

Chapter Eleven

Ten days had passed since his beach side conversation with the senator. At eleven forty-five that Monday night, two burly men awakened him from sleep, duct taped his mouth, placed a blindfold over his eyes and pushed the frightened and struggling Perry Johnson out into the misty San Francisco night. They drove him to an ornate mansion on the outskirts of town.

"This way," an accented voice commanded, as he led Perry into a large, mahogany paneled room and painfully removed the tape and then the blindfold.

"Have a seat, my friend," the man with a gruff voice, known only as Dimitri, said. "Yes, that one," he added, while pointing to a plastic covered chair that sat directly opposite his desk.

Silently, Perry took his place as ordered and waited.

"Forgive me for the hour but I am a busy man," Dimitri said, with just a hint of Russian accent.

"What is the meaning of this?" the usually cool Perry stammered, while glancing sideways at a hissing gray cat.

"It seems that Misha finds you unacceptable," Dimitri remarked, while gesturing for the cat to come nearer. "You know," he continued, while assisting the animal to his lap, "cats are very perceptive, they can feel what we cannot see."

"I guess so," Perry replied, with a forced smile, as he gazed up at the domed, fresco covered ceiling.

"I hope we are not boring you, but," Dimitri declared, while throwing up his hands, "where are my manners? Sergei, bring the refreshments."

A ruddy complexioned, impeccably dressed bodyguard carried a large silver tray to the desk and carefully placed it within both men's reach. Before returning to his post at the back of the room, however, he leaned forward and whispered into Dimitri's ear, "Kerberos called, he wishes to speak with you."

"I have no time for him now," he hissed, "tell him to call back tomorrow."

"As you wish," Sergei responded.

"Help yourself to the caviar," Dimitri said, while filling two crystal glasses with a fine Russian vodka.

"No thank you."

"No? Well, then Misha thanks you," Dimitri replied, as he scooped up a dollop of caviar with two fingers and held them out

for the cat. Wiping his hand on a linen napkin, he added, "Come now, you must try the vodka."

Perry leaned forward, removed a chilled glass from the tray and took a tentative sip while Dimitri observed.

"Well, is it not the best you have ever tasted?"

"Yes, it's very good but it's late, can we get to the reason for this meeting?"

"Ah, you Americans, always business, no time for social graces," Dimitri barked, as he slammed his glass on the highly polished desk. "It is business you want, yes? OK, tell me, do we not pay you enough?"

"Yes, of course, I am very happy with my compensation."

"Then why have you been avoiding me?" Dimitri shouted, "you have had plenty of time to inform the senator of our needs but I have not heard a word from you!"

"I have done everything in my power, even veiled threats but he is a principled man."

"Ah yes, principles ... they can be very bad for one's health."

"You can't be thinking--he is a state senator, for God's sake!"

"These are desperate times, my friend, there is much money at stake and besides, I too have superiors to whom I must answer."

"I don't know what else I can do to convince him."

"Your second in command," Dimitri inquired, with a more pleasant tone, as he poured himself another glass and downed it in one gulp, "Clayton Howard, I believe?"

"Yes."

"He would be happy with your job, no?"

"Why do you ask?" Perry questioned, nervously.

Reaching into a desk drawer, Dimitri removed a piece of neatly typed NAPCO stationary and placed it before his guest.

"You will sign this document," he commanded.

"What is it?" Perry asked, while grasping the offered pen with a shaky hand and mindlessly signing the unread page.

Dimitri's eyes narrowed as he nodded to the well dressed bodyguard, who quietly removed a silenced pistol from his shoulder holster while walking towards the back of Perry's chair. "Your suicide note," Dimitri replied, with a feigned grimace and saddened tone. "I am afraid," he added, "that you have become irretrievably depressed."