo to prove herself capable of the work he'd been teaching her to do. It was time for her to get real-life experience. Tonight, they would both know whether she had the stomach for wet work.

As much as it pained him, Kostya believed she would excel tonight. She would do her job and she would do it well. After tonight, there would be no turning back for her.

All the times he'd offered to get her a new identity, to set her up in a private school and pay for her college, to give her a normal life, she'd politely declined. Inside, she was just as broken and busted up as he was. Maybe she understood as he had at a similar age that there was no other course for her life but to live in the shadows and do these terrible deeds.

In every way she had been the ideal student since the night he had discovered her chained to a wooden post in that shithole brothel in Ciudad Acuña. Scrawny, filthy and damn near mute, she had somehow escaped the horrors of sexual abuse that were rampant elsewhere in the house. But the bruises mottling her skin had been proof enough of the hell she'd endured there.

He had been in the border city on a side job at the time and having a witness to his crimes that night was not a good thing. Putting a bullet between her eyes and ending her suffering probably would have been a kindness, but he had dismissed the thought as quickly as it had entered his brain. Something about her had called to him. He hadn't been able to leave her behind. So he'd broken those chains, wrapped her up in a blanket and taken her.

He cast a quick glance at Lobo as she started placing pieces of medical equipment from her own backpack next to the little pallet. Had it really been seven years since he'd found her?

Seven years since he had offered her that choice—to be dropped off at the first police station he reached in Texas or to come with him and learn how to avenge her family’s deaths.

Seven years since he had christened her Lobo, wiping away the identity and childhood she couldn’t remember, and giving her a new life as a ghost who didn’t exist.

Seven years that he had been keeping her a secret from Nikolai and Ivan and everyone else who thought they knew him. *Even from Holly...*

Seven years that he had been training and molding her into the perfect covert operative.

Seven years since she became the first of his little spiders...

He left the supply room without saying a word. Lobo didn’t need him standing over her to get things done. He moved quietly and quickly through the back hallway, keeping tight to the wall on the way to Holly’s office. Lana appeared briefly in his view, and his feet stuttered beneath him. Fuck, she looked so much like Holly with her hair bleached ice white and cut short. The similarities unsettled him.

Not even a week ago, one of his underworld contacts—the Liquidator—had called him with a strange request for a middle of the night rendezvous. Kostya had expected to be given interesting information or first dibs on virgin steel or maybe even the chance to pick up a little side work to earn some money for his retirement fund, but he’d been led to a hotel room where Lana, bruised and battered and rail thin, had been waiting for him. She had been clutching a note from the Liquidator explaining that he had found the young woman in the home of a target he’d just neutralized. After hearing her speak Russian, he had decided to hand her off to someone else.

It hadn’t taken Kostya long to work out that she had been trafficked from her home in Belgorod after answering one of those popular models wanted ads. She had been through hell in the last year, and eventually he would find the men who had done this to her and hurt them even worse.

Nikolai would have to be told about her soon—tomorrow, even. The boss would go fucking ballistic when he found out there was trafficking going on right under his nose. He didn’t draw many lines in the sand when it came to the illicit businesses other bosses ran but trafficking was punishable by death. Nikolai wouldn’t stand for it.

Kostya made a sweeping motion at Lana, silently telling her to get back to work. She had one purpose tonight. He wanted her to play the role of decoy to keep the cartel hitman busy here. In exchange for taking on this dangerous role and risking her life, he would give her an apartment, car, living expenses and a clean identity. He was a bastard for putting her in this position, especially after the ways she'd been abused and manipulated and debased, but keeping Holly safe was a goal he would achieve no matter the cost to himself or anyone else.

When he finally entered Holly's office, he hesitated. Disgust grabbed hold of him and twisted up his insides at the sight of her slumped back in her desk chair. She wore a non-rebreather mask, and the low hiss of oxygen was easy enough to hear.

Fucking monster, he silently berated. *Take a good fucking look and remember this the next time you get stupid ideas about having this woman.*

He moved toward Holly and checked her pulse. It beat steadily and strongly beneath his fingertips. Under his orders, Lobo had slipped into the salon earlier, purposely setting off the alarm so Fox could take control of the system and get a good recording of Holly's voice. He had given Lobo a precise dose of a hypnotic sedative to add to whatever Holly was drinking—usually soda or sweet tea—and demanded that she put Holly on supplemental oxygen as soon as she was out, just in case.

The medical files he had stolen spoke of no contraindications to the drugs he'd just forced on her, but he wasn't taking any chances. The pulse oximeter clipped to her finger assured him that she was breathing adequately but he would feel better once she was safely locked away in the supply room with Lobo playing nurse and bodyguard.

If anything happened to her tonight, he would have to follow her right into the grave. Holly had scratched away the protective armor he wore and had wrapped those beautifully manicured fingers around his heart. He had never allowed her to see what she meant to him. He couldn't risk alerting anyone to that vulnerability because of the danger it would pose to Holly. But she was it. She was the one—the *only* one.

And you can never have her. Never.

Very carefully, he placed the lightweight oxygen tank on Holly's lap and then gently lifted her from the chair. He cradled her fragile neck against the curve of his arm and carried her out of the office. The scent of her perfume and shampoo teased his nose.

The feel of her in his arms, of her slight weight and her heat, were a cruel reminder of all the things he would never experience with her.

This was as close as he would ever get to Holly—and she would never remember any of it.

But that was a good thing. He didn't want her to see or hear any of the violence that was about to happen here. He didn't want to break her heart or shatter her sense of reality by revealing all the secrets he knew about her. What would he say? Your father is a ruthless fucking mob don? Your mother is a liar?

If she even is your mother...

Kostya had his doubts that the woman Holly knew as her mother was her actual flesh and blood. Maksim had a type and a notorious penchant for criminally young blondes, but Frances Phillips had been at least forty when she'd supposedly become pregnant by the most powerful and dangerous man in the Moscow. It didn't make sense to Kostya.

"You brought the DNA kit?" Kostya asked as he placed Holly on the pallet of towels and arranged the oxygen tank on the floor next to her shoulder.

"Right here." Lobo placed it on the pallet before picking up an automatic blood pressure cuff. "Max said to get hair and saliva."

"Get it done. Quickly," he added before digging through his toolbox for the items he needed. Platinum blonde wig. Two pistols with silencers attached. Garrote wire for quick, stealth death. Small portable speaker.

"Do you think he'll do it?" Lobo pulled aside the oxygen mask long enough to swab the inside of Holly's cheek.

Kostya didn't have to ask which he she meant. Finn Connolly was supposed to come here tonight to kill Holly. There would be a cartel hitman following Finn to snip any loose ends and make sure the job was done. They would probably try to plant evidence to spark a war between the Russians and the Albanians or the Russians and the Hermanos crew to muddy the waters.

But he would kill the *sicario* first and anyone who came with him. If he somehow failed, Lobo would be the one to finish the job. He placed the second pistol next to her knee and caught her gaze for a moment. She glanced down at the weapon she knew how to handle with almost expert marksmanship and nodded.

Answering her question, he said, “He’ll do it.”

Lobo didn’t ask him how he could be so sure. She tucked the swab into the protective tube and sealed it tight. As he watched her pluck a few strands of hair from Holly’s head and stuff them into a small envelope, he thought of the contingency plan in place tonight. It was a plan he hadn’t mentioned to Lobo because she would give him that look, the one that made his chest tighten with something suspiciously akin to shame. He didn’t have time for that shit tonight.

As soon as she finished with the DNA samples, Lobo checked Holly’s blood pressure with the automatic cuff and read out the number to him. Reassured that she was stable despite the drugs, he reached into his toolbox and withdrew the syringe pre-loaded with a precise dose of a fast-acting sedative. “If she wakes, you hit her with this.”

“She won’t wake.” Nevertheless, Lobo took the syringe and set it aside.

“Don’t let her see your face.”

“I won’t.”

“Once I leave this room, no one opens this door again except for me. You put two bullets in the first chest you see. Understand?”

“Yes.” She held his gaze and calmly gave her answer. “I won’t fail you.”

A fatherly pride warmed him right to the core. Lobo was of an age that she could be his daughter. Their relationship over the last seven years mimicked that of a father and his daughter—if the father was a notorious killer and the daughter had a thirst for revenge.

Casting one final glance at Holly, he took the tools he needed and left the supply closet, securing the door firmly behind him and leaving the two women alone in the dark except for the glow sticks and flashlight. He was two steps from Holly’s office when two clicks echoed in his ear. He perked up to the warning of an incoming communication.

A moment later, Fox came across the airwaves. “Clone system is up and running.” After her multiple infiltrations and tests, she had duplicated the salon’s security system, creating a clone dummy that the cartel hitman could set off without alerting the police or the security company. It was one that she fully controlled and could manipulate if the hitman managed to hack it. She would allow them to see real-time video of the salon’s floor where Lana pretended to be Holly but they would see stock recorded loops of the hallways where he or Lobo might be seen. “And Jarhead is nine minutes out.”

“Received.” That part of the update provided a bit of relief. He no longer had to worry about ordering Artyom to do something truly unspeakable to force Finn to follow through with the plan.

Aware of the time crunch, he entered Holly’s office to set up the speaker, dim the lights and set the scene. He flicked the switch on the speaker. “I’m go for the recording.”

“I’m queued up and ready. Standby.”

After a quick glance around the office to ascertain whether the lights were dim enough, he pulled on the wig, removed the fake glasses and dropped into Holly’s chair. He smacked the spacebar on the keyboard to wake up her sleeping desktop and typed in the passcode Fox had temporarily placed on all the computers logged into the salon network.

Appreciating how seamless she made all this technological bullshit, he decided to pay her a little bonus on her birthday next week. She was so damn good that she made everything look so easy, but he had seen her in action and knew how hard she was working to make this operation a success.

Sitting there, waiting for the hit squad to set off the alarm to draw Holly—Lana—to her office where the instructions left for Finn had promised she would be, he thought of all the ways his plans could go to shit tonight.

If Finn made one misstep, he could catch a bullet. A wounded veteran with a very rich and very well-connected girlfriend was going to be a big fucking problem.

If the cartel hit squad was larger than he had anticipated, Lobo and Holly could be badly hurt.

If hit squad noticed Sunny trailing Finn or Fox’s van parked not far from here, they could be identified and marked for retribution or worse.

If Holly woke up too early, she might see or hear something that could never be forgotten. Would she run to the police? Would she run to her mother? Would Frances Phillips finally reveal her true self if Holly told her what had happened here tonight?

“It’s time.” Fox calmly warned.

All those troubling what-ifs fled his mind. He steadied his breaths and waited for it all to start. When the alarm blared, he swallowed slowly and adjusted his grip on the clean Grach he’d picked up for this job. He heard footsteps—Lana’s footsteps—that

paused in the hallway near the security system keypad. She banged on the box a few times and then punched in the passcode that Lobo had helped her memorize.

The phone on Holly's desk started to ring, the signal that would call Lana into the room. It would be Fox on the other end, of course. Lana jogged into the office, playing the role of Holly superbly, and slipped into the small closet on the left. He picked up the phone but said nothing as Fox played the recorded conversation from earlier. Her portion of the fake call that had aggravated Holly so much played over the phone line while Holly's replies came through the speaker.

The earbud crackled against his eardrum. "Jarhead is on site."

It wouldn't be long now. Sixty seconds? Seventy? One or two nicely placed shots—and it would all be done. He controlled his breathing and listened intently, waiting for the whisper of a footstep or the creak of a door.

There! Finally.

The office door opened slowly. He held his breath now, straining to hear over the recordings. The fine hair along the back of his neck stood on end. He glanced away from the computer screen to stare at the darkened corner of the room to give his eyes time to adjust before he had to make a good, clean shot.

A hand gripped the back of his chair and spun it around with a quick burst of force. Finn Connolly dropped down to one knee, moving out of the line of fire. Kostya spotted the dark figure in the doorway and centered his muzzle on the target. He squeezed off two quick shots and the man in the doorway, the *sicario* who had been sent to trail and kill Finn—and Holly if Finn failed—fell forward.

Kostya shoved out of the chair, sidestepped Finn and rushed the doorway. He kicked away the gun still held in the cartel hit man's hand and then crouched down to check the man's pulse. He found nothing and exhaled a pent-up breath. *It's done.*

"Is he dead?" His gun pointed safely at the ground, Finn rose to his feet with only the slightest wobble before quickly finding his balance on that prosthetic leg.

"Yes." He picked through the hitman's pockets but found nothing interesting or useful. The dead man was a professional and had nothing on him that could identify him or tie him back to the cartel.

Finn moved closer—and then stopped suddenly, his entire body going rigid. Kostya lifted his head just as Finn tapped his shoulder, the silent signal alerting him to the sounds of another person approaching.

Shit.

Even before Kostya could react, Finn displayed those finely honed Marine instincts and grabbed the possible assailant the moment he appeared in the doorway. Finn slammed the man into the wall and pressed his forearm across the man's throat.

“Hey! Hey!” Hector Salas lifted his hands while croaking the words.

Finn spotted the gun in Hector's hand and stripped him of it before pointing his own weapon on the cartel's new boss. “You have three seconds to tell me why you're here.”

Fuck. The last thing Finn needed was to make an enemy of Hector Salas, a man secretly related to Finn's new girlfriend, Hadley. Whether Finn was aware of that connection or not, Kostya couldn't say.

Trying to head off a disaster, he tapped Finn's hand. “Lower your weapon.”

As if realizing he didn't know the full score, Finn frowned and did as instructed.

Kostya glared at Hector. “You're late.

“It's been a busy night.”

He could only imagine. “Did you get it done?”

“It's finished.” Hector slashed his hand through the air. “It's over.”

He harrumphed and nudged the dead man with the toe of his boot. “What do you want to do with this one?”

“That's your specialty, not mine,” Hector replied easily.

“That's right,” Kostya answered dryly. “Betrayal and treachery are yours.”

Hector flipped him off, but Kostya ignored it. He noticed that pensive expression on Finn's face and decided it was time to get the injured vet out of there before he started piecing things together. The less he knew the better.

As if sharing his thoughts, Hector gestured toward the door. “You should go, Finn. This isn't the sort of night you want to be without an alibi. Get back to the hospital. Hadley needs you. This is done. You're free of whatever obligation you had to the cartel.”

“Wait.” Kostya reached into his pocket for one of his special cards. He handed it to Finn. “Consider it your insurance policy. Whatever you need, you call me. I owe you a debt.”

Finn took the card and tucked it into his back pocket. He glanced at the dead body on the ground, shook his head and left the building without saying another word. Kostya hoped it was the last he ever saw of the former Marine.

Alone with Hector, Kostya glanced at the usurper who had led tonight’s coup. “You should get out of here, too.”

Hector’s gaze drifted down to the dead man bleeding out on the tile floor. The whitish blue light from the computer screen illuminated his confused expression. “There were supposed to be two of them. I got that information right from El Jefe’s mouth. So he either lied to my face or this one killed the other one before the job started to keep the money.” He paused and grimaced. “Or we’re missing a man.”

His pulse pounding now, Kostya tilted his head down toward the ID badge dangling from the front of his coveralls and rushed out of the office. “Did we miss someone?”

“Jarhead was trailed by one man.” Fox answered him quickly amid the tap of keyboard keys. “Sunny didn’t see anyone else. I haven’t picked up anything in the salon or at the rear or front entrances.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fox mentioned the entrances, and he realized he had forgotten to lock the front door of the coffee shop or set the alarm. “Do we have eyes in the coffee shop?”

“There’s no video link there. It’s just straight security with motion sensors.” *Tap. Tap. Tap.* “There’s a traffic cam with a view of the coffee shop. Let me see if I can—hell! It’s been knocked off line.”

Shit.

Fearing the worst, Kostya reached the door of the supply closet and rapidly knocked five times to make sure Lobo wouldn’t put a bullet in him the second he opened it. He twisted the handle and pushed the door open.

The scent of blood and worse hit him right in the face.

An invisible fist twisted his gut. He slapped at the wall to find the light and blinked away the momentary blindness from the sudden blast of brightness.

When his eyes focused on the bloody, messy scene before him, Kostya expelled an agonized breath. *Fuck.*

It seemed Lobo had a stomach for wet work, after all.