

# THE DIAMOND EYE

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THE  
DIAMOND  
EYE

KATE QUINN



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*To all the writers who managed to produce a book during  
the COVID-19 lockdown—to all the creators who  
managed to make art in the middle of a pandemic.  
It was really tough, wasn't it?*



In the summer of 1942,  
as the world was locked in war against Hitler,  
a woman crossed the sea from the Soviet Union to the United States.

She was a single mother, a graduate student, a library researcher.

She was a soldier, a war hero,  
a sniper with 309 kills to her name.

She was Russia's envoy, America's sweetheart,  
and Eleanor Roosevelt's dear friend.

Her story is incredible. Her story is true.

Meet Lady Death.



# PROLOGUE

August 27, 1942  
Washington, D.C.

He stood with a pocketful of diamonds and a heart full of death, watching a Russian sniper shake hands with the First Lady of the United States.

“Whoever heard of a girl sniper?” the marksman heard a photographer behind him grumble, craning for a look at the young woman who had just disembarked from the embassy limousine. She’d seemed to flinch at the barrage of camera flashes like muzzle fire, averting her gaze and walking in a phalanx of Soviet minders up the steps of the White House. The photographer snorted, scoffing, “I say she’s a fake.”

*Yet we couldn’t resist coming here for a look at her,* thought the marksman, idly flipping his falsified press badge. A delegation from the Soviet Union arriving for the international student conference that was Eleanor Roosevelt’s latest goodwill project—it wouldn’t have merited more than a few lines of newsprint, much less roused a lot of hungover journalists and photographers out of their beds before dawn and sent them scurrying, pens in hand, to the White House gates, if not for that girl in her crisp olive-green uniform.

“Did they say she had seventy-five kills on the Russian front?” a *Washington Post* journalist wondered, rummaging through his notes.

“I thought it was over a hundred . . .”

“Higher,” said the marksman in the Tidewater Virginia drawl he’d grown up with. He’d long since ironed his soft southern vowels out into a flat mid-Atlantic cadence that could belong anywhere and nowhere, but he often let Virginia creep back into his tone, depending

on who he was talking to. People trusted a southern accent, and they found themselves trusting the marksman: a loose-jointed man of medium height, medium hair between brown and blond, a bony face, and mud-colored eyes, usually jingling a clutter of uncut diamonds in his trouser pocket. He didn't like banks; anyone who hired him paid in cash, which he then promptly converted to jewels. Lighter than cash, easy to hide—just like bullets. He was thirty-eight years old and had been operating for nineteen years and more than thirty marks. It added up to a lot of diamonds, and a lot of bullets.

“How does a girl like that kill over a hundred Nazis?” a columnist at his side was speculating, still watching the Russian woman on the front steps of the White House, standing to one side in a cluster of dark-suited embassy men as the First Lady welcomed the rest of the Soviet delegation. “Wasn't she a librarian or a schoolteacher or something?”

“Russkies let women in their army, apparently . . .”

*Their medical battalions, maybe,* the marksman thought. *But even the Reds don't make women into snipers.*

Yet he was here to see for himself, wasn't he? Wanting a look at the woman whose sparse biography he had already committed to memory: Lyudmila Pavlichenko; twenty-six years old; fourth-year history student at the Kiev State University and senior research assistant at the Odessa public library—before the war. After the war, thirteen months of continuous fighting against Hitler's forces on the Russian front.

Nickname: Lady Death.

“Dammit, how many kills *was* it on her tally?” The *Washington Post* journalist was still searching his notes. “Was it more than two hundred?”

*Three hundred and nine,* the marksman thought, but he didn't believe a word of it. This little junior librarian/schoolteacher was no trained killer. She was a trick pony stuffed with Soviet propaganda,

handpicked for the student delegation, and the marksman could see why. A pretty brunette with lively dark eyes and a neat, photogenic face above her bemedaled uniform, nothing like the sort of mannish freak Americans would expect of a Russian female soldier. The Soviets needed American aid; they needed good press coverage on this delegation to American shores, so they'd selected the most winsome candidates they could find. Front and center, this girl sniper who looked so small and appealing beside that tall bony bitch Eleanor Roosevelt.

"Congratulations on your safe arrival in America." The press corps clustered close enough to hear the First Lady's cultured, silver-spoon voice easily as she addressed the Soviet delegation, see the flash of her horsey teeth. "On behalf of my husband the President, welcome to the White House. He looks forward to meeting you all at a later time and invites you to spend your first days in America's capital under our roof. You are some of the first Soviet guests to be hosted in the White House, a historic moment in the friendship between our nations."

She began ushering the Russians inside, and that was that. It wasn't even six-thirty yet, the skies above the capital barely flushed with sunlight as the pack of journalists, photographers, and one lone innocuous assassin began to disperse. "Never thought I'd see the day a Russian sniper got welcomed to the White House," a grizzled columnist grumbled. "FDR will rue the day."

*He won't be alive to do it,* the marksman thought, eyes still on Mila Pavlichenko's neat dark head as she followed the First Lady toward the doors of the White House. *In nine days—the last day of the international conference—President Roosevelt will be dead.*

"I can see the headlines now," the *Washington Post* reporter muttered, scribbling in his pad. " 'Russian Female Sniper Receives Warm White House Welcome.' "

The marksman smiled, jingling his pocketful of diamonds again. Ten days from now, all the headlines would scream **RUSSIAN FEMALE SNIPER MURDERS FDR!**

## Notes by the First Lady

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*The President was intending to greet the Soviet delegation with me as they arrived, but he had a fall this morning. I'd just entered with a knock, carrying a packet of memoranda and reports for him to read, and I saw the valet lose his grip as he transferred my husband from his bed. Franklin fell hard on the carpet of his bedroom. Had it happened in public he would have roared with laughter as though it were all a prank, a Charlie Chaplin pratfall, and set about regaining his feet with some hearty, bracing joke. Since he was in the privacy of his bedroom, he allowed his face to twist in agony. I always feel I should look away in such moments—watching the proud facade of President Franklin D. Roosevelt crack with frustration in response to his body's failings feels like a violation.*

*I reassure Franklin when he is sitting upright again, tell him to take his breakfast at leisure, and offer to greet the Soviet delegation alone. The President already has a packed schedule; I can at least take on this first task. I see the gratitude, even as he makes a joke about his fall. "Better in here than out where all the jackals can see."*

*"They wouldn't dare cheer," I say lightly.*

*"But they'd pray I never got up."*

*Something about his tone bothers me, but he's already reaching for his morning newspapers, girding himself for the day ahead. To the world he appears invincible: a voice full of golden confidence trickling honey-thick from the radio, a profile like a ship's prow cleaving the world, with a juted cigarette holder rather than a bowsprit. Only a few see the iron will that keeps his facade*

*in place, keeps his body moving ever forward, keeps his enemies at bay.*

*I hope, moving into the morning light to greet the Soviet delegation—a block of dark-suited inscrutable men, and one unexpected serious-eyed young woman (they say she is a sniper?)—that it will be enough.*



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# FIVE YEARS AGO

November 1937  
KIEV, SOVIET UNION

**Mila**

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## CHAPTER 1

was not a soldier yet. We were not at war yet. I could not conceive of taking a life yet. I was just a mother, twenty-one and terrified. When you're a mother, panic can engulf you in the blink of an eyelash. All it takes is that instant when your eye sweeps a room for your child and doesn't find him.

"Now, Mila," my mother began. "Don't be angry—"

"Where's Slavka?" I hadn't even pulled off my patched gloves and snow-dusted coat yet, but my heart was already thudding. There was my son's half-constructed block factory on the floor of the apartment, there was the small worn pile of his books, but no sturdy dark-haired five-year-old.

"His father dropped in. He knew he had missed the appointment—"

"Nice of Alexei to acknowledge that," I gritted. The second appointment I had set up to have our divorce finalized; the second appointment my husband had missed. Each time it had taken me months to scrape up the required fifty-ruble fee; weeks to get an appointment with the backlogged office; then hours waiting in a cold, stuffy corridor craning my eyes for a glimpse of my husband's golden head . . . all to lead to nothing. Anger smoldered in the pit of my stomach. Any Soviet citizen already spent entirely too much time waiting in lines as it was!

My mother wiped her hands on her apron, her big dark eyes pleading. "He was very sorry, *malyshka*. He wanted to take Slavka out for a treat. He's hardly seen the boy these past few years, his own son—"

*Whose fault is that?* I wanted to retort. I wasn't the one keeping our son out of Alexei's life. My husband was the one who decided only a month or two after giving our son the name of Rostislav Pavli-

chenko that marriage and fatherhood weren't really to his liking. But my mother's kind, pretty face looked hopeful, and I bit back my hot words.

Mama's voice was soft. "Maybe there's a reason he keeps missing these appointments."

"Yes, there is," I stated. "To make me dance on his string."

"Maybe what he's really hoping for is to reconcile."

"Mama, not again—"

"A *doctor*, Mila. The best surgeon in Ukraine, you said—"

"He is, but—"

"A man on his way up. Rooms of his own rather than a communal apartment, a good salary, a Party member. Not things to throw away." My mother launched into the old argument. She hadn't approved of how Alexei and I had come together; she'd said it happened too fast and he was too old for me and she was right—but she also wanted me safe and warm and fed. "You always said he's no drunk and never once hit you," she went on now. "Maybe he's not the man you dreamed of, but a surgeon's wife won't ever stand in a bread queue, and neither will his children. You don't remember the hungry years, you were just a little thing . . . but there's nothing a woman won't put up with to keep her babies fed."

I looked down at my worn gloves. None of what she said was wrong, I knew that.

I also knew that a part of me was afraid to let my little boy be alone with his father.

"Mama. Where are they?"

THE SHOOTING RANGE wasn't much, just a converted storage space: bars on the windows, a small armory, a line of wooden shields with targets, men on a firing line standing with braced feet and pistols raised or lying on their bellies to fire rifles . . . and in the middle, a tall

blond man with a small boy: Alexei Pavlichenko and little Rostislav Alexeivich. My stomach flipped in relief.

“Every man should know how to shoot,” I could hear Alexei telling our son as I came closer. He was showing Slavka how to hold a rifle far too large for him, and his voice had that expansive cadence I remembered so well. There was nothing my husband liked better than explaining things to people who knew less than him. “Though inborn abilities are required to be a true expert, of course.”

“What kind of abilities, Papa?” Slavka was round-eyed, looking up at this golden stranger he hardly knew. A man who had walked out of his life without a backward glance when he was just six weeks old.

“Patience. A good eye. A steady hand, and a precise feel for the tool in your grip. That’s why your papa’s such a good shot—he has a surgeon’s touch.” Alexei flashed a smile downward, and Slavka’s eyes got even rounder. “Now you try—”

“Slavka,” I called, striding down the firing line, careful to keep behind the shooters. “Give that rifle back. You’re too young to be handling weapons that large.”

Slavka started guiltily, but Alexei didn’t look surprised to see me or my thunderous face. “Hello there,” he said easily, brushing a lock of fair hair off his tall forehead. He loomed a head above me: thirty-six, lean and golden, his teeth showing white in his easy smile. “You’re looking lovely, *kroshka*.”

I didn’t bother asking him not to call me that—he already knew it made my hackles rise. For about one week during our marriage I had found it adorable when he called me his *bread crumb*—“Because you’re such a little bit of a thing, Mila!”—but it hadn’t taken me long to realize a crumb was something that could be flicked away into a dustbin. A piece of trash.

“You shouldn’t have taken Slavka out without me,” I said instead, as evenly as possible. The pulse of fear was still beating through me, even at the sight of my boy safe and sound. I didn’t really think Alexei

would try to steal our son away from me, but such things weren't unheard of. At the factory where I'd worked when Slavka was a baby, one of the lathe operators had wept and raged when her former husband swooped their daughter out of school and took her off to Leningrad without any warning. She never got the girl back; her husband had too many Party friends in his pocket. These things *happened*.

"Relax, Mila." Alexei's smile broadened, and that was when the fear in my stomach started curling into anger. He knew I'd been afraid; he knew, and he rather enjoyed it. "Who's going to teach a boy to shoot if his father doesn't do it?"

"I know how to shoot, I can—"

"Anyway, it doesn't matter." Another amused glance. "You're here now. Here to spoil the fun!"

I saw him throw a wink over my head to some friend behind me. *Women!* that wink said. *Always spoiling a man's fun, am I right?* I busied myself pulling off my gloves and disentangling myself from my winter coat, aware I was the only woman standing on the firing line. Females stood at the back, applauding when their brothers or boyfriends or husbands sank a shot. From Lenin on down, Soviet men have always talked a good game about women standing shoulder to shoulder with their men in every field society had to offer, but when it came to children being tended, dishes being scrubbed, or applause being given, I had always observed that it was still female hands doing most of the tending, scrubbing, and clapping. Not that I questioned such a thing overly much: it was simply the way of the world, and always had been.

"Mamochka?" Slavka looked up at me anxiously.

"Give that weapon back, please," I said quietly, brushing a hand over his hair to make it plain I wasn't angry at him. "You're too little for a rifle that size."

"No, he's not," Alexei scoffed, taking the weapon. "Baby him like that and you'll never make a man of him. Watch me load, Slavka . . ."

Alexei's hands moved swiftly, loading the TOZ-8. It was his hands

I'd noticed first, when I saw him at that dance—a surgeon's hands, long-fingered and precise, working with absolute skill and focus. *What, you can't say no when a tall blond man smiles at you?* my mother scolded when she learned I was pregnant—but it wasn't Alexei Pavlichenko's height or his charm or even his hands that had drawn me into his arms. It was his skill, his focus, his drive—so different from the boys my age, all horseplay and careless talk. Alexei hadn't been a boy, he'd been a man over thirty who knew what he wanted—and what he wanted, he trained for; aimed for; *got*. I'd seen that in him that first night, young and laughing as I was in my flimsy violet dress. Barely fifteen years old.

A mother nine months later.

I sent Slavka to hang up my coat at the back of the room, then turned back to Alexei. “You missed the appointment.” Fighting to keep my voice even. I was not going to sound shrill; it would just amuse him. “I waited nearly three hours.”

He shrugged. “It slipped my mind. I'm a busy man, *kroshka*.”

“You know they require us both to be there in order to finalize the divorce. You don't want to be married to me, Alexei, so why won't you show up?”

“I'll make it up to you,” he said, breezy, and one of his friends farther down the line chuckled, seeing my face.

“She doesn't want you to make it up to her!” Laughter rippled behind me, and someone muttering, *I'll let her make it up to me!* Alexei grinned over my head.

“I'll set another appointment to finalize the divorce,” I said as coolly as I could manage. “If you can just be there, it will all be over in a matter of minutes.” I didn't like the mess I'd made of my own life, a mother at fifteen, estranged within months, and potentially divorced at twenty-one—but better to be divorced than to be stranded in this limbo of the last six years, neither married nor unmarried.

“Ah, don't get all prune-faced, Mila. You know I like to tease.”

Alexei gave me a playful dig in the ribs. Only it was a dig that hurt through my wool blouse. “You’re looking well, you know. Glowing, almost . . . Maybe there’s a reason you want this divorce? A man?”

He was still teasing, still playful, but there was an edge behind the words. He didn’t really want me anymore, but he didn’t like the idea of anyone else wanting me, either. Much less having me.

“There’s no one,” I said. Even if there had been someone else, I wouldn’t have told him—but there wasn’t. Between university classes and studies, Komsomol meetings and caring for Slavka, I was getting by on about five hours of sleep a night. Where was there the *time* for a new man in my life?

Alexei turned the rifle over between his hands, still looking at me. “You’re in your third year of studies now?”

“My second.” The history department at Kiev University, and my student card had been hard-won after a year of studying at night while working shifts as a turner lathe operator at the arsenal factory. Back then I’d been operating on about four hours of sleep a night, but it was all worth it. All for Slavka, for his future and mine. “Alexei, if I can get another appointment—”

“Alexei!” someone called further down the firing line, looking me over. “This the little wife?”

My husband brought me under his arm with a quick squeeze. “Tell her what a good shot I am, Seryozha. She’s not impressed with me anymore. Just like a wife, eh?” Alexei saw the look on my face and leaned down to nuzzle my ear. “Just teasing, *kroshka*, don’t bristle.”

“Your man’s good, watch him with the TOZ-8!”

“Just a simple single-shot rifle,” Alexei told me as I wriggled out from under his arm. “We call it the Melkashka.”

“I know what it’s called.” I was no expert, but I’d been to the range before with the factory shooting club; I knew something about firearms. “TOZ-8, good 120 through 180 meters—”

“TOZ-8, muzzle velocity 320 meters a second, good from 120 to 180 meters,” Alexei said, not listening. “Sliding bolt here—”

“I know. I’ve handled—”

He raised the rifle, took careful aim, and the crack of the shot sounded. “See? Nearly dead center.”

I bit my tongue hard enough to hurt. I wanted to turn my back, gather up my son, and storm out of here, but Slavka was dawdling by the coat hooks listening to two men having some loud political discussion—and I didn’t want to depart without some kind of guarantee. A guarantee that the next appointment I set to finalize our divorce, Alexei would *be there*.

“You never used to spend much time at the range. What made you want to get so good at it?” I pushed out a note of grudging admiration for his marksmanship. “You’re a surgeon; you know what happens to muscles and organs when they take a bullet. You used to tell me about patching wounds like that.”

“Soon there will be war, don’t you know that?” Reloading the Melkashka. “When that day comes, they’ll need a gun in every hand.”

“Not yours.” As long as I could remember, my father had been shaking his head and saying, *One day there will be war*, but it hadn’t happened yet. “If war comes, *you* won’t be a soldier.”

My husband frowned. “You think I’m not capable?”

“I mean a surgeon like you is too valuable to waste on the front line,” I said quickly, recognizing my mistake. I hadn’t lived with Alexei in so long, I’d forgotten how to flatter his pride. “You’ll be running a battlefield hospital, not pulling a trigger on command like a blind monkey.”

His frown disappeared, and he raised the rifle. “A man sees chances in war, Mila. Chances he doesn’t get in ordinary life. I intend to be ready.”

He fired off another shot, not quite hitting the bull’s-eye. “Good shot, Papa,” Slavka said breathlessly, running back up.

Alexei ruffled his hair. Two young girls at the back were watching, winding their curls around their fingers, and maybe my husband saw their admiration, because he squatted down beside his son and said, “Let me show you.”

That was the very first thing he’d said to *me*. To little Mila Belova, just past her fifteenth birthday and careening happily through a drafty dance hall, entranced by the music and the laughter and the violet dress swirling about my legs. I was dancing with a girlfriend, both of us eyeing the boys showing off across the room, and then the song changed to something slower, more formal . . . and a toweringly tall man with fair hair pulled me neatly away from my girlfriend and into the curve of his arm, saying, “Let me show you . . .” Later he spread his coat on the grass outside the dance hall for me to sit and told me he meant to be a great man someday. *I’ll make the name Pavlichenko resound from Moscow to Vladivostok.* He’d grinned to show he was joking, but I knew he wasn’t. Not really.

*I can see it now*, I’d replied, laughing. *Alexei Pavlichenko, Hero of the Soviet Union!* He burned bright with ambition, so bright he’d dazzled me. Looking at him now in the winter dimness of the shooting range, remembering how he’d taken my hand soon afterward and guided it as he whispered *Let me show you something else . . .* well. I could still admire the fire of ambition in him, much as I disliked him, but I couldn’t feel even a flicker of the old bedazzlement.

“No, no,” Alexei was telling Slavka, impatience lacing his voice. “Don’t let the butt sag, sock it back against the shoulder—”

“He’s too little,” I said quietly. “He can’t reach.”

“He’s seven years old, he can hold a rifle like a man—”

“He’s five.”

“Head up, Slavka, don’t be a baby. Don’t *cringe!*” he snapped.

“Sorry, Papa.” My son was struggling to support the heavy birch stock, trying so hard to please this golden father he hardly ever saw. “Like this?”

Alexei laughed. “Look at you, jumpy as a rabbit.” He put his finger over Slavka’s chubby one on the trigger, pulling. My son flinched at the report, and Alexei laughed again. “You’re not scared of a little bang, are you?”

“That’s enough.” I took the rifle away, pulling Slavka against my side. “Alexei, Slavka and I are going now. And if I set another appointment to finalize the divorce, kindly be there.”

I spoke too curtly. I should have been soft, said *Please be there* or *Won’t you be there?* The cautious wordsmithing of a woman stepping lightly around a man who has the upper hand, and might use it to lash out—no poet ever agonized over the crafting of a sentence more carefully.

Alexei’s eyes took on a hard glitter. “You should be thanking me, *kroshka*. Who else is going to make this puppy of yours into a man?” A glance down at Slavka. “I remember when he was a baby and I’d come back from twelve hours of surgery to find him still awake and crying. *He can’t sleep*, you kept whimpering, *he can’t sleep*. Not like me, I can sleep anywhere.” A glance at me, and Alexei dropped his voice to a murmur, just between us. “What does that tell me, Mila?”

“I can’t imagine what you mean.” I could feel Slavka trembling as he pressed against my side, uncomprehending but nervous. He wanted his toy train, I could tell—he wanted his grandmother’s cramped, cozy apartment, the gleam of the samovar, the spoonful of jam she’d give him off a ladle. I just wanted him out of here, and I began to hand Alexei the Melkashka so I could leave, but his words stopped me.

“This boy doesn’t sleep like me, that’s all. Doesn’t have my hair either, or my eyes . . .” Alexei shrugged, still speaking softly. “A man might wonder things, about a child like that.”

“He takes after my father,” I said icily.

“He takes after someone.” Alexei sank his hands in his pockets, airily unconcerned. “Maybe that’s why you want to get rid of me,

Mila. Not a new man in your life; maybe a man you've had in your life since before we met—"

"Go get my coat, *morzbik*," I interrupted sharply, sending Slavka toward the back of the room with a little push.

"—because I look at that boy with my name, and I wonder." Alexei watched our son—*our son*—drag off uncertainly toward the row of pegs again. "I really do wonder."

I still had the Melkashka in my hands, birch stock sticky from Slavka's nervous fingers. I felt my nails digging into the wood and wanted to sink them into Alexei's high-cheekboned face. I wanted to scream that I'd had no one before him and he knew it, because I'd gone straight from the schoolroom to his bed to pushing his baby out of me. But I knew the moment I lashed out at my husband, he'd seize my wrists and squeeze just a little too hard, chuckling, *Women! Always throwing tantrums . . .*

"Your face!" Alexei shook his head, grinning. "*Kroshka*, it was a joke! Don't you know how to laugh?"

"Maybe not," I said, "but I know how to shoot."

I raised the rifle, spun, aligned my aiming eye and front-sight and rear-sight with the farthest wooden target across the range, and squeezed the trigger. My ears rang, and as I lowered the Melkashka I imagined exactly where I'd sunk my shot: the bull's-eye, inside every one of my husband's shots. But—

"Good try," Alexei said, amused. "Maybe next time you'll even hit the target."

A burst of hoots from his watching friends. My cheeks burned. *I know how to shoot*, I wanted to lash out. I'd gone to the range a few times with the factory shooting club, and I'd done just fine. I hadn't dazzled anyone, but I hadn't missed the target either—not once.

But today I'd missed. Because I was flustered, angry. Because I'd been trying to wipe that smile off Alexei's face.

"Look at you, serious little girl with your great big gun." Alexei

clipped the Melkashka out of my hand, chucking me under the chin like I was a naughty child, only this clip snapped my head back hard enough to sting. “You want to try again, *krashka*? Jump for it!” He held it far over my head, smiling, a glint in his eye. “Jump!”

Other men along the firing line began laughing, too. I heard someone call *Jump for it, coucoushka! Jump!*

I wouldn't jump for the rifle. I turned to Slavka, coming back to the line with my coat, and began shrugging into it. “I'll let you know when I get another appointment, Alexei.”

“Have it your way.” Shrugging, he began to load the Melkashka again, flashing a smile at the two girls on the watching line. I saw them smile back. That's the thing with young girls: they're easily impressed. By lean height and golden hair, lofty ambition and devouring dreams. I used to be like that. But now I was twenty-one, an angry mother with the smell of gunsmoke on her hands and cheeks that burned in humiliation, no longer impressed by surface shine on bad men.

SLAVKA'S MITTENED HAND clung tight to mine as we walked through the darkening streets of Kiev. The iron-colored sky overhead sent snow spiraling down to catch in my lashes. “Put your tongue out and catch a snowflake,” I told my son, but he was silent. “Hot pelmeni with sour cream when we get home?” I tried next, but he just kept trudging through the muddy snow, shoulders hitching now and then.

“*Morzhik*,” I cajoled softly. It meant *little walrus*—a name I'd given when he was still nursing at my breast. He'd certainly fed like one.

“Papa doesn't like me,” Slavka mumbled.

“It isn't you, *morzhik*. Your papa doesn't really like anybody, even me.” Feeling my fingers tremble with anger in my patched gloves. “We're not going to see your papa anymore, Slavka. You don't need a papa. You have your babushka, your dedushka.” My parents, who hadn't approved of my separation from Alexei, but who had still taken

me back in, doted on Slavka with all their hearts, cared for him so I could work a lathe in a factory and study for my exams. “And you have me, Slavka. Your mama, who is always proud of you.”

“But who will teach me to shoot? I need a papa to . . .” Slavka floundered. He was only five; he didn’t understand those phrases Alexei had flung around today: *be a man, make this puppy into a man, baby him too much*. He just understood that somehow his father had found him wanting.

I looked down at his dark head. “I will teach you.”

“But you missed,” my son blurted.

I had missed my shot. Because I’d made a mistake, let myself be goaded. But there wouldn’t be any more mistakes—I couldn’t afford them. I’d already made one colossal error when I fell into the arms of the wrong man, and my entire life had nearly tumbled off its tracks. Now I had a son, and if I made another mistake, his life would come tumbling down with mine. I drew a long breath and let it out. “I won’t miss again. Not ever.”

“But . . .”

“Rostislav Alexeivich.” I addressed him formally, drawing him to a halt by a streetlamp and going to one knee in the snow, holding his small shoulders. My heart thudded again. I’d missed the wooden target at the range, but I couldn’t make a mistake here. “From this day, I will be your papa. I’ll be your papa and your mama both. And I will teach you everything you need to know to be a fine man someday.”

“But you can’t.”

“Why not?” He looked uncertain, and I pressed. “Do you know what it means to be a fine man, Slavka?”

“No . . .”

“Then how do you know I can’t teach you? Women know fine men when we see them.” Especially after clashing with men like Alexei. “No one better to teach you to be a good man than a good woman, I promise.”

Slavka just looked back in the direction of the gun range, snow veiling those long dark lashes. “You can show me how to shoot?” he whispered.

“Maybe I missed today, but that doesn’t matter. Your mama goes to the shooting club sometimes already. Well, with a little more practice I can qualify for the advanced marksmanship course.” I hadn’t even considered it before—with a full course load at the university already, who would add on a three-times-weekly class in the finer points of ballistics and weaponry? Shooting was just a casual hobby, something I did to prove I was a proper civic-minded joiner in state-approved recreational activities. I’d gone because my friends were going; we’d fire a few rounds after work or after Young Communist League meetings, then we’d go off to a film or more likely I went home to care for Slavka. I’d never taken it very seriously.

That was about to change, I decided. An advanced marksmanship badge—now *that* would wipe the smirk off Alexei’s smug face. More important, it would make Slavka believe I was more than just his soft, fond, loving mamochka. Because I had so much more to teach him than shooting, to make a fine man of him. To work hard, to be honest, to treat the women in his life better than his father ever did . . . But that marksmanship badge—yes. That would be a good place to start.

Besides, I recalled that edged, possessive glint in Alexei’s eyes as he looked at me. Not wanting me himself, but not really wanting anyone else to have me, either.

Maybe it would be no bad thing if I knew how to defend myself better than I did now. Knew how to defend my son.

“He said I was a *baby*,” Slavka burst out. “I’m not a baby!”

My heart squeezed and I hugged him tight. “No, you aren’t.” *You’re not a baby; your father is a bastard. But we don’t need him, you and me.* My son had me, and I would give him everything. An apartment of our own someday; a wall of bookshelves; a future. I didn’t

need my name to resound forever like Alexei dreamed of doing; I didn't need fame or greatness. I just wanted to give my son the life he deserved.

*So no more mistakes*, that flinty internal voice said. And I promised myself: *Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.*