

Chapter 30

Last night, during our marathon lovemaking, you demonstrated such tenderness,” Svetlana commented, at breakfast the following morning. “I would never have thought it possible.”

“It came from deep within and it’s all your doing, you unleashed it,” Weylin whispered.

He watched with admiration as Svetlana cleared the table, washed the dishes and carefully returned them to their places of origin. When finished, she meticulously wiped each finger on a dish towel, put her hands upon her hips and frowned. “So,” she said, “where do we begin?”

“The library at the New Jersey College of Medicine.”

“OK, I am ready, let’s get started.”

Condor had long since established a relationship with the medical college, paving the way for their employee’s use of the library. Weylin flashed his corporate ID and nodded to the librarian as they passed the front desk on the way to the stacks. “I’ve compiled a list of texts and

journals that address various lethal poisons,” he said, as they walked side by side. He stopped briefly, tore the page in half. “Here,” he suggested, while handing her the shorter of the two, “see if you can find these.”

“What exactly are we looking for?”

“A quick acting, tasteless poison that can evade the standard laboratory tests; probably something exotic.”

She leaned close to his ear and whispered. “Perhaps we should be exploring old KGB documents. I’m sure we could find many examples of exotic poisons, no?”

He grimaced, while rubbing his chin. “Hmm, hold that thought,” he said, “we might need it.”

They parted, meeting forty minutes later in a private, glass enclosed reading room, where they deposited the fruits of their labor. A pile of books and periodicals now sat before each one of them on the round, modern table. After five hours of nonstop page turning, Weylin gasped and excitedly slapped his thigh. “Bring your chair closer,” he urged, “I think I may have found something.”

“I too have found something,” she said, while holding up a squashed package of condoms that had been left behind by a prior reader as a bookmark.

“I remember those days,” he chuckled. “We thought about it a lot but rarely had time.”

Quietly dragging her chair alongside his, she asked, “What have you discovered?”

“Look at this,” he said, while pointing to a page in the Journal of Toxicology. “P.S.P.. Odorless, colorless, tasteless and stable when subjected to high temperatures or acidic environments.”

“And of course, a proper Cabernet is normally acidic,” she said, knowingly.

Twisting to face her, his expression turned inquisitive. “I’m impressed,” he remarked, “but I won’t bother asking how you knew that.”

“What is this, P.S.P.?”

“Finally,” he joked, “something that you don’t know.”

“I am trying to be serious, if you haven’t noticed,” she complained, with an obviously feigned pout.

“It’s paralytic shellfish poison. Comes from certain varieties of algae often seen in red tides and is similar to the puffer fish toxin.”

Groaning, she hissed, “Dermo!”

“Excuse me?”

“Russian slang,” she explained, “it means shit! But this is saxitoxin you are describing--I am familiar with it.”

“Please, tell me what you know.”

“We experimented with it, but it was your CIA that actually used it in the nineteen fifties.”

“How did they use it?”

“It was rumored that they carried the substance in their suicide capsules; much more effective than cyanide. It is extremely potent, a thousand times more so than the nerve gas sarin.”

“The symptoms match,” he marveled, after reading the remainder of the article. “This has to be it. Says here that it dissipates rapidly and is rarely found in the human body after

ingestion and its effect may be enhanced by inhalation. The lab wouldn't have found it unless it was specifically tested for and who would suspect something like this."

"Is there anything else in those books that could do the same thing?"

"I don't think so. Doesn't look like anything else could have survived the wine making process and the acidic environment, plus, it doesn't take very much of this stuff to kill rapidly."

"OK, now what?"

He quickly checked the time on his wristwatch. "We take a little ride over to Interlabs," he replied, "and convince them to test for saxitoxin!"

They stormed through the Interlabs waiting area at four-thirty in the afternoon and blew by the receptionist. "You can't go in there!" she shouted after them.

Paying no attention, he walked directly into the specialist's office without knocking. Turning from his computer screen, the specialist smiled. "Is this about our bill?" he asked, sheepishly.

"No. I want you to test the wine for saxitoxin."

"Saxitoxin? Why?"

"Please, just do it."

"It's not part of our repertoire. I'll have to arrange for the test reagent to be overnighted to us. Check back with me Monday afternoon."

"Where does the reagent come from?"

"There's a guy at the University of Miami who has developed a florescent test for the stuff. It binds to the toxin and shows up under ultraviolet light."

"OK, expect my call," Weylin said, as he turned, took Svetlana by the arm and left the

building.

He unlocked the passenger door and waited until Svetlana had entered. His mind was a whirl of angry thoughts and it wasn't until he was seated beside her and exiting the parking lot, that he temporarily put them aside. "How about an early dinner?" he asked, while shifting into second gear.

"Fine with me," she replied, "maybe you can survive on powerbars," adding, as she reached forward to lower the radio, "if the laboratory confirms the presence of saxitoxin ..."

"Yes, I know," he interrupted, "but I don't think there's any question about it. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"OK. Then how do you suppose it got there?"

"That is the question, isn't it?" he replied, leaving unsaid his innermost fears.

Villa Torino was quickly becoming his home away from home. He deftly guided her to a booth in the rear and ordered a bottle of wine as they perused the menu. Shifting her gaze from the list of daily specials, she lowered the menu. "This saxitoxin theory troubles me greatly," she admitted.

"What do you mean?"

"We've already established that it couldn't have gotten there by itself. Its use would require a sophisticated knowledge of toxins, not within the realm of the ordinary criminal. Then, there is the question of motive."

“You’re moving too fast. Let’s wait for the confirmation.”

“Just a short while ago you were convinced, have you changed your mind?”

“No, but I’m hoping for a negative result. The implications of an affirmative result are just too terrible, because if I’m right, it could only mean a deliberate sabotage.”

“My thoughts exactly. I think we should discuss this with father.”

“Not yet, we might be able to resolve this ourselves. You know, the motive may not be as sinister as you’re implying. Perhaps it’s just the frustrated response of a disgruntled competitor.”

She shook her head knowingly, while frowning in disagreement. “That is the worst example of wishful thinking I have ever heard,” she observed.

After draining the last drops from their bottle of wine, they drove back to the penthouse in silence. As he weaved in and out of traffic, Weylin chewed on his cheek while glancing sideways at Svetlana. She’s one hell of a woman, he said to himself. Soft, sexy and bright but I’ve got a feeling she knows where this is leading and I’m in no rush to find out.

When they arrived at the condo, Svetlana walked directly to the restroom while Weylin entered the den to check his e-mail. He deleted the usual barrage of advertisements but stopped when his cursor landed on a familiar e-mail address. Paolo came through after all, he thought, while hitting the print key. He waited the several seconds for the printer to complete its work and then sat back to read: *Dear Weylin, after a great deal of cajoling, I managed to convince my cousin to review his mortuary records. His facility is one of the largest state operated hospitals in our region and was a regular customer of the Camalia vineyard. During the twenty-four month interval prior to the sale of Camalia, there were sixty-two unexplained or poorly documented causes of death. It is not known what percentage of these*

patients had consumed the wine, but given our regional preference for the red variety, I would have to assume that most did. I trust you will keep this information confidential as its release could prove detrimental to my relative.

Your friend, Paolo.

P.S. during the two year period prior to that noted above, there were only five unexplained deaths. At that time, wine was purchased from local vendors who did not carry the Camalia label.

“Wow,” he exclaimed, as Svetlana entered the room.

“What have you got there?” she asked.

“Here, read this,” he said, handing her the printed page.

“Hmm,” she mumbled, while dropping into a nearby chair without removing her eyes from the page.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think we are dealing with a well orchestrated operation. There is a pattern here, although, we cannot be totally certain that these deaths were due to the wine.”

“Did you read the postscript?”

“Yes, I see your point.”

“Whoever did this, for whatever reason, introduced the toxin at the winery.”

“Ah, now you are again convinced?”

With a wry twist of his mouth, he turned to face her squarely. “I know you just arrived, but how would you feel about a trip to Bolgheri?”