

Chapter 35

The Alpha Romeo crept along Florence's Via Lugarno Vespucci, as Svetlana searched for a parking space. *Dermo!* (shit), she said to herself, I've been around this street five times already. I hope Uri is still waiting at Harry's Bar. Ah, someone is pulling out.

She parked and walked the short distance to Harry's. Uri, an ex-KGB agent turned freelancer, was leaning against the outside wall smoking a cigarette. The two had never met, but earlier in the day she had e-mailed a description of her outfit and a coded phrase.

Stubbing out the cigarette with the heel of his shoe, he stepped away from the wall and approached. "A beautiful day for ducks, is it not?" he said in Russian accented Italian.

"I see no ducks," she said, answering with the prearranged reply.

"Let us walk," he suggested, while taking her hand. "Why has Sascha sent you in his place, he knows that I answer only to him?"

"Sascha is my father and I was an officer in your old organization. He is not aware that we have made contact and for the moment, I choose to keep it that way."

“Understood, but how will I be paid for my services?”

“In the usual manner.”

He nodded in acceptance. “I have some preliminary information,” he said.

“I’d prefer that we not mention the subject’s name in public, old habits die hard.”

“Agreed,” he replied, as they continued their leisurely pace along the cobble stoned street. “I have just begun to gather information and already I can see that the subject is not a professional.”

“And the reason for your conclusion?”

“Sums of money have been transferred to his personal account from a Malaysian source. A professional would have used a numbered foreign account.”

“But of course, you assume he has something to hide.”

“If not, then why are you wasting my time?”

“To reaffirm the validity of my intuition.”

“Ah yes, intuition, the foundation upon which we build our craft,” he said, with a ridiculous grin.

“The Malaysian source,” she asked, “what is its name?”

“Useless. It is merely a shell corporation at the end of a long line of similar attempts at subterfuge.”

“There are no names associated with any of these shells?”

“Yes, there are but they are low level individuals paid for the use of their names. I have not yet found a reference to a bona fide, but I will.”

“What else?”

“One of my people witnessed his passage into a local Muslim cultural center but, for obvious reasons, she could not enter.”

“Interesting, what significance do you place on this piece of information?”

“I would prefer to determine if this visit was part of a pattern before answering, but together with the bank transfers from a largely Muslim country, one might assume that he is a follower.”

The meeting ended with Uri’s promise of a more complete dossier in the coming days.

On the drive back to Bolgheri, she wondered, what does this all mean? Well, until I figure it out I will keep it to myself.