

*****Special Access*****

DELTA: REDEMPTION

CRISTIN HARBER

CHAPTER ONE

“NO!” *Roar!* “NO!”

Ten little girls, ranging from junior kindergarteners to second graders, slammed their heels down. They gritted their teeth and pushed both hands in front of them.

“Good, girls. Keep your eyes open.” Victoria Massey paced the front of the focused line, mimicking their efforts, her hands also outstretched. “Remember to push with the bottom of your hands. You won’t get in trouble.”

A few kids tried the move over and over again. A couple recalibrated their insole heel step and smashed the floor of the community center at Sweet Hills’ town hall. From the side, the row of parents looked on in rapt attention, both uneasy that this was the world that caused self-defense classes for kids to be necessary and proud that their little girls were taking to it without the bashful, ridiculous thought that *girls can’t do that*.

Still, it had to stay age-appropriate and fun. Victoria walked to the side and grabbed the face mask made to look like a yellow smiley emoticon. “Remember, just because I look friendly”—she knocked the cheesy face with a closed fist to show it was padded—“doesn’t mean I’m a good person. Is anyone allowed to touch you without permission?”

“No!” the class yelled.

“Should a grown-up ever ask you for directions?” Victoria asked, tilting the cartoon-like face back and forth like she was bantering with the kids.

“No! Keep walking!” They didn’t even giggle, and she appreciated they’d listened and let it sink in.

“What if it’s a secret?” She leaned forward as if she was telling one.

“No secrets!”

“Okay, line up single file.” Victoria walked over and donned the rest of her protective gear. They might be kids, but she’d taught them to fight like hell with the expectation that they could. *And they could.* She needed that layer of foam.

After slipping on the boots and padding, she stepped to the first girl who had a huge smile on her face. “Ready?”

The smile turned into focus, and Victoria couldn’t have been prouder as the kindergartener nodded.

“Remember, I don’t know you right now.”

“I know. I remember.”

Last week’s class had done a great job their first time with the role-play. “Hey, sweetie. Have you seen a little puppy? I thought I saw him run down the street? But…” She looked around. “I can’t find him.”

The little girl walked away quickly, and Victoria followed.

“Sweetie?” She carefully placed a hand on the girl, cupping the kid against her hip.

“No!” The little girl spun in, both hands smashed together in an open-handed punch to Victoria’s crotch then ran away. “No!”

The move had a surprising amount of force behind it, throwing her off balance. “Good job.”

The parents and kids both clapped as the girl ran to the end of the line.

After the remaining kids did their role-play, they ran over to the table where the families had brought snacks and drinks for afterward. Victoria pulled off her gear. The mayor came over, all smiles. His boy had been in her class the day before.

“I can’t wait to have the joint class.” He turned around and saw the little girls, who were warriors mere moments ago, back to being little girls. “It’s like they take everything you taught them and tuck it in the back of their heads.”

“That’s the point.”

He nodded and popped a homemade snickerdoodle in his mouth. “You talk to the sheriff’s office lately?”

“Yup.”

“I will *not* let gunrunners take over the outskirts of my town just because they’ve found a nice partnership.”

“What is it that you want?” she asked.

“Lee Marrow is a pain in my ass. You know what he does?”

“Mayor, with all due respect, what other bounty officers do is *their* business.”

“Cutting deals—”

“We all cut deals.”

“The dirty kind, Victoria. Not like the ones you work out. I get the good-old-boys club. But there’s a line, and at some point, I have to call a spade a spade. He’s jumping in bed with the Russians, with Mayhem, with everyone.”

“The Russians are starting to be a big problem. That’s what I hear.” She tried to watch him out of the corner of her eye. Mayhem had always been Sweet Hills’s biggest concern, but now there was a new player in town. The status quo might not be the same anymore if what Victoria heard was true.

The mayor shrugged, avoiding eye contact. “I don’t see the gunrunners’ future as profitable as Mayhem’s.”

Fair enough. The Russians were newer on the scene and rumored to stick to guns, whereas the motorcycle club dabbled in everything and were a multi-club force with a national network. Strictly from a business point of view, the mayor was probably right. “I plan to keep on keeping on.”

“You know what bail-jumper Lee’s hunting?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” she mumbled, stuffing her mouth with a snickerdoodle. If she couldn’t speak, she wouldn’t get herself into a pickle.

“Sheriff heard some scuttlebutt that—”

“Scuttlebutt, really?”

“Now you sound like my wife.”

“Marjorie knows when you sound ridiculous, sir.” Victoria took a step back, wanting another snickerdoodle more than Sheriff Turnball’s *scuttlebutt*.

“In all seriousness, I’d prefer if I had both you and Lee searching for this one.” He pulled a folded-up paper from his back pocket. “One of Vashchenko’s right-hand men.”

She unfolded it and read over Yuri Maysak’s sheet and the amount attached to it. That was a decent bit of money. More than normal. “Call me interested.”

“Maysak’s woman is a bartender at the Ice House out on Route 209.”

“I’ll check it out.” And she would too, because that cash would be a solid paycheck.

“Thanks.”

“They’re due a new shipment at week’s end,” the mayor mumbled. “Then another later this month.”

She screeched to an internal halt, surprised that half the room didn’t hear the sound of the record scratching that was in her head. “I assume that’s not going to happen?”

“It is.”

His lips barely moved. For everything he said about wanting to keep crime away and Sweet Hills safe, he was letting them set up shop and plant their roots. “You’re going to *let them* sell their guns? That’s such bullshit.”

“Nothing we can do about it. There are forces beyond my control on this one.”

She glared at him. “I’ll go after Maysak but not because I’m competing with Lee or because you told me to.” She was trying to float a business, a mortgage, all kinds of things that people didn’t do at her age, when they were normally thinking about graduating college.

“That’s all I was suggesting, and I knew that.”

“You did not.” She rolled her eyes.

Why did it feel as though her sweet town always had criminal SOBs circling it in the near distance? As every real estate agent within a dozen miles always said, location, location, location. Sweet Hills was at that special juncture in the middle of the country that made it a crossroads Mecca for the criminally traversing. Then again, there was always that chance that the mayor was trying to play some political move, thinking she wouldn’t see it—or couldn’t—simply because she was younger than most everyone involved in the community.

Though... she didn’t see it. Letting a gun sale go through? All she saw was a BS olive branch to some criminals. The ‘why’ evaded her.

Victoria shifted, the awareness of her past always sitting on her shoulder like a silent voice, pushing her to do whatever the mayor asked in order to always prove she was a good girl. She *was* good, and nothing anyone did could change who she was.

The door to the community center opened, and Seven, Victoria's closest friend, walked in. Half the cookies and pastries that covered the table were from her mom's coffee shop, and her friend's bright blue-and-pink hair matched some children's summer outfits.

No one thought Seven would be able to keep the Perky Cup open when her mom had a stroke, but no one knew Seven the way Victoria did. Everyone underestimated them because of their age and "life decisions," as the scuttlebutt crowd liked to call it, when Victoria decided to get a PI license instead of go to community college, and Seven continued on, brightly, with her family's long-steeped, gossip-inducing history in Sweet Hills.

"Think about what I said. Bye now." The mayor, one of the first people Seven won over, waved to her as they passed.

"Another success." Seven held up a hand. "Nicely done, my kick-ass friend. Nicely done."

"They're here for the sugar rush."

"Don't downplay." Seven clucked at her then tilted her head toward the mayor making his rounds. "What was that about? Your face was all kinds of what-the-fuckery."

Victoria choked on a laugh. "What?"

"With a side of you-have-something-to-prove—which you don't, by the way."

She always had something to prove, even if everyone said she didn't. "He's trying to help me out on a jumper."

"Oh, money, money, money, honey, I like."

"Yup. I still have that silly mortgage to pay."

"Yours hasn't gone anywhere either?" Seven winked.

“Nope. Might as well help keep our little town clean.” Victoria watched the kids run around and decided that next week, she’d bring superhero capes for everyone to wear. The town’s seamstress kept reminding her that she wanted to repay her for finding out who was siphoning money from Sew Me.

Victoria always waved away her offers to pay. Most times, her PI work was a steady part of her income, but for Miss Betty, she didn’t charge a thing—not because she couldn’t pay, but because the woman had such a kind heart had been taken advantage by a local church treasurer. *The asshole*. When all was said and done, underprivileged kids had lost out, and Betty anonymously redonated every penny lost to the treasurer’s personal greed to the church. Victoria figured out what Miss Betty had done and kept it to herself.

But Betty could pull together enough capes for both the boys and girls self-defense classes. How hard would it be? Cut fabric, make ties? *Voila*.

Seven grumbled as she continued to track the mayor. “But there’s always a catch.”

“Yup.” Victoria focused back on him. “And the one he presented is too easy.”

Seven’s bangles clinked as she bumped shoulders with Victoria. “I know you, and you’ll figure it out. You’ll always do.”

“Maybe...”

The windows vibrated with a semi-familiar rumble—familiar in that she knew the sound, unfamiliar in that this was the wrong place to hear the roar as motorcycles came up Main Street and slowed. Kids ran to the windows and cheered as the club idled out front. They never had business in town.

Seven’s bright eyes widened. “Well, that’s something.”

Certainly was. *A power play.* Victoria's gut twisted. She respected the boys on their bikes, and they respected her, but it was all business, and respect or not, she was still the enemy. Still law enforcement. A bounty hunter. A private investigator. But they weren't making a show at her self-defense class; that much she knew.

Engines idled outside, revved, and took their time as they rode off.

The mayor strolled over, eyes locked on Seven. "Good day for a ride?"

Seven smirked. "You can save your 'all is safe in the land of unlocked doors' spiel for someone else, sweet pea."

Victoria watched the dynamic between them. Seven's family, the Blackburns, were synonymous with Mayhem Motorcycle Club, and she was the MC's princess, whether she actively took ownership of that role or not. Either way, what Mayhem had done was unexpected enough that the mayor and Seven traded passive-aggressive barbs. Victoria had never seen that before.

The MC were sending a message. Victoria had no idea to whom. A few wayward eyes were still cast toward windows, but the kids were back to their games. Some parents even seemed not to notice. But the mayor did. She felt his anxious gaze latch onto hers the second the first window rattled—and the reality of what was happening hit her.

Two rival gangs.

One prime location.

Turf war.

They were in the middle of Iowa, and Sweet Hills was going to be a battle zone.

CHAPTER TWO

“If the bail-jumper weren’t important, the mayor wouldn’t have said anything.” Victoria gnawed on the stale granola bar and knew it was sacrilege to eat that while talking to Seven on the phone. Her pastries weren’t more than a five-minute drive away. “There’s something he doesn’t like about what the sheriff’s up to.”

“Sheriff came in this morning,” Seven said. “Ordered three dozen donuts. Cleaned me out. What does it mean? His day for donut duty? Or a nefarious sugar scheme?”

Victoria rolled her eyes at her friend mocking her and took a bite of the old granola bar, facing her cell phone as though Seven could really see her. “Why’s this jumper important?”

“Why are any jumpers important?”

“Good question.” Victoria chewed the inside of her cheek. “Some are worth more than others.”

“So-so answer and better question: why’s he playing politics and involving you, who gives no hoots about town gossip and politics?”

Seven was right. Victoria would sooner die than be a conversation piece. That anxiety was nearly debilitating. She cut favors and played the game with criminals, law enforcement, and attorneys at the bare minimum to keep the steady flow of information flowing, and that was that. No gossip. No BS. She never wanted the limelight when it came to chatter.

“Besides the fact,” Seven started to answer her own question, “you’re better than Douche Bag McDoucherson. Maybe he just wants a clean pickup.”

“Maybe.” But it felt like anything but.

“What are you going to do?”

“Snoop around. Check out his old lady.”

“Want some company?” Seven asked. “I know, I know. You work better alone.”

“Not always.” Victoria crumpled the wrapper over the half-eaten granola bar and pitched it into her trash can. “But I’m heading to the Ice House—”

“Ew, that place smells like year-old peanuts, beer breath, and armpits. Hold your breath, and don’t stay long enough to pass out.”

She wrinkled her nose, remembering the last time she’d pushed past the Ice House doors. The stench of stale beer and fermenting barrels was bad. “I thought it might not be your cup of joe.”

Seven giggled. “Not yours either.”

“The places I’ve seen.”

“And probably smelled. Pee-ewww.”

“Agreed.” Victoria reached into her office desk drawer and grabbed the subcompact 9mm that tucked nicely at the back of her jeans. “If you don’t hear from me by day’s end, you know where I am. Bring smelling salts.”

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The heavy wood door had layers of paint that had peeled and been painted over far too many times, and yet the section near the door handle was completely worn away. If Victoria had to guess, it was from too many drunks falling against the door, going in and out. She smelled the stale beer before she toed the swinging door open.

The lights were low. The television broadcasted boxing from satellite—or so she assumed because she couldn’t understand the commentator or read the words on screen. The

bartender, casually refilling a draft and lifting a phone to her ear, had a harsh glint in her eye. She smiled and made small talk, replacing the receiver, slinging the beer, paying no mind to the mess she made.

Victoria pulled up a bar stool, and the bartender made her way closer, dirty rag in hand. The cloth was more for show since she seemed to ignore the old sweat marks from glasses long gone.

“What can I do you for?” Her black eyelashes had on too much mascara for what Victoria thought such light eyes needed, but she wasn’t one to judge.

“Whatever you got. Just needed a break. My boss is riding my ass this morning.”

Pink-lined lips pressed into a fake smile as the bartender stepped back and drew a glass and filled it without taking her eyes off Victoria. “What kind of boss is that?”

“Sales.”

The woman slung the beer toward her. “Starting a tab?”

“The way my month’s been going? Yes and no.”

“Which is it?”

Victoria forced down a long gulp of crappy, piss-poor beer. “Yes.”

“What kind of sales your boss barking at you about?”

She looked side to side then leaned forward. The bartender took the bait, inching closer and leaned too. Victoria whispered, “Couples’ products.”

The woman leaned back, not registering what she meant.

Well, hell. The plan to girl-talk the dirty deets over orgasm sales wasn’t going to fly if she didn’t clue in. “As in, pleasure.”

Even if the woman was ultra-conservative and pooh-poohed the whole idea of *couples' products*, she would at least broach the topic of a boyfriend, and they could go from there.

“You sell pornos?” Her lip curled up as if she didn't believe it.

And neither did Victoria. “No.” She laughed, actually embarrassed, and not needing to feign it for the purpose of forging girl talk. “Maybe this is why my boss is on my ass.”

The lady laughed. “I got one of those too.”

“Who doesn't?”

“What is a couples' product, if not porno?”

“Do you watch porn with your man?”

“Do I look like the type?” The bartender scowled.

Was she saying she didn't watch porn or didn't like men? “I'm the one failing at the lube and toys biz. I don't know.”

“Ah, honey.” She slapped the rag down, finally wiping away the old glass sweat rings.

“You're barking up the wrong tree.”

“Why?” Victoria made a face, leaning close again. “It's *awesome*.”

“Might be, but my man is old school. *Awesome* ain't old school.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Maybe you bring him some *awesome* and change his mind.”

The bartender cackled and leaned back, shaking her head. She reached over for a pack of smokes with the lighter shoved in the plastic wrap, pulled a cigarette out, and let it dangle unlit on her lip. “He likes what he likes, when he likes it, how he likes it.”

That sounded like it sucked. “And you?”

The lighter flicked, and she drew deeply until the red ember crawled down the paper. After letting the smoke out her nostrils, she ashed in a bottle. “I get mine.”

“The way you like it?”

“This is your job?” She gestured with the cigarette. “To talk to folks about how they diddle each other?”

“Guess when you put it like that, it is today.”

“Vanna,” a man at the end of the bar bellowed.

“Well, good luck with your boss.” She dropped the cigarette into the bottle and headed to the yeller.

Victoria forced down as much of the crap beer as she could in order to get the woman back for a refill. *Damn*. The place was called the Ice House. *Think the draft could be a few degrees colder than room temperature?*

She took another couple huge gulps as the door opened. Two people entered. They meandered slowly, taking time to sidle up to the bar, one on each side of her. Jeez, she had no time to be hit on, and it was about noon. Why did they want to make a move on a woman slamming back beer on her lunch hour? *Because* she was slamming beer at her lunch hour. *Hello...*

But her ears pricked as they chatted to each other. Russian accents. Definitely the right bar, though neither were her bail-jumper.

The bartender hustled over when she saw them, her eyes worried, almost guilty. They quickly glanced at Victoria, but their eyes didn't stay on her long. An instinctive burst of chill bumps cascaded down her arms, and the woman behind the bar quickly went to work getting what seemed to be the men's usual drinks. There was tension in the air.

Victoria slipped her purse open, extracting a ten-dollar bill and tossing it on to the bar. “Thanks again. I better get back to work, now that I think about it.”

The bartender gave a flat smile, showing no recognition that they'd ever spoken. Again, Victoria's instincts roared to life. She remembered how the woman picked up the phone when she walked in, and how her guilt seemed pronounced, even as she ignored their couples'-product-forged acquaintanceship.

"Where do you work?" the man to her right side asked.

His tone wasn't flirtatious or conversational; it was downright interrogational.

"Home product direct sales." She closed her wallet and slipped the purse over her shoulder.

"You work for yourself." The other man came up too close behind her.

They shouldn't be able to tell that she had a weapon tucked at the small of her back, but if one of them felt her and knew what they were looking for, they'd identify it as a gun. Awkwardly, she hopped off the barstool. "I've got a man, boys. He don't take kindly to me smiling where I shouldn't."

"It was a simple question." The first man's accent was heavier as the directness came on strong, and the rest of patrons quieted down.

She looked around the bar. No one turned or spoke.

"Don't worry about them."

Victoria raised her chin. "I'm not worried."

"Do you know who we are?" the first man asked.

She knew he wasn't her jumper. "It doesn't matter to me who or what you are. I didn't come here for you."

"But you did come here for Yuri Maysak."

Victoria remained still, waiting to see where this conversation would go. Who was their attorney? Most clubs and gangs had a firm on retainer. But these guys were so new to the scene that she didn't know if they had roots deep enough. "What do you want?"

They said nothing, but cold radiated from the man next to her. Bounty hunters sometimes worked in packs, other times alone. She would do takedowns with someone, depending on the mark and their threat level. But strictly on recon work? She wasn't too worried. Same with PI work. Stakeout. Asking around. Lookie-loos. Nothing more than gathering intel. These guys though... They screamed that a sinister showdown loomed.

"Nice chatting." She made it two steps before a hand clamped on her shoulder. *Asshole.*

Her elbow slammed back and elicited a solid oomph as the other man came forward. Two against one—not what she wanted. She swung the flat palm of her right hand up, hitting the man under his chin. His teeth snapped together as she popped her knee into his nuts.

As that one doubled over, the second man wrapped his arms around her chest.

"No!" she cried out. Victoria used him as leverage, kicking both her boots forward and smashing the heels into the face of the other man as he rebounded, holding his crotch, growling.

"Bitch." The man's arms tightened, and he bit her ear.

"Oh—ow!" Pulling from his vise grip made the pain worse, and she curled her legs to her chest then slammed her boots to the ground, desperately trying to hit the man's feet. Success on one foot, and he lost his bite on her ear, shouting and spitting.

He threw her onto the ground, and her ribs cried out in pain when she crashed into a table and chair. Up onto her hands and knees, Victoria broke for the door, pushing off the dirty floor.

A hand caught her foot, dragging her back. She kicked, stabbing the air with her free leg.

"Let me go!" Damn it. "Let me go! Now!"

A bar of onlookers, and no one did a thing.

“What are you going to do?” she shouted, still kicking from the floor. “Scare me away? You don’t want him picked up? That’s what this is about?” She kicked harder, jamming the heel of her boot onto the man’s fingers.

The other man came close to the one holding her on the floor by her ankle. The bartender came forward. Victoria stilled, watching her with an eerie feeling that shit was about to get a whole lot worse.

“She came here about my Yuri?” the bartender asked coolly.

Her Yuri didn’t bode well.

The one with her ankle nodded. “You did good to call. We knew they were making a move.”

The bartender handed the other man the rag in her hand, but it wasn’t the same one she’d been mopping the bar top with. She squatted next to Victoria’s face. “He may fuck me whenever, however he likes it. But I said I liked it.” She spat to the side. “No way you’re going to like whatever these psychos do. You’re about to be fucked.”

The man crouched on the other side as Victoria thrashed and pulled away. He held her forehead to the floor, and forced the rag over her mouth, its bitter taste abrading her tongue and burning her nose. She couldn’t breathe without her lungs burning. A heaviness wrapped an invisible blanket around her limbs. She couldn’t kick, couldn’t move, even though she wanted to roll over and throw up. She couldn’t. Her eyes wouldn’t focus; they spun around the room like she was spiraling. Slow, fast, she didn’t know. Gray clouds closed closer, closer, closer...

CHAPTER THREE

Lights flashed. Everything went down. The room spun as the hot air seemed to go ice cold then scorching again. Victoria rolled on her side and got sick. Her arm dangled; her hand reached and found nothing. Blips of the attack burst into her skull alongside the pounding headache that shot daggers behind her eyes, but she struggled to sit up, desperately blinking away the blindness that held her down.

Out of breath, she collapsed again, the sweet darkness of passing out begging her to come to the other side. “No,” she moaned.

Shaking, Victoria pushed up again, needing to fight, to get away. She gasped for breath even as her neck wouldn’t support her head. Falling backward, Victoria hit a wall, and it held her up, its harsh texture a welcome relief.

“Oh, God...” Slowly, her head stopped spinning, and she tried opening her eyes, slits only at first. The room was light but not bright, and it smelled. *She* smelled, and the shocking revelation nearly knocked her back out as she caught her jeanless legs and dirty shirt. The room reeked of urine and vomit, and her mouth was so filthy and parched the idea of drinking water was both fantastic and foul.

“Get up.” A man stepped into the room, and his heavy Russian accent sounded as ugly as he looked.

She stared, limbs shaking—not just from nerves but an uncontrolled weakness.

“Up. When you wake up, you clean.” He strode over and had her on her bare feet, knees almost knocking, then half-walked, half-supported her down a dimly lit hall.

Her raw throat burned with every attempt to swallow, but she managed to whisper, “Where are we?”

“Don’t speak.”

He understood English and spoke it haltingly, and his Russian accent was thick. Very unlike the Russian gunrunners she was investigating. Where had they been hiding this guy? He certainly wasn’t skirting the town limits of Sweet Hills. Someone would have mentioned it.

They entered a bathroom, and he turned on the shower. There was no question about what she was supposed to do, about what she wanted to do, but with him standing there, watching, Victoria couldn’t. *Until he drew his weapon.* She stripped off the urine-soaked underwear, embarrassed, and trying to cover herself, her shirt, and bra, then stumbled. He didn’t help, seeming not to notice, as she crawled to the tub and pulled herself over the edge.

The lukewarm water rained down, and she opened her mouth, swishing and spitting, then rubbing her eyes. She found bar soap and a small bottle with writing she didn’t recognize and started the process of washing as best she could without standing. She didn’t have the strength to do both.

Once all the lackluster bubbles washed away, the man turned the water off, dropped a threadbare towel on her, and helped her out onto the cold floor. Shivering and shaking, she dried off, trying to stay covered. A dress, somewhat resembling a cloak, landed by her, and she glanced up.

“Dress, dress,” the man ordered.

Victoria shed the towel, tugging on the rough cloth over her still damp, chill bump-covered skin. He yanked her by the arm back onto her feet, and into the hall they went. Victoria

felt exhausted beyond what her mind could comprehend. He deposited her in a room, physically lifting her and leaving her on a cot.

Eyes closed and heartbeat pounding in her ears, she tried to catch her breath—and felt eyes. Instincts desperately trying to keep up and keep her alive, Victoria jolted, pulling her legs beneath her and bracing her arms in front, ready as she could be for whatever came next.

Girls.

Women.

She let her gaze sift across the room as they all studied her. What on earth was... *Oh, shit.* This was a prostitution house? Her foggy mind tried to clear. Not a prostitution house. Prostitutes were pros. These were slaves. Sex slaves? Victoria looked down at herself then at them, at their rows of cots, and the door where the guard had disappeared.

“Where are we?” she asked, willing her voice not to crack. She wouldn’t show fear, not even a sliver of the horror she knew could be found in places like a sex trafficking hellhole.

“Russia,” someone whispered.

Then the whole world turned upside down.

###

Three days. Three days in this God-forsaken bleary room, and Victoria was crawling the walls—on the inside. Externally, she was the face of calm resistance. Maybe it was because she was the oldest one at entrepreneurial billionaire pig Ivan Mikhailov’s Russian estate, but the rest of these girls here had been handpicked. She, on the other hand, was captured and sent away, an offering to the big man like a gift.

But she'd yet to meet this Ivan jackass. Some of the guards were more talkative than others. The older ones were stoic, old guard. They'd die before breathing wrong against the former soviet intelligence official, now some higher-up in the Russian government. Talk about corruption. But the younger ones? They didn't buy into the bullshit nearly as much.

She'd learned a lot from them. Namely, Ivan was a prick of epic proportions. He wasn't home much, and he was trying to talk his daughter, Taisia, into working this part of the "family business." What kind of monster would involve his daughter in sex slavery?

The man who brought their food clambered in with two sacks' worth of meals for everyone in the room. Victoria hastened over, hoping there was something of substance to get them through the night. No. Not only no, but there wasn't enough to feed all of them now.

"Hey!" She jumped up, rushing toward the doorway to catch the man.

"Victoria. Hush," whispered worried voices behind her.

The hell with that. None of them had been touched yet, no one had been hurt, but they still needed their strength.

"Excuse me!" she called down the hall.

Nothing. *Well, damn.* "Let's divide up the—"

She saw eyes go wide before she heard the grunt of the meanest guard. He seemed not the least bit concerned.

"What?" he barked.

She straightened her spine and pushed her shoulders back. "That's not enough food. Nowhere near enough."

He looked over her shoulder and shook his head. "Eat."

"We would if there was enough. We need more food."

He walked farther into the room, his gaze crawling over the young ladies. “You have needs?”

Dread curled in her stomach. They were supposedly Mikhailov property. No guard had dared to touch them, the younger guards admitted, because Ivan Mikhailov was fanatical about his possessions. He hadn’t returned yet, and Victoria gathered they were still in the start-up stage of this endeavor. What started as only a few girls days ago had almost doubled.

“You get more food.” He grabbed a young girl by her hair, yanking her down onto her knees. “I get what I want.”

“No,” Victoria roared as the young woman sobbed.

All around them, the room balked. Gasps reverberated. The guard drew his sidearm, pointing the barrel at her face, and snarled his, snapping at her in Russian.

“We just want food,” she tried again.

He caressed the gun against the girl’s face then gestured to his belt. Sobbing, she cried that she didn’t want to, but her hands shakily went to her chest as though she were considering undoing the bastard’s pants.

Fucking hell. Furious anger coiled inside Victoria’s chest. “Food. That’s all we asked for. We didn’t cause problems. Leave her alone.”

The man laughed and pointed the gun back at her. *Good.* At least it was off the poor girl who was shaking like a leaf—Victoria was too, on the inside.

“It was my request, if that’s what it takes to get fed around here.” Carefully, she stepped toward the Russian pistol. What was she thinking? She didn’t want to blow the guy. She wouldn’t. But she wasn’t going to let the girl do it either.

The man cackled. “You are Ivan Mikhailov’s gift.”

She'd heard that so many times at this point it was almost a shield of protection. "So what? I'm hungry. Get up," she said to the young girl who'd gone so pale Victoria thought she'd pass out. All of these girls were too young, too innocent to be here. What awaited them if she didn't figure out a way to get them out was going to ruin their lives. "Go, honey. I've got this."

A string of Russian fell from the guard's angry, bellowing mouth. Spittle flew, and the veins at his temples popped.

If she was Ivan Mikhailov's gift, the bastard wasn't going to kill her, was he? Victoria walked face first to the barrel of the gun. "Honey, get to your cot." The risk was high he would always kill another girl who wasn't a billionaire's gift. "We're all his property. Are you really supposed to use any of us before he sees us first?"

Victoria sent up a prayer that Ivan Mikhailov was a possessive, controlling bastard who didn't like to share his toys or investments. Each woman was unique in her features. They were all beautiful. They were handpicked. This was the sex trafficking stable of a billionaire, and she knew when Mikhailov got his new business venture up and running, it would be bad for them, but right now, it was almost as though they were wrapped in a protective layer.

"We need food," she demanded, "before Ivan Mikhailov arrives to find us wasting away."

The unexpected sound of footsteps broke the tension as the other man came back, two more sacks of food in hand. Victoria turned to see his face falter as he tossed them down. The two men scowled, bickering back and forth, voices dropping in angry tones, but she didn't understand a word.

The guard slammed his jaw shut and holstered his weapon. Without saying another word, he stomped out. The other man simply gestured to the new bags of food, turned, and left as well.

“*Merci.*” The girl who had been on her knees rushed over, wrapping her arms around Victoria.

The chatter in the room began, and the realization dawned on all of them that they were from all over the globe. It also seemed that Victoria was their chosen leader for as long as they were in this situation. They hadn’t talked much, but maybe it was time to change that. “My name is Victoria, and I will do whatever I can to make sure we survive this.”

DELTA: REDEMPTION

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