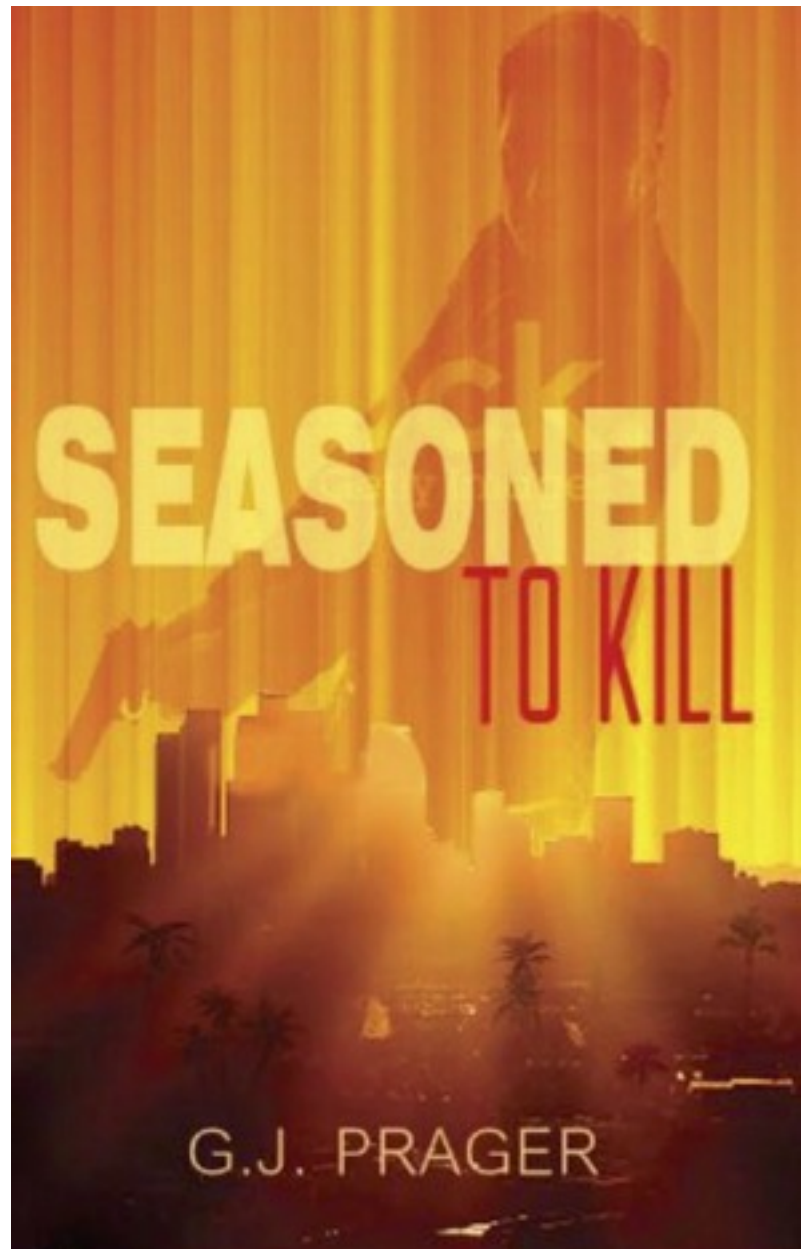


**CHAPTER
EXCERPTS
FROM –**



SEASONED TO KILL

by G.J. PRAGER

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Chapter 1

November's not the best time of year to be hopscotching around New York. It gets colder and grayer by the day, along with my disposition. But I was in town for a week visiting relatives, squeezing them for shelter and hot meals while I hit the pavement seeking out a business opportunity that had recently come my way. I was heading crosstown to seek out an elderly gentleman who lived on the East Side of Manhattan and was purported to be an art dealer of some renown.

My old friend and sometime consigliere, Zeke Stanton, put me up to the task back in L.A., knowing I'd been chomping at the bit for work ever since my parole ended. It was a half-baked but lucrative proposition he put forward, and I agreed to come east to learn the fine details and get moving on it right away. Zeke had known Mr. Howard through some of the Hollywood stars he'd worked for over the years. It seemed this elderly gentleman once sang for a big band during the Swing Era but his career fizzled out after the War, so he took up accounting instead.

Zeke said he held a secret that could make someone very rich.

Mr. Howard lived in one of those pre-war buildings that cost a pretty penny in rent. I peeked through the large glass doors into the lobby; it was laid out in marble made dull by the years, and a chandelier with missing crystals hung from the ceiling. The place had seen better days, as did Mr. Howard, I assumed.

I rang him up on the intercom a number of times before he finally buzzed me in. The only thing missing from this setup was a pricey doorman. I took the elevator to the twelfth floor, and only after knocking a dozen or so times on his door did he get wind of me. I'd read somewhere that hearing was the first thing to go in old dogs

and geezers. His footsteps progressed down a long foyer; I heard a few locks turn.

“Who is it?”

“Robert Klayman. We have an appointment.”

“Who?”

“Robert Klayman,” I repeated, loudly. “You just rang me up on the intercom.”

“Oh, yes, yes.”

He struggled to unclasp the chain and finally got the door open, greeting me with a big smile that showed off a full set of implants.

“Mr. Klayman, it’s nice to meet you,” he boomed in the melodic baritone that once graced the radio waves.

“Likewise, Mr. Howard. I’ve been looking forward to it.”

His mood was light and airy, a sharp cry from the senility he had projected thus far. But I sensed something sinister about him. His gracious facade hinted at a dark secret or two. He might even have some skeletons in his closet. For real. Nevertheless, this wasn’t missionary work I’d signed up for.

“Come on in,” he bellowed.

I stepped inside as he locked the door behind me, then followed him down a long and never-ending foyer; it was dark and narrow and reminded me of a crypt. I had the heebie-jeebies and we hadn’t even gotten started.

The place lit up once we got past the foyer. I sat down on a brown leather sofa that stretched across one side of a sunken living room. He sat stiffly on the edge of a matching leather chair tucked away in the corner, looking like he was about to get back up.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked generously.

“Bourbon?”

“With ice?”

“Yeah.”

“Coming right up.”

He proceeded to the kitchen while I sat around, patiently observing the surroundings. He returned and handed me my drink; it was filled to the top, as was his own spirited concoction. It seemed we were headed for a long session together. I began the discourse.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Mr. Howard.”

That wasn’t really the case, but I did hear him sing once on an old-time radio program early on a Sunday morning when I couldn’t get back to sleep. He crooned pretty well back then, I have to admit.

“Good things, I hope.” He sat back down in the corner chair.

“Oh yes, of course.” I was being tactful.

The place looked to be a small one-bedroom, the sort of place a Manhattan pensioner is apt to live in. The walls were plastered with music memorabilia from a generation before rock ‘n’ roll hit the charts. He was front and center in those black and white photos, with suited-up musicians holding saxophones or trumpets standing amusingly behind him. His furniture was from that era too; and, as with most geezers, his place was dark and dreary, coffins not being too far from their minds, I assumed.

“You must have sung with the great bandleaders of the time,” I gushed.

“I knew a few of them: Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey. They weren’t the nicest people to work for, but they were damn good at their job.”

“They don’t make music like that anymore,” I lamented, though I preferred rock ‘n’ roll.

“No, unfortunately not,” he said impatiently. “Let’s discuss your reason for being here.”

“Go ahead and fill me in,” I said defiantly. I didn’t like the grumpy attitude.

“Mr. Stanton had directed me to that article about you online,” he began.

“Yeah, Zeke’s a great friend. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“I read the piece a few weeks ago. I believe it was first published in the Los Angeles Times back in March.” He began knocking down his drink. It looked like scotch and soda.

“It was a pretty accurate description of my P.I. exploits and all the trouble it got me in.”

Mr. Howard looked back at me as if he knew all my dark and dirty secrets. “I’m aware of that, Mr. Klayman.”

“I received a lot of sympathetic mail from readers but no job offers,” I cracked, trying to make light of it. But failure has no friends.

“Yes, well...once you’ve been scorched by the powers that be,” he began cryptically, “there’s no way back.”

“Huh?”

He didn’t hear me. I noticed a pair of flesh-colored hearing aids tucked inside his ears. They did a good job these days camouflaging those gadgets.

“Don’t let it keep you down,” he said. “The system is no example. They’re all corrupt and rotten to the core.”

“I broke the law, carrying a gun without a permit,” I offered, raising my voice a bit. “I had no business getting involved in a murder case without a P.I. license, or shooting that bum for the couple of dollars he stole from me.”

“You’re underestimating yourself, Mr. Klayman. You showed initiative and resolve, and you defended yourself with courage, in my opinion.”

“The penalty sure didn’t fit the crime,” I said bitterly. “I was railroaded.”

“It was an injustice, plain and simple. But I was impressed with your tenacity. You’re going to need it for this job.” I was getting to like this guy.

“Let’s talk about it,” I said excitedly. “All I know is that it involves a work of art.”

“Not just any work of art, Mr. Klayman.” He paused with dramatic flair. “You’re familiar with Rembrandt?”

“Most definitely,” I tooted. “The famous Flemish painter of the eighteenth century.” He needed to know I was no ignoramus.

“No, but close enough. Do you know how much a Rembrandt is currently worth on the market?”

“A hell of a lot.”

“Exactly.”

“Where do I fit in?”

“Patience, Mr. Klayman. Let me digress.”

He began to relate a tale that was convoluted, mysterious, intriguing, and hardly believable. Yet I sat back and listened like a wide-eyed kid.

It began with an affair he had with a well-placed society lady during World War II who left him to marry a bigwig in the State Department. This lady was also a relative of a former President of the United States, which put her in very high company, indeed.

Having said all that, he began to relate a story about Hermann Goering, the former head of Nazi Germany’s Luftwaffe and the second most powerful man in Germany at the time. Among other things, Goering fancied himself an art lover but didn’t believe in paying for any of it. After the Nazis conquered most of Europe he had assembled quite an art collection for himself. The society lady’s father also happened to be an ardent Bundist back in the thirties. Having a good deal of German blood in his veins, he wished to advance the fortunes of the Aryan race in the United States as well. As if they hadn’t been running things already, I thought.

He’d traveled to Germany a few times before the war and befriended Goering, who offered to sell him a famous Rembrandt at an appreciable discount. The deal didn’t go through, as war broke

out soon after. But it seemed that Goering and the society lady's father had already exchanged some of the money for the sale, and Goering, for the record, wrote out a bill of purchase.

Goering kept the contract in a Swiss bank planning to complete the transaction after the war. He was looking ahead, after all, since he couldn't be sure he'd end up on the winning side, and figured to use the money for safe passage out of Europe. He didn't use his own name, and instead used the name of a former Jewish art dealer in Berlin.

"Very interesting," I chimed in. "But I still don't understand where I come in..."

"Patience, Mr. Klayman."

He went on to say that after Pearl Harbor the society lady's dad had a patriotic epiphany and quickly put his aircraft company to work making instruments that would help tear the Fatherland to pieces just a few years later.

"He more than made up for his apostasy," Mr. Howard noted. "His contribution to the war effort was immense."

"Where is the Rembrandt now?" I was trying to get to the bottom of it.

"There's more to the story."

"Go on."

What choice did I have? This geezer sure liked drawing out a good yarn. I kept looking in my drink, treating it like an hourglass, counting down to the finale. Not that I wasn't interested. I'd always been hungry for postscripts to the machinations of the Third Reich, but all that stuff about Goering was just for starters. Much more befell the Rembrandt as the war came to an end.

"In 1945," he began, "as the Russians swarmed over the Reich from the east, a Red Army grunt found the Rembrandt in a warehouse along with a booty of masterpieces and turned them over to his superior officer. This officer, bravely decorated, rose in rank

over the years and gained quite a standing in the Communist party.” He paused to knock off the rest of his drink, then continued. “A few years ago, a Viennese Jew who survived a concentration camp claimed to have owned the Rembrandt but could not prove it. As the painting was thought to have perished in the war, no more inquiries were made into the matter. After the man passed away, he left no family to do his bidding if the Rembrandt should ever reappear...”

Mr. Howard stopped abruptly, realizing he’d tried my patience a bit too long. “I’m sorry for the length and complexity of the information, but I must relate it all to you.”

“Don’t worry,” I said breezily. “I find the subject fascinating.”

He peered into his glass. “It seems I need some replenishing.”

He took my empty glass along with his to the kitchen, refilling mine with bourbon and his with some expensive port. After handing me my fresh drink, he sat down on the matching leather chair, sipping quietly and lost in thought.

I was trying to pigeonhole this former big band singer. It seemed a thief would have been more calculating in his presentation. This was a Rembrandt, after all, and a lot of greenbacks were at stake. But he stayed cool and detached throughout his improbable tale. I didn’t trust his buttoned up formalities; you’d never guess he’d be so priggish from the way he crooned songs back in the day.

But I hung in – an opportunity like this didn’t come around often. He was trying to reel me in, no doubt, but at least the bait seemed legit.

“Now, getting back to where we were,” he piped up. “Yes, I find the subject fascinating, too.”

“But not for the same reasons I do, Mr. Howard.” He looked back suspiciously. “What I mean is...I have a more visceral attitude about the Nazis than you do.”

“I fought those bastards, Mr. Klayman. I didn’t sit out the war in a sound studio cutting records like Sinatra or Crosby.”

“I’m sorry. I meant no offense.”

“No offense taken.”

I was relieved that he finally showed some passion. It made him seem a little more human.

“I’m thankful for your service,” I said. “It was the one war we fought whose purpose was clear, not like the war we’re waging in the Middle East...”

“Yes, of course,” he cut in. “Now, are you still following the story?”

“I’m trying my best,” I confessed.

“This is where you come in.” We finally got down to business. “I received a call from an art dealer acquaintance who had visited Odessa, in Ukraine, about three months ago. Word had surfaced in the art market that the Rembrandt was being held by a criminal element that was willing to deal. He was sent at the behest of the family I spoke to you about, although the society lady I mentioned earlier died years ago.”

“Did they agree to the sale?”

“The dealer told me they offered to sell it to him for quite a bit of money, as one would expect. He related all this to the family and they agreed to buy the painting. However, they are not interested in paying a ransom for it, which is how they see this Russian gentlemen’s over-the-top asking price.”

“This is where I come in?”

“Our mutual friend, Mr. Stanton, had introduced me to David Abramovich, the man who hired you. We spoke on the phone, and he agreed to facilitate the sale and get the asking price down to what the family is willing to pay. He has contacts with the underworld in Odessa, who don’t need mentioning. You will travel to Ukraine and complete the transaction.”

“You’re suggesting a strong criminal element is involved, correct?”

“Would you like me to refill your glass?”

I looked down at the empty glass in my hand. “Yeah, sure...more ice, too.” It suddenly dawned on me I was getting sloshed.

“I’ll be right back.”

I had a creeping feeling he was sending me straight to the wolves. But like a barroom drunk, I was ready for whatever pipe dreams he put in my head. It seemed any offer of employment was enough enticement for me at the moment. I looked around the place for a clue to his integrity – the sparse décor and a retiree’s austere lifestyle gave me confidence. He probably needed the money as much as I did.

He returned with both glasses full and a big smile. “Here you are. Kentucky bourbon for your pleasure.”

“Yes, it’s good, very good,” I said giddily, as I took a slow, smooth sip before speaking again. “Now, as I was saying...this family you spoke of...they don’t seem very interested in the Rembrandt, if you ask me.”

“I can assure you they want that painting back. In any event, you are to travel to Odessa and transport it out of the Ukraine.”

“How would I know a Rembrandt from a Rubens?”

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” he chided. “As far as I’m concerned you’re a first-rate private detective.”

“I appreciate that.” This guy sure knew how to brown nose, but I wasn’t buying in yet. “Why don’t they plum the art world for guys who specialize in this sort of thing? An art major at UCLA could do the job better than I can.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“Which is?”

“The family only wants it as part of their private collection. They cherish their privacy and want to stay out of the limelight. Someone without an art background and with a low profile like yourself can keep this out of the public sphere. They want complete privacy in

this matter. They're not very proud of their grandfather's role in it. Do you understand?"

I didn't know whether to take that as a compliment or not. The whole idea seemed preposterous. "What if they handed me a fake?"

He looked back in frustration. "You're not following what I said. We have worked that part out already." He took a long sip of his port. "There's money in this for you, Mr. Klayman. I will lay out your instructions. As long as you follow them we will pay you for your services. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure, as clear as daylight. What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Meet this Russian gentleman and pick up the Rembrandt. The money will be transferred through Mr. Abramovich. He will instruct you on the specifics of what to do after you retrieve it."

"Why don't you go there and make the transaction yourself?" I blurted out.

"I've already explained that. Now, do you want the job or not? I'll get someone else if you don't."

He was being coy, and he wasn't making it any easier. But like he said, there was money in it for me.

"If that's all I have to do..."

"That would be all."

"Does this entail a hit? You know, a contract killing?"

"I didn't hear that."

"There's a reason you sought me out, Mr. Howard. You've read about a two-bit, wannabe private detective released from prison with no prospects." I tried to stop myself, but I continued. "Maybe you just don't want to pay a professional, so you hire me on the cheap. Or you might need a patsy, someone disposable after the transaction is completed."

"Make up your mind already, Mr. Klayman." He looked quite angry. This time I'd tried his patience a bit too much.

“Alright, I’ll take my chances,” I said flatly. “I need the money. I’d do anything to pull myself out of the gutter. Anything, you got it? Just be square with me.”

“Are you done?”

“Yeah.”

“I am being square with you. We’ll fill you in as we go along. Now, do you want the job or not?”

I paused, knowing there was more to this than he let on. I looked in my glass and it was empty. It reminded me of my bank account.

“Okay, it’s a deal.”

“I’ll give you five thousand dollars now. Your flight has already been paid for.”

“How much more when the job gets done?” I demanded.

“That’s between you and Mr. Abramovich.”

“Take it one step at a time?” I offered.

“Precisely.”

I couldn’t help wondering why he spoke like a butler on an English estate, but I planned on googling his bio later. I needed the money now.

“When do I start?”

He was fiddling around with some dishes on a breakfast counter that doubled as a bar. He began pouring himself another glass of port. This guy looked to be having a bit of a problem with that.

“A week from today.” He tried to steady his gaze.

“Jeez,” I muttered, “I gotta fly back to L.A. first.”

“Do you want the job or not?” he burst out, forgetting his resolve. I blamed the port for that.

I had to think fast. There were lots of guys who’d jump on the opportunity. But getting involved in a caper of this sort in Ukraine – with all those criminals I’d heard about who had nothing to lose – was like walking into a minefield. Nevertheless, this guy claimed to represent a clique of very wealthy clients. There were a hell of a lot

more greenbacks in this than in chasing after adulterous wives with jealous husbands and thin wallets.

A heist or a hit, I wasn't yet sure, but either one would be quite lucrative on the international stage. What did I have to lose? At some point we all end up dead. Why not call it quits with some real money in my pocket?

“Well, Mr. Klayman, I'm out of patience. What the hell is going to be?” It looked like the booze had put him in a very sour mood, indeed.

“It's a deal.”

He came out from around the counter and picked up a manila envelope that was lying on the coffee table. “Here's your first installment,” he stated very clearly. “We expect you in Odessa on the twenty-fourth of the month. The plane ticket has already been modified to accommodate your point of departure, which I'm assuming will be LAX.” He was beginning to sound like a textbook.

“Right,” I concurred.

He handed me the envelope with a stern look on his face. “There are also instructions as to what you need to do once you arrive.”

“I'll get started on it right away.”

I took the envelope from his hand, opened it, and eagerly peered in. There was a computer printout of my ticket along with a letter of instructions and a bundle of cash. I took the greenbacks out and quickly counted them – five grand, like he said.

I looked back in the envelope. “Hey, there isn't any...” I cried out, checking for a return ticket.

“We'll deal with that as we go along.” He was reading my mind.

My heart was pounding. These people were all business – one little mistake and it was the boneyard for me. This family, or conglomerate, or whoever the hell they were, was certainly not as innocent as he described them to me.

“I’ll be in Odessa on the twenty-fourth,” I assured him. “You can count on that. But I’ll need a return ticket, too.”

“We’ll take care of that, Mr. Klayman. Please read the instructions first.”

“I intend to.”

“Good. I’ll see you out the door.” He followed me down the hall to the foyer. As I reached the door I turned to say goodbye, and an arched expression fell over his face. “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Klayman.”

“Likewise,” I returned.

I shook his hand before taking off and landing back out on the street. An icy, raw wind was blowing off the river, settling on my face like a cold wrap. New York was getting awfully chilly in November. I had a sinking feeling this gig was leading me straight to another kind of freeze box.

Chapter 2

“He’s cute...very cute,” I gushed, peering over the crib at the little tot.

I was laying up at my cousin’s for the week in his small two-bedroom condo on the westside of Manhattan. He and the wife bought it years before real estate prices went through the roof around here. You could fit the whole place in a garage, yet it was worth two million on the market and they were going like hotcakes. Those high-priced Manhattan shrinks sure knew how to earn their keep.

“I’m a grandfather,” Harry piped up. “Can you believe it?”

“That’s quite an accomplishment,” I said. “You should be brimming with pride, pushing sixty with a brood to pass along. Look at me, empty nest and all.”

“I have to say you pretty much missed the boat.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“You should have married and settled down years ago like most people.”

“No law that says you should. I just didn’t plan it that way.”

“No one does,” Harry proclaimed. “We fall into it.” I detected a whiff of regret in his tone.

I suppose he needed a reason to have invested his whole life in one partner. I just thought it smart to hedge my bets. But it takes a certain amount of fortitude to stick to bachelorhood as long as I had. Most people don’t like the sound of being alone.

“My only hope is to snatch up a foreign lady.” I was dead serious. “They’re more forgiving of a man’s bank account.”

He chuckled, and I sensed he sympathized. It must have brought to mind his wife, Barbara, who just then stepped into the room. I put a lid on my musings for a while.

“How are you two today?” she inquired.

“We’re admiring Reid,” Harry said, bursting with pride.

“The kids will be here for dinner,” she began. “They’ll pick the baby up then.” Babs looked me over curiously. “Whatever happened to your roommate, Bob? The cute Shepherd mix you showed us a picture of last time you were here?”

She tried being playful but her tone was downright smarmy. The wrinkles on her face and a sagging throat made her look older than her years, and her once appealing figure had filled out quite unattractively. Perhaps it was watching herself fall apart that made her so resentful.

“Homer’s doing fine,” I said, putting a smile on for her. “The guy who lived next door at my old place is watching him while I’m gone. He took care of Homer while I was in prison, too.”

She threw a dirty look my way. The gal never could get used to having an ex-con in the family.

I continued. “We never got along when I lived next door to him. It’s funny how people change over time.”

“You can never tell who your neighbors are,” Harry offered cautiously. “One day they’re out to get you, the next day they’re your best friends. Remember the Kreugers, Barbara?”

“The couple who lived next door?”

“A perfect example,” Harry declared.

“Very schizo,” Babs whispered back, as if the Kreugers were listening in. “I never knew if they were going to greet us one day and kill us the next.”

“That’s scary,” I said, before turning the conversation back on myself. “When I got out of prison, Homer seemed happy in his new digs. Eric volunteered to take care of him till I got my life back together. Now I just have visiting rights.” Harry smiled. “I don’t live too far away, though,” I continued, “so I’m not...”

I was choking up. It was something I'd been doing when talking about Homer of late, but I pressed on. "I get to share him often enough. In fact, he was staying with me before I flew out here..."

"I'm glad it worked out for you," Babs cut in, turning her attention to the little tot. "Look at him, Harry. Isn't he adorable?"

"Yeah, cute little Reid," he gushed. "What a gift." Harry looked at me suddenly. "Don't you want a family?"

"Sure I do," I replied. I didn't know what else to say.

"How long do you plan on staying, Bob?" his wife inquired. But I'd already told Harry. I guess he didn't want her to know.

"My plans have changed. I have to cut my stay short." I felt a collective sigh in the room. "I just got a call about a new job and it starts right away."

"What sort of job?" Harry looked excited.

"Uh...sales...telemarketing."

"Harry's going out to the west coast in March. One of his Asian suppliers is located in Costa Mesa. Isn't that right, Harry?"

"I'll be going in February, dear."

"We'll start the new year off with a bang," I rang out. "Here's to '07." I raised my hand in a mock toast.

"I don't know if I'll get a chance to visit, Bob. Barbara thinks I take too much time when I go on these business trips." Babs was glaring at him. It looked like he'd just stepped on a land mine. "Don't start in again, dear."

"I'm not saying anything."

There was a strange silence in the room.

"You won't take it personally if I can't find time to visit?" Harry pleaded.

"No, of course not." I put him at ease. "Just knock on my door if you do."

"I just remembered," Babs blurted out. "Susan Epstein's sister is back in town. She's in her forties and single, too."

“What about it, Bob?” Harry threw in.

“Sure, I’d love to meet her.” I didn’t have a choice, it seems.

“I’ll call Susan and see if I could set it up for tonight, after we have dinner with the kids.” She hurriedly set off.

“It’s too bad you can’t stay longer,” Harry offered.

I didn’t believe him, but it was nice enough to say.

“I’m on a short leash. I’d better call the airline and see about changing my flight...”

“Not now, Bob. Let’s go for lunch. How about a big fat juicy corn beef sandwich, kosher style?”

“I haven’t had one in years. They don’t serve deli in the pen,” I said darkly.

“I didn’t think they did,” he laughed. “I’ll buy you the juiciest, most delicious sandwich in New York.” He went for his coat that was hanging on a rack near the door. “I swear this place packs in club sandwiches like you’ve never seen. And their fries are this thick” – he spread his fingers out to illustrate – “and cut individually, second to none. They’ve got the best pickles in the city, hands down.”

I put on my jacket and followed him out. He was on a roll and feeling very sure of himself. I hoped some of it would rub off on me.

Chapter 3

“Wendy?”

“Robert?”

“Nice to meet you,” I said with a smile, joining her at a small table in the back of a Starbucks, holding a cup of java in my hand.

“It’s nice meeting you, too, Robert.”

She sounded pleasant enough. I had taken a cab uptown to 98th and Broadway, and watched the meter run up the fare as we waded through heavy traffic. I’d forgotten how painful it was to watch. The place was crowded like every other establishment in this bustling town, and she was lucky enough to have found a table. Somehow she had me pegged as I was ordering at the counter and waved at me to catch my attention. I sure wouldn’t have guessed right about her. The place was filled with women her age staring into newspapers and laptops with the same smarmy air and weathered look – pert, officious, over-educated, and quite oblivious to everyone around.

“It’s getting easier to find a place to sit and chat in Manhattan,” I began. “There’s a Starbucks on every corner nowadays.”

“They sprout up like mushrooms. It’s horrible.”

“Yeah, but I remember when you needed a search party around here to find a coffee house that wasn’t a greasy spoon,” I countered.

“You go back pretty far.”

It seemed she was already brandishing her saber. I could fill a tome trying to explain that, but I soldiered on. “New York seems more inviting these days.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well...” I fished around for an answer. The tables nearby reverberated with loud conversation, so I had to raise my voice a couple of decibels. “It’s a lot safer than it used to be.” I looked at her

for approval and she seemed to finally agree. “The mood is more upbeat,” I added. “There aren’t as many homeless around, either.”

“A lot’s changed but not the mood,” she corrected me. “When did you last live here?”

Her petulance reminded me of a grammar school teacher I once had. “Whew,” I sighed. “It must have been fifteen years ago.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I had my reasons. I don’t feel like talking about it right now.”

She took a long, reflective sip on her coffee. I was expecting her to scoot out very shortly.

“It’s a big move relocating to another city. Do you like it there?” She set her coffee cup down on the table.

“L.A.’s got the weather but not much else. You get used to the mild winters. Kind of like that Neil Diamond song...L.A.'s fine but it ain’t home, New York’s home but it ain’t mine no more.”

I sang part of the verse for her at the risk of looking like an idiot, but she flashed a smile back.

“Absolutely,” she said, and took another sip of her latte. “Susan tells me you’re a teacher. What do you teach?”

“I used to teach high school. But I left the profession.”

“What do you do now?”

I knew the question would pop up so I jumped on the bullshit train.

“I’ve been working in private detection for the past few years, helping law enforcement solve murders and the like.” I said all that with cocky aplomb, even if I was greatly exaggerating the facts. She was gonna buy in or take a powder. I had nothing to lose either way.

“That’s exciting,” she rang out, her eyes sparkling with admiration. “What kind of cases do you work on?”

Her reaction didn’t surprise me. Most women go in for risk takers. Given the choice, they prefer the maverick over the humdrum male – as long as the money well stays deep enough.

“I’ve worked on murder cases, theft, adultery...” I continued unabashedly, watching her watch me as I got cockier than a kid on a skateboard. “I’ve cracked cases for the L.A.P.D. and the Arizona police department.” I was pouring it on.

“Did you come here on a case?”

I was beginning to enjoy this charade. It’s not often a gal buys into my conceit.

“Yeah, I’m investigating stolen art for the L.A.P.D. – a couple of seventeenth century landscapes by Dutch and Flemish painters that were taken from the Getty Museum. But I can’t talk about it. And don’t mention this to your sister or anyone else.”

“Oh, I won’t.”

“Good,” I returned in classic gumshoe fashion. I had her in the palm of my hand.

“That’s fascinating what you do. I could spend all day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with a Rembrandt or a Vermeer exhibit. I’m enthralled by the realism in their paintings and by their technique.”

“Yes, it was a very productive period.” I had no idea what she was talking about. “There’s a lot of money in art, as you know. I was surprised to find out firsthand just how much.”

Her eyes were popping out of her head. I had hit on a gold mine of appreciation in this gal.

“My favorite artists are actually French Impressionists,” she said with professorial aplomb. “But I really admire the landscapes and portraits of the Flemish Baroque period and of the Dutch Golden Age. In fact, I wrote a term paper on it in college.”

“No kidding?”

“I spent hours after school at the Metropolitan Museum walking through every exhibit.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” I said in a whisper. “I’m looking for a Rembrandt. But keep that between us.”

“A Rembrandt!”

“Shh...not so loud.”

“Sorry.” She lowered her voice. “I won’t say a word.”

“Good.” I took a sip of my coffee and slyly moved on. “It’s great to be near so many museums. Do you live around here?”

“Riverside and 101st street.”

“You must have a view of the river.”

“I do, actually. It’s a small studio, but the view is probably worth a million dollars.”

“Why don’t you sell it?” I asked curiously.

“I don’t own it. But it’s rent controlled. I’m lucky to have found it.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“It’s a long story...” she hesitated, then delved right in. “A choreographer for a Broadway show died of AIDS and I was at the right place at the right time. There was a lot of competition, as you can imagine, but I knew the building manager. That most definitely helped.”

She grinned for just a second then demurred, trying not to let on just how much she knew this stud.

I didn’t have anything to add. I stared mindlessly through the plate-glass window, watching headlights skim up and down Broadway, waiting for her move.

“Do you want to see my place?” she asked innocently.

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all.”

She got up and I followed suit. I pulled her coat off the chair and politely helped her into it, making sure it was on nice and snug. She quickly started for the door and I tagged right along.

Before I knew it we were casing her one-room cubicle like it was a guided tour. This setup was like painting by the numbers. We

ended up on a cushy sofa, sinking back into a pair of huge silky pillows.

I began enchanting her with tales of P.I. derring-do in the netherworld of Hollywood and parts thereof. She listened doe-eyed like a kid on her daddy's lap. When I finished telling my torrid tales I planted a kiss on her lips and she reciprocated in kind. Taking her to bed was a quick move in more ways than one; her mattress was parked next to the sofa we were sitting on.

I was pretty rusty when we finally got down to it. It'd been quite a while since my last official coupling, prison time being what it is. But she was kind and forgiving and kept a smile on throughout. I stayed past midnight, lying beside her naked form, soothed and cuddled like a nursing baby. My younger days were behind me now – I couldn't summon up the old mojo like I used to. But I thought I did pretty well without resorting to expensive pharmaceuticals.

I got up, dressed, and said goodbye to her at the door, and mumbled something about staying in touch. You gotta leave them expecting a next time, it's only right to do.

I headed back to my cousin's place in very good spirits for a change. It seems there's nothing a lady's soft touch couldn't cure.

Chapter 11

I suddenly had company at my table. It was Gilbert Schoen, Abramovich's pal and point man for the Odessa job. He was right on time for our meeting.

He sat his large frame down holding a container of coffee in one hand and a day-old apple muffin he never paid for in the other – courtesy of the Coffee Grind. A large piece of it was stuck in the Fu Manchu style mustache that draped over his lip like a push broom. A long swig of coffee managed to wash away most of the hanging scraps from his mouth. He lit up a cigarette and went into a tirade.

“You won't believe what happened here last night.”

“What happened?” I asked deliciously. My mood was picking up.

“That fuck-face, Barry Goldshit. He showed up last night serving up crap again about the young ladies in South America he says he's been screwing. What a delusional prick. I'm gonna pop him in the face next time he starts in on that baloney.”

It was well known among the local crowd that Schoen held a grudge toward everyone who showed up at the Coffee Grind. But none incited his wrath more than Barry Goldfarb, arguably a more irritating presence than Schoen himself.

“Which young ladies was he going on about this time?” I charged. “The ones in Medellin or in Bogota?”

“All of them, like he's some young stud, a freaking Casanova. Can you believe it? How can anybody stand to listen to his crap?”

“He's in his own world. Aren't we all?”

“Not like him,” Schoen fired back.

Barry Goldfarb was a fantasist to be sure. He planned on moving to Latin America on a small pension and convinced himself he could lure the young ladies pretending to be a rich old gringo. He'd been

down there often enough, and each time he returned he told of romantic encounters with adoring twenty-year-olds. We assumed he meant the prostitutes who serviced him on his meager savings, which went a lot further down there.

“You gotta feel sorry for a guy like that,” I proposed. “He’s got nothing else to live for.”

“Who cares about his goddamn problems.” Schoen was furious. “That loser butted into a conversation I was having with an attractive lady here last night.”

“He does that a lot.”

“I couldn’t get a goddamn word in. No broad gives a rat’s ass about him, but he kept babbling on till she got fed up and left.”

You could almost see the smoke rising off the top of his head. Schoen was an overweight curmudgeon, to be sure, but a smile slowly took shape as he took another drag on his cigarette.

“I told him what a fucking asshole he was, and that he ought to stop using shoe polish to color his hair,” he chortled, cigarette smoke pouring out of his mouth. “He threatened me, said he was gonna break my mother fucking legs. I swear to God, I don’t care how sick I am, if he starts up I’ll take him down. He thinks he can talk to me like some badass nigger...I’ll take him down, I swear.”

Listening to him rant had put me in a better mood for some reason. I sat there smiling, knowing full well he did the same to me behind my back.

Schoen was a defining sight on Main Street. His shoulder-length, orange-tinted locks were hard to miss. It must have taken several bottles of over-the-counter dye to cover all that gray. His extended waistline kept growing even with a serious but undefined illness, and his mustache was so retro he must have looked like an exotic animal to the young bar crowd down the street.

“I wouldn’t bother about Goldfarb,” I argued. “Let him fantasize. It’s all he’s got in the world.” I seemed to be making a case for myself as well.

Schoen looked away. He was stubborn and vindictive, and rumored to have killed a business rival years before. He had run a heroin syndicate in Nepal back in the seventies before getting arrested, then spent years in foreign prisons and claimed to have been tortured by sadistic guards. When he returned to the States he was a broken and bitter man, and never rebounded from his misfortunes. A serious infirmity had put him on government assistance a few months back. It seemed his sordid, drug-filled past had caught up with him and was clearly living on borrowed time. His liver looked to be the culprit, though no one was really sure. The doctors had performed experimental treatments on him to the tune of about three quarters of a million dollars of the taxpayers’ money. But it was only giving him a short respite. He wasn’t long for the world unless a medical miracle came through.

“Yeah, he’s all talk.” Schoen finally settled back into more polite conversation. “He’s not worth my time.” He lit up another cigarette. “How was New York?”

“It went well.”

“Did you take the job?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see the paper today?”

“No...why?”

He leaned over in my direction, glaring at me for all he was worth. “Have you spoken to Mr. Howard lately?”

“I tried contacting him in New York after our first meeting, but I never got through to...” I stopped, sensing bad news.

“Look at this.” He picked up a newspaper that was sitting on the next table, turned to the obituary page, and handed it to me.

“Former Big Band Singer Dead in Suicide,” it began. “Avery Howard, a 1940’s-era crooner who sang with the leading big bands of the day, fell to his death from his apartment in Manhattan on Tuesday...”

“They got to him, too,” I muttered frightfully.

“Just like the guy who used to live next door to you,” he laid in. “He was on page one the other day.”

I looked Schoen in the eyes. “What do you know about this?”

“As much as you, I suppose.”

“I don’t have a clue. But I’m smack in the middle of it.”

“You better find a way out.”

“Can you help me?”

“I don’t know any more about it, Bob. I swear.”

“I’m heading to Ukraine tomorrow. It’s a delivery job, moving a piece of art for some rich family.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

“Listen to me. Some murdering bastards want the painting, too. They probably know just where I’m heading.”

“They think you’re the one that can lead them to it. That’s why your mug wasn’t on the front page.”

“Someone sent word to them about the Rembrandt. Probably one of Abramovich’s goons who wants to double-cross him. But why did they kill Eric and Mr. Howard?”

“To send a message,” he replied, leaning back in the chair. “Was this Eric a friend of yours?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why.” He looked at me, then took a long drag on his cigarette. “A Rembrandt?” he blurted out. “Jeez...I didn’t know that. That’s a lot of green.”

“No kidding.”

“Just follow it through. Abramovich will protect you.”

“I couldn’t say no if I wanted to. I’m up to my eyeballs in it.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Are you?”

“I don’t want to die. At least you got a choice in the matter. You don’t have to do this. I’ll talk to Abramovich and see if...”

“No,” I cut him off. “I don’t want to go on living like this. The job pays well. Abramovich said he’ll try to get me work as a P.I. when I return. I’m taking a big chance, I know. It could buy me the farm before you. But I’m firm on this. It’s my only way out of the gutter.”

“It seems you didn’t need any coaxing.”

I wondered what he meant by that. “I can make up my own mind.”

“Try and get back in one piece.”

“I had the same thought.”

“Why the fuck does Abramovich deal with those Russians? He’d stay out of there if he knew what was good for him.”

“They’re art connoisseurs,” I quipped.

“What do you think the painting’s worth?”

“I’m guessing a couple million.”

“He’s a very smart cookie, Abramovich,” he said enviously.

“It sure seems that way.”

It looked to me like Schoen wasn’t well-briefed on the caper, and wasn’t much of a point man, either.

“I’ll ask Abramovich what it’s worth when I see him again.”

“With Howard out of the picture he’ll keep the commission all to himself,” I noted dryly.

“He’s a businessman,” Schoen laid in. “He only thinks of himself.”

“I don’t care what he thinks as long as I get paid for my services.”

He finished off the cigarette and lit another one as we watched an exhibition of young females pass by. I started thinking about Homer again.

“They killed Homer, too,” I said bitterly.

“Why the hell would they do that?”

“I don’t know. Some kind of message, I guess. A real sick one.”

“Did you bury him?”

“I had him cremated.” I weighed the finality of those words before going on. “That poor, innocent dog is dead because of me.”

“It’s a damn shame. I’m real sorry about Homer. He was a great dog.”

He wasn’t looking at me. He’d been staring out in the street when I brought up Homer. He had a strange way of expressing condolences, I thought.

“They’re vicious people,” I fumed. “But they’re keeping me alive for now.”

“Be careful. It’s only worth the pot of gold you can live to enjoy. There’s nothing in it for a stiff.”

“I appreciate that.”

“The doctors don’t give me more than a month or two.”

I felt bad hearing that. As if on cue he started a coughing fit. His skin turned as gray as the morning fog around here. Death sure had a style of its own.

He stopped hacking for a moment to throw in his two cents again. “You might be dead before I kick off...like you said.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

“By the way, you’re forgetting something.”

I pulled out my wallet. “Here’s some dough to hold you down for a while.” I handed him five one hundred dollar bills.

“My car’s in the shop,” he grumbled, coughing up gobs of phlegm.

“I’ll drive you home.”

“Eddie can drive me home when he gets here.”

I sensed his angle, so I stalled for time. “How can you drive around in your condition?”

“I’m not having epileptic fits, for crissake. I can drive to the hospital. It’s only a few blocks away.”

“How do you die from what you have?” I was being blunt, but he wasn’t making me feel any better, either.

“I’ll let you know in a month or two.”

I handed him another hundred.

“Thanks.” He slipped it into his pocket. “It’s my liver. Didn’t I mention that?”

“I know that. That’s not what I’m asking. I mean...how do you die from it?”

“Just watch me.”

“Is it painful?”

“I don’t feel a thing with my prescriptions.” He suddenly got furious with me. “You forgot about our deal, Klayman. I’m supposed to get fifteen percent.”

“Ten percent – of Mr. Howard’s down payment. You just got it, and then some.”

“We made a deal...”

“What deal?”

“I got you the job, Klayman.”

“You’re not in the picture anymore, Schoen. I’m not cutting you in on my arrangement with Abramovich.”

He looked away resentfully. “Forget it.”

“Don’t mention it.” I got up to leave. “Hope to see you soon.”

“Hope’s all we got,” he muttered.

I walked away and went right back to my car. There was a flight in the morning I had to catch and it was getting late. Spending time around Schoen had me contemplating dark and depressing thoughts. I needed to get into a brighter mood if I was to get through this mess.

When I got home I felt sure I'd been followed. I chalked it up to a pair of overworked dicks, but it could have been the murderer for all I knew. I got out of the car and hurried up the stairs, keeping the doc's .45 in my grip. I looked around before opening the door and stepping inside. I picked up the phone and dialed Abramovich's number. He didn't sound happy.

"Why are you calling at this hour?" he bellowed.

"Why was Howard killed?" I demanded. He was silent. "Tell me, damn it."

"What's it to you?"

"Are you going to get rid of me too when I'm done with my end of the job?"

"No one has it in for you."

"Howard was killed the day after I spoke with him. Do I know something I shouldn't know?"

"It has nothing to do with you. It was suicide, don't you read the papers?"

"That's a lot of crap."

"It could have been a burglar, or his fag lover. He was queer, did you know that?"

"That explains him getting thrown off the twelfth floor of his building?"

"It might. Look...I'm in the dark about it, too."

"Who murdered my dog?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"Don't bullshit me."

"How the hell should I know who killed your dog? Call me when you get to Odessa. I'll ask around about it in the meantime."

"Yeah, sure...you do that." I hung up.

It looked like he still needed my services. I could sleep easier now. But just to be sure I laid the doc's gun neatly alongside my pillow. We were going to be close friends for the night.

Chapter 12

It was a sure bet slipping out of town was good for my health. As long as I kept moving I could count on these killers to believe I was leading them to a pot of gold. If I stayed a step ahead I might even avoid their bloody hands altogether. Abramovich was my firewall for now, as long as I stayed useful to him. There's no free lunch in this world. It's a quid pro quo all the way to the grave.

I packed my heaviest sweaters and jeans to hold up against the Russian weather. I had to rummage carefully through my wardrobe to find them, since I hardly ever get to wear heavy clothes in a winterless L.A. If I needed to double down I'd do some shopping when I arrived, I thought. Where better to purchase warm clothes than in Ukraine in wintertime? In rubles, no less, or whatever they were using for money these days.

It was ten p.m. and I had an early flight so I got down to business. I went online to search for a little town outside Odessa, then printed out a Google map of the area. But it didn't give me what I needed most – public transportation options. That was a safer bet for staying under the radar. Personal drivers and cabbies could easily identify me. I had to keep my footprint small. As long as I kept my trap shut I could easily melt in with all those Russian faces.

This business I was orchestrating outside of Odessa was the lucrative side job Abramovich offered me in addition to the task of moving priceless art out of Ukraine. I had never met Abramovich up close. He was adamant about doing business strictly by phone. I suppose running a busy crime syndicate didn't leave him time for personal meetings, unless it became necessary to rectify a situation, so to speak. But he did send me emails with all the necessary information – without getting into the finer details, naturally.

What he and his dad had in mind for this side job was not the usual fare for a courier, nor was it above my station in life like the elite art world. I could sink my teeth into this gig. It was much more than the usual dealings of smugglers and thieves. Murder would become my mantra, and I'd make it my business, as well, rectifying old injustices from the last World War.

There was one more thing to look up. I started surfing the Internet for a history lesson regarding a matter I'd recently taken an interest in. A pop-up ad online a while back had stoked my curiosity and led me to search out my genetic ancestry. A research company offered to do a DNA test for genetic markers that could identify my paternal bloodline. The result turned up an obscure gene, which slated a Siberian origination.

I had become fascinated with genetic history. Ads for it were blossoming all over the Internet and even showing up in television commercials. It wasn't just for the usual suspects – racial supremacists who are naturally drawn to this stuff. It was now fodder for people of every ilk and background, and fast becoming a full-time occupation for those trying to make hay of their origins.

For a reasonable fee one could find a recent ancestor, or trace an origination ten to twenty thousand years in the past. There was a visceral thirst out there for this stuff, though I didn't think one cared to find a toothy caveman in their ranks. But as it turns out, Neanderthals actually were fooling around with our great great grannies, keeping them warm in those icy cold European caves.

My own genetic marker identified me in a very surprising way, with a tribal affiliation I had no idea even existed. This male genetic marker was being hyped on some websites as the “smoking gun of Khazarian ancestry.”

I began to read up on the Khazars. History had all but ignored them. A millenium ago they ruled over a large swath of the

European continent as the nation-state of Khazaria. Their land ran along the Caspian and Black Sea shores, and stretched over a wide territory that bordered the Byzantine and Persian empires. One of their kings, Bulan, converted to Judaism and brought a number of his subjects to the fold before Khazaria disappeared from the map sometime in the twelfth century.

There's money in this racket. Tracing genes of modern-day people to ancient tribes, more or less, can offer a sense of identity that's lacking in our present day world. It seemed I shelled out a hundred dollars to find I shared genes with a ruthless steppe warrior clan with close blood ties to Attila the Hun. I almost fell off my chair when I read that, but after knocking down a few drinks I took stock and doubted if it said anything more about me than I already knew. Nevertheless, I was itching to find out.

These hard fighting warrior nomads intrigued me. They were merciless according to historical accounts, yet they had organized a multicultural state of sorts and ruled tolerantly over it. They ran an empire efficiently and had the only standing army in medieval Europe. Even the mighty and crafty Byzantines paid a hefty tribute to them. These dudes ruled, I noted proudly. They lorded over Slavs, Finns, Bulgars, Magyars, and a whole slew of pagan tribes. They fought to victory against the Arabs, I gloated. History sure had a way of repeating itself. And even berserko Vikings along the Volga sought a truce with them.

The heart of Khazaria had lain in southern Russia. It seemed fated I would stake my life in this particular venue, even if I considered this genetic obsession bordering on the absurd. I already had an identity – one that was exclusive, unforgiving, and victimized like no other. Why the hell did I need to be weighed down by one more? But in its own way it would serve my purpose, lending me confidence to carry out the side job if nothing else.

I threw some ice in a glass, poured bourbon over it, and sat back on an old, frayed leather chair I picked off the street some time ago. I started to reflect some more:

This ancestry bit, along with my involvement in an art heist a half-world away, was just plain nuts. I was either off my rocker or close to it. It was a psychiatrist I needed and not a new career path. All those big ideas of making a P.I. comeback were pushing me off the deep end, to be sure.

I finished off the glass, poured myself another, and kept knocking down shots till I finished off the rest of the bottle. I stared out the window for a while before going out like a light.

Chapter 16

We carefully avoided the splintered planks and gaps in the woodwork as we made our way up the three flights of stairs. The hall was dark and murky, which made the going even more perilous. I didn't think the landlord cared much for tort law, probably never even heard of it, not even in Russian. You were on your own in this town.

I was unfamiliar with the keys and fumbled around at the door, trying to find the right fit. There were two large locks bolted on with more screws than I could count. These doors were installed with bank vaults in mind. When we entered the apartment I took her coat and pointed to the lone chair in the room. She chose to sit on the bed instead, and studied me with keen interest while I heated up a pot of water. There was a complementary box of tea bags and a jar of instant coffee on the table. I pulled out two glass mugs from a cabinet and slipped a couple of tea bags in.

When I turned around she was half naked, having shed her clothes right down to her bra. I tried not to look surprised.

"You must be freezing," I suggested.

"Freezing?" She had to think for a second. "Oh, no...not cold." She started taking her shoes off.

I thought it strange how indifferent she was to the chill, not to mention her swift unveiling. I had on a wool sweater over a bulky t-shirt along with a thick pair of corduroy pants. I even considered putting my coat back on. I'd paid good money for that cloth coat but rarely got a chance to wear it. You just can't go broke buying winter clothes in California.

After watching her sit around like that, I decided it looked unmanly with all my gear on. So I started peeling off my clothes, too. I hadn't figured her for a call girl, but her swift unveiling sure

looked practiced. The women around here seemed aloof and self-assured and I didn't think they'd lie down so easily for a little cash. But it was a moot point, as I was totally game.

I went for my travel bag and pulled out a condom. After putting aside the notion of tea for the moment, I landed on the bed in good form as we both went about shedding the rest of our clothes.

She had very thin lips. I couldn't kiss her properly so I dug in with my tongue. She pulled away at my heavy-handedness and came back with a softer approach, nibbling lightly on my ears while I pecked delicately at her neck. We were like two sparrows dining on breadcrumbs. Her gray blue eyes were soft and seemed to sparkle. Her breasts were small but attractively set – firm and pointed, not the loose, flabby kind I generally preferred. Her thinly contoured waistline led down to long, elegant legs that were spread out on the bed shamelessly.

Nevertheless, she was cool at the edges and that bothered me. I liked a good dose of passion thrown into the mix. She had a robotic sensibility and paced herself like a timer. Her facial expressions were distant and cold, and when we finally made love it was over much too soon. I wondered why I had gone through all that trouble of chatting her up for such a modest payoff.

We laid around not saying a word as I waited for the bill, but she stayed mum. I was getting quite annoyed by her behavior. I wanted to pay up and get her out of the room so I could get some sleep.

“Do you want to go home?” I broke the silence. She didn't understand. “Home...leave place.” I motioned toward the door.

“Nyet.”

“You wish to stay tonight?” I pointed to the bed.

“Oh, da...yes.” It sure didn't seem that way. Besides, she might add it to the bill.

I had stuff to do in any event and didn't want her prying around. But I couldn't resist the opportunity of lying beside her beautiful

form for the rest of the evening. Waking up with a woman like that puts confidence in a man, lending him the wherewithal to face up to an indifferent world. That's the idea, at least.

I got up and went in the bathroom to wash up, not an easy task as it was about as big as a broom closet. When I came out I heated up water for tea again and sat down at the table. I watched her staring up mindlessly at the ceiling and wondered what was going on in her head. She was the quiet type that stayed disengaged unless spoken to, it seemed. Her attitude was offensive, I thought. After all, we had made love just minutes before, and besides, I still didn't know what she charged. The kettle started whistling. I went to pour water for her.

"Don't you want tea?" I pointed to her steaming hot cup.

"Nyet."

I poured myself a cup, sat down and sipped on it while I stared at her beautiful form. She didn't mind my gawking; she just lay there like a corpse. There was something amiss about the whole arrangement. I went to get a magazine out of my bag and saw her turn her gaze in the direction of the door. When I turned to look I noticed the lock turning. I suddenly realized it was a setup and stood there stewing in my own stupidity.

Three men burst through the door. They were wearing navy blue ski masks and pointing semi-automatic handguns in my direction. They ordered me to get dressed and start moving in a coarse but understandable English. I got right to work.

My lady friend had parked herself in the bathroom, embarrassed at the sight of a few masked men gaping at her bared flesh. Boy, did I read her wrong. She'd sell her own mother for a few grivnas but couldn't bear standing naked in front of a couple of hoodlums. I had looked into her soft gray eyes and offered myself up innocently. But as always, I find women hard to read.

Chapter 17

They took away my passport and went through my wallet, eager to get at my personal identification. But they left me the cell phone, which led me to believe they were the guys I was there to do business with. They sure had a strange way of putting out the welcoming mat. I was then blindfolded and pushed and poked down the stairway, barely avoiding the broken woodwork along the way.

They shoved me into a car and piled in from both sides, pinning me uncomfortably into the back seat. The car rumbled along like it was missing a few cylinders, belching rancid fumes that leaked right back into the car. There was a lot of Russian being spoken, which didn't make me feel any better. I couldn't know if I had a minute, an hour, or the rest of eternity to spend with these guys. I'd been transported from a sexual fantasy to my worst nightmare in a matter of minutes.

It seemed we drove in circles before accelerating onto a highway and clearing out of town. Twenty minutes later we pulled off the road and two men on either side of me jumped out. One of them grabbed my arm and twisted it hard like he was trying to wrench it off.

“Okay,” I cried out, “you don't need to pull so damn hard.” He let go, with some reluctance. “Thanks a lot,” I yelled as I stumbled out of the car. He shouted back in Russian and I heard him spit on the ground. I thought I'd better cool it with these guys.

They started right in with the pushing and shoving again, forcing me up a staircase into another apartment. I was thrown into a chair and someone pulled the blindfold off. The overhead light blinded me and it took a moment to adjust. When I looked around, it turned out to be another grubby dump – moldy walls, peeling paint, dust and dirt all around. One place looked like the next in this burg.

I found myself sitting across from a man in his late thirties or early fifties. It was hard to tell. They get old fast around here.

“Would you like tea?” He spoke in very clear English and with a brooding bass voice. “We make good tea in Odessa.”

“Tea?” I hesitated since I hadn’t expected the slightest bit of hospitality. “Sure, I would like some tea...can you spare a little vodka, too?”

“Da...yes, yes,” he returned excitedly.

He barked out some orders in Russian and one of his men began tending to a fancy samovar they’re so keen on. I’ve always wondered what tea would taste like from that contraption. He pulled out a small bottle of vodka from his leather jacket and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said, and proceeded to empty the contents in quick order.

“Good?” he inquired.

“Da,” I replied in my best Russian. He broke into a laugh.

“Russian wodka better from America wodka,” he gloated.

“Yes...of course,” I obliged.

“Da,” he returned with finality. I was getting to like that word.

I changed the subject. “Can you tell me why I was blindfolded and forced to come here like a hostage?”

“We want not you know address.” I got the gist.

“Who are you?” I begged.

“Who? My name, Vitaly. I friend of Abramovich in California. He sent you, no?”

“Yes, he did.” I settled down on that note. The hostage treatment had me worried, after all.

“We do business together,” he boasted.

“Yeah, well...you didn’t have to kidnap me. That was goddamned unnecessary,” I fired off, knowing full well how invaluable I was to them.

“We do to everyone this. Not special, you.”

“Forget it.” I didn’t need to push my luck.

“We have art.” He got down to business. “We bring tomorrow. Then you go Prague, no?”

“I’d prefer to see it now,” I said. He shrugged his shoulders. Obviously the wrong guy to ask.

“We bring tomorrow.” He was quite adamant.

“But I have to see it now.”

“Nyet...tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll have to contact Abramovich,” I said. “He wants to know the condition of the painting immediately. I should call while it’s still daytime in Los Angeles and tell him you will bring it tomorrow.”

I was lying through my teeth, but I needed to straighten a few things out with Abramovich before I went any further with these guys.

“Why? We sell him what he want, no?” Vitaly returned suspiciously.

There was something amiss here. I couldn’t reconcile hard-boiled hoodlums and high art. I could see them handling a Warhol or an overpriced Pollack, but not a genuine Dutch Master. It was as if a murderous drug cartel was looking to fence off The Dead Sea Scrolls.

“He told me to call him today,” I pressed on. “Los Angeles time.”

He studied me for a moment and softened. “Okay...you call.”

He stood up, not a tall guy but quite big, nonetheless. His shoulders stretched out in a wider arc than most men his height, while his neck filled up a lot of the space in between. He might have been a wrestler or body builder – you don’t just come out of the womb looking like that.

“We bring art for you...tomorrow,” he reiterated. “Also, say hello to David for Vitaly.” He stretched a big smile out just for me, revealing a line of gold-plated teeth.

“I will,” I smiled back.

He left the room while I sat around and finished off the excellent Samovar tea, sulking in paranoia. The rest of his crew were sitting around, too, guzzling vodka and watching me curiously. I couldn't help thinking they were going to hurt me. They'd already bared their teeth and I didn't like it.

The middleman is usually the one who gets knocked off after the hoods pocket the payoff. The murderers go happily on their way, ridding themselves of any trace that might lead back to them. That's not just a Hollywood script - the newspapers are filled with stories like that.

I was scaring the hell out of myself. I couldn't let them see that, so I put on a smile like I was having happy thoughts. It seemed to work. They smiled back. But I worried that I'd put too much faith in Abramovich and regretted getting myself involved with the likes of a Gilbert Schoen. He was a dying man who had nothing to lose and was probably gloating at the thought of outliving me, though not by much.

The fear factor was all over me now.

I had to calm down and set my mind on something else; I became curious about the expensive wardrobe these goons had on. They were all wearing custom-made lambskin leather jackets along with pricey denim jeans and Rolex watches strapped to their wrists. It's what you see gangsters sporting in feature films these days. It looked like Hollywood had gotten some traction in the former communist utopias; style and not substance was winning their hearts and minds.

Conspicuous consumption was the flavor of the day, and they were swimming in it – flashing expensive apparel and jewelry at

every turn. It was almost comical, like watching stock characters from an old Warner Brothers gangster film. But they were the real deal, and I sure as hell didn't want to end up like the fall guy in one of those movies.

Chapter 21

The cabin was up ahead. I noticed an old man crouched down in his garden picking vegetables; he had a pail in one hand. I stepped in closer to get a better look, checked the photo Abramovich had emailed me, and bingo - I was ready for business.

He stood about twenty feet away dressed in baggy trousers and a pair of muddy boots. He had on a wool coat and a long grey shirt underneath with a banded peasant collar that circled his neck. There was no gate or fencing to guard the place. It seemed the old man had no concern for poachers, thieves, wolves, or vengeful Jews. This killer thought he had all his bases covered. I was going to give him quite a surprise.

It was a small cabin, fragile and weather-beaten; the salt air and sea winds had seen to that. At its base was a stone foundation that looked uneven, but somehow it held together – kind of like the old man's conscience, I thought.

His vegetable patch was extensive, producing enough to survive the winter and then some. He seemed quite content in his little outback, knowing full well the good fortune he had escaping justice all this time. I was about to change that in spades. I got up pretty close, as he was hard of hearing, but he finally noticed me out of the corner of his eye. I stood my ground and stared into his eyes.

He had a bunch of carrots in his hand and began speaking to me in Russian. I didn't respond and moved in closer. He started yelling at me, sensing a problem, no doubt, then quickly retreated to the cabin.

I went after him and grabbed his coat just as he got to the door. He was shouting like a madman, so I wrapped my arm around his neck and squeezed till he couldn't make any sound at all, then

dragged him back to the garden. He was easy handling; I could have broken him in two. It didn't seem right manhandling an old geezer, but tell that to his former victims.

When I let off a bit he immediately started pleading for his life. It sounded like he was gargling mouthwash. I tightened up on my grip till he stopped begging, and held him like that for almost a minute before letting go. He fell to the ground gasping, his face beet red and his false teeth lying beside him on the ground. A sorry sight, I had to admit. But I couldn't let pity get the better of me.

He began crawling away in a mad frenzy. I followed his moves, kicking him twice under the shoulder. He tried curling up but I wouldn't let him. We played a game like that for a while. Each time he curled up I kicked him in his lower back and he'd straighten out. I was having some fun. I should have squeezed the life out of him by now, or cut his throat with that razor blade in my pocket. But I was feeling sorry for the old bastard and couldn't finish him off.

There was a sudden movement in the brush. A big, burly figure appeared through the trees a few yards away. He held an ax in one hand and some cut wood in the other. His expression left no doubt as to his intentions. He threw down the wood and swiftly made tracks toward me.

He was coming with that rusted ax primed over his shoulder. I started to run, but he was fast, and when I looked back he was about to bring the ax down on my head. But he let out a loud shriek instead, the likes of which I never imagined a human voice capable of. I watched in horror as his face contorted in extreme pain. He collapsed on the vegetable patch, knocking down a few stalks of corn on his way down. Vitaly suddenly appeared through the trees.

“Why not to do job?” he roared.

“Huh? This guy was about to kill me!” I pointed to the big lug lying face down in the vegetable patch, a long, thick arrow

embedded between his shoulders. Vitaly had finished him off with the crossbow he held in his hand.

“Why not kill old man? Go...do,” he commanded angrily, pointing to the cabin the old man had just crawled into. I’d forgotten about the old bastard.

I marched back and found him hiding behind the cabin door. He lunged at me with butcher knife but I quickly dodged his shaky hand and watched him stumble over himself, thrown off balance by age and disrepair. I lifted him up by his collar and wrapped one arm tightly around his neck, then twisted the hand that held the shiv, forcing it to fall to the floor. I felt a bone snap in his arm and he began writhing with pain. I squeezed his neck as tightly as I could, looking to finalize my task and put this miserable bastard out of existence. His face turned a grayish hue. I held on, making sure he was a goner.

When I let go he slumped to the floor like a loose rack of meat. I stared at my handiwork for a moment, then stepped out of the cabin ready to call it a day. A moment later Vitaly was screaming again. “This not my job to do!”

He was pulling the arrow out of the woodsman’s back, his foot set firmly on the victim’s buttocks. “What’s matter with you?” he heaped on, pointing to the cabin again.

I looked back and watched the old bastard crawl out of the cabin. That old jerk had more lives than a house cat.

Vitaly pulled out a hunting knife from his pocket and ran over to fetch the old man. He crouched down and took hold of the geezer’s head, slitting his throat with one swipe of the blade.

The old man fell on his back and quivered for a few seconds before going limp. It was a sure bet he wasn’t getting up this time. Vitaly laughed in amusement.

“Go, go back to car,” he ordered. “We leave now.”

“Okay,” I returned slavishly. I noticed more movement in the brush behind the cabin.

The driver and the other goon who’d come along suddenly appeared through the pine trees. It seemed they’d watched the whole episode unfold behind a cover of thick brush. Vitaly handed one of them what looked like a card. I couldn’t make out what they were doing, but I figured it was some sort of payment.

The two lackeys proceeded to drag the bodies one by one into the cabin. Vitaly and I walked back to the car. I got in the rear while he threw the crossbow in the trunk. He came around and sat in the driver’s seat. After a long moment of silence he started mumbling.

“Good we not make noise. With gun...bang, bang, can hear in forest long way,” then continued his ramblings in Russian. I thought he made a good point.

Ten minutes later his henchmen came by, their hands caked in mud. They filed into the car very casually, like it was all in a day’s work.

Vitaly quickly pulled out of there and sped away, making good time out of the forest and back to the paved road. He drove fast and talked angrily to the others - grumbling over me, no doubt. His henchmen listened intently and smirked, throwing shameful looks in my direction. I couldn’t blame them. It was pretty clear I had gotten in over my head. It seems easy enough to dispose of human beings in theory; it’s another thing when you’re tasked to do it. Any soldier in the field could tell you that, and I couldn’t even measure up to buck private with my resume. I just didn’t have what it takes to be a hit man. My tough guy persona was just for show to promote myself as a private detective. Vitaly was the real killer – cold blooded and professional, the guy who did this sort of work thoroughly and with finesse while reaping pleasure from it, to boot.

I worried what Abramovich would do when they filled him in on my botched efforts. I figured to be right out of a job. He wouldn’t

trust me delivering precious art all the way to Prague after showing myself inept and a coward, as well. He'd have no problem getting someone else to finish the job, and for a lot less money, too. This wasn't a corporate junket I signed up for. They might decide to fire me in a most unconventional way. These boys played by their own rules.

This neck of woods had a long history of killing fields; it was saturated in the blood of millions who perished for no good reason. Nothing could be done to bring justice to those poor victims, but the old bastard got what was coming to him even if it was a pittance of payback in the scheme of things. It was better than nothing; and it gave the dead a little bit of their due.

The story of the mighty Khazar kingdom that once ruled by these same shores was a footnote to history that I handily appropriated; much like raising up a dybbuk to wreak revenge. I was no contract killer and had better drop the ruse before it did me in, if it wasn't too late already.

Chapter 39

We passed through a maze of concrete walkways lined with thick shrubs and landscaped gardens, but the place remained devoid of people. It wasn't even eight p.m., yet it seemed to be past everyone's bedtime. A couple of kids were kicking a soccer ball around on a patch of green off in a distance; they seemed to move in slow motion through a haze of fluorescent lights. It felt surreal, to be sure.

I peeked over my shoulder only to find no one in sight. The goon who was tagging along had taken a wrong turn, it seemed. Carina was a few steps ahead, weirdly indifferent to my presence. Something was amiss about this setup, but I had no time to ruminate; I turned to make a run for it. Just then a scraggly haired, feral-looking youth appeared from twenty yards away. He was thin and gangly, but his vigilant and focused manner left no doubt as to his bloodthirsty intentions. I turned right back around and beat a trail behind Carina.

His youth frightened me even more. These gangster kids were like baby rattlesnakes, unpredictable and primed to let loose with all their venom – in his case, bullets. He caught up immediately and joined in our walkathon a few yards behind. I assumed he had a gun, so making a run for it was not an option. We proceeded in single file. Carina hadn't turned around even once to check if I was still behind her, which was strange to say the least. We finally entered one of the buildings in the complex. Our young friend didn't miss a beat and joined us on the elevator ride up.

Carina pressed the eighth floor button and smiled at me. I wondered if they planned on throwing me out a window instead. Mr. Howard suffered the same fate and now it was my turn, I feared.

The youth kept his head down the entire time it took to reach the eighth floor. He looked remorseful, I thought. Perhaps it was a need

for contemplation and prayer to ease his conscience; even murderers succumb to guilt feelings from time to time. Carina and I hung a right as we got out, and he took a left, but before we got through the apartment door I spied him staring at us from down the hall with shrewd businesslike comportment. He didn't look like a kid anymore, and his guilt trip seemed to have disappeared into sock heaven. I expected him to be joining us shortly.

She locked the door once we got in, but it made no difference. A smooth operator like Sandoval had scores of spare keys for all the hit men he employed. The place was bare with just a couch in the middle of the room and a stiff wooden chair set in a corner. She began undressing and settled down on the couch, bare-chested, leaving on only her jeans and a pair of high-heeled shoes. For a moment I forgot the frightening mess I was in. She looked at me and smiled.

“Sit.”

“Yes, of course,” I replied, dumbfounded. I sat down next to her.

“Kiss, please...” she insisted, so we started kissing. She kept her bag right up by her leg which was odd, I thought, unless she was planning to slip a condom out in a hurry. But I was quite used to things not being what they seemed so I threw caution to the wind and our kissing became passionate very quickly. Movie titles suddenly came to mind: *Kiss Me Deadly...One Kiss Before I Die....*

I pulled away in a panic.

But she was relentless and shifted herself on the couch to get a better grip on me. I was suddenly staring into a couple of swollen nipples that looked like a double serving of chocolate marshmallows. I dove in like a hawk – kissing, nibbling and licking every inch of flesh I could get my mouth around. It was quite a finale, so to speak, and an incongruous way to get knocked off. Nevertheless, I proceeded to pull my clothes off in a frenzy and began ravishing every inch of her. I didn't even bother slipping off

my loafers. She stripped away the rest of her gear and was stretched out naked on the couch, ready for business. But just as I got on top I heard jostling at the door.

That lean, scraggly kid came through like clockwork. I had forgotten about him. He was halfway through the door when I noticed Carina leaning over to get a better view of the young party pooper. She had one hand hanging over the sofa stuck in that bag of hers. I sat right up when he leaned in with his gun and was just about to say my prayers when a couple of rounds went off from inside Carina's pouch. I watched her zero in like a marksman; this was no call girl I was about to make love to. The kid fell to the floor, moaning and in a lot of pain, shot through the ribs and upper arm. She got up off the couch in a flash and quickly took hold of the situation.

I joined her, picking up his gun and aiming it at his head. She had hers pointed in the same direction. There were now two naked people holding guns on this kid. You couldn't make this up. She went back to her bag and pulled out her cell phone, sat down, dialed a number, and started ranting in Spanish. When she finished her call she got up and started to dress.

"You, too, put on clothes," she said with a laugh.

"You speak English?"

"A little," she said modestly.

I started dressing while she kept an eye on the kid.

"You work for Battista?" I inquired.

"Yes...and you kiss good."

"Thanks. What do we do now?"

"Mr. Battista arrest men who follow us. He will soon arrest Augie Sandoval, too." She looked down on the kid. "Battista's men will come pick up this puta. We need him for to convict Sandoval."

"How did Battista know that it was the last..."

“You have questions for Senõr Battista?” she broke in. “You talk to him.”

I kept asking nonetheless. “Augie could have killed me on the way here. Why did he want to go through this facade?”

“You are American. You are too much trouble for them if they kill you in the car or on street. Here they make it look like you are predator, sexual, kinky thing. It make less suspicion for drug gangs.”

“They’re worried about their image now?”

“They work very smart. Drug gangs have many tricks.”

“How did you become one of Augie’s girls?”

“Sandoval interview me last month. We fuck after that. I gain his trust, as you say, no?”

“You undercover cops are put through a lot.”

“It’s terrible, no?” she laughed. It didn’t sound like she minded at all.

“Tell me...why did you go through the charade of getting undressed and taking me to bed? You could have just told me what you were up to...”

“Was it problem for you?”

“Not at all.”

“Me, too.” She smiled.

“What’s your real name?” I ventured.

“Maribel.”

“That’s a beautiful name for a beautiful lady.”

“Do you want to make love?”

I thought I heard her right. “What about the puta on the floor...he’ll be watching.”

“El bano.” She pointed to the bathroom.

“It’s a little tight in there, no?”

“Not us,” she chuckled, shaking her head. “We throw the puta in there.”

“What about Battista’s men?”

“Is twenty minutes not enough time for you?”

“I’ll try,” I said.

We got right to work.