

Chapter 36

A thin layer of powdery snow covered the road leading to Sascha's estate. It was colder than usual for springtime in Geneva but the snow had already begun to melt under the influence of the early morning sun. The taxi came to an abrupt stop and discharged its two passengers in front of the tall carved wooden entry doors. "Do you smell that?" Svetlana asked.

"Something's burning," Weylin replied, as he paid the cab driver and made certain that all of their bags had been deposited at the front steps.

"Not a good sign at this hour of the day," she remarked, while biting her lip.

"Why?"

"Something is troubling father, he has lit the fireplace and is preparing for a lengthy discourse in the library."

"Yeah, I remember, his favorite place for serious conversation."

Svetlana, key in hand, hesitated briefly before inserting it and opening the door. Weylin followed from behind with the bags and placed them in the anteroom as Momma, Sascha's

housekeeper, gourmet cook and ex-KGB infiltration expert, arrived to greet them. “How nice to see the two of you together,” she said, while drying her hands on a colorful apron. “I have just finished serving breakfast but much remains, come, take off your coats and you will eat.”

“Where is my father?” Svetlana asked.

“Better you eat first,” Momma warned.

Svetlana shivered, while stealing a sideways glance at Weylin as they followed her towards the dining room.

With breakfast consumed, Momma began to clear the table while Weylin and Svetlana drained their coffee cups. About to return to the kitchen, she stopped and turned to face Svetlana. “Now you are ready,” she said, “he is waiting in the library but don’t tell Sascha that I warned you.”

As they rose from their seats, Weylin gently grabbed Svetlana’s arm. “What is this all about?” he asked.

“Wait, you will see.”

From the entrance to the library, Weylin could see Sascha standing before the roaring fireplace, stoking the logs with a polished brass poker. Svetlana entered first and approached her father from behind. Leaning forward, her gesture of affection ignored as she pecked him on the cheek, he grunted. “Sit down, both of you,” he ordered.

They meekly took their places in the large leather covered easy chairs that sat in front of the enormous stone fireplace. No one spoke; the only audible sounds came from the crackling logs as sparks flew about in a fiery dance. Finally, Sascha broke the silence. “We had an agreement,” he barked, while avoiding eye contact with his daughter.

“Yes, I know but ...”

“There is no but,” he interrupted. “You agreed not to contact any of my assets without prior approval!”

“But, we are partners.”

“To a point. It has taken me years to cultivate those resources and earn their trust. Fortunately, Uri and I have worked together many times in the past and no harm has been done.”

“He contacted you?” she asked, with surprise.

“Of course, he wanted to make certain that he would be paid for his services. Now,” he said while turning to face Weylin with a big smile, “it is a pleasure to see you again my friend, especially, in the company my errant daughter.”

“It’s good to see you as well, but I am somewhat embarrassed to be here at this very moment.”

“You shouldn’t be,” he said with a smirk, while swiveling to face Svetlana, “after all, I suspect that my daughter’s digression had something to do with you.”

“Father, I think we should discuss my ‘digression,’ as you call it, in private.”

“Nonsense,” he said, while pointing to Weylin, “this concerns him as well.”

What the hell is he talking about, Weylin wondered, as he sat between the bickering pair.

“Now, would you like to tell your boyfriend what you have been doing or shall I?”

Svetlana grimaced as she bowed her head. “I’ll do it,” she said.

“It seems that I am the only one here in the dark,” Weylin said, as he turned to face her squarely.

“Alright, I was going to tell you but I wanted to be certain before I did. It is about your

alleged friend Paolo ...”

“Paolo?” he interrupted.

“Yes. Remember how I reacted when you introduced me to him?”

“Y-e-s,” he said tentatively, as Sascha rose to stoke the fire.

“During the cold war, whenever I crossed paths with an enemy spy, the little hairs on the back of my neck would come alive and I would feel a chill. I experienced that with Paolo.”

“But Paolo is only a simple restaurateur.”

“Things are not always as they appear,” Sascha said, as he returned to his seat and nodded for Svetlana to continue.

“I employed one of father’s assets to gather information on Paolo. I am sorry that I lied but I did not go to Florence for the purpose of shopping, I had used your computer to arrange a meeting with Uri.”

“OK, go on,” he said, anxious to hear the remainder of her explanation.

“There is reason to believe that Paolo is more than he claims to be.”

“How so?”

“I have learned that Paolo has been receiving bank transfers from a Malaysian source to his personal account.”

“What does that prove?” Weylin asked.

“Ha,” Sascha quipped.

“By itself,” Svetlana admitted, “perhaps nothing, but there is more. He was seen entering a Muslim cultural center—a local place of prayer.”

“So, are you implying ...?” Weylin started to say, as his internal alarm began to sound and

the impact of her statement took effect. He slumped back into the chair, his mind a whirl of confusion. “This is all too bizarre,” he whispered.

“Listen, my friend,” Sascha said, while leaning closer to Weylin, “I understand your bewilderment but for us, there are no straight lines. We must always assume that there are three sides to a coin, friend, foe and something in between. It is not always easy to tell. True, we do not know for sure what this means but, in light of your current circumstance, one must be suspicious.”

“What circumstance are you alluding to?” Weylin asked.

“Come now, Weylin, must I repeatedly remind you of my KGB heritage. When you first told me about the wine problem, I began to make inquiries of my own. I am quite up-to-date on all that has happened, including the recent visit from Interpol and Carabinieri.”

“Then you know about the saxitoxin?”

“Sadly so.”

“Do you think Paolo is somehow involved in this mess?”

“Anything is possible.”

As Weylin tried to digest this new development, he glanced at Svetlana, who appeared to be mesmerized by the dancing flames. “What do you think?” he asked.

Without shifting her gaze from the colorful display, she replied, “I think we should reassemble the facts as we know them and look for a familiar pattern.”

“Good girl,” Sascha said, “you have not lost your objectivity.”

Later that night, following dinner, they returned to the library and began their assembly of the seemingly scattered bits of information.

“So, what do we know for certain?” Sascha inquired, as he returned from the library’s normally concealed bar carrying a tray supporting three glasses of cognac.

“The only concrete fact that I’m aware of is the intentional poisoning of my wine,” Weylin said, while reaching for one of the offered glasses with his right hand and balancing a yellow legal pad on his left thigh.

“Good, then we start there,” Sascha said, returning to his chair after handing the remaining glass to Svetlana.

“Do you have any business enemies, Weylin?” Svetlana inquired.

He pondered her question for a moment. “There was a group of antiabortionists that targeted Condor and myself,” he said. “One of their members even took a shot at me. But on second thought, I don’t think they’re sophisticated enough for something of this magnitude.”

“Think, Weylin, there has to be someone lurking in the shadows,” Svetlana urged, after taking a sip from her glass.

“You know,” Sascha said, as Weylin sat staring at a flaming log that was about to break in two, “I have been thinking about the e-mails you asked me to consider.”

“Have you deciphered their hidden meaning?”

“Perhaps they were an encrypted warning of events yet to take place.”

“But a warning from whom, about what?”

“Ah, that is the question is it not? But for the moment, let us assume that an unknown guardian had foreseen the wine debacle. Although the original message appeared to have been sent from Russia, a careful search of its travel history revealed that it actually originated from somewhere in the Mideast and I suspect the same for the second.”

“I can’t imagine who could have sent it,” Weylin said.

“For the moment, it does not matter,” Sascha replied, “what does, however, is that it reinforces our conclusion of premeditation.”

“OK, but where does that take us?”

“To the Mideast,” Svetlana cut in.

“What about the missing Egyptian enologist, Hathar?” Weylin asked.

“She is gone, out of reach,” Svetlana commented.

“Which brings us back to your friend, Paolo,” Sascha said, as he rose, walked to the bar and refilled his glass.

“How do you figure that?” Weylin asked.

With the glass to his lips, Sascha pointed at Svetlana.

“Transfers of money from a Muslim country; for what purpose you might ask? A visit to an Islamic place of prayer, all very suspicious,” she concluded.

“And all circumstantial,” Weylin observed, still not prepared to believe that he had been duped.

“Listen my friend,” Sascha said, in a conciliatory tone, “an unpleasant possibility has

been tugging at the drawstrings of my mind. You do have mideastern enemies who live by the old adage of an eye for an eye.”

“Oh shit, not them again,” Weylin hissed.

“At the risk of damaging your apparent friendship,” Svetlana interjected, “I think we should interrogate Paolo.”

“Yes, I agree,” Sascha remarked. “If they are behind this, and we are already aware of their technological capabilities, it would make sense for them to have an outside observer.”

“Alright, I see your point,” Weylin agreed, with some reserve, “but how do you propose to get his consent?”

“Leave that to us, it will be done,” Svetlana promised.