

Chapter 7

Weylin sat at a small desk in his Pisa hotel room. Spread before him were Camalia's financials and a mental image of the future McCain Vineyards. He had already run the numbers through the small laptop that he had brought with him and had decided that, putting aside his emotional affinity for the purchase, it made good business sense. Before he left for Italy, Charlie had provided some information regarding comparative land values in the region as well as the approximate worth of the vineyard's hard assets with data he'd received from the broker. Weylin had assumed that the numbers contained some degree of fluff but from what he had seen, they were in the ballpark. There remained, however, one small troubling issue. Considering that the vineyard is profitable, he reasoned, the sale price is probably below market value. On the other hand, it may very well have to do with the fact that there is no room for further expansion but for my purposes, a small boutique winery would be just fine.

It was now eight-thirty, Thursday evening, and all he had eaten since lunch at the trattoria were the crackers supplied at Camalia's tasting room. The small hotel did not have its own dining facilities and given his lack of familiarity with Pisa, he decided to return to the homey atmosphere of Paolo's restaurant.

"Good evening my American friend, so nice to have you back," Paolo said, as Weylin entered his now busy establishment.

"Lunch was so memorable I just had to see what you have to offer for dinner," Weylin replied.

Only one table remained unoccupied and Paolo led the way. "Would you like the menu or do you have something special in mind?" he asked.

"Perhaps a veal dish but why don't you surprise me."

Paolo raised his hand and kissed his first three fingers. "You won't be disappointed," he promised.

When the remains of the final course were cleared from the table, along with an almost empty bottle of wine that Weylin had consumed by himself, Paolo arrived with a double espresso and a colorful dessert. "Paolo, how long would it take to drive to Florence?" Weylin inquired.

"Depends on what you are driving."

Weylin laughed. "I'm familiar with your autostrada driving standards. Let's say something fast."

"Less than an hour. Do you have a car?"

"No, I hadn't planned on needing one but I've decided to make a brief trip to Florence to buy a gift for a friend."

“My brother-in-law runs the local Avis store, I’ll call him and arrange for something nice.”

Before Weylin had risen from his chair, Paolo returned and stood before him. “My brother-in-law has a brand new Alpha Romeo 166 that was delivered this morning,” he said. He planned to use it himself for a few days but I convinced him to rent it to you. You are planning a short trip are you not?”

“Two days at most.”

“He’ll bring it to your hotel when he opens in the morning.”

“Thank you for your assistance and most of all, for a chance to sample some of the finest food I have had the pleasure to consume.”

“I expect to see more of you,” he said, beaming with pride, “after you buy the vineyard and, perhaps you will give me a chance to purchase some of your wine.”

The wake-up call came at six A.M. and five minutes later, a clerk delivered his preordered cappuccino and croissants. He wanted to get an early start on the day and hoped the rental car would arrive as expected.

It was Friday, an Indian summerlike bright sunny day. Paolo’s brother-in-law arrived at eight A.M. with the shiny new silver Alpha sedan. His English was only passable but Weylin understood his intent when he cautioned that the car was in *rodaggio*, break-in period. They shook hands and the brother-in-law left, although, he turned several times to look back at the car before finally disappearing around a corner.

By the time Weylin had entered the autostrada, he had completely forgotten the break-in warning. The big Alpha's engine barely groaned as it pushed the luxury car to a speed of two hundred kilometers per hour which he calculated to be the rough equivalent of one hundred and twenty-four miles per hour. Even at that speed, the car was buffeted by the turbulence of passing vehicles. The exit for *Firenze*, Florence, was well marked and Weylin made his way towards the center of town. He planned to peruse several jewelry shops with the hope of finding something special for Cassandra.

He parked and walked in and out of the many shops along the Ponte Vecchio until he encountered one that seemed to display antique jewelry. Entering, he made his way to the long counter and began examining the hundreds of interesting displayed pieces. One in particular caught his eye and the proprietor removed it from the case and placed it on a black velvet cushion for his review. It was a ruby and emerald encrusted brooch claimed to be several hundred years old. As he leaned forward to get a better look, he felt a hand loop around his right forearm from behind. "I would keep looking if I were you," a familiar sexy, Russian accented voice suggested.

Recognizing the speaker's reflection in the glass case before him and shocked, though pleased, Weylin turned with childish excitement. "Svetlana, up to your old tricks are you?" he teased.

"Are you not happy to see me?" she cooed, while still holding his arm, her mouth approaching his.

Weylin kissed her tentatively but Svetlana, true to form, refused to release him and pressed her lips to his with ever greater pressure until their tongues met. "Now," she said, stepping back slightly, "that is a proper greeting for old friends."

Weylin had first encountered Svetlana after enlisting the assistance of Sascha during the Olera affair. Although he initially assumed that the tall, curvy, vampish brunette ex-KGB operative was Sascha's girlfriend, it quickly became apparent that he had erred; Sascha was her father. During that time, they had engaged in an intermittent sexual sparring match where, until the very last minute, Weylin occupied the subservient position. They parted in stalemate. Aside from her voracious sexual appetite, remarkable intelligence, knowledge of wines and obvious attraction to Weylin, she had proven herself as a superior operative, capable of accomplishing astonishing physical feats.

"Is this meeting purely coincidental?" Weylin asked.

"No, I have been following you for the past two years," Svetlana laughed. "But really, I arrived in Firenze this morning on a shopping trip and, yes, the meeting is joyfully coincidental."

"How is your father?"

Pulling him closer, she placed her lips against his ear. "He is now in semiretirement," she whispered. "After your last mission, he decided that we've had enough of the dark side but he is not having an easy time of it. I too miss the challenge, the excitement ... but here you are."

"I remember being a fairly easy target for you," he whispered, recalling the time she clandestinely entered his locked hotel room, drugged him while asleep and had wild abandoned sex, only to leave him wondering whether his obscured recollection was a fragment of a dream or reality.

"I don't recall any complaints and besides, you did get even," she remarked, with a coquettish smile while tilting her head.

Weylin shook his head in affirmation and leaned towards the clerk who had been watching the entire time. “I’ll take it,” he said, “put the broach in a nice box.”

He stuffed the small box in his pocket and the two of them left the store, side by side.

“Who is the woman?” Svetlana asked, her arm entwined with his.

“Jealous?”

She hesitated briefly. “Perhaps,” she admitted.

“It’s time for lunch, will you join me?”

“Wonderful idea.”

Svetlana released his arm and walked ahead into the warm sunlight. Weylin followed briefly from behind, transfixed by the outline of her sensual body visible through the sheer cream colored silk dress. As if yesterday, he recalled the sense of urgency he experienced with the feel of her smooth naked flesh, her firm, yet supple breasts beneath his fingers and the unmistakable invitation from the magnetic vee between her legs. As she continued to walk, he called for her to slow down. She turned, twisting her ankle as a stiletto heeled shoe caught in a crevasse among the ancient Florentine cobble stones. Quickly closing their short separating distance, he grabbed her by the waist while she tested her weight on the now injured ankle. “Can you walk?” he asked.

“With your help.”

Pulling her closer to his body, her fragrance was overwhelming. “My car is nearby,” he said, “I’ll take you to your hotel.”

“I’m staying at the Grand Hotel—Piazza Ognissanti.”

“Haven’t got a clue,” he said.

“You drive, I’ll direct.”

As they approached the entrance to the hotel, Svetlana turned in her seat. “It’s feeling a bit less painful,” she said, “if you can help me to the dining room I’ll treat you to a wonderful lunch.”

“Lunch was great,” Weylin remarked, as a waiter refilled their coffee cups.

“You never mentioned the objective of your trip to Italy, surely it was not for the purpose of buying a gift?” Svetlana pried, with the intonation he had once heard her use during the interrogation of Jamal Tarooob, the A.I.F. leader.

“I flew into Pisa for the purpose of evaluating a small vineyard whose purchase I am considering. I’m only here for the day.”

“To buy a gift for a girlfriend, I presume?”

“Yes,” he said, without hesitation. “I came for a gift but instead found a lost treasure.”

For the first time during their rocky acquaintance, Svetlana blushed and for a brief interval remained speechless. Feeling her discomfort, he broke the silence. “I didn’t intend to make you feel uncomfortable,” he said, “but I’m beginning to see a different person before me.”

Leaning forward, with just a hint of moisture in her eyes, she stared for a moment. “I am not the cold and calculating person the KGB tried to construct,” she whispered, “although, I must admit that their training has served me well.”

Earlier, while standing behind her in the sunlight, he was overcome with renewed

sexual desire for her but now, those feelings were inexplicably intermingled with tenderness, understanding and a desire to comfort her. What's happening to me, he wondered, this is the woman who took of me what she wanted without question or emotion, yet, I believe her-- beneath it all, she is a woman. "How is your ankle?" he asked.

Looking down at her foot, she pursed her lips. "It looks swollen," she replied, with childlike animation, "but I won't know if there is pain until I stand on it."

Weylin rose from his chair, knelt down and examined her ankle. "Damn, it's red and swollen," he remarked, "let's get you back to your suite and see if I can do something to help."

They slowly walked to the elevator and then into her suite. With Weylin supporting her weight, her right arm around his neck and his left around her waist, the feeling was electric. He led her to the edge of the bed where she sat while he emptied a pitcher of ice into a towel and returned to gently place it against her ankle while helping her to lie down on her back.

"It seems that you have me at a disadvantage," she said, more as a question than a statement.

"I am a doctor, you will recall."

"Is that all this is about?"

Now, at a loss for words, he thought to himself, I'm beginning to wonder but am I willing to step into the quicksand again? Then, standing above her, he witnessed the emergence of a small tear preparing to fall from her half closed lid. "Are you in pain?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied with hesitation, "but not what you might think."

Standing by her side, torn by his emotions, he reasoned that he really should return to Pisa. "I'll let you rest," he said, "it should be better by morning."

"If you must ... I will send your regards to father," she said, her head turned away from him.

He left the bedroom, walked to the door and with his hand on the doorknob was fraught with indecision. If I leave now, he said to himself, I may never see her again. There is something beneath her protective shell that lures me as intensely as it did the first time I saw her. I remember comparing her to Macy, thinking that they were alike except for the absence of Macy's warmth ... but there is warmth, intelligence, excitement and more. He released the doorknob and quietly returned to the bedroom.

"Have you forgotten something?" she asked.

"Yes," he whispered.

She dabbed her eyes, smiled and made room for him on the bed. They lay side by side holding each other in silence for some time. Finally, after Weylin had repositioned several of her stray locks, she turned over on her back. "What did you forget," she asked, a smirk spreading across her lips.

"The little Russian girl that surfaces from time to time."

The tears returned. Weylin held her closer, kissed her eyelids, cheeks, forehead and finally her lips. She quivered while her arms encircled his head and their tongues mingled playfully. His hands explored her body, unimpeded by the thin silk dress. She offered no resistance as he slowly unbuttoned the front of her dress and removed it. Cautiously, she lifted her body while he removed her white satin bra and bikini panties. He kissed and caressed every inch of her naked flesh causing her to moan sensually when he lingered at her

breasts and inner thighs. She gently pushed him flat on the bed and began to remove his clothes while gazing into his eyes.

Lying there, while she hovered above, undressing him, Weylin felt a sense of sexual urgency combined with a feeling of tranquility and abandon that he had never previously known.

Slowly, she ran her hands across his chest, softly kissing what her fingers had abandoned while continuing down his torso, lingering only when she reached his erect member. He groaned as she engulfed him and her lips began a dance of pleasure. Unable to contain himself, he gently lifted her head while guiding her to a lying position. She gasped as he slowly entered her, teasingly at first, followed by mutual thrusts of great urgency.

The pinnacle of pleasure arrived; they slowly separated. Weylin, shocked by its explosive satiating intensity, sensed that it represented much more than pure physical gratification. Sapped of energy and overcome by a state of nirvana, he slept.

When the rays of first light penetrated the room, he awakened to find Svetlana by his side, staring at him. "So, you were not a hallucination," she said.

"I should hope not, last night was all very real to me."

"And to me as well. I am happy for our chance encounter, but--"

"Perhaps it wasn't chance," he said, holding his hand to her lips, interrupting her.

They embraced and eagerly sought the pleasures of the night before.

Later that morning, Weylin dressed while Svetlana remained beneath the covers. Looking into the bathroom mirror, he wondered, what's happening to me? My vision for the future was clear; what is it that I'm feeling towards this woman? He returned to the bedroom without an answer and gazed at Svetlana as she lie peacefully on her side. "It's time for me to

leave,” he lamented. “My return flight departs from Pisa tomorrow.”

“So, this is goodbye again?”

The question lingered, remaining unanswered in words. Weylin bent forward, kissed her tenderly on the lips and left.

Passing Pisa, he drove on to Bolgheri and spent several hours at the Camalia vineyard. Pleased that his first impression remained untainted, he returned to the hotel and prepared for departure.