

## Chapter 18

Considering the early hour of Svetlana's arrival, Weylin decided to drive directly to the vineyard rather than the castle.

"You must be very proud," Svetlana said, upon observing the large black and gold sign on the road leading to the McCain Vineyard.

"I am, but wait until you've tasted our Cabernet."

After a quick and impressive tour of the winery and attached facilities, Weylin stopped by the store room and removed several bottles from the cases originally set aside by Capelli, while Svetlana waited in the anteroom admiring the artwork. He glanced at his wristwatch as he approached her. "It's lunch time," he announced, "you must be hungry but would you rather stop at the castle and freshen up first?"

"I'm quite fresh, if you haven't already noticed!" she said, with a slight giggle, "I've been looking forward to the local cuisine."

"Well, we have the wine," Weylin said, holding up two bottles, "let's go find some

food.”

At the suggestion of signore Capelli, they dined at a small restaurant in the town of Bolgheri. The establishment’s owner, a friend of Capelli, greeted them at the door. “I hope you are not offended,” Weylin said to the owner, as he produced a bottle of his own wine.

“It is I who should apologize to you,” the proprietor replied in broken English, “Your wine is not part of my inventory.”

“Perhaps we can change that,” Weylin said, as they were escorted to a table.

As soon as they were seated, a waiter appeared and supplied menus and wine glasses while proceeding to open their bottle. To Weylin’s surprise, Svetlana initiated a conversation with the waiter in fluent Italian. She then went on to describe the afternoon’s specials to Weylin. “I’m impressed,” he said. “Where did you learn to speak so well?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

About to respond, the letters KG... barely forming on his lips, she placed her index finger across his mouth.

“We will not mention that organization in public, will we?” she said, authoritatively.

“I guess not,” he replied, while pointing to her now full glass, adding, “give me your honest opinion.”

“What a wonderful bouquet, flowery and fruity at the same time.”

“You are going to taste it, aren’t you?” he jested.

“Of course, silly ... umm, my compliments. It is truly amazing, my father will hound you for a case when he hears of it.”

“He shall have one,” he said, while raising his glass to hers.

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The drive from the restaurant to the castle was brief but silent. He assumed that the lack of conversation was the product of travel fatigue and wine. Svetlana's only reaction upon seeing the castle was to turn to Weylin with a big grin.

“What do you think of this place?” he asked, as they entered the suite.

“More important is what I think of you for choosing it.”

“Are you displeased?”

She smiled and put her arms around his neck. “No, Weylin, I am overwhelmed by your thoughtfulness and romanticism.”

“Have I gone too far?”

She kissed him passionately on the lips, quickly moving her tongue to his ear. “Did I answer your question?” she whispered.

He kissed her neck while slowly guiding her towards the bed. Gently placing her on the gold brocade bedspread, he began to remove her clothes while kissing each newly exposed area of her body. He had succeeded in removing her blouse when she rose slightly, gently but forcefully pushed him onto his back and began to seductively complete the process of undressing. He watched, mesmerized by her deliberate and snakelike movements. When she had removed all but her wisp of transparent panties, she began to unclothe him.

Their lovemaking lasted for several hours while daylight passed into to darkness.

“Wake up, I am hungry,” she said, while nudging the sleeping Weylin.

“What time is it?”

“It is almost eight o’clock.”

Shortly thereafter, dressed, in preparation for dinner at the castle’s restaurant, Svetlana took Weylin’s hand and removed it from the door knob. “Did you change your mind?” he asked.

“No, but there is something I must tell you before we go.”

“Can’t you do that while we are walking?”

“This must be said in private.”

“OK,” he said, while lowering himself onto a nearby chair.

“It’s about the e-mail you sent to father,” she said, while kneeling beside him. “At first, he dismissed it as a misdirected message but something in your voice concerned him and he considered it further. Without going into his methods of deduction, he has come to the conclusion that whoever sent it had a distinct purpose.”

“Please, get to the point.”

“The message speaks of the Art Information Forum. He thinks that this might be a reference to an enemy of both yours and ours, the Armed Islamic Front or A.I.F. The word *traffic*, a term used in the intelligence community, and the phrase, personal interest in you, suggests that the sender has monitored their conversations; the phrase needs no interpretation.”

Why do they keep coming back to haunt me? he wondered.

“What does he think that really means?”

“It could mean nothing, after all, they could better expend their energies against larger

targets. On the other hand, they may feel that there is a score to settle?”

“You’re referring to Taroob, aren’t you?”

She shrugged affirmatively. “I would not dig a hole just yet,” she cautioned, “the message is somewhat vague and there is no indication of time, place or action.”

“Alright then, time for dinner,” he said, with a smile. But the damage had been done, the thought firmly embedded in his mind.

The restaurant was quiet and empty. They dined slowly, with conversation limited to comments about the food or wine. Although he grinned at her often during dinner, his mind was clouded by thoughts of the A.I.F. and their past bloody battles.

They returned to the room and a night of urgent, yet passionate sex. Morning brought with it sunshine and a refreshing shower. He stood under the steaming flow with his back towards the curtain. A gentle hand touched his buttock as Svetlana joined him. “Good morning,” she said, while taking the bar of soap from his hand and rubbing it on his back, “I hope you will not dwell on last night’s conversation.”

“I’m sorry about my silence at dinner.”

“I understood. That is why I waited to tell you.”

He turned, pulled her to him and kissed her deeply, the soap falling from her hand. Their tongues intertwined as his hands explored her slick body. Reaching between them, she grabbed his now erect member, slowly and rhythmically massaging it back and forth increasing its rigidity. He pinched her nipples, bringing them to full attention while she continued the unrelenting cadence. Almost at the brink of ejaculation, he pushed her hand aside, put her arms around his neck and lifted her legs to his waist piercing her at the same time. With her

body now supported, he and plunged her depths until she had reached the pinnacle of pleasure. Spent, he remained imprisoned within her. “I’m growing attached to you,” he said, with great tenderness.

She looked down towards the juncture of their bodies; simultaneously they began to laugh.

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Sunday was spent exploring the countryside and picnicking in their car, a special request made by Svetlana. The castle’s chef had prepared a large basket full of local cheeses, fresh breads, salami and mortadella, complemented by the remaining bottle of McCain Cabernet. Sitting in the back seat of the Alpha, drinking wine while overlooking the Mediterranean, Weylin’s eyes became moist. “I’m glad you decided to come,” he said.

“You made me feel something wonderful when we last met in Florence, I wanted to experience it again.”

He turned to look towards the sapphire blue water while immersed in thought. “Since the death of my wife,” he said, his voice cracking slightly, “I never thought I would ever be able to find someone I could totally confide in or feel comfortable with. I’m ashamed to say that I have been a social climber of sorts but those aspirations have brought me nothing but grief. I can’t begin to imagine what life has dealt you in the past, the death and despair that you have witnessed. Yet, it has not erased your warmth and compassion.”

“My past will remain locked away, a hidden slice of time between my childhood and

the present, however, what I experienced in Florence was not a fluke, it was real. It is what I have been looking for, hoping for. With father considering his retirement, it is time for me to begin my life.”

“I’m not asking you for a commitment, just the time to see if one can develop. There is distance between us, years and miles. It’ll take time.”

She lovingly ran her hands through his hair. “Distance,” she whispered, “is immaterial, age is irrelevant.”

They kissed at great length, returned to the front seat and drove towards the castle as the barely visible sun approached the horizon.

Sunday ran into Monday, with little change in activity until late morning when they drove to Florence. Weylin had carried with him the jeweled broach that he had purchased on his previous trip. Having given some thought to presenting it to Svetlana, he had changed his mind, realizing that she had been aware of its intended purpose. She should have something special, he had said to himself, for her and her alone.

They walked from shop to shop along the Ponte Vecchio until an odd antique ring caught her eye. “I must see this one up close,” she insisted, while grabbing his coat sleeve, requiring him to follow. She stood at the glass counter as the proprietor removed the ring from the window display and placed it on a black velvet viewing blanket. “What do you think?” she asked, while placing the emerald encrusted green gold band on her ring finger.

“It’s beautiful but do you really want a ring for that finger?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not what you think,” she replied, with a wink.

Hmm, he said to himself, that’s what they all say, as he leaned into the counter and

handed his credit card to the proprietor, “we’ll take it.”

She pushed the ring over the knuckle securing it on her finger, turned and french-kissed him.

After lunch, during the return trip to the castle, a strange sound was heard emanating from the glove box. “What is that ringing?” she asked.

“Damn, sounds like my satellite phone, it’s in the glove box.”

She opened the compartment and handed him the phone. “McCain here,” he said, clearly annoyed by the interruption. He spoke tersely into the phone, finally, resting it on the seat beside him.

“Is there a problem?” she asked, “you look disturbed?”

“Condor has had some run-ins with an antiabortion group. To get them off my back, I promised their attorney a voice at one of our board meetings without telling the board. Now he’s making a fuss and the board wants me to deal with it.”

“But you are here. Can it not wait until you return?”

“You don’t know my board. They are quite adept at threat making. I’ll see if I can stall them.”

Ten minutes after arriving at the castle, the phone rang again. Weylin took the call while Svetlana busied herself in the bathroom. “Armond, how nice to hear from you. I assume you received the wine shipment?”

“Yes, and as you requested I forwarded two bottles to one of our local wine experts.”

“And?”

“It is a fine Cabernet. It needs a few more years on the shelf but by then it should be



spectacular.”

“What about the critic?”

“Oh yes, he loved it. He is planning a splendid article for this month’s wine review. You should encounter little difficulty disposing of your entire stock at a premium price.”

“We can discuss that when I return next week.”

“I was hoping you might be available sooner. There will be a fine wine exposition here in New York the end of this week. It would be the perfect opportunity to showcase the Cabernet. The next showing will not occur for another twelve months.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Speak to you soon.”

Two pressing problems, he pondered, and just when things were going so well.

At that moment, Svetlana exited from the bathroom. “I heard the phone ring, same problem?” she asked.

“No, another just as important.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you must leave before we had planned?”

“I feel terrible,” he said, while taking her in his arms, “I don’t want to leave you but these issues cannot wait.”

“Well,” she pouted tearfully, “if you must.”

“You can stay here for the remainder of the week.”

“In this romantic setting, by myself? No, I think not.”

“Then, why don’t you come with me?”

“I don’t think I am ready for that yet.”

“But you are here.”

“Father thinks I am on vacation by myself.”

“So, you’re going to keep me in the closet?”

“He is old fashioned. You may have to speak to him if we are to go any further.”

He thought about that for a minute and then shook his head. “I’ll find a way to tell him,” he promised.

“No, to ask would be better.”