

Chapter 37

Weylin had spent the night by himself in a bedroom suite attached to but not part of the house. Svetlana had previously made it clear that Sascha was in many ways an old fashioned man and that she preferred to avoid his disapproval.

Sunday morning arrived sooner than anticipated. A car door slammed shut outside his window and he awakened with a start. The sound of crunching pebbles could be heard as heavy footsteps strode across the gravel driveway. Sitting at the edge of the bed, he strained to read the luminescent dial on his wristwatch. Four A.M., he said to himself, what the heck's going on? But the noise had stopped just as quickly as it had appeared and fatigue prevailed; he fell back to sleep.

At eight A.M., he reawakened to a brightly sunlit morning and the faint aroma of freshly brewing coffee. He quickly showered, dressed and made his way to the dining room in search of breakfast. Svetlana and Sascha were already seated, drinking coffee and eating freshly baked black bread in silence. "Good morning," Weylin said.

Turning towards her father, who was engrossed in the newspaper and for whom silence at the dining room table was a rule, she placed her finger across her lips. “Good morning,” she whispered.

Considering the speed with which Momma had served and removed the dishes from the table, Weylin had assumed that something unusual was in progress. So, when Sascha had drained the last drop of coffee from his large mug, rose from his seat and gestured for them to follow, he was not surprised when Svetlana pulled him aside and put her lips to his ear. “There is a guest to whom we must attend,” she confided.

He followed them into the library and waited as Sascha pressed a hidden button, causing a section of the paneled wall to slide back, revealing a large gray toned room. On its far end sat a motorized hospital bed, while its center housed a tall red, many drawered metal cabinet of the type used by mechanics. He had visited this room on one prior occasion during the Olera affair when, after the capture of the A.I.F. leader, Jamal Tarooob, he bore witness to an artful drug assisted interrogation.

The wall completed its journey and they entered. A lifeless form lie upon the crisp white sheeted bed. Weylin approached but stopped several feet from its edge, his mouth agape with a horrified expression. “How did you, why did you have to do it this way?” he exclaimed.

“There was little time to lose,” Sascha explained. “If we are to find those responsible for the saxitoxin we must act quickly.”

“But how did you get him here?”

“We used the most expeditious method; Uri, drugs and a private jet,” Svetlana replied, smugly.

Weylin approached the bed for a closer appraisal, “Paolo, can you hear me?” he asked.

“He is too deep at the moment,” Svetlana commented, while holding a syringe in a vertical position, expelling several drops of liquid from its pointy end as she walked towards the bed. “This should wake him some,” she added.

Weylin stepped back, not wanting to be the first thing Paolo saw when he opened his eyes but before he had reached his intended destination, a chair at the side of the room, Paolo began to groan and slowly move about in the bed.

Svetlana removed the syringe needle from his arm and retreated to the head of the bed as Sascha slid a chair to its side. “How are you feeling my friend?” he asked.

Paolo’s lips moved in an attempt to speak but no sounds were heard and then, gradually, he found his voice. “Where am I?” he asked.

“No need to be concerned, you are safe and in good hands.”

“Who are you?”

“Unfortunately, my friend, you are not in a position to ask questions,” Sascha said with a soothing tone while nodding towards Svetlana.

Taking her father’s cue, she removed a remote control device from her pocket and aimed it at a cabinet positioned on the opposite side of the room. Suddenly, the room came alive with the entrancing, ethereal sounds of Russian choir music. Weylin moved his head about the room searching for the source but none could be found. The sound seemed to emanate from the room itself and was at once both soothing and unnerving.

“Am I in a church?” Paolo asked, with obvious concern.

“You may consider this a place of worship,” Sascha said, “I am here for your confession,

my son.”

Svetlana had moved from the head of the bed to Weylin’s side. He tugged at her sleeve.

“Is he still under the drug?” he whispered.

“Most definitely, at this level he will be open to suggestion and believe almost anything,” she replied, in a subdued tone.

Paolo rolled his head slowly from side to side. “Why am I behind these bars?” he asked.

“The bars are to prevent you from falling out of this bed,” Sascha replied, in a soft and steady tone. “Do you believe in Christ, my son?”

He hesitated, “I believe in Allah, is that the same?” he asked.

“How long have you been devoted to the Islamic faith, my son?”

“Since I returned from America some years ago.”

“You converted, my son?”

“Yes, father,” Paolo replied, demurely.

“For what reason, my son?”

“I was troubled, father. When I graduated from college in the United States, I wanted to stay. The Americans would not grant me citizenship, I hated them for that.”

“How was that experience responsible for your devotional change?”

“Muslim friends took me in. They hated America for different reasons but convinced me that my hatred was righteous. Allah has taught me that hatred of the nonbelievers is acceptable and desirable.”

Sascha turned briefly to face Weylin and winked. “I understand your devotion,” he said, turning back to Paolo, “who were these friends that took you in?”

Paolo licked his lips and pulled at his restraints. "Why am I tied?" he said.

"So you do not injure yourself, my son. Now, tell me about the nice friends who took you in."

Paolo began to fidget and tug more conscientiously on his leather restraints. Sascha nodded towards Svetlana, who retrieved a new syringe from the red metal cabinet and carefully injected a small amount into the clear plastic tubing that dangled from Paolo's arm. The agitation ceased.

"Again, who are these friends?" Sascha insisted, with audible impatience.

"They are soldiers of a holy war."

Weylin leaned forward in his chair with alarm and continued to listen.

"Are they part of a larger group, my son?"

"Yes, father. They are soldiers for the Armed Islamic Front."

Sascha lowered his head and scratched his scalp. Following a rapid sideways glance at Weylin, he continued. "Did the A.I.F. have a purpose for you in Pisa?"

"Yes father. I was to make friends with the new owner of Camalia, if possible."

"For what purpose?"

"So I could keep close watch on him."

"Why?"

"To make certain that the plan for his destruction would not be interfered with."

"And what was that plan?"

"To destroy what he holds most dear, his reputation."

"And how would that be accomplished?"

“By serving his poisoned wine.”

“Even if it meant injuring your friends?”

“They were infidels, expendable.”

Having heard enough, Weylin rose and silently left the room. Twenty minutes later, Svetlana found him sitting in the library, staring at the fireplace, his mind a whirl of anger and confusion. “Ah, there you are,” she said, “did our little session bore you?”

“I can’t believe that I fell right into their trap. And Paolo, he really had me convinced that he was a friend,” Weylin lamented, while shaking his head in disbelief.

“Do not deride yourself, if it were not for my training he would have fooled me as well.”

“I still don’t understand how he managed to poison several of his friends and why; the wine that I initially gave him came from my own ten cases. It was not tainted.”

“Father asked him about that just before I increased his medication and sent him back to dreamland. He apparently felt that poisoning his friends would remove any potential suspicion. His Muslim colleagues supplied the saxitoxin laced wine.”

“And the hospital deaths?”

“Their testing grounds.”

“How could the A.I.F. have known that I would buy the winery?”

“Who knows, perhaps they took a calculated risk,” Sascha interjected, having overheard the question as he exited the interrogation room and passed into the library. “Who did you buy the winery from?” he inquired.

“A holding company.”

“No names attached?”

“I asked, but got nowhere. All I know is that my funds were transferred to a Malaysian holding company.”

Sascha took a seat beside Weylin and momentarily glanced at Svetlana with an amused expression as she repeatedly attempted to reignite a fire. “As you know,” he said, still observing his daughter’s fruitless efforts, “I have entered a period of semiretirement and look forward to the day when I can close the door on my sordid past. I cannot do that, however, until those rotten A.I.F. scoundrels are put to rest.”

“It’s not your fight,” Weylin said, pensively.

“It has become my fight. I may be getting older but I am not blind, Weylin. I recognize the bond that is forming between you two,” he said, nodding towards Svetlana, who had finally succeeded in lighting a fire.

“What are you proposing?”

“These fundamentalist organizations rarely focus on one single individual. It is more efficient for them to expend their energies and finances on large groups. Therefore, the decision to attack you is most likely a vendetta and probably the pet project of the current leader.”

“But you once made a point of telling me that when one of these monsters falls another rises to take his place.”

“True, but the next lunatic may not be willing to waste his resources with such frivolity.”

“So, when do we begin?” Weylin asked, the familiar, bilious taste of fear just barely perceptible.

“When we are ready!” Sascha replied, as he rose and left the room.