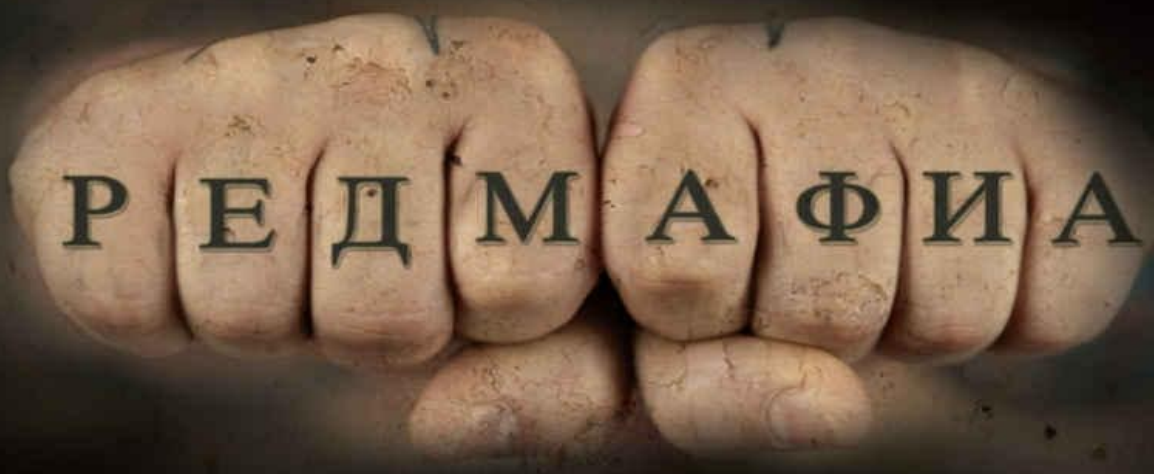


JONAS SAUL

Book Three of the Mafia Trilogy



The Russian Mafia had no idea who they were trying to kill.

The Blade is back...in The Scythe

THE SCYTHE

The Scythe

by

Jonas Saul

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The Scythe

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Chapter 1

Yuri Pavel sat in his palatial home in Toronto, sipped his vodka neat, and stared at the TV as broadcast the hell falling down upon his territory.

“I will kill them all,” he shouted at the television.

He picked up his plate of *piroque*—Russian pastry shells filled with spicy pork and topped with dollop of sour cream—and took a large bite.

“We are live at the scene of yet another raid on the Russian Mafia’s strip club called *The Mistress*,” newswoman Juliet Lawrence said into the camera, a black microphone in her hand. “Inspector Carl Michaels, what can you tell us about the current raids?”

A strong man with a jutting jaw, standing in full RCMP regalia, with his hands clasped in front of him, moved closer to the microphone.

“After the explosion at the factory in Mississauga the other day, we have ramped up our attack on the Russian Mafia. Just as we did in Ontario and Quebec years ago against the biker clubs, we’re raiding all their known establishments and hideouts.”

“And what are you hoping to find?”

“As it stands now, Ontario is the money-laundering capital of organized crime in the entire world. We have dealt with the Italian Mafia, the Triads and the bikers for many years, but the Russian Mafia are smarter and stronger. They don’t seem to care who gets hurt. We lost a few good men in that explosion in Mississauga. Our goal is to shut them down and in doing so, we’re also looking for Arkady.”

“Just Arkady, Inspector? A man with one name?”

He shook his head. “We only have the name he’s known to go by.”

The newswoman pulled the mic back to her mouth. “Why him specifically?”

“Our wiretapping, in conjunction with the FBI, has led us to believe Arkady was behind the explosion in Mississauga.”

“Can you tell us more about what happened at the warehouse in Mississauga and why there is a publication ban?”

“All I can say is that the RCMP and the FBI are working together to catch as many of the Russian *made men* as we can and process them through the system. We will deport them, jail them, and, or, press charges that will stick. This has to stop.”

“Are there more raids scheduled to take place?”

“Yes, but where and when won’t be released.”

~~“Last question, Inspector. The media has talked about a Canadian man by the name of Darwin Kostas, also known as The Blade. Lately he has led his own crusade against the Mafia. Rumor has it that Kostas was in the warehouse when it was destroyed. Can you verify that for us? If not, can you tell us where he might be and how he’s involved?”~~

“I have no comment on the whereabouts of a private citizen. Thank you.” The inspector walked away from the screen.

“There you have it. This week’s raid on two warehouses in Toronto and a shipping company in Quebec at the Port of Montreal, and now we have this strip club, The Mistress, as another Russian Mafia establishment. Behind me, the raid is coming to an end as the female dancers are being escorted out to RCMP vans. My name is Juliet Lawrence—”

Yuri turned the TV off. He wanted to throw his glass of vodka at it.

“What have you done, Arkady?” he whispered.

After refilling his glass, he buzzed the front door and asked Sergei to come up to the den. Minutes later there was a soft knock on the door.

“Enter.”

Sergei Ivankov opened the door, slipped in and closed it behind him. Dressed in his finest suit, and always, he almost busted out of his jacket. The barrel-chested Sergei had been a prize fighter in Russia for twelve years. Yuri had visited Russia seven years ago and offered Sergei a deal he couldn’t refuse: flying him over to act as his personal security. He became known on the streets as The Scythe.

“Come. Sit.”

For a big man, Sergei walked lightly across the carpet and chose to stand on the far side of the couch. He crossed his arms and waited.

“Sit,” Yuri insisted.

“Sir, I throw up at the smell of pirogue. I need to stand back here.”

Yuri waved off his comment. “We have a problem.”

Sergei waited.

“I need to find out if Darwin Kostas survived the explosion at the warehouse. If he is alive, I need to have him located.”

Sergei nodded. He wasn’t much for words.

“If so,” Yuri continued, “I need to talk to him. You understand? Do whatever it takes.”

Yuri sipped his drink. That was one thing he loved about Sergei. He could explain everything he

wanted without interruption. If Sergei needed more he would ask at the end.

“Also, I want you to arrange a sit-down with the Italians and the Chinese. We will have two meetings. The first is to be held at the golf course convention center. Have the address distributed through my restaurant on Queen Street. The second will be held three months from now. Let the Italians pick the spot for that one. Send word that I want Arkady there, too. Got it?”

“Yes, boss,” Sergei said.

“Good. But before the first meeting I need to know the whereabouts of Darwin Kostas. I want him brought here alive. Understood?”

Sergei adjusted his suit and made a small nod of his head.

“Good. Get back to me as soon as you have something. It is time to end all this fighting. This war can’t continue.” He looked up at Sergei as he downed the rest of the vodka. “I have a plan for Darwin that he won’t resist. Then, when the media find his body, along with Arkady’s, the raids will stop and our business can continue as usual.”

He got up and headed over to refill his glass.

“Go, Sergei. We are out of time. Set up the meeting with the Italians and Chinese and find me Darwin Kostas. He needs to die painfully and publicly. For the sake of the Italians and the Chinese.”

Chapter 2

The emotional swamp, the absolutely desperate mental existence that had been Darwin Kostas sleeping state began to wake. He felt the air on his skin, the breath in his nose and the pain, mostly the pain.

The nightmare came in snippets. The warehouse, the initiation rite and the explosion. Arkad setting him up to have the Chinese angry at him and killing the hookers. Darwin jumping in the bus. The explosion, mostly the explosion came to him. The fear, hoping he would walk away to be with his wife again.

The horror came back and he wanted the release that sleep offered. If only he could go back under. Stay under.

Thoughts of Rosina brought him up.

Moaning did nothing to ease the pain. It only brought on a flurry of movement around him. The presence of people moving to and fro close to him made his head ache. He wanted to tell them to stop but his mouth didn't work. He willed his eyes to open, but something held them closed.

What the hell has happened to me?

“He's trying to wake up, Doctor.” A female voice.

“Okay, that's good.” A firm male voice. “Remove the tape from his eyes.”

The tape was torn from his right eye, then his left.

“Dim the lights,” the doctor said.

Darwin blinked. He opened his eyes to slits and waited.

“Take your time, Mr. Kostas. It's okay.” Then, after a pause. “Nurse, remove the tube from his mouth. He may want to say something.”

Darwin closed his eyes and swam backwards to avoid the pain, the harshness of being alive. He had felt so good to be under, so light. He had dreamt of holding his wife's hand and walking in fields of sunflowers basking in the sun.

He drifted back out and let the flow pull him down until he was gone.

Darwin opened his eyes slowly and scanned the hospital room. Night pressed against the window to his right, darkening the curtains. A single light on a table shined in the corner. Beside it sat a uniformed RCMP officer, a magazine in his hands. He hadn't looked up yet. Darwin took the chance to examine the room.

No flowers. A desolate hospital room, ugly blue walls, medical cabinets with glass doors and

supplies within. Nothing comforting. He looked down the length of his body and saw all the right parts where they were supposed to be.

The pain in his head had subsided some since he tried to wake earlier. He moved his fingers and toes without hesitation.

Good, everything still works.

He rolled his head over the pillow. The cop stared at him, the magazine on his lap.

“I’ll get the doctor,” he said.

The cop walked to the door, opened it, whispered something to someone outside and then closed the door. He retook his seat and stared at Darwin.

Darwin blinked and looked up at the ceiling tiles. Rosina wasn’t in the room with him and nothing revealed that she lingered in the cafeteria or the hallway waiting for him to wake. He couldn’t tell that she didn’t know he was here. That meant they didn’t know where she was.

He thought about Rosina and the life they had dreamed of and how it would never be possible. Darwin had too many enemies. Too many people knew his name. The Italian and Russian Mafia had been trying to kill him and now the Triads would weigh in on the bidding of who would get to kill him first.

He wished it would all go away. His luck would run out one day and he couldn’t face that day if it meant Rosina would get hurt.

The door opened and a tall man in a white lab coat entered, followed by two nurses and two men in suits.

“Good evening, Darwin,” the doctor said. Darwin recognized his voice from when he partially woke before. “How are you feeling?”

Darwin nodded with a slight dip of his head as everyone filed in.

“I’m Doctor Jameson and these are nurses, Jessica and Mary. You’ve had quite a traumatic experience. Can you talk?”

He opened his mouth and rolled his tongue around. “Water.”

“Of course. Mary?”

The older blonde nurse grabbed a glass, brought it over and lowered a straw to Darwin’s mouth. He sipped slowly as instructed by the doctor.

After the nurse pulled the straw out, the doctor asked, “Is that better? Can you talk now?”

“Yes ...”

“Good. These men behind me are with the FBI and the man in the corner is RCMP. The FBI has a few questions for you, but first I’d like to explain what happened.”

Darwin turned his head sideways and looked up at the doctor, waiting for him to continue.

“You hit your head pretty bad. I understand there was an explosion of some kind. When you got here, it was touch and go. There was swelling on your brain. I had to induce a coma to get the swelling down, which has worked. But I have to say, you’re quite the fighter.”

“How ... so?” Darwin asked.

“You were in an induced coma and you tried to wake from it. Yesterday morning, you almost opened your eyes, but then we lost you again. That’s a rare event. These drugs are seriously strong.”

Darwin waited for him to go on as he wasn’t too interested in what the authorities had to say. They were probably here for a statement to explain what happened before they listed all the charges Darwin was going to be arrested for.

The doctor stepped closer and leaned against the bed. “The swelling centered on the brain stem near the hypothalamus and the amygdala part of the brain. Are you aware of those areas?”

“No ...”

“The hypothalamus is one of the busiest parts of the brain as it regulates hunger, thirst, response to pain, anger, and aggression. When you asked for a drink, that tells me it’s still working. Are you following?”

“Yes.”

“Good. The hypothalamus also deals with breathing, blood pressure and response to emotional situations. The amygdala is an area of the brain that deals with fear conditioning. Do you know what that is?”

“Please ... explain.”

“Fear conditioning is phobias, really. It deals with the development of phobias. It also deals with positive conditioning, but mostly phobias.” He leaned in closer. “Now, if you have any phobias, they may not be any change, or they may have disappeared. Your aggression may have been altered, too. The swelling has gone down, but it’s hard to tell if there was any damage to that area of your brain. I’m going to have to ask you to take it easy for a while.” He stepped away from the bed and raised his voice. “You’re going to have to stay bedridden for a few more days without too much excitement so we can monitor your brain waves and—”

“Rosina?”

“Excuse me,” the doctor said. “I’m sorry, I missed that.”

“Rosina?”

“Is that your mother, your wife?” the doctor asked.

“His wife,” one of the two men in suits responded for Darwin. He met Darwin’s gaze. “You want to know where she is?”

Darwin nodded.

“So do we.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” the doctor interjected. “That kind of talk could upset my patient and I won’t allow it. He has been through a traumatic injury, intensive care for over a week and he’s now just waking from an induced coma. Your questions must be brief and not confrontational or I’ll have you escorted out of the building.”

The suit raised both hands. “Take it easy, Doc. We’re on the same page here. But you’re going to have to wait outside while we question Darwin.”

The doctor moved back to Darwin’s bedside. “Are you feeling up to it?”

Darwin nodded. “Yes.” *Better to get it over with.*

“Okay, but I’ll be just outside that door. If you need me for any reason, just press this.” The doctor slipped a button attached to a thick wire into Darwin’s hand. “Press this and I’ll come running.” He turned to the men in suits. “If you upset him, that machine monitoring his blood pressure will send an alarm to the nurse’s station. Then I will have no choice but to have you removed until my patient is up and walking on his own. Are we clear?”

None of the suits moved in any way to acknowledge what the doctor said. He didn’t appear to notice the snub.

He motioned for the nurses to follow him and exited the room without another word.

All Darwin could think of was Rosina—what had happened to her, where she was. Alive or dead. He wanted to cry and curl into a corner of the bed to hide under the covers at how unfair it all was.

The suits moved closer, one on each side of the bed. The chair in the corner by the lamp was empty. He was alone with the FBI.

“Darwin Kostas, I’m Special Agent Kirk Williams. We need to discuss with you—”

“I’m sorry,” Darwin cut him off. “About ... Greg Stinsen. He was,” Darwin cleared his throat. “My friend. He helped me in Rome, Florida, and back here in Toronto.”

Williams looked at his partner, then back at Darwin. “We’re sorry, too.” He gestured as his partner introduced the other man. “This is Agent Scott.”

“Rosina? What happened?”

“Let’s exchange information, deal?”

“Deal.”

“You tell me something I want to know and I’ll tell you what we have.”

“Okay.”

“What happened in that warehouse?”

Darwin told them as much as he could remember about how Arkady tried to trick him into believing that he was being allowed to join the Bratva, the Russian Mafia. How they had done the ritual ceremony and then drove him to that mall. He was meant to be killed there, but escaped and stole a city bus to drive back to the warehouse which was rigged to blow after Darwin answered the cell phone Arkady had left behind. Arkady’s men in Florida were trying to locate and kill Darwin and his wife, Rosina.

“The last I remember was Arkady, on the phone. He didn’t have Rosina at the time. His men weren’t far behind her.” Darwin cleared his throat. “Now it’s your turn.”

“That was over a week ago,” Williams said. “Agent Carson Dodge was shot three times and remains in a Florida hospital. Rosina and Arkady have disappeared. No one has seen either one. And the best part is everyone thinks you’re dead.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone. Even Carson Dodge. Anyone who knew you or was close to you. It’s for your own safety.”

“What happens if Rosina gets away? It’ll crush her if she thinks I’m dead.”

“As soon as we have her, we’ll tell her the truth.”

Darwin turned his head and twisted as far away from the men as he could to hide his grief. Where was his wife? What had happened to her? She could be anywhere—dead in the Florida swamps, captive of a maniacal killer or starving and still on the run. Why did this have to happen? They were in separate countries, a three-hour plane ride away from each other. There was no way Darwin could protect her from here.

“Darwin, we’re going to need a full statement.”

He didn’t look at the men. “Not right now. Tell me what else you have. How did the Russians find the safe house where Rosina was being kept? I understood it was classified because of what happened the last time.” He rolled over and eyed Williams up and down. He couldn’t help but feel anger toward the FBI who had betrayed him time and again. “Wasn’t it only Carson and Greg who knew where she was?”

“That’s what we understood.”

“So, what went wrong?”

~~Williams looked at his partner for support. Agent Scott said, "We're looking into that."~~

"Well, fucking look harder," Darwin shouted. "There's a scared lonely girl out there trying to stay alive while every fucking Mafia boss in North America is after her. Isn't it your job to protect and serve or something?" He leaned back on the pillow, his anger spent as the pain in his head rose. The throbbing angered him further. He clenched his teeth and breathed deep, trying not to lose control. It would be the wrong thing to do just ten minutes out of a coma.

"Maybe we should come back after you've slept more," Williams said. "We need a detailed statement and descriptions of all the people you came into contact with. You got a rare glimpse into their warehouse and what went on there." Williams adjusted his suit jacket. "We lost three RCMP officers from the emergency task force in that explosion. Inside the building, they found a Chinese man who appeared to be dead before the bomb went off and four female bodies we're still trying to identify. A couple of them fell under the bus you were driving. You need to rethink your position here and watch the anger, Darwin. We have enough to charge you on multiple counts of manslaughter, but until we get all the facts we're willing to work with you. Do you understand what I've explained to you?"

Darwin wanted to get out of the hospital bed, lift Williams over his head and shove him through the hospital window. Arkady killed those people while he was trying to kill Darwin. It was a miracle that Darwin was still alive. How dare they entertain charging him with anything?

"This is a joke," Darwin said, his voice a little above a whisper.

"Let's go," Williams said to his partner. Near the door, he turned back. "I'll excuse your anger and the pain killers talking."

Darwin was alone. Seconds later, the door opened again. The RCMP officer returned and walked up to his bedside.

"I gotta stick around in here," he said.

"Do what you have to do."

"Those guys are assholes, eh?" The cop seemed sincere. "I mean, you're a hero. How the hell did you get out of that warehouse?" He stopped talking, moved the chair and cleared his throat. "But the best part is the media don't know shit."

"What? Why not?"

"There's a publication ban on the details of what happened at the warehouse."

"A publication ban? Why?"

"The authorities have been conducting raids on warehouses, strip clubs and all known hangouts of the Russian Mafia looking for Arkady, but nothing has turned up. I guess the higher-ups don't want anyone finding out you're still alive."

Great.

“Anyway, I’m sure it’s just a matter of time before they find Arkady, but if you ask me, he’s fled the country.”

Darwin’s eyes were getting heavy.

“Listen,” the cop continued. “I’ve got a friend in the bureau down in Florida. Let me give him a call to see if they’ve found out anything on Rosina and I’ll let you know when you wake up. Deal?”

Darwin nodded. “Thanks.”

He shut his eyes.

The hospital room door opened. His doctor walked in.

“You okay, Darwin?”

“He’s getting sleepy,” the cop answered.

Darwin realized as he drifted off that he didn’t get the cop’s name.

The doctor’s voice droned on as Darwin sunk lower. Something about what happened when Darwin got angry, and what set him off. The cop said he wasn’t in the room.

Darwin wondered why he didn’t have a reaction to the IV in his arm. He knew it was there. It was a sharp object—something he would’ve violently protested in the past, but barely noticed now. When he first woke, only a single lamp was on in the corner by the cop. Otherwise the room was pretty dark and the doctor kept it that way to be better on his eyes. Despite his fear of the dark and, he felt no inner reaction to it.

Could his phobias have been cured? If so, how come his temper flared so easily? Maybe it had something to do with what the doctor said about the aggression part of the brain being affected.

He drifted deeper.

In his mind’s eye, he saw Rosina standing in the Rome airport and wished they could go back to the innocent days ...

Chapter 3

Darwin hated physiotherapy but he had to do it after being stuck in bed for ten days. The nurses had exercised his legs daily, but he still couldn't quite walk on his own. By tomorrow, he might still have a slight limp but he would be good enough to walk without crutches.

The RCMP cop he'd met the first day was John Cavendish. He worked the night shift, guarding the inside of Darwin's room. That night he was supposed to have information about Rosina for him. Information that the FBI assholes, Williams and his buddies, weren't relinquishing.

Darwin promised them a full statement tomorrow, after the stitches in his head were removed and he was discharged from the hospital. Doctor Jameson had said he'd healed fast. Special Agent Williams planned to pick him up and escort him to the local branch of the RCMP where they would take his statement and then secretly put him up in a hotel until they learned more about Arkady. Possibly they would fly him back to Florida so he could be close when they found Rosina.

Darwin settled back into bed and ate the bland hospital Jell-O and soup. He debated his next move. Could he really be reunited with his wife and they'd ride off into the sunset? Maybe they could go to Italy where her parents were from or Greece where his dad was from, and live in a small village far away from Mafia turf wars and hit men hunting them. Somewhere so far removed even the FBI wouldn't be able to find them.

He was pretty sure Rosina was alive. She was a survivor. She probably found an abandoned building to hole up in. As soon as he got to Florida, he would retrace her steps from the safe house and find her. He was the only one who knew how she would think.

As soon as the authorities found Arkady, it would truly be over. With Darwin's testimony, Arkady would go away for a long time. Fuccini and Gambino were dead. Once Arkady was gone, Darwin and Rosina could live the lives they deserved.

He pushed the remains of his meal away and checked the bedside clock. The cop who worked the day shift didn't talk much. After dinner, the day cop got up, gathered his novel and magazine, his garbage from lunch, and left the room without a goodbye.

Five minutes later, Cavendish entered the room, a large smile on his face. He nodded at Darwin and set his things by the chair in the corner.

He looked at the door to make sure it was closed and then walked up to Darwin's bedside.

"I've got good news for you."

Darwin pushed himself up in the bed, eager to hear what John had found out.

"Although you may not be happy."

"Just tell me, John."

"My source knows where Rosina will be—"

“What? Where?”

“Keep your voice down,” John said. “She’s here, in Toronto.”

“How’s that?”

John shrugged. “No idea. Maybe Arkady’s men picked her up in Florida and that’s how she made it here.”

At the mention of Arkady’s name, stones weighed down Darwin’s stomach. “Is she hurt? Alive?”

“She’s very alive. In fact she’s having dinner as Yuri Pavel’s guest at his restaurant on Queen Street tonight in about,” he checked his watch, “two hours.”

Darwin frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Look, Darwin, I don’t have all the details so I’m going to have to guess a bit here.” John looked at the door again, then back at Darwin. “Arkady is reportedly working for Yuri. I’m going to guess that Arkady’s men grabbed Rosina and brought her here like they did you.”

Darwin grabbed the water glass beside the bed and took a drink to satiate his suddenly dry mouth.

“Then he handed *The Blade*’s,” he said with air quotes, “wife to Yuri as a goodwill gesture.”

“Why goodwill?”

“Because Yuri is pissed with all the raids happening in his territory ...”

“The raids you told me about?”

John nodded.

“Wow, I’m happy to see the RCMP working with the FBI. It looks like progress is taking place.”

“They have to do something because Ontario’s primary multi-force organized crime agency, the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit, is being reorganized and possibly dismantled soon. Without the RCMP and the FBI working together on this, nothing would be getting done.”

Darwin gestured. “Get me back to Rosina.”

“My source said that Yuri is keeping her safe and healthy until he can confirm you’re dead. You know, in case he needs her to get to you. Sorry, but that’s my best guess. Since there’s a publication ban on what happened at the warehouse and who died there, no one on the street has confirmation about you. As far as the street knows, you just disappeared.”

Darwin dropped back onto the bed. Would it ever end? How could a known Russian Mafia boss named Yuri Pavel be able to parade Darwin’s wife around like a trophy and the law did nothing about it?

~~“What’s being done about it?” Darwin asked.~~

“What do you mean?”

Darwin glared at him. “How can he have her and no one arrest him?”

“As far as the law is concerned, she’s with him willingly. She comes and goes without restraint nor does she call out for help. Based on that, there’s nothing we can do.”

“But she doesn’t want to be with him.”

“I know that. You know that. Yuri has something on her to make her so compliant. Maybe she’s waiting to see if you died. Then she’ll decide what to do. Who knows?”

“You have no idea how fucked this is.”

“True, but there’s something you can do about it.”

Darwin kicked his legs out from under the covers and slipped off the bed. He steadied himself.

“You want the crutches?”

“No.”

He took a step. Then another, using the bed for support. At the end of the bed, he let go and his unsteady legs made it across the room to the closet without falling.

“Tell me what I can do about it while I get dressed.”

“You can go get her.”

“That’s what I plan on doing.”

“But you don’t get discharged until tomorrow,” John said.

“Wrong. I’m leaving now. My head’s fine. My legs will support me. I’m ready.”

“What do you think you can do in your condition? You’re unsteady. You can barely walk.”

“I can go and get my wife,” Darwin said as he let the hospital gown slip off his shoulders and hit the floor. “I will get Rosina and we will leave North America. That’s the only way for this madness to stop.”

“Darwin, if you walk into Yuri’s restaurant alone, he will kill you. Actually,” John gestured with both hands in the air, “if you walk in with backup, they will probably kill you and your backup.”

Darwin slipped the T-shirt over his head and started on his jeans. “Then tell me what options you have.”

“File a missing persons report for Rosina with the FBI. Explain that you have an unnamed source confirming Rosina is being held against her will with Yuri Pavel.”

“And you think the FBI will help us? After all that has happened?”

John looked at the floor. “Right, sorry.”

Darwin finished dressing and walked to the door. “What’s the name of the restaurant?”

“Wait a second,” John said as he walked up to Darwin. “You can’t leave.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re in protective custody.”

“Protective custody? Have I been charged with a crime?”

“No.”

“Then you and I both know that they can’t hold me.”

“True, but charges are pending.”

“No, they’re only holding them over my head until I give them a statement and everything calms down. We all know the Russian Mafia attacked the safe house where Greg and Carson were holding my wife. At the same time that was happening, Arkady planned my execution. I got away and Arkady blew up his warehouse. That’s it in a nutshell. I’m a free man. Haven’t Rosina and I been persecuted enough?”

“Look, I’m with you, man. But even if you walked out of this hospital and made it to the restaurant, Yuri would have you dead before sunrise. I can’t have that on my conscience.”

“John.” Darwin put a hand on John’s shoulder. “I’m leaving in the morning or I’m leaving now. What’s the difference? They can only hold me so long. I’m a Canadian citizen and can go freely.” He let go of John’s shoulder. “Is this source of yours reliable?”

“He is.”

“I have information on the whereabouts of my wife. Do you think I would just let it go?”

John shook his head.

“Exactly,” Darwin said. “What’s the name of the restaurant?”

“The Russian Quartet at Queen and Jarvis. He flies Russian singers in to entertain all the time. It’s famous because it’s one of the few Russian restaurants that has entertainment.” As a side note, he added, “I’ve lived here all my life. Actually grew up off Jarvis Street, not five blocks from there.”

“It’s only a fifteen-minute walk from here. Maybe twenty minutes for me.” Darwin waited

holding the door handle. He lowered his voice. "What am I to expect when I walk by the guy outside this door?"

"Won't happen. He'll call it in to the FBI and they'll ask to have you detained until they get back."

"Well, I'm leaving. Are you going to help me, or do I have to do this all by myself?"

They stared at each other for a long moment. John broke the silence.

"I'll get him to take a piss break. Then you walk out. When he comes back I'll ask if he saw you exercising your legs. All I know is you went out for a walk to circle the floor. That'll give you the time it takes for the man to piss. Can you get out of the hospital in the time it takes a man to piss?"

Darwin nodded. "Do it. And thanks."

John shrugged. "I have no idea what you're thinking of doing, but I can't see it working out for you."

"That's my concern. Just get that cop off my door."

John moved around Darwin to open the door and then stopped. He pulled a piece of metal out of his back pocket.

"Here, take this."

Darwin took the proffered brass knuckles. "Why do you have these?"

"Don't worry about that. I took them off some punk yesterday. I've carried them around since and thought maybe you could use them. It might help if you get in trouble. Just make sure there's a lot of people wherever you are. Yuri won't shoot you in front of too many witnesses. Once you get Rosina, he'll send people to follow you. Lose the tail and you're free."

They let one last look pass between them.

"I don't agree with this," John said. "But good luck."

John opened the door and stepped out. Darwin waited by bouncing from one foot to the other, getting his legs moving and ready for the walk. This was his chance. Rosina was close. He would wait in, get her from the restaurant and walk out. If anyone stepped in his way he would shout *fire* or pull the fire alarm or call the police beforehand or just wait until she leaves the table to go to the bathroom. Whatever happened, he was going to get his wife.

The door opened and John stepped back inside the room.

"He's on the phone. As soon as his call is done, he said I could cover him for a bathroom break."

"Okay."

“That gives me a chance to tell you about a case we had five years ago.” He paused, cleared his throat. ~~“A stupid man, who didn’t realize what he was doing, threatened Yuri in front of his soldiers once.”~~

“And.”

“They grabbed his wife at home and poured sulfuric acid on her face, burning her eyes out. The twenty-four-year old model’s face turned to a wrinkled, burned up glob. As far as I know she committed suicide a year later after plastic surgery failed to allow her to go out in public again.”

“Brutal. Horrible. How is it men like Yuri aren’t in prison or dead?”

“That’s not all.”

“What?”

“Part of the man was found in a field in Hamilton and the other parts were found in his car trunk.”

“You mean they dismembered him?”

John’s face hardened. “Not exactly.”

“Then what?” Darwin stopped bouncing and sat in the chair.

“About thirty pounds of flesh was cut off the man while he was still alive. Before that, a blowtorch was applied to his face and his genitals. After burning his cock and balls off, they shoved them inside his burned mouth. He was suspended to the side of a barn with wire where he was blinded by the blow torch and tortured for several days before they finally shot him fifty times. All that because he threatened Yuri.” John leaned against the door, a hand on his stomach. “This is what they do.”

“Then maybe I should walk into the restaurant and kill him. He deserves to die.”

“Sure, but then you spend the rest of your life in prison.”

“Might be better than spending the rest of my life looking over my shoulder.”

“You won’t survive prison. The Mafia has the prison system sewn up. You get inside for offing Yuri and you’ll be knifed within the first week.”

“Thanks for being so bleak. You’re a pal.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Coming,” John said. To Darwin, he said, “Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent.”

John slipped out the door. A moment later, Darwin heard John's knock.

He opened the door.

"You've got maybe four or five minutes. Staircase is over there." John pointed to the exit sign.

Darwin walked by him, hit the stairs and made it to the main floor without encountering anyone. He opened the stairwell door slowly and stepped out. The hallway was empty, the gift shop already closed. He walked toward the exit sign where the emergency doors led outside.

Once outside, he fluffed his hair up and kept his head down as he walked, and sometimes limped south on University Avenue toward Queen Street.

He was quickly lost in downtown Toronto's evening foot traffic, but one thing kept nagging him.

Why would John, an RCMP officer, carry brass knuckles on him? Could that be part of the police inventory, like handcuffs?

Something told Darwin it wasn't.

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