

## Chapter Seventeen

For the second time since his ascent to the position of president, Clayton Howard stood outside of the door to Dimitri's office. He had been assigned the task of dealing with what had been termed, the Senator Raymond issue and Clayton had promised that he would *get the job done*; a promise that would prove impossible to keep. On more than once occasion, mostly over the company's allegedly secure communication system, Dimitri had made it clear that success in the matter would be key to his longevity. Although Clayton initially interpreted that to mean his career, he later suspected otherwise. He had been asking around, trying to determine what had happened to his predecessor but had been stonewalled at every turn. Word of his efforts had reached the top floor of the NAPCO building and although he had

no definite proof of Perry's demise, there were rumors, rumors that seemed to concur with his own suspicions; he was petrified.

"He is ready to see you now," Sergei said, while holding the door open for Clayton's entry and following him into the office.

"Ah, Mr. President, how good of you to come. Have a seat," Dimitri said, while pointing to the infamous, familiar plastic covered chair.

"Thank you," Clayton replied, a tiny tremor beginning to build on his upper lip.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"No thank you, sir, it's a little too early for me."

"Ah, I understand. I am afraid that the years have caught up with me as well, my friend," Dimitri remarked, while unscrewing the cap from a large bottle of colorful antacid tablets, dumping several into his hand and crunching.

"Did you get my last report?" Clayton asked, hoping to keep the conversation on a business track.

"Yes, I am very pleased with the profit projections but they are just that, projections."

"Certainly, but I feel confident that we can achieve or perhaps even exceed those numbers," Clayton remarked, with a parched tongue.

"Clayton, Clayton, aren't you the optimist?" Dimitri exclaimed, with a big sigh. "We are being bled dry by the credit consolidation industry; your numbers are nothing more than a creative fantasy."

"I disagree ..."

"An unwise decision," Dimitri interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

"Never disagree with your superior," Dimitri barked, while emphasizing the sentiment with clenched fists.

"I only meant to say that the projection took that matter into consideration," Clayton replied, meekly.

"So, while we are discussing 'matters,' what have you to tell me of the Raymond issue?" Dimitri inquired, with a sinister smile.

"I have not been as successful as anticipated," Clayton replied, with a frown.

"Not as successful? Exactly what success have you had?"

"None, I am afraid."

"I applaud your honesty, Clayton, but unfortunately, honesty will not get the job done," Dimitri scolded, while drumming his fingers on the edge of his desk.

"What would you have me do, the man won't see me?" Clayton begged, his legs beginning to sweat from the heavy plastic.

"A NAPCO president should use his ingenuity, power and status."

"I've tried but he will not budge."

Dimitri gazed pensively at Clayton, then abruptly rose from behind his desk and stood there, leering at the man. "Perhaps this matter requires other measures," he said, while thoughtfully rubbing his chin.

"What other measures?" Clayton asked, as he gasped inwardly when sensing the presence of another man standing behind him.

"This matter is no longer your concern, my friend."

"But ..."

"No, there are no buts," Dimitri interrupted, while signaling to Sergei with the wave of his hand. "You will concern yourself with normal business operations, the Raymond issue will be dealt with by others more capable."

"I will do as you wish."

"Yes, you will," Dimitri murmured, as he returned to his desk then added, "now, it is time for you to get back to work."

Encouraged by his apparent reprieve, Clayton grasped the arms of his chair and rose, heading for the door, when he was stopped.

"Before you leave," Dimitri barked, "there is one further issue."

Clayton, now standing but inches away from Sergei, turned to face his boss. "Yes, sir?" he asked, wondering if he had underestimated the man.

"It has come to my attention that you have been inquiring about your predecessor?"

"Well, yes I have," Clayton said, his internal alarm clanging with earsplitting intensity.

"And to what end, might I ask?"

Clayton hesitated, he couldn't tell the man that he suspected him of murder, he thought to himself, that would be suicide.

"Cat got your tongue, my friend?" Dimitri taunted.

"Uh, no sir."

"Your answer?"

"I thought that he might be helpful during the transition period."

"Ah, and that is the only reason?"

"Why yes, of course, what other reason could there be?"

Clayton replied, proud of his quick thinking response.

"You were not influenced by the fantastic rumors that have been floating about?" Dimitri asked, his eyes narrowing.

"What rumors?" Clayton asked, his worst fears resurfacing.

"Come now, if they have reached this lofty height, surely they have been heard on the floors below."

Damn, he thought to himself, this guy can read my mind. Well, no use denying it. "Oh, that rumor," he said.

"Yes, that rumor," Dimitri whispered, as he once again rose from behind his desk and walked to the center of the room.

"Clayton," he added, now standing in front of the man, "you must know that we are not gangsters. Are we at times ruthless on behalf of our business interests? Of course, but that is the nature of our competitive industry. Does that make us gangsters, or worse, killers? No, it does not."

I didn't believe it for a minute, sir," Clayton responded, with a reassuring smile.

"Good, now, back to work you go," Dimitri gently demanded, while holding the door open for his exit.

Clayton held his breath until reaching the sanctity of the elevator. He was lying, even though I can't prove it, I felt it, he said to himself, as the elevator made its way to his floor. What the hell do I do now? There's no way out of this. If I keep my mouth shut, I'll be an accomplice and if I don't, well, I'm as good as dead.