

### Chapter Fifty-Two

Clayton Howard sat behind his desk biting at his fingernails. Ever since the meeting with Dimitri, where he was ordered to forget about the *Raymond issue*, he had taken to locking his office door. There had been something sinister about Dimitri's attitude that day, he had thought to himself, and he was worried. Although the rumors about Perry's disappearance had died down, his suspicions had not. With his imagination and concern for survival reaching a boiling point, late one night, he returned to the skyscraper and rifled through the accounting department's files. He was looking for tax records, health insurance payments or anything suggestive of Perry's continued existence. But there was nothing, not even a home address. Even the personnel office was devoid of records. It was as if Perry's

essence had been erased, ergo the door locking ritual. It was merely a gesture, a false sense of security but anything that could calm his nerves and allow him to work was worth the effort. But the day was Tuesday, a day that would prove to be anything but calm.

Clayton, a closet homosexual, began each day the same way. Out of bed by five A.M., showered and dressed by five forty-five, a trot to the kitchen for a bowl of dry cereal at six and then off to the battle that was morning traffic. Coffee and newspapers, local, national and international, were reserved for the office and that morning was no different than any other, with one glaring exception.

After leaving a message for his secretary, he grabbed the waiting mug of coffee from her desk and walked the short distance to his office. Making certain that the door was locked, he tossed his briefcase onto a side chair and eased behind his desk. He took one sip of the steaming brew and almost choked. The front page of the San Francisco Chronicle sat before him, the headline striking him like a medieval mace. "Holy shit!" he cried, a spray of coffee striking the page, as he read and re-read the article. He didn't spell it out, he said to himself, but the senator's probably on the right track. What the hell am I going to do? I can't quit, it would be too obvious, especially now, while these jackals are on a murderous rampage. Shit, I could easily be next. But you have to respect the senator for sticking his neck out like that, it took some balls to come out

and say what he did, even if it was only implied. So, what are my options? Team up with Senator Raymond and try to distance myself from this place? A good idea but it would never work, after all, I doubt that he'd even return my phone call. Contact the authorities myself? Who knows how far up the Russian's influence goes? Damn, it sure looks like a dead-end street for me, he said to himself, while staring out the window.

"Mr. Howard?" his secretary called over the intercom.

He turned from the window and glared at the telephone.

"Mr. Howard," she repeated, "are you there?"

"Yes, Becky, I'm here," he replied, warily. He cringed, hoping that it wasn't about a call from the press or even worse, *upstairs*, as he had begun calling Dimitri's office, since even the sound of his name made him nauseous.

"There was a call from *upstairs*."

His hands shook as they wavered above the intercom talk button. "What did he want?" Clayton queried.

"To see you at your earliest convenience."

"Is that exactly how it was phrased?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Becky," he hissed, while leaning back in his chair, pondering the possible meaning behind Dimitri's words. *My earliest convenience*, he said to himself, is that a good thing or is it about me deciding the time of my own death? Well, there's no avoiding the guy, he thought, while unlocking his door. My

will's in order, the cat, the only pussy I've ever had, inherits everything. May as well get it over with.

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"He's waiting for you," Sergei said solemnly, as Clayton exited the elevator.

Clayton nodded unemotionally, keeping his head bowed while entering the office, fully expecting Sergei to follow from behind; but he did not. Trying to appear collected, he nonchalantly gazed about the office, while Dimitri was busy on the telephone. Reassured that they were alone, he waited patiently.

"Calm down, my Turkish friend," Dimitri said, a cell phone pressed firmly to one ear. "Nothing has changed between us, it is merely a clerical modification, words on a page. Yes, our business will endure, fear not. I must go, we shall talk again soon." Dimitri placed the cell phone in his pocket and as if a switch had been thrown, turned to face Clayton with a big smile. "Thank you for coming so soon," he said, "have a seat."

"If you don't mind, I would prefer to stand," Clayton replied, glancing nervously at the plastic upholstered chair.

"Whatever makes you comfortable, my friend. So," Dimitri remarked, with a perfunctory wave, "you have read the morning paper?"

"Yes, all of them," Clayton responded, his hands clasped behind his back.

"What are your thoughts?"

Taken by surprise, he realized that his best defense was an offense. "I find it totally preposterous," he said.

"But aren't you the least bit curious, given your most recent nighttime visit to the accounting department?" Dimitri asked, with a mischievous grin.

"Uh," he murmured, not knowing how to respond.

"Come, come, my friend. I can't give away all of my secrets but it is shame you did not know about the little cameras."

"What cameras?"

"Those darling little technological marvels that I have strategically placed throughout the building."

Does that mean my office as well? he wondered. "I meant no harm," he replied, apologetically, "I was merely looking for some information that my accountant had requested."

"Yes, yes of course you were," he remarked with a comical expression of disbelief. "So, I imagine you are wondering why I requested your presence?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Well, it is about the ugly rumor that you read in this morning's paper."

"Yes, but it isn't true?"

"My dear friend, Clayton, you must know how difficult it can be to disprove a rumor, no?"

"Of course, I understand but ..."

"Well," he broke in, "it seems that you have acquired a new responsibility."

"I don't understand," Clayton replied apprehensively.

"You can't possibly expect me to get involved in this nonsense," Dimitri commented, indignantly, while removing a gold cigarette case from inside of his jacket.

"But I have no experience in these matters."

"Then I suggest you prepare for what you Americans term 'on the job training'."

"Let me make sure that I understand. You want me to handle the press?"

"No, my friend, that's for the legal department."

"Then what?"

"It is very simple. If I am not mistaken, we made you the President, did we not?"

"Yes," he replied, cautiously.

"Have I not told you, time and time again, that for all intents and purposes I do not exist?"

"You have."

"Then, mister President, it would seem that the rumor is yours to dispel."

"You're not serious, are you?" he exclaimed, realizing that this was indeed a fate worse than death.

"Quite so, Mr. President. Now, I suggest that you get back to your office. It wouldn't leave a good impression to be absent when the authorities arrive."

"But surely they will question everyone, including my secretary, Becky? She knows who you are." Clayton said, defensively.

"Yes, of course, all NAPCO principals and employees will be interrogated but Lyudmila is one of my most trusted comrades."

"Lyudmila? But her name is Becky."

"Yes, we argued about that but in the end it was her choice."

"What do you mean?"

"Poor, poor Clayton, I am afraid that we have deceived you. She has been what you call, a plant?" Dimitri proudly announced. "You see, Lyudmila came to me directly from the home office in Moscow, she will do and say whatever I wish."

"But there must be other evidence of your complicity?" Clayton asked, pleadingly.

"It would appear that in your search for documents, you failed to see perhaps the most important," Dimitri proclaimed, while walking to the door and opening it. "You see," he said, while fingering the freshly painted lettering that spelled out the words, *Eurasian Imports, Ltd.*, "I am just a humble renter."

Clayton could not have been more horrified. I'm fucked, he said to himself, there's nowhere to run.