

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle

February 2022 – Commission

Chapter Two

It was this one, singular night that did it – that initiated her transformation from little Katya into Katarina, freedom fighter.

Oh, sure. Katarina had always thought of herself as clear-sighted. Rational. Unable to be swayed by all the idiotic and horrific Changes that their new dictator had brought to the country. She had no reason to believe the lies his government spewed, after all. The tyrant had taken her education, her father, and her very future, so why on earth would she even think of listening to the official narrative?

But here, in the surreal warmth of this underground gathering, she began to realize – much to her own growing dismay – just how many of the dictator's regime of lies she had unconsciously begun to internalize. To assume were true. To believe.

"Welcome, friends," began Julia Rudawski, and there was the first jolt of disillusionment. Her low voice, edged with quiet menace, was nothing like the airheaded and sycophantic babble that she spouted in commercials on national TV. "You all know why we're here. You may not know everything, but you know enough." Her green eyes swept the room, lingering on one face after the other. "You know what was taken from us. You know the cruelty and the lies and the utter travesties that Anton has brought."

Anton. Jolt number two. He wasn't the Supreme Leader here. He wasn't even "the dictator." He was just Anton – just a man. A single person. And therefore assailable.

Katarina shivered as Julia's searching gaze connected with hers for a second before moving on. "He has destroyed our economy. He has torn apart our families. Like the filthy beast that he is, he spits upon our most sacred values: of equality, of democracy, and of justice." Amid the murmur of fierce assent from her listeners, she took a breath and drew herself up, her auburn hair gleaming in the light. "We all know that something must be done to stop him, to save this country. And tonight... Tonight, I'm here to share with you all what we will do. What we must do... or die trying."

And then, jolt number three. Julia laughed: a grim, low laugh of derision. "Why should you trust me, you may be asking? Why would I – living in the lap of luxury in that criminal's palace, perhaps the most fortunate woman in the entire country – why would I want to take him down?" She

sighed, and her expression grew somber. "Oh, I know what some of you must think of me. I know what they want you think of me. I see the official broadcasts. I'm there at every single fucking photoshoot, pinned there against the wall, forced to preen and pose and smile like the sweetest and most delighted wife ever. But you have no idea what it's really like. What Anton does to all the women around him. How he beats us... humiliates us... uses us for his pleasure... fucks us and then throws us away like a spoiled brat throwing away his broken toys..."

A murmur of horror amid her audience, and then a voice called out. "Even you?" "Yes. Even me," she returned, and though she remained still and erect, her voice was trembling with rage. "But listen well. I will not indulge myself here tonight by telling you all my personal hardships. Each of you has your own story, and your own hardships that are just as horrific as mine, and even more so. I am here to bring you a solution: a solution, and hope."

Katarina's heartbeat thudded in her ears as she listened, completely absorbed in the sight and words of this remarkable woman. So Julia wasn't the perfect dictator's wife. She was suffering just like they all were. She had a solution, and a way to bring an end to this horrible nightmare...

Though she wasn't remotely prepared for the sort of solution Julia began to expound.

"We have intel, thank god," she proceeded, and her tone of brisk confidence now lent authority to her every word. "At least three of his current secretaries are known to us as reliable and trusted agents. They are relaying information every day as to his plans, his activities, his schedule, and his projects." She flashed a grim smile. "Oh, yes. We know everything, for instance, about his plans for the new prison facility at Shkova. And as you're about to see, that intel is going to be very useful to us once we remove him from power..."

What? A prison facility? Is Julia going to propose that we imprison the Sup-

"We are all women here," Julia announced simply, interrupting Katarina's wondering thoughts. "We are women: mothers, aunts, daughters, and sisters. We have within each of us both velvet and steel: the nurturing maternal instincts nature has given us, and also our fierce desire for revenge upon this brute who has wronged us all. And so, I propose that the way in which we remove Anton from office be made not only to fit his crimes, but to fit ourselves."

A low murmur of puzzled incomprehension rippled through the gathered women, and she held up a hand to still them. "What do I mean by this? Well, it is simple." She took a deep breath. "We need him out of power. But we must also de-legitimize him, and legitimate whomever the people choose

as a leader to take his place. Thus, while we must undoubtedly rely on the military for some assistance," and here she nodded toward a cluster of fatigue-clad female soldiers in the back of the room, "The means by which we remove him must not be seen as a naked grab for power. He must fall from power through his own clear and irrefutable inability to govern..."

And then she finally came to it: the words that explained the entire scheme. "We must force him into mental and physical incompetence. And what better or more fitting way than to physically and mentally regress this spoiled, overgrown brat into the state of babyhood he deserves?"

Gasps, chuckles, and shocked murmurs ran around the room, and Julia laughed grimly. "Yes, you have all heard me correctly! And believe me: we have the means to make this happen. This will be like nothing that any of our neighbors will expect, which is precisely what we need. Outside observers – whether from the UN or from other nations – will simply interpret what happens to him as an unfortunate fit of insanity. And after all..." and here her fiery gaze swept the room. "Don't you think that it is only fitting for a man who has abused our sex so horribly to be forced to regress into helpless dependence on us? To be made completely reliant on the very sex that he has so often exploited for his own pleasure?"

She then laid it out in no uncertain terms: terms that thrilled Katarina and made her catch her breath in astonishment. They had methods, so Julia said – drugs, psychological conditioning, devices – that would rob a person of their muscular control... their ability to speak and think clearly... their very sense of who they were. With their aid they could turn this despot from a young man into a veritable infant, whimpering and wailing and helpless to control not merely the nation, but even his own words and bodily functions...

"We are on the verge of success," Julia concluded with fierce determination. "Thanks to our agents, the facility at Shkova is already being adapted for the purpose. We know that only two weeks from now, he is planning to vacation at a summer palace barely twenty kilometers from Shkova. All we need is to seize the right moment – to pull him away from public view and divert his attention for just long enough to take control. And for that, we are going to require a volunteer: someone brave, committed, and willing to risk themselves for the cause..."

Katarina reflected on it now barely an hour later, curled up safe in her cold bed, hardly daring to believe what she had just done.

How had it happened that her hand had shot up at once? How had those words tumbled from her lips – words offering herself, begging to be allowed to help, voicing with awkward but passionate enthusiasm her desire to be the one chosen for the task?

She still wasn't quite sure. But even so, through all of her anxiety and incredulity now hummed the thrill and pleasure of Julia's fierce, approving eyes locking with hers. The memory of that extraordinary woman's low, delighted words of approval. Her murmur that Katarina could be exactly what they needed: a bright young woman who could pose as a pretty, brainless toy for the dictator's pleasure and distract him from his imminent demise. Her soft assurance that in the next few days, Katarina would hear of what she must do next...

Sleep was not going to be easy tonight. But that didn't matter. All that mattered now, she mused as she stared up at the darkened ceiling of her little bedroom, was the resistance, and Julia's plan, and doing the very best she could to ensure its success. And maybe, just maybe, she could help these brave women to coax the glimmer of hope she'd received tonight into a glorious blaze of reality and freedom.