

Chapter 38

**B**y early Monday morning, Svetlana had already dispatched a forged e-mail to Paolo’s family explaining his untimely disappearance as the result of a midlife crisis. “This should buy us some time until we figure out what to do with him,” she had said, while describing the message to Weylin and her father.

Following the usual discussion-free breakfast, the trio left the house and took a walk through the Pine studded forest surrounding the estate. While they roamed, Sascha toyed with a thin fallen branch, rhythmically slapping it against the palm of his hand. “This morning,” he announced, stooping to sniff a spring bloom, “I will begin to reassemble my team.”

“How will we determine who the leader is and where he might be?” Weylin asked.

“I was busy while you both slept,” he replied. “I have requested information from several of my most trusted assets.”

“How many members of the old team will be needed?” Svetlana asked.

“It will depend upon our destination and the anticipated number of opponents.”

“Would you care to guess where we might be going?” Weylin inquired.

“There are no guesses in this business but if you insist, probably somewhere in the Mideast,” he replied. “I expect to have some answers by later today, we can then begin to structure a plan.”

When they returned to the house, Weylin excused himself, feigning fatigue, and slowly walked back to his suite. Closing the door, he sat on the edge of the bed and contemplated the dangerous decision that had just been made. All those bullets flying around me the last time I crossed swords with the A.I.F., he said to himself, and me getting shot in the butt—well, it could have been a lot worse. Yeah, I’m lucky to be alive and now we’re gonna’ do it again? Well, I really have no choice. If I can’t clear the McCain name, my future is lost.

Weylin passed most of the afternoon on the telephone, conversing with his New York attorney and later, Alberto, in an attempt to convince him to maintain his position at the winery. At one point during the conversation, Alberto appeared despondent. “It appears that the business will not survive this terrible tragedy,” he bemoaned.

“Listen, Alberto, I’ll admit that things look bleak a the moment but please hang in a bit longer,” Weylin pleaded, realizing that Alberto’s despair was hardly altruistic in nature.

“For what purpose, after all, I have my family to think of?”

“I’ll continue to pay your salary and benefits and there is still a chance that things will improve.”

“Dr. McCain, there are many vineyards in Italy and many direttori ... we all know each other. My future employment prospects have been darkened by this incident and remaining here can only make things worse.”

“As you said, your prospects have diminished. I’m only asking for another month at best. What have you got to lose?”

“OK, one more month while I look for work elsewhere.”

He ended the conversation wondering how he was going to deal with the dilemma? On the one hand, he said to himself, I should be back at the vineyard trying to patch things up as best I can and on the other, McCain Vineyards cannot survive unless I clear its name by dealing with and revealing the people responsible for its predicament--and that’s exactly what I must do!

At five P.M., fifteen minutes after his closing argument with Alberto, a powerful fist knocked on the bedroom door. “Weylin, I must talk to you,” Sascha barked, as he opened the door and sat down on the room’s only other chair. “We have a problem. My sources have not yet been able to obtain the information necessary to formulate our plans.”

“Is there a contingency?” Weylin asked, his disappointment oddly mixed with relief..

“These people are the best. If they cannot accomplish the task, I fear no one else can. Our only choice is to wait, they will not fail me. There is some good news, however. I have located my entire team.”

“Are they available?”

“It took some convincing, but once they understood the nature of our intended target they agreed. It will, however, cost thirty percent more than their usual stipend.”

“I’m prepared to pay whatever it takes,” Weylin said.

“That will not be your concern. This time, it is on the house.”

“What would you like me to do while we await the intelligence?”

“I am certain that you and Svetlana will find a way to entertain yourselves but,” he

warned, while pointing towards Weylin's midsection, "it would serve you well to get some exercise before we depart." Sascha pushed his chair aside, rose and had reached the door when he placed his hand into a pocket. Pivoting rapidly, he tossed a Berretta, semiautomatic pistol in Weylin's direction. Weylin, facing Sascha but gazing at the floor, reacted immediately to the movement, catching the pistol by the butt and instantly shifting it to the firing position. "I see you have not lost your edge--good," Sascha remarked, "it will serve you well in the days to come."

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Nightfall came quickly, and following an hour in Sascha's small gymnasium, crisp sheets and a firm bed were a welcome sight. As Weylin drifted towards the first stage of sleep, the only audible sounds were those articulated by a passel of frogs and assorted insects. A brief period of dream awareness followed, carrying him back to a dingy multilevel building in an unnamed mideastern country. Gunfire and muzzle flashes, horrific screams and blood spattered walls flashed before him. And then it was over, replaced by deep, dreamless sleep. At two A.M., he awakened to a sensation of subtle movement, as Svetlana quietly slid beneath the comforter. Placing her index finger across her own lips, she gently placed her hand over his mouth. "I can only stay for a short while," she whispered, "father has strict rules."

"I don't think he'd mind," Weylin replied, while recalling what Sascha had said earlier in the day about finding a way to occupy themselves.

"Remember his famous words, 'things are not always as they seem.' What he does not

see he does not mind.”

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Svetlana had returned to her room before sunrise, leaving Weylin in a state of bliss. At breakfast, with the exception of a few traded smiles and knowing glances, there was no hint of their brief tryst. That morning, in addition to the usual freshly baked black bread and strong coffee, Momma carried a tray of scrambled eggs and pancakes to the table. He thanked her, recalling that she had done the same thing prior to the last mission. I hope this one has a better outcome, he said to himself, while reaching for the maple syrup. Halfway through his pancakes, the usual silence was broken by the sound of a ringing telephone. Momma approached from the kitchen carrying a cordless phone while glaring at Sascha. “It is for you,” she said, with raised eyebrows.

He waved his hand briskly, as if to shoo her away. “Not now,” he barked.

“The caller insists that you be interrupted,” she replied, emphasizing each syllable as she spoke.

Releasing his newspaper, he angrily reached for the phone and left the room. He returned five minutes later and with an air of confidence, stood at the head of the table, his arms crossed in front of his chest. “We have our information,” he announced. “Finish your coffee and we will talk.”

Weylin gazed at Svetlana and together, they lowered their coffee cups and rose to follow Sascha. He led them into the library where they assembled around the fireplace. While lowering

himself into one of the plush chairs, Weylin recalled that his one time friend, Paolo, had been restrained and sedated in an adjacent room. He turned to face Sascha. "What have you done with the prisoner?" he asked.

"Prisoner is such a harsh word," Sascha chuckled, "I prefer--involuntary guest. But, no matter, he is probably weaving baskets or whatever they do at the local mental hospital."

"Mental hospital?" Weylin blurted out, incredulously.

"Yes, they will take good care of him and make certain that he does not escape. Do not worry, when we return from our little outing, he will be released, unharmed."

"I assume the telephone caller provided the awaited information?" Svetlana said.

"Lebanon, they are near the border on the Lebanese side," Sascha replied.

"Who's in charge?" Weylin asked.

"The current leader is a man called Mahmud, I do not know his family name. What is most important, however, is that he is closely related to the late Jamal Tarooob."

"Tarooob!" Weylin snapped, nodding his head in disgust. "So, that's what this has all been about? An elaborate plan for revenge?"

"Calm down, Weylin," Sascha hissed. "Clear your head."

"Alright, I'll try."

"OK, so we begin," Sascha declared. "As we speak, Momma is recording a coded phrase on the answering machines of each of my team members. They have been told to expect the call and should arrive here within forty-eight hours."

"Do you know the A.I.F.'s location with exactness?" Svetlana asked.

"I am told that they alternate between three closely situated locations near the border.

We may not know for certain which one they will occupy until we have arrived.”

“But that will minimize the element of surprise and increase our risk,” she complained, while resting her chin in the palm of her hand.

“That will not be our only problem,” he lamented, “the entire area is patrolled by Hezbollah.”

“Do you have a plan to assure our success?” Weylin asked, anxiously.

“Not yet, but I have some ideas. When the team arrives we will discuss the possibilities.”

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Forty-eight hours passed quickly and all of the team members had been accounted for. Each one greeted their old friend Sascha with great enthusiasm and wishes for an end to their mutual foe.

The following day, they assembled in the basement situation room. Weylin entered last and was immediately overcome by the recollection of his last visit to the stone walled cocoon. The old, ceiling mounted, fluorescent tubes cast a greenish hue over the surrounding walls and all present. An electronic jamming system, borrowed from Sascha’s prior KGB employers and keyed to the light switch, deployed immediately upon closing the echoless chamber’s only door. A battered wooden table and accompanying chairs sat dutifully in the center of the cubicle. Beyond the small room, two corridors could be seen leading off in opposite directions; one to a well stocked wine cellar, the other to a locked steel door, the contents of which were said to be off limits. When all were seated and relative calm achieved, Sascha leaned to his side and

retrieved a thick stack of papers from an well worn leather briefcase. “Gentlemen and lady,” he announced, “I am about to discuss a mission that carries a great deal of personal significance both to myself and perhaps to all of you as well. If anyone here is experiencing second thoughts, now is the time to speak.”

The team members traded glances and then refocused on Sascha. “Alright, then I assume that there are no dissenters,” he said. “In short, our job will be to dispatch the current A.I.F. leader and as many of his subordinates as possible ...”

“What has happened to create this urgency?” a surly and bearded team member interrupted.

“They have embarked upon a campaign of revenge for the death of their prior leader with whom you are all familiar.”

“Who have they targeted?” a shaven headed member inquired, while slowly moving a pencil eraser in and out of his left ear.

“A relatively new member of our fearsome family,” Sascha replied, while gesturing towards Weylin.

“I intend no disrespect but how has this become personal to us?”

“If an attack against another member is not reason enough, then consider it a personal attack against me!” Sascha growled.

“I accept the explanation,” the questioner replied, while wincing from an overzealous plunge of the eraser.

“If there are no other questions, I will continue,” Sascha declared, sarcastically, as he gazed at their faces. “Our target, known to us only as Mahmud, is the current leader of the A.I.F.



Trusted sources have placed him in Lebanon, along the Hezbollah controlled border. Our objective will be to infiltrate in disguise, dispose of Mahmud and as many of his inner circle as possible in a well timed, lightening fast strike.”

Sascha had spread several maps of the territory across the table. A team member nearest Weylin leaned forward and tapped his pencil along a grid line. “Where along this border is our target located?” he asked.

“Ah yes,” Sascha said, “you have struck upon our first tactical problem. Information suggests that he and his group periodically change the location of their base of operations.” Removing a red marking pen from his shirt pocket, he drew an “X” at the three alleged positions. “Here, here and here,” he said, sharply, “they could be at any one of these places. A rapid assessment must be made upon our arrival before we commit to any action.”

One team member, sporting a close cropped beard, sat at the far end of the table snapping small pieces of dark chocolate from a large brick-like bar. “We cannot simply walk into their territory,” he declared, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, “without expecting reprisal. And how do we get there?”

Sascha, raising his hand, pointed towards Svetlana. She looked up and lowered the magnifying glass that she had been using to examine minute map details. “That is exactly how we shall enter,” she said. “With the proper clothing and identification we should have no difficulty. We will arrive in Israel as tourists on separate commercial flights and will cross into Lebanon via the Fatima Gate or in the Sheeba Farm region, whichever appears less guarded at the time of our arrival. Equipment and uniforms will be supplied by one of our trusted operatives.”

“The papers must be valid or they will shoot us on sight,” the questioner retorted.

“That is not your concern,” Sascha chimed in, “the documents will pass scrutiny.”

“And the exit plan?” he mumbled, a giant chunk of chocolate protruding from the corner of his mouth.

“After all of the years we have worked together,” Svetlana replied, caustically, “why do you question our planning abilities?”

Waving his hand, signaling for Svetlana’s silence, Sascha rose from his seat. “Underneath your peasant clothes,” he instructed, “you will be wearing an Israeli Defense Uniform, complete with valid identification. Momma is prepared to record our photographs and transmit them to the engraver. Any further questions or concerns?”

“Yes,” a previously silent team member replied, “do we have photographs of the three A.I.F. locations?”

“No, but I have their basic descriptions. All three are small structures, the largest has two levels and a total of seven above ground rooms. I do not know if they possess any underground space. There will be little if any cover available to us on approach.”

“Sentries?” the same member asked.

“What would you expect?” Sascha growled, while shaking his head in disbelief. “*You* will be assigned to reconnaissance, it will be *your* job to determine the exact number.”

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After dinner, during a rare philosophical repartee, Weylin and Sascha were seated in the library, drinking cognac discussing their past and future involvement with the A.I.F.

“I find it strangely unsettling to contemplate these terrorist group’s alleged religious underpinnings, it makes no sense,” Weylin commented.

Sascha rubbed his chin pensively. “My dear Weylin,” he replied, “religion is like bread, there are many varieties but they all rise from the same basic ingredients. Terrorist ferocity has nothing to do with religion, they seek power and control, nothing more. You have only to look back at the crusades to understand that those motives are hardly unique.”

Following a lull in the conversation, and between sips of the finely aged brandy, Weylin lowered his glass to a tray and turned to face Sascha. “You didn’t seem as confident discussing this mission as you have with past excursions?” he remarked.

“Perhaps I am getting to old for this business. In the past,” he said, with a deep sigh, “a pocket full of uncertainties was cause for excitement but now it forces me to face my mortality.”

“Is there a hidden meaning to your words?”

“No, my friend,” he chuckled. And then, changing the topic and tone of conversation, he said, “I am pleased to see that you have grown close to my daughter, watch out for her, she is all I have.”

“You have my word.”

“Good.”

“You know, I would feel more comfortable if she were to remain here.”

“I agree, but she would not allow it and besides, we need her expertise.”