



*Kenneth Szulczyk*

I want to thank an old college friend, John Daubenspeck, for editing my manuscript. He really polished and sharpened my writing. If this story ever becomes successful, then he played a critical role in its success.

All characters, places, and situations that appear in this work are purely fictitious, created in the writer's mind. Although the places in the novel do exist, any resemblance to real people – living or dead – are entirely coincidental.

I re-wrote my story, *The Big Adventure in Little Bosnia*. I tried to enrich the characters, tell a better story, and remove blocks of information that hindered the flow of the story. Of course, I re-wrote this story, so I could enter the manuscript to Amazon's 2015 Breakthrough Novel Award, but Amazon canceled the contest.

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## Chapter 1

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I sat in the armchair in my apartment, watching the swirling snow blow outside through the large bay window, with a 0.38 Smith and Wesson lying next to me. Reckless thoughts flashed through my mind, like a springtime thunderstorm. The icy, cold gun was sandwiched between my left leg and the chair, and I shivered a little from its coldness. I had never owned nor shot a gun before, but I planned to kill Damir and Adnan and Jasmin, maybe not in that order, but I knew the world would be a better place without those three living in it.

The radiator clicked and clacked as it heated the apartment. The January snow covered the town in a fog of whiteness and pushed the people into their homes. The streets were deserted, like they were during the height of the Bosnian War in 1995.

I looked down to study my muscular arm, flexing my muscle several times. I spent hours pumping iron in the gym. I remembered when I was in high school, the other kids always called me a nerd, among other names, and sometimes I would arrive home with a bloody nose, torn clothing, and scraped knuckles. Then I discovered the school's weight room. Every repetition I did, I became bigger, and every insult and lost fight melted away. Then one day, the kids stopped calling me a nerd and left me alone. I'm not athletic, but I look threatening.

I should be happy the semester had ended, because I had a whole month off before the spring semester would start. But I sat in this chair, thoughts swirling in my mind like the blowing snow outside.

I lifted the beer can and guzzled my fourth beer. I rarely drank beer, but I needed to drown my troubled mind with alcohol. I needed to slow down the blizzard of thoughts and plot a course of action.

I looked down at the gun with the cracked handle and observed several nicks and scratches on the metal. I traced the handle's crack with my index finger and wondered about the gun's journey through life. Did a soldier use this gun during the Bosnian War? How many people did this gun kill? Were any victims

innocent? But those questions were irrelevant. This gun had one more mission in life before it could retire.

I pointed the gun at the opposite wall. My hand trembled under the cold weight. Under my breath, I mumbled, “Bang! Bang!” as I pretended to shoot the wall, but didn’t pull the trigger.

I had never killed anyone before. Maybe I bloodied a couple of noses or blackened someone’s eye or two, but I never started those fights. Then I had heard many stories about Damir and his drivers. They were war heroes who knew how to use guns and how to kill people.

My hand trembled and shook as I held the cold gun. Coldness terrified me because death can only be cold, like someone who lay dying, as death circled the body, like a defeated army during a war. Death must be cold, as warmth scatters in all directions from a cooling dead body. I don’t want to be condemned to eternity in a freezing hell, but I have no choice. Damir, Adnan, and Jasmin must die!

I always hid this gun behind the radiator under the window. Because I knew someone from the university searched my apartment weekly when I taught a class in another city.

At first, I was confused and thought my mind was playing tricks on me, exhausted from teaching and the long hours traveling in the car between cities. My mind refused to accept the obvious. A soda bottle or a bag of chips would be missing here and there.

Then one cool day in November, when I returned to the apartment, I noticed a cigarette butt right outside my apartment door, and I smelled the faint stench of its smoke in my apartment. Then I saw the brand name, *Bosna*, which was produced by the Sarajevo Cigarette Company and was Adnan’s and Jasmin’s favorite. Only proud Bosnians smoked their brand, *Bosna*.

I continued sitting quietly in my chair as another beer had slowed down some of my thoughts. Outside, the snow kept falling while temperatures hovered below the freezing mark. Being oblivious to the falling snow, I began to recollect the time when I first came to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the time when I first met my friend Karl and first saw my soon-to-be serious girlfriend, Yelena.

I remembered the first day I arrived at the Bosnian University of Management...

... on a pleasant August day. The summer's savage heat flew south, along with the birds. As I approached the building, I saw an old cinema marquee, painted a fresh white with a bright red trim. Incandescent red light bulbs outlined the marquee, flashing and flickering during the night. The large red letters spelled out the university's name. Someone posted smaller signs along the front of the building, "Now accepting students, please inquire inside. University has 3 million euros in scholarship money to award to top students."

I should have known something was wrong. The university president, Damir Kovacev, remained aloof and distant from the faculty. He placed the professors as far away from him as much as possible and housed them across the street in a large community office. The president barricaded himself in a large office at the back of the university. His large drivers, Adnan and Jasmin, guarded his office door, stopping any unexpected visitors from popping in.

I had never met the president, but on my first day I paused in the foyer, studying his large portrait that hung on the wall. He wore an Armani suit and a smile, sitting behind a large mahogany desk. He held a pen in his right hand and appeared to have just signed some important document. As I studied the picture carefully, the president's smile seemed slightly contorted, as if he had forced himself to smile. His eyes were black, like two dark caves filled with cobwebs, dust, and poisonous creatures.

I found it odd that I had never met him, and yet planned to kill him. I thought this Damir Kovacev was doing well for his country, but during my first semester of teaching, I uncovered his mass grave site, filled with bodies and human misery. Damir Kovacev was an evil man, a wicked man, who owned a university and was educating the next generation of Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs.

In the beginning, I didn't know this. I was eager to start teaching and thought I could educate the future leaders of Bosnia.

However, I found it odd that the university reeked of an invisible stench. This stench was not the stink of a decomposing body buried beneath the foundation, but more of a feeling. The stench reminded me when I walked into a deserted house when I was seven to prove my bravery to my classmates. Everything felt wrong, dead wrong. Something evil lurked in those places, but it could not be described with just an odor. It slapped you in the face when you walked through the front door.

Every morning, when I walked through the front doors, I felt a cold, ghostly tingle caressing my shoulders and back. Sometimes, I would glance at the president's portrait and his two black eyes would stare back.

I met Karl Carlson at the university, a sex-crazed political science professor from Oklahoma. He was nearing 60 years old and continued chasing young women in their 20s and 30s. Karl still had a full head of white hair with a clean-shaven face. Although he was slim, age assaulted his body daily while the blows left permanent marks. Large deep wrinkles covered his face as they were connecting the dots to his grandfather's portrait. On his cheeks and chin, skin hung down in flaps as gravity pulled and tugged his skin towards the ground.

I met Karl for the first time at the faculty office. As I walked through the door, he turned around in his swivel chair, and extended his hand for a handshake, "How ya doin', partner?"

I grabbed his hand and vigorously shook it. "I'm doing well. My name's Keith. I will be teaching finance here."

"Oh, a finance guy. Well, my name's Karl and I'm a political science professor." He swept his arms in a large circle, "As you can see, this is a community office." Then he pointed at the empty desks, "Just grab a vacant desk, and write your name on a piece of paper and claim it. But watch out for those computers. These computers are ancient. I hope you brought your laptop with you."

"Alright, thanks for the info. I have my laptop right here," I stated as I patted my black briefcase for emphasis.

I sat at a corner desk with a window view of the courtyard. Then I moved the computer mouse and waited several minutes until the screensaver switched to the desktop.

Veronika, the HR manager, popped into the office.

Karl bellowed, “Did I ever tell you, Veronika, that you’re the most beautiful woman in this room?”

Veronica stopped, laughed a second, and turned to face him. She replied in jest, “Well Karl, I’m the only woman in this room.” Then she carefully walked around Karl and his eager, pinching fingers.

He continued, “How about I take you out for dinner tonight, babe?”

Veronica turned to face him. “Karl, I know you are married. You have a Ukrainian wife living in Oklahoma.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” Then Karl winked at her and added, “I can keep a secret if you can.”

Veronika shook her head no. Her cheeks reddened slightly, and she smiled a little. She was a traditional Bosnian woman. They craved attention from the men, as long as the men admired them from a distance.

I liked Veronika immediately. Her soft smile with her ocean of wavy blonde hair flowing across her shoulders and back. I noticed her hips protruded slightly as old age cruelly re-sculpted her body.

As Veronika approached me, she held her right hand for a handshake.

I rose and shook her hand gently.

She said, “Hi, Professor Swanson. I’m glad you could make it here. Did you have any troubles?”

“Thank you for asking. Everything is okay. But I’m still getting used to my surroundings.”

“Great! I just wanted to welcome you to the university. I would also like to schedule a meeting with you. Bosnian government requires many documents. I need your passport and official transcripts. Could we meet in my office on Friday at 10 o'clock?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Professor,” then Veronika turned to leave the faculty office.

Karl studied her ass, watching her apple-butt dance before his eyes. As she walked out the office, he began salivating a little.

I sat down and caught Veronika sneak another glance at Karl. I did not know it at the time, but Bosnian women competed fiercely for single men with a job. Although Veronika was still attractive, age advanced across her orchard and hid all the available men. She had better odds catching a shark in the salt pond located on the northern side of the city than finding a single, employed man. The young, single women snatched and married the good men quickly.

I looked at Karl and joked, “Could you make it a little more obvious?”

“You know me; I enjoy fishing. I cast as many lines as I can. Then I sit back and reel them in,” Karl replied.

“How good are you at fishing?”

“I would say if I cast ten times, eight women would slap me across the face, but one always says maybe and the other a definitive yes.”

We exchanged chuckles, and then I added, “In statistics, we call this the Law of Large Numbers. As the number of propositions you ask women approaches infinity, you’re bound to get several yeses.”

Then both Karl and I burst into laughter again.

“So, how are you adjusting to the place?” Karl asked seriously.

“Bosnia is different. I think I’ll adjust just fine, but I don’t think I can learn their language. Bosnian is a Slavic language, and Slavic languages are the most difficult to learn. After I earned a C in Russian, I never stepped into a foreign language class again.”

“Don’t worry about learning Bosnian. If another university gives you an offer, just take it. Don’t ask questions. Just take the offer and go.”

I began frowning. I asked while my voice wavered in doubt, “I don’t understand. What’s so bad about this place?”

“Not here! They may be listening,” Karl whispered in hushed tones, pointing at the ceiling as if listening devices were relaying critical information back to the university president.

Then at a normal tone, Karl asked, “If you’re thirsty, we can go get coffee. I know this great little coffee shop in the center of town.” Then he winked and added, “Waitresses are cute there, too. As if you haven’t noticed, Bosnian women are beautiful.”

“That sounds great. Let’s go.”

Karl and I walked the four blocks to the city’s center.

I stared in awe, and I scanned my head back and forth to study the Hungarian architecture while we walked to the city’s center. Tuzla remained untouched from the commercialization of the west. I saw no drive-thru restaurants or large, neon signs to steal the night’s shadows. Tuzla was a beautiful European city with large, spacious plazas, water fountains, cafes, shops, and restaurants. Any Bosnian from the 19<sup>th</sup> century would still recognize all the streets and places.

I loved walking along the cobblestone walkways, not seeing a single car anywhere. These plazas attracted the pedestrians at night, as Bosnians strolled up and down the sidewalks. Their eyes wandered along the endless stretch of storefronts, scanning the crowds for friends and family.

I noticed a coffee shop on every street corner. These coffee shops attempted to satisfy the unquenchable thirst of the Bosnians love for coffee. Most coffee shops only displayed the name *coffee shop*. Bosnians didn’t worry about fancy names. Once they found a good spot, they would plant themselves there for hours with no care in the world, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and gossiping rampantly about everyone they knew.

Karl and I walked pass the Grand Fountain that sprayed water six feet up into the air. Then we stopped at a coffee shop that had 20 tables and chairs outside in front of the White Palace. We sat at a table, closest to the water fountain, so we could enjoy the cool September air.

The sun felt a little tired today. Although the sunlight struck our hands and back, the soft rays lacked any strength. I

heard faint rumbling of thunder in the distance, as storm clouds gathered on the other side of the mountains.

Then I noticed a waitress moving from table to table. Her dark hair dangled halfway down her back. Her face was creamy, smooth, youthful, and she had the brightest blue eyes. She wore faded blue jeans that outlined the shape of her legs. I was not attracted to her figure, but to her demeanor. She smiled radiantly, reflecting her enthusiasm for the world. She only had begun her travels down the tortuous road of life, and life's onslaughts had not worn her down yet.

Karl began, "I see you are enjoying the view." Then he glanced at the waitress and added, "As I said, Bosnian women are beautiful. Unfortunately, the war messed them up a little."

"What do you mean?"

"The Bosnian War was particular nasty. Every Bosnian has a relative or friend who was killed during the war. Bosnian women tend to be distant and a little neurotic, but I heard if you do marry one, she'll be a loyal wife. Just remember, you're never to talk about the war during your lectures. Topic of war is taboo, especially for outsiders like us. We never experienced their pain, or what they went through."

"That's so odd. When I walk around the city, I see no evidence of a terrible war. Bosnians seem to be peaceful people."

"Tuzla didn't get hit that hard. In 1995, a Serbian platoon arrived at the northern edge of the city. They launched an artillery shell that landed a block over there. That artillery shell killed 79 people, including children walking to school."

"Damn! That's terrible."

Then Karl pointed east and added, "The memorial for the people, killed that morning is two blocks that way. They named it, *Kapija*. You can't miss it. If you go north, you run into the slums of Tuzla. You can still see the bullet holes in the buildings' walls, where snipers shot down at the city from the mountaintops. Of course, if you need some drugs or a little female companionship, that's where you go. I also know this magnificent brothel there."

“Please, like I’ll pick up a prostitute,” I whispered. I wanted to make sure patrons at the neighboring tables couldn’t hear our conversation.

“I’m only making a suggestion. I probably could get you a first-time discount.”

I snickered and replied, “Dude, are you crazy. No!” Then I noticed Yelena was approaching our table.” Subsequently, I added, “Come on man. Let’s change the topic. So what were you saying about the university?”

Then the waitress stood at our table. She asked with a slight Slavic accent, “Hi guys, what would you like to drink?”

Karl began, “I’ll take a light beer from the tap.”

I glanced up at her and fumbled my words as they became glued to the back of my throat. Then in a quick succession, the words stumbled out, “I’lllllll taaake a-a-a cappuccino.”

She cracked a smile and stared at me for a moment. Then she returned to the café’s interior to prepare our orders.

“You got a smile out of her. Nice!”

“Will you grow up? I’m not trying to sleep with every woman whom I meet. So, what were you saying about the university?”

“The university is fucked up. You’ll never meet the university president, and he has a wicked temper. He fires his employees at will. You met Veronika today. Well, I bet you \$20 she’ll not be working at the university by the end of the semester. The president will fire her for something ridiculous.”

“Really? Why does he do that?”

“I really don’t know. Lucky for us, he never talks to us. Either we intimidate him or he gets angry and fires us, then he has trouble finding replacements. Twenty Bosnians aren’t lining up to take our job, at least not yet.”

“WOW! I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Also,” Karl stopped.

The waitress approached our table, carrying a tray with our drinks. Then she placed the mugs on the table and the receipt near Karl, placing the ashtray on top of receipt, so the breeze wouldn’t blow it away. Next, she disappeared into the interior of the cafe.

Karl picked up the receipt and uttered, “See, I told you. She likes you. She charged me for my beer but didn’t list your cappuccino on the receipt.”

I snatched the receipt and read it. Sure enough, the waitress didn’t charge me for that cappuccino.

I replied guiltily, “It must be a mistake. I will flag her down and ask her. So what were you going to say?”

Karl took a swig from his beer, returned it to the table and added, “I was saying, the president is a control freak. He has his drivers and employees monitor the professors. Whatever you say gets back to him.”

I squinted my eyes and frowned. I snapped, “Oh come on! You mean the university president has so much free time, he forces his employees to spy on the professors?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying. Last year, we had an English professor. She sat in the car and complained about the computer information system. We must put all the attendance and grades into their system. She said the database was stupid and was designed by a fourth grader. The driver, Adnan, listened to every word, and, the next day, the employment director fired her. Of course, last year it was Selma and not Veronika. The director fired Selma two months ago. Like I said, the university goes through employees, like a baby going through clean diapers.”

“Damn!” Then I sipped my cappuccino.

The breeze cooled my coffee, so I raised my cup again and gulped half the contents down. I winced a little as the strong, bitter coffee hit my taste buds. I said, “Bosnians sure like their coffee strong.”

“Just like their cigarettes too.”

I spotted two little boys playing in the water fountain, jumping up and down, splashing each other.

Karl continued, “I don’t know if the president installed listening devices in our office, but I do know he reads our emails. So at work, you should never log into your private email account. You should never use the university’s email system for personal emails.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Then I saw the waitress again and waved at her, “Miss! Oh, Miss! Please come here,” as my voice found more confidence.

As Yelena trotted to the table, her smile deepened.

I picked up the receipt and showed it to Yelena, “I noticed you didn’t charge me for the cappuccino.”

“Oh! I apologize. I had problems with the machine, sir. So please don’t worry about it.”

Yelena started to turn, and I added, “May I ask what your name is?”

Yelena turned to face me, and she blushed a little as if this stranger had asked a taboo question, such as how old are you? How much do you weigh? Will you run away with me to Mexico?

Yelena quickly replied, “Yelena,” then she looked down, turned away, and returned to the interior of the café.

“Congrats, buddy. Just as a side note, Bosnian women are very conservative. You got her name today, but it’ll probably take you another two months to get her phone number, and then a year for the first kiss.”

In the distance, we saw Yelena place another receipt on the table surrounded by young Bosnians.

Then Karl blurted, “Yeah, the machine is busted alright. I think she likes you, so you have a challenge facing you.”

Then we exchanged chuckles again.

“Well, I do like challenges. Anyway, I may be stuck in Bosnia for at least a decade. The U.S. job market sucks really bad. I have no intentions of returning for at least a year or two. So, I have plenty of time.”

“If you want a challenge, then a challenge is what you’ll get. If you want to speed things up, I know this great little brothel on the northern part of the city. You can condense a night of passion into 60 minutes, and it’ll only set you back a hundred euros.”

“Come on Karl. Seriously. I don’t go to places like that. I’ve never been to one. I am not interested in taking off my clothes in front of a strange woman, a woman whom I don’t know.”

I reddened a little because I never went to those places, but I must admit the curious monkey was sitting on my shoulders, and

he wanted to know. I finished my cappuccino and looked my friend in his eyes, “Since you keep bringing it up, what’s it like inside one of those places?”

“I’ve been to many of them around the world. My favorite is the Russian brothel in Yekaterinburg. They’re always the same. A young cute girl grabs your hand and leads you into a large room, and the Madam lines up all the available women. Then you choose which one you want and how long you want her. Make sure you bring plenty of money.”

“How do you find those places?”

“You ask a taxi driver or a hotel bellhop. They always know where they are, but you must tip them. I liked Yekaterinburg because she was good, and super cheap. I bought a woman for two hours, rented the room, and had a taxi driver waiting outside for me. The whole adventure set me back forty dollars.”

“Damn! That sounds cheap. That poor girl! Aren’t you worried about diseases?”

“Oh please, at my age. Of course, I always use protection. I definitely don’t want to bring any more children into the world especially from a prostitute. Besides, I helped that poor girl pay for her college tuition. She truly appreciated my financial aid.”

“Ah, yeah! Forty dollars really pays a lot. She probably got ten dollars to help pay for her school.”

I paused for a minute to collect my thoughts, and then I asked, “What’s the wildest time you ever had at a brothel?”

“That’s hard to say. Middle East is the wildest because Muslims strictly follow the Koran. A rich sheik will walk into a brothel and enter into a marriage contract with a prostitute. Then he can make love to her for an hour or two. After he’s done with her, he divorces her, and she’s free to marry the next man. This is all legal under Sharia Law.”

Both Karl and I erupted into laughter again.

Then I continued, “That seems so unnecessary. Go through all the ritual to comply with a religious decree. Besides, I thought Muslims could have multiple wives. Why do they need to waste their time with prostitutes?”

Karl raised his eyebrow in confusion and uttered, “I don't know. You've got me. I guess the sheiks get bored with their wives too!”

I continued my probing, “What's the weirdest time you ever had with a prostitute?”

“Weirdest time I had with a prostitute was in Dubai. While I made love to her, she reached over to the bed stand and grabbed an apple. Then she started eating ...”

“What the ...! In the future, you probably want to keep that one nugget of information to yourself. She was so bored with you, she decided to eat during...”

Karl interrupted, “Or she was really hunger because I took too long to finish.”

Both Karl and I exchanged laughter again.

Several Bosnian males, sitting at the next table stared at us.

“Okay, let's change the topic.”

I reddened a little because I spent too much time studying finance in the library and rarely thought about the opposite sex. Although I am attracted to women, I wasn't completely sure what to do with one, because a woman doesn't come with instructions. I can't enter her parameters into a financial calculator and figure her out. But, I found Yelena attractive, likable, even though I had to be 10 years older than her. I am definitely old enough to be her older brother.

Karl glanced at his watch and uttered, “Oh, I've got to go. I have a seminar next week, and I need to work on my presentation.”

“Okay. I should work on my lecture notes and prepare for my class tomorrow. Thanks for showing me this nice coffee shop.”

Karl and I finished our drinks, and Yelena returned to serve a new table of young, obnoxious Bosnian men.

I stared at Yelena again, and Karl asked, “So, how do you like this coffee shop?”

“This was a pretty good cappuccino. So I think I shall return.” Then I slapped a five-euro note onto the table, placing an ashtray over it, so the wind could not run away with it.

“Wow! That’s a good tip. Just to let you know, this is a poor country. Bosnians never leave tips. That waitress may think you like her.”

“Well then I’ll let you on a little secret. I do like her. Besides if she doesn’t want to charge me for coffee, then I’ll give her the money as a tip. I have a feeling this will become my favorite coffee shop. Of course, it’s the only coffee shop I have been to, but I ranked this one at the top of my list.”

Walking away from the cafe, I turned and glanced at Yelena. Then she noticed and turned to look at me. Like a lightning flash, she frowned at me facetiously and raised her eyebrows. Then her frown softened into a smile. She raised her hand to her chest and waved goodbye so the other patrons could not see her hand.

I nodded my head forward and back slightly. Then I turned and walked away. I knew I had plenty of time to chase after Yelena. I didn’t plan to return to the bad U.S. economy anytime soon with empty job interviews and forgotten resumes ...

I came out of my daydream.

I shivered from a cold draft that found its way through the cracks and crevices around the window, as the wind chased the coldness inside.

I wanted to shed a tear for my new friend Karl. The police found him on a deserted street with a gunshot wound to the back of his head. Then my girlfriend, Yelena, was missing, and the police had no leads. Of course, I know who the culprits are – my boss and his henchmen.

Then I reached for my gun...

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## Chapter 2

---

Yelena awakened. Her last conscious thought flashed through her mind. She remembered Keith was hurt, and she struggled to breathe as blackness blanketed her thoughts.

Now, she was awake. She stood up, but the walls held their ground. She hit a wall with her right hand, and the wall did not bulge. She turned and hit the next wall. Then the next. Finally, she struck a thick, wooden door. She looked down and saw a line of light, illuminating the bottom of the door.

Her kidnappers had locked her inside a dark, dank closet. She felt for her watch, but it was gone. Then she reached into her jeans pocket for her cell phone, but felt nothing there.

Yelena reached across empty space, moving her hand up and down the door. Finally, her trembling hand brushed against the doorknob. Then she gripped the doorknob and slowly turned the knob back and forth, but it remained lock.

Yelena clenched her hands into fists and pounded on the door. She struck the door with the bottom parts of her fists while she screamed, "Let me out of here. Let me out of here...."

After several minutes of pounding, someone kicked the bottom of the door, and the door shivered in its frame. Then he shouted, "Shut up bitch. I can hurt you real bad."

"Please, don't hurt me. Please let me go."

She put her ear against the door, but she heard only the TV in the background.

Yelena started pounding on the door again, screaming, "Let me go! Let me go..."

"I said, "Shut the fuck up."

Then a muffled explosion penetrated through the door as a bullet whizzed above her head and buried itself into the wall.

Yelena quieted and slid down the back wall to sit down. After fifteen minutes, she heard several Bosnian men talking outside the closet door, but the thick wooden door muffled their loud voices.

Then a small stream of tears flowed down Yelena's face as she cradled her head in her hands. She knew what it meant for a poor girl in Bosnia to be kidnapped. Her kidnappers will sell her in

the sex trade. She heard many stories of girls kidnapped from the villages. These stories were old and only happened after the Bosnian War, but she had heard of some poor families selling their daughters to the traffickers, because poverty could not satisfy their hunger.

Yelena remembered her last thoughts before being kidnapped. She had planned to meet Keith at the large water fountain at the city's center at 9 o'clock after work.

Yelena was excited all day long, and she couldn't wait to see Keith. Her boss noticed her excitement and let her leave early from work. She smiled deeply and rushed out the door, and sat on the bench to wait for him. She shivered as she waited on the cold bench as the bitter cold reddened her cheeks and nose, turning them a rosy red.

Yelena glanced at her watch. It was five minutes before nine. She noticed two large Bosnian men approaching her. She scanned the courtyard but saw no one else. She positioned herself, ready to spring up and make a run for it.

Then Yelena noticed the men wore dark brown uniforms with the university's logos on the upper left sleeves, Keith's university. One man neared his 60s with all gray hair while the other one was in his 20s who appeared to be a muscular, dumb village boy.

The younger stranger stated, "Oh, you must be Yelena. We have bad news for you. Keith was hurt. He's in the hospital. He needs your help."

Yelena leaped up from the bench while her eyes widened and the creases deepened across her forehead. Her voice shrieked, "Is he al-"

Before Yelena realized what happened, she felt strong arms grab her from behind as a moist cloth covered her mouth. She struggled and twisted and kicked the grabber's shins while her thoughts started fading and darkness swallowed her. Then she awakened in this dark closet.

Then Yelena began crying, softly at first, but the stream of tears began gushing as she thought about her predicament. She wished Keith would show up and rescue her.

Then Yelena remembered the first time she met Keith and had their first conversation...

...Yelena had a day off from work on a Thursday night. She usually stayed at her work to socialize because her boss gave her a discount, stretching her meager monthly salary. Sometimes, when the other workers were not looking and busy with the customers, her boss would slip her a free drink or two.

She met Keith in late September as the nights stretched longer, and cold winter snuck closer by the day. The trees transformed into a canopy of browns, reds, oranges, and yellows as nature's artist threw paint onto a green canvas. Vibrant colors filled the surrounding mountainsides. Then a Bosnian winter would add the final brush strokes and cover everything with a brilliant white.

That Thursday night was typical as patrons smoked their cigarettes. As one smoker extinguished a cigarette, he or she would immediately like up another one. Bosnians refused to give their lungs any breaks, and the cafe quickly filled up with a thick, choking haze. If a nonsmoker happened to pop in the place and drink a beer or coffee, he or she would develop lung cancer after several hours of exposure or at least a severe case of bronchitis.

Yelena sat across from her friend, Teah. Teah had long, blonde curly hair with a voluptuous body. Her Slavic features attracted many male suitors.

Yelena saw the door open, and Keith and his old friend, Karl walked into the cafe. They sat at a free table near the entrance, and Keith scooted his chair and partially blocked the entrance. One patron stumbled and almost tripped over the chair's leg, but he grabbed and steadied himself by holding the doorknob. He squinted at Keith and clenched his fists.

Keith said, "Sorry, but I'm not looking for trouble." Then Keith stared at the man.

The patron turned and stumbled out the door.

Teah noticed Yelena's sly eye movement and turned to study the new guests and the tiny confrontation. After a minute, Teah blurted, "They're definitely not from around here. They're

certainly not Bosnian,” as her voice shrieked across the room. If her voice were slightly higher, everyone’s glass mug would shatter.

Several Bosnian men sitting at the next table turned to glance at Teah, curious at first, and then their molesting stares probed Teah's feminine features.

Teah, at first, smiled at them and then her smile contorted into a frown. If Teah were a traffic light, wrecked cars would litter the intersection. The men quickly returned to their guy chat.

“No, I think they’re American. They come to the café often and speak English,” Yelena replied while looking down at the table.

Teah glanced at Karl and Keith again and snapped, “Are you interested in one of them?”

Yelena reddened slightly and then sheepishly replied, “No, I’m just curious.”

“Curious, huh! C’mon. Tell me the truth.”

“Well. Well, I don't know.”

“Let me guess. You like the older one, huh?”

Yelena laughed and almost dropped her cigarette onto the floor. Then she snapped, “I don’t think so.”

“Ah, it must be the younger one, then.”

Yelena looked down at the table.

Teah added, “Aren't you going to find yourself a good Bosnian man?”

Yelena picked at a loose thread, pulling it from her blue jeans, and dropping it on the floor.

“Well answer me. Aren’t you going to find yourself a good Bosnian man?”

Then Yelena lifted her face and stared at Teah, squinting her eyes, clamping her lips. Then she shrieked, “Are you serious? I’m Serbian. Bosnians don’t marry Serbian women. Besides, I don’t like Bosnian men. They don’t work, and they’re lazy. They’re always bumming cigarettes and money. What would I do with a Bosnian man? I would become his servant and work twice as hard in this café to support him.”

Teah began laughing, nodding her head up and down, “I don’t like Bosnian men either.” She took another puff of her cigarette and exhaled, “If he’s an American, you can always get yourself a green card. Then you could go to America.”

Yelena's face contorted into a frown, and she snapped, “Teah! I would never marry a man for a green card! I must love him first.”

Then the women began exchanging giggles.

Afterwards, Teah picked up her pack of cigarettes and tapped the pack lightly. They both smoked '*drina jedina zlatna*,' the Drina River brand is the one of gold, which only sophisticated Bosnian ladies smoked. Both Yelena and Teah grabbed a loose cigarette.

Yelena lit up her cigarette and passed the lighter to Teah.

While they smoked, they sipped their espressos – a Bosnian tradition, where everyone drank copious amounts of coffee, even before bedtime.

“Well, I would marry any man if he would take me to Florida!” Teah replied with a beaming fake smile.

“Teah! You're bad,” Yelena scolded in an exaggerated, motherly voice.

“Well. What can I say? I know what I want. I love the white sandy beaches around Miami and Tampa. Warm winters with no snow. Plus, I wouldn’t be in Bosnia!”

Yelena’s smile deepened as she tilted her head towards Karl and added. “Well, he has a friend, an older friend, I might add.”

Teah turned and glanced at Karl again. Then her eyes bulged out and her mouth opened wide, “Yelena! Pleease! He’s old enough to be my grandfather!”

They began giggling again.

Then Teah added, “Well if he has a nice mansion on Miami Beach, then it could be a possibility. By the way he looks, I doubt he’ll survive another 10 years.”

“If he has a mansion on Miami Beach, why would he be here in Bosnia?” Yelena added while jerking her head up and down sarcastically.

Ladies smoked another cigarette and ordered another round of espressos.

Teah sipped her espresso and followed it with another drag on her cigarette. Then she stated, “Well, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. When I finish this cigarette and coffee, I’ll leave. Then maybe your boyfriend will come over and sit down. I’ll even bump into his chair as I walk out. Then I’ll wait outside by the fountain for you for fifteen minutes. If I don’t see you in fifteen minutes, I’m going home.”

Yelena just sat there. She wanted to say something but didn’t know what to say. Then she glanced at Keith again.

True to her word, Teah did exactly what she said she would do. She slowly walked to the front door, and then she veered left and bumped into Keith’s chair hard. She replied, “Sorry,” in a thick Slavic accent and stumbled through the door. Before the door closed, she had looked at Yelena and had nodded her head slightly.

Keith looked up at Teah, and then turned his head to glance at Yelena.

Sitting alone, Yelena crossed her legs, tilted her arm that held the cigarette, looking sophisticated, and smiled when Keith looked in her direction.

After several minutes, Yelena saw Karl and Keith huddled together as they moved their chairs together and whispered into each other ears. Then Karl quickly pointed in Yelena’s direction and nodded his head. After an eternity, Keith rose out of his chair and slowly strolled to Yelena’s table, dragging his feet across the floor. He swiveled his head left and right, and avoided looking directly at Yelena. Approaching Yelena’s table, he looked confused, like a stray animal ready to dart in the bushes from the slightest sound.

Of course, if he were Bosnian, she would have fun toying with his emotions, but Keith wasn’t. He was different. Keith was interesting. He approached her table and asked politely, “Is this seat taken?”

“No.” Yelena took another puff from her cigarette. Then she turned her head away from Keith and exhaled her plumb of

smoke. She knew he didn't smoke, and she didn't want to blow her pollution into his face.

Keith slowly sat in the chair and scooted the chair closer to the table. Yelena sat still and wondered if she should be mean or nice. Keith grinned and asked, "Do you come here often?"

Yelena knew Keith was joking because he came to her cafe almost every day and always left a nice tip. "Sometimes," Yelena giggled. Although it was a corny pickup line, his line was much better than what the Bosnian men tossed out. Usual the Bosnian icebreaker was, 'Could you spare a cigarette?'

"I come here regularly and wanted to say hi. You make a good cup of cappuccino."

"Thank you." Then Yelena asked kindly, "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a professor. I teach finance at the university here."

Yelena raised her eyebrows and scooted her chair close to the table.

Educated men were difficult to find in Bosnia. Many Bosnian men skipped school and refused to do their homework. An educated man in Bosnia was like finding a pair of diamond earrings lying on a sink in a public bathroom.

Then Keith asked, "At which college do you study?"

"I'm not in college yet. I must work here at this café. Once I save enough, then I plan to go to college."

"I can relate. The university, where I teach, is very expensive."

"How expensive?"

"I think they charge around 7,000 euros each year for tuition, but some students get scholarships."

Yelena opened her eyes wide while her mouth widened into a large oval.

Yelena shook her head back and forth. Seven thousand euros were a godly sum of money, a king's ransom in Bosnia. Yelena felt her stomach squirm while stomach acid bubbled up to the back of her throat. During Yelena's lifetime, she rarely saw any money and doubted her long hours toiling at the café would add up to 1,000 euros per year.

Yelena quickly changed the topic away from money, “So what do you think of Bosnia?”

“Bosnia is a little different. The Bosnians seem a little distant. They’re polite, but they don’t form friendships very easily. That’s why I’m so surprised you are so friendly.”

“Perhaps I’m not Bosnian,” Yelena mumbled, raising her eyebrows for emphasis.

“Huh?” Keith uttered while his hands trembled.

“I’m Serbian,” and as Yelena said this, she studied Keith’s face to see if his expression had changed. However, it didn’t. Keith didn’t care about her nationality.

This was the irony of dating in Bosnia. Many Bosnian males would be disgusted to discover a truth like this even though Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs shared the same ethnic origin. They refused to mix their races. They wanted to keep their races pure and pristine.

“What’s your race?”

“I’m American. I’m half-German and half-Irish. The German in me likes to work hard during the day, and then the Irish part likes to come out to party at night.”

Keith laughed, and Yelena joined him.

Keith added, “Sorry, bad joke. We don’t really care about this in America. I’m just a plain ole white guy. I imagine I would encounter problems if I traveled to Ireland or Germany. They would hate me in both countries,” Keith replied with a smirk.

“Which university do you teach at?” Yelena asked while her left leg twitched up and down. She took the last drag on her cigarette and then smashed the cigarette butt into the ashtray as the red coals lost their fire. Then she looked up and studied Keith’s face.

“I teach at the Bosnian University of Management.”

Yelena saw the university many times as she walked by it on her way to work, but she never went inside. Yelena knew wealthy Bosnians studied there.

She asked, “Do you plan to stay in Bosnia for a while?”

Keith smirked and looked downward.

Yelena persisted, “You don’t like Bosnia?”

Keith looked at Yelena, “It has nothing to do with Bosnia. It’s just I am always looking for new opportunities. I plan to stay here for a year or two.”

“I understand. I know Bosnia was not your first choice. Don’t worry Keith. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t pick Bosnia either.”

Then they exchanged laughter.

Then Keith asked, “What are your dreams if you permit me to ask?”

Yelena’s smile deepened because no one showed any interest in her future. Unfortunately, the extreme poverty in Bosnia chased her dreams away, “I always wanted to own my own business.”

“Really. What kind of business?”

“I don’t really know. I thought about owning a hair salon or restaurant.”

“I gotcha. You want to be your own boss, to control your own destiny.”

“Exactly.”

Then, Teah stuck her face in the front window and looked at Yelena, shaking her head back and forth, and sticking her tongue out at her.

Yelena uttered, “It was good talking to you, Keith, but I must go. My friend is waiting for me.”

Yelena stood up, grabbed her jacket, and began slipping her jacket on.

Keith looked at her and asked, “May I call you, sometime?”

Yelena hesitated with one arm in the jacket and the other arm dangling freely.

Normally Yelena would never give her number out so quickly, but Tuzla rarely had any interesting men in it or even visiting it. She did not love Keith nor would she marry him, at least not at his time, but he seemed interesting. She needed something interesting in her rather dull life, something different, something not Bosnian.

After Yelena slipped her coat on and brushed back her hair, she grabbed a pen and a small piece of paper from her purse and

scribbled her phone number on it. She raised her head and glanced at him while she slid the paper across the table to Keith.

Yelena reddened, smirked, and lowered her face. This was unorthodox to give out her number so quickly. She turned and fled out the front door.

“Bye,” Keith replied in a loud and confident voice with a sly smile across his face.

Perhaps she could fall in love with Keith, and he could take her away from here, far away from Bosnia. Then she could leave the 500-year conflict between the Bosnians and Serbs behind. They could continue to fight their stupid wars without her...

A large slamming door had shaken Yelena out of her dream. Her tears moistened the front of her dress. Then she heard a new voice speak to her captors outside the door. She placed her ear against the door to hear what they were saying, scheming, but she only heard muffled voices.

She thought about Keith. She wished she could be with him, and he would hold and caress her, and make hot passionate love to her one last time. Then she could leave the world with no worries, no regrets, and she would be at peace with herself. Then she could see her dead father again and run to her father's outstretched hands. She already paid for the Bosnian War, a war that was not hers, a war that took her father.

She dropped her hand to the side and brushed against a board that wobbled. She shifted her position and worked her fingers under the bottom of the board. As she pulled on the board, the board screeched softly and gave away.

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## Chapter 3

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Damir sat behind the director's desk at a university branch in Banja Luka, in Serbian territory. He removed his thick leather belt and was meticulously cleaning and lubricating it. Damir couldn't remember how many people he had strangled with it, but today, the belt had another mission to complete.

Damir held the belt ends in one hand and the mid-section in the other and snapped the belt several times. "I think it's ready," he yelled.

Jasmin looked up from his magazine and replied, "Yes, sir, boss. Today will be a good day." Then he looked down to reading his magazine again.

Damir glanced over at Jasmin, one of his trusted friends. Although Jasmin was getting old, he was still a strong man like an old, rusty tank that squeaked badly every time it moved, but it could still fire artillery with no problems.

They also both shared their hatred for the Serbs. The Serbs had stolen the one thing he cared about in the world – his beloved Emina. He thought he had protected her by sending her to Srebrenica – a safe haven during the Bosnian War. When he heard the Serbian armed forces overran the village, he and Jasmin drove there as fast as they could.

They arrived towards evening and hid in the foothills overlooking the city. The camp held too many soldiers. They heard the firing of machine guns, like a barrage of screaming firecrackers.

The firing went on for hours and hours. Several times, Damir tried to go down to the camp and kill as many soldiers as he could, but Jasmin stopped him. Sometimes, they heard women screaming between the cry of the bullets.

Then the soldiers began leaving in a large convoy before dawn. Damir and Jasmin headed down to the camp. As the sun rose, the humanity in Damir's head began setting.

They smelled a stench of death clinging to the countryside, like an impenetrable fog that tried to stop itself from witnessing the massacre.

As Damir and Jasmin wandered through the camp, they checked every bloody body, searching for his wife, Emina. They finally found her in one of the huts. The soldiers had badly raped and beaten her until she had died. Then they tossed her onto the floor and threw food containers, bottles, and cigarette butts on her.

Damir lowered himself and brushed all the garbage off her. Then he traced every bruise and scar on her body with his index finger. He swore he would get even with the Serbs.

Damir cradled her body in his arms for hours. Then Jasmin helped Damir bury her body in the foothills overlooking Srebrenica. Every year on Emina's birthday, October 25th, Damir visited her grave and placed a bouquet of red roses across the flat gravestone. Then he would whisper to her gravestone how many Serbs he had killed that year.

Even after December 14, 1995, when the Croats, Bosnians, and Serbs signed the Dayton Peace Accord, Damir would soothe his rage by strangling a Serb. He planned to kill as many Serbs as he could and settle the score for his lost wife. Anyone can kill a person with a gun but to strangle a life as it squirms in your arms is personal.

Of course, Damir was always careful and left no clues behind, and the police never solved these crimes, and they never will.

Damir plopped his briefcase onto the desk and unclasped the locks. He pulled out a small zip-lock bag filled with a white powdery substance. Then he pulled out a tiny mirror with a razor blade from the left drawer of his desk. The President spread some of the white powder on the mirror and used the razor blade to create three narrow lines.

Then he reached into the briefcase, slipped a hundred euro bill from one of the money stacks and rolled it into a straw.

The president quickly snorted three lines of coke. The cocaine rushed to his head like a freight train traveling along the rails of his arteries. Then the president's rage began to subside while his mind focused and cleared. His anger melted away like icicles during a spring thaw.

Jasmin snapped, "Boss. Come on. You need to stop."

“I need my medicine,” as Damir shook his head back and forth, enjoying the rush. He pinched his nose, ensuring every miniscule of coke became assimilated into his body.

“But you’re breaking a cardinal rule in business. Never consume your own product.”

“I know but a little here and there won’t hurt me.”

“But your medicine will be walking through that door in fifteen minutes. Use your belt as your natural medicine, not the coke. The rush of strangling a person will enliven you.”

“Look, I know you are right. But, you need to back off. Just give me a little more time. By the way, speaking of business, did Vladimir give you any trouble yesterday?”

“He started giving me shit about expenses. As I reached for my gun, he stopped his bullshit. He pulled the money out and handed me exactly 20,000 euros. I saw him count the money with a counting machine. You can count it if you like.”

“No, I trust you. You covered my back during the war. I know my friends will never disappoint me. Just make sure the chemist keeps busy. Without him, our whole operation would fall apart.”

“I’ll go and check up on him, once we get back home.”

Damir opened a textbook, *How to Manage Difficult Employees*, and started studying it. Damir founded his university three years ago and had trouble with the employees and professors, especially the whining professors. He studied every page, searching for new pointers and tips to motivate his employees.

Damir croaked, “Can you believe this? This expert says I should treat my employees with respect.”

Jasmin chuckled and replied, “That’s unreal boss.” Then Jasmin lifted his heavy boot off the ground and added, “I should write motivator across the front of my boot so those ungrateful employees can read it as my boot goes up their ass.”

Damir smirked and returned to reading his book.

The university became quiet, and all the staff went on vacation. Damir and Jasmin were the only two occupying this desolate, empty building.

Jasmin sat quietly in a chair across from Damir. He was leafing through a magazine. Damir knew Jasmin could not read, and he probably inserted a Playboy magazine into a Bosnian fashion magazine. Occasionally, Jasmin's right brow would rise in excitement as he found a good page to study and a little drool moistened his lips.

Around 10 o'clock, they heard a soft rap at the door.

Jasmin sprang from his chair and quickly opened it.

A tall, skinny kid with wavy brown hair stood outside his door. He always wore eyeglasses with the typical European sleek frame, a Serbian copy of the Giorgio Armani glasses. He was the quiet, observant type. He smirked a little when he saw Damir sitting behind the desk.

"Please come in, Branko. I'm glad you could make it to this meeting. I know everyone is away, but I want to get his out of the way," Damir said politely, oozing with kindness and understanding.

Damir continued, "Please hang up your coat and have a seat. Jasmin, could you please go get us some coffee from the pastry shop down the street? You know the one that has the flirtatious server girls."

Jasmin's smile widened and beamed. He really liked that pastry shop, where the flirtatious Serbian women worked. "Yes, sir," Jasmin said and left the office, slowly closing the door behind him.

"Good morning, sir," Branko replied as he scanned the office and spotted an empty chair by Damir's desk.

"Good morning, Branko. How are you this morning?" Damir asked with false sincerity.

"I'm doing well. I had a great semester. I earned all A's in all my courses."

"Great. That is splendid news. I heard you're a brilliant student. You're at the top of your class."

Branko nodded his head up and down and grinned, "Yes, sir. I don't like to brag, but I'm the smartest."

"As you probably guessed, I wanted to talk to you in person. The finance department has brought it to my attention that

you are behind in tuition payments. You owe the university 6,000 euros. May I ask what the problem is?"

Branko's grin hardened into stone, and he just sat there and stared at Damir.

"You have not answered the question."

After several more seconds of silence, Branko's face reddened, and he snapped, "As I already explained it to your people in the finance department, I plan to pay my bill as soon as I can. My family is having financial problems. Once the problems smooth out, I'll pay you. I'll get my finances in order. Okay, sir. May I leave?" Branko asked, edging himself out of the seat.

Damir replied in a sharp tone, "You understand it costs me money to pay for the staff, the professors, this building." Damir swept his arms out in a semi-circle to emphasize everything in the university and continued, "Unfortunately, we're a small university, and this tuition money is extremely important. That money is vital. The university spent a lot of money to bring those American professors to Bosnia."

"I know sir, but as I already explained, I will pay you the money once my family gets their finances in order. If you allow me to continue next semester, I'll pay you back in the summer. I'll work a summer job and pay you every penny I owe you. It's just that I can't pay you right now."

"Well then. You are lucky I'm an understanding person," Damir grinned, showing his front teeth and continued, "I understand your situation. I can be quite a generous person. You're such a brilliant student. I probably can find a little scholarship money for you. The university needs good students like you. Excellent students enhance the reputation of the university."

Branko smiled while he stared coldly at Damir. Branko tapped his foot on the ground, challenging Damir to continue.

Jasmin returned to the office, carrying two cappuccinos, and he placed the Styrofoam cups on the desk. Then he fished several packets of cream and sugar from his coat pocket and put them next to the coffees.

Damir stated jovially, "Ah, Jasmin brought back some coffee. Please, help yourself Branko to one of the coffees."

Branko leaned forward stretching his hand to grab the closest coffee.

As Branko reached for the cup, Jasmin punched him hard on the side of his head near the temple, knocking his glasses off. Then Branko fell to the floor, sprawled out.

“Well, I guess you won’t need that cup of coffee after all, Branko, You’re so smart. I bet you didn’t see that coming?” Damir said sarcastically.

“Boss, I’ll take that cup of coffee. Let’s not waste good coffee on a piece of shit.”

“Oh by all means, help yourself. I thought that piece of shit would never stop talking. After we finish our coffees, we’ll drag him to the car,”

Damir added with a touch of anger and fury in his voice. “This little motherfucker wouldn’t pay his tuition. Did he actually think I would let him continue to study at my university?”

Jasmin sat in Branko's chair and plopped his heavy, dirty boots onto Branko's back, using Branko as a footrest.

Then Damir and Jasmin enjoyed their coffees in silence and continued reading their magazine and book again.

Fifteen minutes later, Branko began to stir.

Jasmin grabbed a bottle of chloroform and doused a rag. Then he held the rag over Branko’s mouth while Branko drifted into a heavy sleep.

“It’s time to take out the trash,” Damir said.

“Yes, sir, boss.” Then Jasmin walked outside the university building and pulled the car around to the back door.

After he had returned to the office, Damir and Jasmin grabbed Branko and threw him into the car’s trunk, locking him inside.

Then they returned to the office to finish their reading.

A few hours later, Jasmin and Damir changed into camouflage military uniforms and left the university. Jasmin hopped onto the driver’s seat, while Damir rode shotgun. They drove into the deep countryside.

Dusk was approaching, and the temperatures were dropping.

Jasmin turned left on a dirt road. Then he drove slowly over a treacherous road that curved and twisted through the backcountry through the Balkan Mountains. After an hour, they reached their destination, a valley surrounded by wilderness. A desolate frontier spread in all directions for miles. At the bottom of the valley, a group of men wearing military uniforms stood near their parked cars, talking and smoking cigarettes.

Both Jasmin and Damir pulled next to the cars and exited the vehicle. As Damir approached, the 10 soldiers sprang into a straight formation, and Jasmin joined the end of the line.

Damir smiled as he stood in front of his platoon. Then he addressed his troops, "ATTENTION!"

All the troops snapped their heels altogether and saluted their commander with strong, crisp synchronous movements.

Damir began, "Good morning troops. I'm glad you all made it to our training exercise today. Unfortunately, Adnan could not make it today because he's busy with an important errand. I know it is a cold day, and we all would rather be back at home, sitting in front of a fireplace. However, these training exercises are vital. We must prepare for the next Bosnian War. We must continue to train and be diligent. I also have a surprise for you today. Jasmin, will you go grab the surprise."

The day was bitter cold while the snow pelted the ground. Several inches of snow already accumulated on the car. Jasmin walked to the back of the car and...

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Branko awakened in the trunk, confused while his mind tried to assemble today's events. He remembered talking to Damir about his student account. He was reaching for something, and then everything went black.

Branko pushed against the trunk lid, but it wouldn't bulge. He turned on his side and jingled the trunk's lock, but nothing moved.

Bang! The car hit a bump and Branko's head hit the truck lid, almost knocking him out.

Then the car's suspension kept vibrating up and down as someone drove the car over a dirt road.

Branko kept sticking his fingers into the lock, but the car would hit another bump, causing his fingers to lose his grip.

After a long time, the car came to a stop. He jumbled the lock again.

Click! Then Branko slowly opened the truck and peeked out as he shivered from the coldness.

Jasmin stood above him and grabbed him lifting him out of the trunk. Then Jasmin pushed him between the soldiers and Damir. Branko stumbled and crashed onto the snow, landing face down. Then he looked up at Damir and pleaded, "Pleeeasee Daaamiir. I thought you understoooood."

Damir kicked Branko in the face right under his chin.

Branko flew back onto the snow and landed on his back. One of his teeth bit into his lower lip, causing blood to trickle down his chin and onto his jacket.

Branko rolled over, remaining on his hands and knees, looking up at the soldiers and Damir. Branko's body trembled and convulsed as fear gripped his body. He saw the soldiers had Zastava M80s, a cloned version of the Russian AK-47, slung over their shoulders.

Branko began to cry as tears streamed down his face, because he knew death was following him. Death must have been sitting in the car's passenger seat waiting for Branko to get out of the trunk. As he shivered from fear, urine streamed down his crotch area.

Soldiers laughed and mocked Branko after seeing the expanding wetness around his crotch area.

Damir screamed at Branko with hatred exuding in his voice, "You have exactly ten minutes to run. Once those ten minutes are up, we're coming to hunt you. GO NOW!" Then he pressed the timer button on his watch.

Scanning the faces of the troops, Branko then gazed at Damir.

Damir glared down at Branko as if Damir had stepped in dog shit. Branko was a small helpless elk that stumbled across the path of savage hunters.

Branko continued pleading, "I'm sorry sir. I'll get the money for you. I'm so sorry. I'll pay you. My family will find the money for you. You don't need to kill me."

Damir continued to glare at Branko, and then he tapped his watch, "Tick-tock. Tick-tock."

Branko leaped onto his feet like a scared rabbit and sprinted towards the nearest woods. He sprinted as fast as he could. After he had reached the first line of trees, he glanced back at the soldiers.

Soldiers stood still in formation. Damir stood like a statue, watching the timer on his watch.

Branko trembled with fear because he saw his path clearly marked in the snow. His boots at least sank a foot into the snow, making his path known. Even a blind man could follow his path through the snow. Here and there, droplets of blood from his busted lip speckled the snow.

Branko looked around and saw no houses, orchards, or fields. He was in a remote, deserted value, and he had no way of escaping. Wherever he walked, he made fresh tracks on the snow, and the snow would need an hour to erase his path. It appears nature sided with Damir and wanted Branko.

Branko continued running.

After fifteen minutes, he stopped running. His lungs ignited on fire while he hunched over in a coughing spasm, spitting blood onto the snow. He didn't know if the blood dripped from his lip, or if he coughed up pieces of his lung. He wished he would have quit smoking years ago. Then a weird thought popped into his head as he remembered the well-known warning on the side of a cigarette pack, *Smoking may be harmful to your health.*

"No shit," he mumbled to himself.

Branko rose to his feet and walked briskly. He didn't quite have the energy to run again. His lungs begged for mercy, and he wheezed every time he stepped forward. He turned to look behind him to spot the advancing soldiers.

The approaching dusk turned dark forest into a graveyard of silent skeletons. Twilight came quickly, and the forest would become black as the skeletons went into hiding.

Hope sprang from Branko's heart as he realized the darkness could shield him.

Then series of deafening bangs filled the forest air. Several angry bullets whizzed by Branko's head, barely missing him.

Branko started to run again, weaving in and out behind large trees. He kept running, dashing, moving around from tree to tree.

Branko thought the imminent darkness would hide him because he wore dark-blue jeans and a black winter coat today. Fate would come and rescue Branko, but another succession of explosions filled the cold, still air. Three bullets whizzed by Branko's body, and splinters flew into the air as the bullets buried themselves into the thick tree trunks nearby.

Branko continued to run as he gasped for air. His lungs would implode from the strenuous physical activity. He became dizzy and started to lose consciousness. He wheezed and coughed, and tasted copper in the back of his throat.

Another series of bullets exploded through the forest. One of the bullets bit Branko in his left leg as intense and excruciating pain shot up his body.

Branko fell to the ground, but quickly hopped up and started limping towards a large oak tree. He knew his life would end soon.

Once Branko tucked himself safely behind a tree, he pulled out his pack of cigarettes and fished a cigarette out. Branko, a proud Serb, only smoked National, a Serbian cigarette.

Branko inhaled and let the Serbian tobacco soothe his aching lungs. Strong Serbian tobacco alleviated some of the pain radiating up and down his injured leg. Branko felt at peace with himself as he tilted his head back against the tree and inhaled another drag from his cigarette. Holding the smoke in, he let peace and serenity soothe him.

He relaxed against the tree and closed his eyes. A black leather belt snaked around his throat and pulled tightly. Then

someone pulled Branko away from the tree, pulling the belt tightly like a boa constrictor wrapped around his neck.

Branko's body began trembling and shaking as the belt cut the access to oxygen. Branko's complexion turned a bluish hue. Then he died.

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Damir released Branko, and he fell to the ground.

Damir and his soldiers surrounded Branko's body and observed their trophy.

Then everyone began to kick and to spit on Branko. One of the soldiers unzipped his fly and urinated on Branko's face. Afterwards, the soldiers lined up ten feet away from the body and shot him with their assault rifles. Branko's body shook from each bullet as it ravaged his flesh.

Damir stood by his soldiers with a dark smile. Then he pulled out a towel and wiped his belt clean. Then he coiled his belt around his pants.

After the soldiers had stopped shooting, Damir saw Branko's pack of cigarettes lying on the ground. He picked it up and sniffed it while rage flowed through Damir's veins. He crumbled the pack and tossed it to the ground, and then he mumbled, "You Serbian piece of shit."

Some of the soldiers shot bullets into the air to agree with Damir. Then they swung their assault rifle over their shoulders and started walking to their vehicles.

"What do you plan to tell his parents," Jasmin asked.

"I'll tell them the truth. Branko was supposed to come in and see me, but he skipped his meeting. Maybe he ran away from home."

"Boss, we should bury the body."

"Drop it. He's not worth a burial. Nobody will find him out here." Then Damir whispered in Jasmin's ear, "Besides, we have that little Serbian bitch to deal with."

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## Chapter 4

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I awakened in my chair and reached for the gun. It's time to go. I pulled the hammer back, flipped out the cylinder, and spun it, checking every hole to see if it had a slug of death. Satisfied. I closed and locked the cylinder.

As I passed the table, I spotted Yelena's scarf that she always wore when she went outside. I slowly approached the table put the gun down, picked the scarf up, and sniffed it. I smelled traces of Chanel. Then memories of Yelena began flooding my mind...

..I bought Yelena a small bottle of Chanel for Christmas, the Catholic Christmas on December 25th, At first, she became surprised and smiled, when she held the box in her hand. Then her smile transformed into a frown. She jammed the box into my hand, returning the gift to me.

Yugoslavian women were very proud and did not like expensive gifts, even from their men. Yelena knew I bought the expensive bottle in only one place in town, the perfumery in Mercator, a little mall that catered to the few wealthy Bosnians who lived in the area.

After I had walked her home, I kissed her gently good night. As I held Yelena tight, and our tongues swirled and chased each other in our mouths, I secretly slipped the bottle into her jacket pocket. Yelena squinted her eyes and puckered her lips into an angry scowl when she discovered the bottle in her pocket. Then her frown softened into a smile. She kissed me again and went home. Every time I met, I could always smell the faint scent of Chanel...

I came out of my dream. It was time for me to go. I sniffed Yelena's scarf one last time, and then I folded it and tucked it neatly into my back jeans pocket. A partial tear formed in the corner of my right eye.

I missed my Serbian girl, and I must find her. Most likely someone will die tonight.

I kneeled down onto my knees and folded my two hands together for prayer.

“Dear God, please forgive me for I’m about to sin,” I whispered and then I used my right hand to make a cross over my heart.

I rose and put on my heavy winter jacket, gloves, and a thick hat. Next, I slipped the 0.38 into my front coat pocket, and I checked myself in the mirror. I wanted to make sure no one could see the bulge of my gun through the thick fabric.

Before I closed the front door to my apartment, I turned to take a final panoramic view of my apartment. I planned never to see this apartment again. I only lived there for four and a half months, but the short-time duration became filled with sweet memories of Yelena and me. If I never find Yelena, then I never want to step inside this cold, empty apartment again.

As I walked outside, the wind howled as it blew the snow around. I could see in some places, the snow accumulated several inches.

A thick smoky fog blanketed the whole city. I barely saw the outlines of buildings a block away. Most people used coal to heat their homes during the winter, and the dark coal smoke drifted towards the ground. I smelled a hint of sulfur from the coal smoke, and I coughed a little here and there as it suffocated my lungs.

Then wouldn’t you know it. I was not even sure where I was walking and I happened to walk to the damn water fountain – the same fountain where I was supposed to meet Yelena three days ago.

Memories began trickling up like lava flowing up and out of a volcano...

...I was supposed to meet Yelena at the water fountain at 9 o’clock, but I was 10 minutes late. Few Bosnians trekked outside during the bitter cold and walked on the frozen streets as the coldness drove them inside. Few pedestrians walked along the streets and few drivers drove along the roads.

But Yelena was not waiting at the fountain.

Then I walked to the coffee shop. I peeked through the windows and saw patrons packed the café while the strong bass beat of the Bosnian folk music rattled the windows. A thick cover of smoke clung to the moist, stale air inside the coffee shop as bodies huddled to together for warmth, drinks, cigarettes.

I walked into the café and approached the owner who stood behind the bar. He prepared several espressos as he stood behind the espresso machine.

I screamed to be heard above the loud music, “Have you seen Yelena?” The manager could not speak English, but he recognized me. The patrons and owner at the café knew Yelena was dating me.

“She went outside to wait for you,” the manager replied in Bosnian and pointed at the water fountain.

“Thanks, I replied apologetically.

I trotted to the water fountain and saw a thick tarp that covered the fountain, protecting it from the ice and snow. I scanned the plaza in all directions, searching desperately for my girlfriend. Then near one of the benches, I spotted a splotch of color. If I arrived a few minutes later, the falling snow would completely cover it. My heart began racing as I approached the buried object in the snow.

I leaned over and picked it up. It was Yelena's light blue scarf with pink and yellow spots. She always wore it around her neck. As I lifted it to my nose, I smelled the faint scent of Chanel.

I immediately shoved the scarf into my winter coat pocket and called Teah on my cell phone.

Teah answered on the second ring.

“Hello, Teah! Have you seen Yelena?” I yelled into the cell phone.

“Who is this?”

“Keith, Yelena’s boyfriend.”

“Oh Keith. No, I haven’t seen her since noon. I know she planned to meet you at the fountain at nine,” Teah replied cheerfully.

“I’m at the fountain now, and she’s not here. I found her scarf by a bench.”

Teah shriled, “Did you check in the café? Sometimes, she has to work over time.”

“I was just there. Her manager pointed at the water fountain.”

The shrills in Teah’s voice raised several octaves, and she replied, “Oh shit! I’ll be right there,” slamming the phone down with a thump.

I sat on the cold bench and waited for Teah. She arrived fifteen minutes later, and we walked to Yelena’s work.

Yelena’s boss was arguing with a group of young Bosnians, and the boss kept pointing to the bill, showing it to the group.

Teah ran to him, stood on the tips of her toes, and whispered into his ear.

Yelena’s boss, Emir, looked worried. He shouted for an employee to come and take over. He grabbed his coat and threw it on. Then we left the coffee shop and walked to the bench where I found the scarf. Then I pulled the scarf out of my pocket and pointed at the spot where I found it.

We separated and searched the plaza for clues. Then we branched out into the neighborhoods looking for Yelena.

After an hour of searching, we met at the fountain again. Everyone frowned and shook their heads back and forth. No one found her.

We walked to the police station four blocks away. From outside, the police station looked in shambles. Serbian snipers shot at the building during the Bosnian War from the mountain peaks, and the concrete wall was pock-marked with numerous indents and chips covering the whole wall surface. The powerful rifle bullets didn’t penetrate through the solid walls. Unfortunately, the Bosnian government had little money, and the police department could never fix up their buildings. Sometimes, the government could not pay the police salaries.

These bullet holes served as reminders of the Bosnian War, fueling the Bosnians’ hatred of the Serbs and Croats. Remnants of the war would not let the three races forget and forge peace.

As we went inside, I saw electrical wires snaked along the outside of the walls, and large industrial staples held the wires in

place. The paint peeled and flaked off the wall in many places while the floor looked dirty and grimy because no one washed it for at least a decade.

Teah, Emir, and I stood in front of the counter in the police station. Yelena's boss, Emir, started, "Excuse me," as he pounded the counter top.

As the policemen's heads turned, Emir continued, "I would like to report a missing person. Her name is Yelena Backovich, my employee."

"How long has she been missing?" the first cop asked as he sat at his desk behind a large stack of papers, lying in front of him.

Emir glanced at his watch and then replied, "Almost two hours."

The first cop squinted his eyes and crumpled his lips, and he snapped, "She has been only missing two hours? Well sir, I wouldn't worry about it. I'm sure she will turn up."

Teah interrupted, "Please sir. Yelena doesn't run off like this. Her boyfriend found her scarf on the ground, near their meeting place."

For added emphasis, I pulled the scarf out of my pocket and held it up for the policemen to inspect.

Teah continued pleading with the cops, "Please, couldn't you go outside and search for her?" Teah charmed the policemen. Usually, Bosnian men salivated all over themselves to help Teah, but her magic wasn't working tonight with the police. Teah's pleas weren't strong enough to lure the cops outside into the shivering hands of coldness.

The second policeman jumped and jerked his head a little when Teah said 'outside.' He stared through the window, seeing the falling snow outside. Then he shivered as he curled his legs around a small electric heater. He wasn't going outside into the coldness and leave the warmth of his desk.

The first policeman continued, "Look! I know you're concerned. I know she'll turn up. Tuzla rarely sees any murders. Nobody has been kidnapped or disappeared since the end of the Bosnian War. Trust me, she'll turn up." The cop smiled when he

said this, but his smile was insincere, like a defense attorney starting the opening arguments for a hopeless case.

I clenched my teeth and slanted my eyes. Then I slapped the counter top with both hands. I screamed in English, “Look! My girlfriend is missing. Can’t you guys do your job?”

Both policemen reached for their guns while they wrapped their hands around the gun handles.

Teah said, “Keith, we must go.” Both Teah and Emir grabbed each hand and led me out of the police station.

Teah, Emir, and I left the police station disappointed. We would have to search by ourselves, without the aid of the Bosnian police.

I felt like I swallowed a large boulder and stomach acid gurgled to the back of my throat. I didn’t know why, but I suspected the university president, Damir, and his drivers had something to do with this. Who else could it be? Why would someone kidnap or harm Yelena? Yelena was a poor Serbian girl trapped in a poor country. She threatened no one.

We stopped searching three hours later. We couldn’t find a trace of Yelena, except her scarf that I found by the bench near the water fountain.

Next day, Teah and I searched for Yelena again. We met at the bench where I found Yelena’s scarf. We moved away from the bench in concentric circles, covering the plaza first. Then we walked between the buildings. We walked in silence.

We scanned the ground, searching for clues, but the pedestrians and school children trampled and stomped on the fresh morning snow, erasing any traces.

Yelena had disappeared without a trace. If I hadn’t found that scarf, it appeared as if Yelena never existed.

After several hours, the harsh coldness forced Teah and me into a coffee shop. Teah ordered an espresso and I, a cappuccino.

As we waited for our drinks, I began, “Did you tell Yelena’s mom?”

“After I went home last night, I called her. She broke into tears and became very hysterical. I’m going over there later in the day to comfort her.”

I felt sullen and depressed, but continued, “Who would kidnap Yelena? Who would do such a thing?” I pounded my fists onto the table for emphasis.

Teah jumped a little from the sharp noise.

“Teah, do you know anything about the Bosnian University of Management?” I snapped. I didn’t ask a question about the university, but I just wanted to confirm my suspicions.

“Not much. I know it’s several blocks from the center of town. It used to be a cinema. I heard it cost a lot of money to study there.”

“Have you heard anything about the owner, Mr. Damir Kovacev?”

“I never heard of him,” Teah replied, jerking her head in back and forth quickly.

“Have you heard any rumors about Damir or the university or his drivers?”

“I’m sorry Keith,” Teah replied softly, reaching for my hands, doing her best to soothe me, “I haven’t heard anything about the university. Only thing I heard was Damir was a war hero and a successful businessman.”

“That’s it.”

“I’m sorry Keith.”

That boulder in my stomach grew larger, and I didn’t taste the coffee as I gulped it down. I noticed Teah’s hand trembled as she lifted her espresso cup to her lips...

I jolted out of my memories. I pulled Yelena's scarf out of my pocket and took another whiff.

I pocketed the scarf again and continued walking to the northern part of the city.

I discovered only one clue. I found a house. That house must be keeping secrets. Maybe I will find Yelena there, and we can be together again.

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## Chapter 5

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Jasmin and Damir drove to an old deserted warehouse in the middle of the country.

Jasmin backed the car to a loading dock around back. Then they went inside and carried a crate of Bosnian land mines to the car.

Jasmin mumbled, "Our cache of weapons is growing."

"But we don't have enough. We must get more."

"Boss, how much do we need?"

"Once we fill up a whole warehouse, then we'll have enough."

Then they carried the crate to the car and positioned it on the car's back bumper while Jasmin fished the car keys from his pocket and opened the trunk. Then they carefully slid the crate in the trunk.

Damir continued, "We're not going to let the Serbian military get the upper hand for the next Bosnian War."

"Don't worry boss. We'll win the next one."

"But we'll be old. The next Bosnian War should start in 2040, and we only have this," Damir stated as he pointed to his head.

"How'd you know the war will start in 2040?"

"We always have a war every 50 years. It's been that way since the Middle Ages. And those bastards almost won the last one."

"But we'll have to wait 30 more years."

"Not unless we strike first. Victory goes to those who take the first initiative."

Then they started chuckling, and Jasmin slammed the trunk.

Jasmin drove the car fast while Damir napped on the passenger side. They returned to Tuzla in no time, and Jasmin dropped Damir off in front of his house.

Exiting the vehicle, Damir said, "We'll meet at the house at nine. I have some errands to do. Make sure that Serbian bitch is taken care of."

"Yes sir, boss."

After the car door had slammed shut, Jasmin accelerated to the intersection as the wheels screamed in excitement.

Damir walked into his house and unlocked his door. As he opened it a little, his black French poodle barked and hopped up and down excitedly.

“Now boy, did you miss your papa?”

The poodle sat next to Damir’s foot, wagging its tail furiously while Damir patted his dog on the head, “Good boy. Just like a trusty soldier.”

Then Damir went to the cupboard, grabbed a packet of dog food, and poured it into the dog’s dish. He filled the dog’s water dish and threw the food packaging away.

The dog ran to his food dish and gulped down his food in a couple of bites.

Then Damir went to his bedroom, changed into dress clothes, and returned to the kitchen, grabbing the dog leash, “Now, boy, you ready for a walk?”

The poodle hopped up and down next to him while Damir bent over and fastened the leash to the dog’s collar. Then he led the dog outside into the cold, winter night for his daily walk.

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Adnan sat on a chair with a serious contemplative expression on his face as he watched the biography of Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Adnan was not religious, but he felt the tug of religion on his conscience. He knew within another five or ten years; he would become a devout Muslim, but now he was a slave to sin.

Of course, Adnan was several steps ahead in the religion. He had a string of serious girlfriends spread around Tuzla, if he could only marry them all. Although Bosnian women were Muslim, they strictly clung to the Western notion of one man and one wife. Adnan knew Bosnian women could also be very emotional. One day his girlfriend suspected he had another girl on the side, and she chucked a large frying pan at him and came at him with a knife in her hand.

He lifted his arm to block the frying pan and then quickly wrestled the knife out of her hand. After he talked to her and settled her down, they had angry sex – the best of all sex in the world.

Jasmin opened the door and walked into the safe house. He passed the entrance to the living room and said, “Hey, can you come and help me carry a crate inside.”

They went outside and brought the crate into the house, placing it in the upstairs bedroom that was filled with crates.

Then Adnan returned to the living room while Jasmin went to the kitchen.

Adnan heard kitchen cabinets open and shut, and dishes moved around.

After an hour, Jasmin paced back and forth in the living room, still wearing his camouflage fatigues from the outdoor exercise.

Then Jasmin glanced at the closet where Yelena was held captive. As he approached the door, he started to unzip his jeans and unfasten his belt while he patted his little Jasmin several times.

Adnan studied Jasmin and yelled in a loud, authoritative voice, “What the fuck are you doing?”

Jasmin just stared back.

“Get away from the door.”

“The boss said I said look after the bitch, so I thought I could get me a little something before the boss arrived.”

Adnan's face contorted into a frown, 'You are going to stick your dick into that Serbian bitch?’

“Well, I figure the Serbs raped our women. We can return their kind favor.”

“Jasmin! You want to contaminate the Bosnian race with that slut's dirty DNA?”

“That’s not my problem! I’m not going to raise a bastard's child! That’s her problem.”

Jasmin reached for the lock on the closet door.

Then Adnan jumped from his chair and ran to Jasmin. He leaned his large frame against the door, so Jasmin couldn’t open it.

Adnan yelled, “You heard the boss. He said don’t touch her. He has plans for her.”

“I’m not going to hurt her. I just want to feed little Jasmin.”

Then Jasmin pushed Adnan away from the door, and Adnan shoved Jasmin hard, almost knocking him onto the floor.

Jasmin recovered his balance and clenched his fists. His face reddened while his neck muscles pulsated violently.

Then they heard a heavy key slide into the lock at the front door.

Jasmin unclenched his fists and started to fix his belt while Adnan went to the living room to turn down the TV and sat in his armchair.

The front door opened, and Damir walked into the room. He switched out of his camouflage fatigues and wore a dress shirt, dress pants, and a new silk tie. A few snowflakes clung to his thick dark wool overcoat and leather black cap.

A cold draft immediately invaded the warmth of the house. He closed the door, removed his winter attire, and stomped his boots onto the welcome mat to shake off the sticky snow.

Then Damir entered the living room. He studied Jasmin and Adnan, and Jasmin walked away while he zipped up his pants discreetly.

“Boys, did I miss something?”

Jasmin looked at the boss and kept quiet. He had an embarrassed look upon his face, like a pupil whom the teacher caught sticking crayons into his coffee mug. As he looked at the ground, he replied, “I’ve just got out of the bathroom boss.”

Damir hung up his winter coat, cap, and sat on the couch, and Jasmin joined them, sitting on the other side of Damir.

“How’s that Serbian slut?” Damir asked in a good mood.

“She’s doing well,” Adnan replied. “I gave her some food a little a while ago.”

“Did she give you any trouble?”

“No, she’s been locked up in the closet. She’s been very quiet,” and Adnan pointed to the hallway closet for emphasis.

“Did you contact the police detective to find out if anyone saw her kidnapped or reported her missing?”

“Yes sir-ree,” Adnan replied and then added, “Nobody saw us kidnap her. Jasmin and I were careful. We knocked her out with chloroform. Then we helped her walk to the car. We made it look like she was drunk, and we helped her walk home, like the gentlemen we are. It was very cold, and few people were around, so nobody knows we have her, boss.”

“Good! That little bitch will net us 6,000 euros. But, we must get her safe and unharmed to Budva, Montenegro. Sasha will pay top dollar for her. If she has any scrapes or bruises on her, then that would lower the negotiated price.”

Damir glanced slyly at Adnan and then Jasmin. Subsequently Damir added, “Adnan, I want you to take that bitch to Montenegro. Make sure you line the car's trunk with heavy blankets. Before you cross the border to Montenegro, make sure you sedate her. We wouldn't want to attract any attention from the customs police, wouldn't we? We must get her to Montenegro safe and sound with no bruises.”

Adnan nodded his head in agreement. He often smuggled living or non-living cargo across the border, so this was like running to the store for a pack of cigarettes.

Adnan knew customs rarely checked the trunk of citizens of former Yugoslavia as long as they were not suspicious. One literally needed bulls-eye painted on the trunk with a caption, 'Drugs inside,' or a couple of stalks of marijuana partially dangling outside the car trunk before a customs agent searched a car. The police never took the initiative to enforce the law. They needed a swift kick in the ass to get them going.

Adnan knew Damir picked him for this assignment. He knew if Jasmin delivered the cargo, the delivery time would be a few hours longer, and the cargo would become slightly damaged and bruised, reducing Damir's profits. He felt nothing for Yelena. She was just a pawn on a thug's chessboard. Sasha could shoot the bitch for all he cared as long as Sasha paid for it. Sasha could do what he liked with Yelena. Her fate meant nothing to him, except Damir will become 6,000 euros richer.

Then Damir started to chuckle evilly.

Adnan and Jasmin search Damir's face for clues of his exuberance.

Damir explained, "I wish I could've seen Dr. Swanson's face when he discovered his little bitch was missing."

Adnan and Jasmin joined in the laughter. They didn't like one of their top professors dating the enemy or potentially producing offspring with them.

Then Damir added, "I'm also thinking about paying Dr. Swanson a bonus for his hard work. I think a two-thousand-euro bonus would be nice. He did work hard for me this past semester, and he should be rewarded, and his girlfriend helped pay for it."

Adnan and Jasmin roared with raucous laughter that echoed throughout the house. Jasmin almost fell to the floor rolling around in laughter.

After the laughter had died down, Damir asked, "Do you have anything to drink? Something warm?"

"Yes, boss!" Then Jasmin sprang from his seat and scurried to the kitchen. He brewed a traditional cup of Bosnian coffee, similar to the Turkish method of brewing coffee. He filled a kanaka with water, sugar, and finely ground, dark roasted coffee.

Jasmin brought the brew to a soft boil, allowing the mixture to froth and foam. Afterwards, he removed it from the heat for a few seconds, and then returned the kanaka to the fire to re-boil. He repeated the process five times, and subsequently, allowed the coffee to sit for a couple of minutes, letting the coffee grounds to settle to the bottom.

Ten minutes later, Jasmin returned with a shot of bourbon and traditional Bosnian coffee.

Damir took the shot of bourbon and quickly gulped down its fiery liquid. Next, he picked up the Bosnian coffee and chased it after the shot.

"Aaahhh!" Damir uttered. After a minute once the coffee and alcohol worked its magic in Damir's brain, he asked, "Did you bring the jingle bells inside?"

"Yes, boss. We've got three crates of jingle bells.

"Boss," Adnan protested, "I don't like the jingle bells. Couldn't we use something else?"

“Oh come on. They’re very small and effective. They’re...”

“But boss, I’ve seen too many comrades who had their legs and arms blown off.”

“We need those. Like I said before, we will plant large Bosnian land mines on the main roads and hide the jingle bells in the shrubs and trees. That way, we’ll maximize our damage to the Serbs.”

“Hell yeah,” Jasmin replied and added, “I’ve seen a Bosnian landmine destroy a tank. The tank was a hunk of metal.”

Damir continued, “We must prepare for the Serbs. We’ll start the next war and kill as many Serbian dogs as we can.” Then he paused for a moment because his throat became parched. “Jasmin, you forgot to bring a glass of water.”

Jasmin ran to the kitchen and returned with a clean glass and a bottle of natural spring water.

Damir gulped down a glass of water and placed it on the end table. He continued, “Jasmin, how’s your surveillance going in Banja Luka?”

“Very well. After I dropped the professors off at campus, I drove by their old military bases and then the main government buildings. I haven’t seen any unusual activity. So far, everything is quiet.”

Adnan objected, “Boss, I like that the campus is in Banja Luka. It gives us a means to keep our eyes on the Serbs, but I don’t like educating them. We’re educating the enemy! They can use their education against us in the next war.”

Damir sighed and then started his discourse, “I know we’re educating the enemy, but you must realize one thing. We’re educating Serbs, who in all likelihood will become officers in the Serbian war machine. From our school records, we’ll know their identity and more importantly, where they live. Once the war starts, we’ll sneak into Banja Luka and take them out. We’ll kill their officers! We’ll damage their leadership, and blast a gaping hole into the Serbian war machine!”

Jasmin and Adnan were grinning.

If only those Serbian students knew what diabolical plans, the university president contemplated. Serbian students thought the

Bosnians wanted to make a little money from educating them. They didn't realize Damir was monitoring them for the next Bosnian War.

Then Jasmin and Damir began to exchange chuckles again. Adnan looked at them in surprise.

"What's so funny now, boss?" Adnan asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Ah, you missed today's training exercise. We kidnapped a Serbian student and hunted him down like the dog he was," Jasmin said between bursts of laughter.

Damir jabbed Jasmin's ribs playfully with his elbow.

"Who's this Serb?" Adnan continued.

Damir smiled and tugged at his favorite black belt for emphasis, "He's one of the top students at the Banja Luka campus. He owed me some money, so I cashed in his ass. Now his debts are paid in full."

"How did the hunt go? Did he pose any challenge?" Adnan asked earnestly.

"Ppppssst," Jasmin added and started to laugh louder and added, "He was weak. It would be more of a challenge to shoot at a barn blindfolded."

Damir added, "He didn't pose a challenge. Sad thing was he was the top student in Banja Luka. These young Serbs are so weak and spoiled. I know we can win the next war."

"What about his parents," Adnan asked intelligently.

"If his parents ask, I will just say he missed his morning meeting with me. I only tried to help the young kid. If his parents ever find the body, I'll send them my condolences and a wreath of flowers for his funeral."

Then the whole group erupted into a loud, raucous laughter again, echoing throughout the house.

Then Damir pulled out a small, plastic Zip-lock bag filled with several grams of cocaine.

Upon seeing the baggy, Jasmin frowned while Adnan looked away. Damir went into the kitchen to take his real medicine.

As the room quieted, Adnan heard soft sobbing sounds coming from the hallway closet. Then they started chuckling again.

Damir came into the living room again with a little white dust surrounding the left nostril of his nose. He laid his head back on the couch, smiling with glee.

Yelena continued sobbing for an hour until she became quiet while the men watched an old war movie with the volume turned down.

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## Chapter 6

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Yelena piled the food from her plate in the corner of the closet. She wedged the metal plate into the loose wallboard and pulled back.

Then she slid her left hand on one side and her right on the other and pulled hard.

The board creaked and moaned but came away. She pushed in a little and pulled it out carefully. Nails pried loosed. Then the board came off.

She set the board in the corner and worked on the next board and the next.

Once the opening was wide enough, she crawled into a closet in one of the bedrooms. She stood up and reached for the doorknob.

The door creaked open.

She heard the TV from the living room.

The bedroom was filled with crates, and stenciled on each side was, "Handle with Care – Explosives."

She saw one box by itself on the floor and pulled the lid off. Rows of hand grenades stacked in the box. She saw hand grenades in movies but never touched one.

She grabbed one and repositioned the lid over the box again. She shoved the grenade into her bra between her breasts. Then she pried a window open and crawled out.

She ran and ran and only ran to the one place she knew. She ran to Keith's apartment.

Her smile deepened, and she could no longer feel the icy hands of coldness caressing her.

Yelena ran to the front entrance and screamed, "Ugh!"

A large looking country boy and an old man quickly grabbed and pinned her hands.

Yelena tried to scream, but the old man covered her mouth with a chloroform-saturated cloth. Then everything went black again.

Yelena awakened an hour later.

She found herself lying down in a very dark, cramped place. Her heart rate quickened. She must be buried in a coffin!

Someone wrapped Yelena in a thick wool blanket. She forced her left hand through an opening and used her fingers to feel around. She reached outward, measuring the dimensions of her final resting place. Then her fingers hit something hard.

Yelena rapped her knuckles on the solid surface and knocked, "Cllinnnk! Cllinnnk! Cllinnnk!" The sounds possessed a metallic hollow ring, like a bell on its last rungs.

Yelena became confused.

Then a centrifugal force pushed Yelena's head against the sidewall of the car, and she heard the soft hum of the car's tires gripping the road. She was locked in a car trunk!

Driver sped around the dangerous curved roads in the Balkan Mountains.

Yelena fumbled her hands in the dark, searching for the lock's latch. Her fingers touched the latch and tried to move any mechanism, but the lock wouldn't budge. The trunk stayed securely closed. Next, she pounded the latch with her fists. Unfortunately, the latch resisted Yelena's futile efforts and remained locked.

Yelena reached into her bra and felt the coarse grip of the grenade.

She started to think about Keith. She remembered the first night when she and Keith kissed. First night they made love, hot passionate love. She began to daydream about Keith...

Yelena sat at her bureau in her bedroom and sketched a woman wearing an expensive dress in her sketchpad. Although she thought she drew well, she would never show it to anyone. She was afraid people would laugh at her. She slammed the sketchbook closed and tossed the pencil onto the bureau.

Yelena stood up and approached her closet, searching for something to wear.

She had three pairs of jeans, five blouses, and two dresses, hanging in the closet. She picked the skimpy red dress and quickly slipped it on. Although this dress was over five years old, Yelena only wore it for special occasions, so it appeared new. She thought tonight will be a special occasion. The dress revealed her upper shoulders and arms and formed deep V's along the front and back

of her body. The dress displayed Yelena's exquisite chiseled physique and her light creamy skin.

Yelena sat at the bureau and dabbed a little makeup, a little eyeliner, a couple pats of blush upon her cheeks, and rolled a cherry color lipstick across her pursed lips.

Yelena smacked her lips together to even out the lipstick. Then she blew a couple of kisses towards the mirror because she knew she looked ravishing.

Yelena slid into her coat and fished out her pack of cigarettes. Then she placed the lighter and pack of cigarettes onto the bureau, because she planned to not smoke tonight. She wanted her breath to remain fresh and pristine. Keith was becoming more than a little interesting. So who knew what events would unfold tonight?

Yelena walked out to the living room where her mother sat and hypnotically watched a Spanish soap opera on TV.

Yelena's mother turned to look at her daughter as suspicion filled her eyes like a tyrannical policeman with a quota to fulfill. She asked in a scolding voice, "Yelena, where're you going tonight?"

"Mom, I'm going out."

"Do you have a date?"

"No, Mom. I'm meeting Teah at the Roma."

"The Roma! Only thugs and mafia guys hang out there."

"Mom, c'mon. The Roma is the only nightclub in town."

"But I heard so many things about that place."

"I'll be okay. You worry too much."

Her mother's questioning eyes scanned up and down her daughter's body. "You know in my day, we never had to dress like that to get a guy."

"Mom! I'll be fine."

Yelena's mom looked her squarely in the eyes and scolded, "Make sure you're home at a decent hour. It's just that I worry about you." Then she turned to watch her soap opera.

Yelena bent over and kissed her on the cheek, and added, "I know, Mom, bye." She dashed for the door before her mom could

ask any more probing questions, or lock her up in the bedroom for the night.

Yelena met Keith at the water fountain in the center of town. He came early and sat on a bench near the water fountain, wearing a patterned light brown sports jacket, a blue dress shirt with a dark-blue tie, and light chestnut trousers.

As pedestrians walked by, they stared and gawked at him.

Yelena's face reddened a little when she saw him. She eagerly skipped to the bench and sat down with a thump.

“Hi, Yelena.”

“Hi, Keith.”

“So—how’re you doing?”

“I’m doing well.”

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?” Keith whispered.

Yelena shook her head no in exaggerated movements.

“What do you want to do?”

Yelena blushed a little as her cheeks turned a shade redder while a sly smile snuck across her face.

“So what do you want to do?” Keith repeated.

Yelena scooted closer to Keith, removing any cold distance between them.

“Well then, I guess we’ll just sit here and enjoy the sunset.” Next, he stretched his right arm over and then laid it on top of the bench.

Then Yelena leaned back, so her back rubbed against Keith's arm.

Subsequently Keith scooped his right arm around her in a loose embrace.

Yelena and Keith peered at a flowerbed of red and white Vinca flowers, while a fresh fall breeze caused the flowers to dance in the wind.

Yelena stared at Keith as her lips clamped tightly. She wondered if she should draw diagrams on Keith's lecture notes because she sent out a myriad of signals, and he ignored them all.

Keith gazed at her blue eyes and whispered softly, “Yelena, you look really beautiful tonight.”

Then he began to caress her right cheek and ear with his left hand. He stroked her gently, smoothly, sensually.

Yelena closed her eyes as the smooth caresses sent her on a journey of ecstasy.

Then Keith bent down and kissed Yelena softly on the lips. His lips barely touched hers. Then he retreated from her a little and came back for another round. He kissed her firmer, a little deeper, a little longer. Keith's tongue began to search for Yelena's. Then their tongues began to dance and twirl as the Vinca flowers danced in the breeze.

After several minutes, Keith retreated and lifted his head while Yelena opened her eyes.

Keith was different from the Bosnians because they were rough and to the point. He fondled Yelena gently, softly. At that point, she knew she loved him.

They sat on the bench and watched the sunset.

Sun emanated a spectrum of colors, yellow, orange, and red, transforming the clouds into pink-orange hues. Then the colors darkened until the mountains had hidden the sun.

During the sunset, Keith kissed Yelena several more times. After each time, their kisses became longer, more intimate, more sensual.

Then he retreated again and whispered sweetly, "Are you hungry? I know this pizza place, the Heartland. They make excellent pizzas."

"I'm not hungry. I'm a little thirsty."

"What would you like to drink? Would you like a soda or a coffee?"

Yelena slowly shook her head no in exaggerated motions.

"I can get some wine if you like?"

Yelena began to smile.

"I know this great coffee shop near the university. They have a good selection of wines."

Yelena shook her head no again and whispered into Keith's ear, "I don't want to be around people, not tonight. I just want to be with you, only you."

Keith trembled a little and stuttered, "Oh, okay. Uh, I can get some wine at the store. Uh, uh, maybe we can have, uh, uh, some wine at my place?"

Yelena smiled brightly.

Then he came in and kissed Yelena again while his kiss became deeper, more passionate.

Yelena felt light-headed, drunk from Keith's kisses. She felt a pulsating heat sensation emanating from the center of her body.

Then they stood up from the bench and walked towards Keith's apartment. Keith lived seven blocks from the center of town.

When Yelena and Keith approached a dark alley alongside a building, they hid in the shadows and kissed passionately, holding each other tightly, oblivious to strangers walking by them.

They strolled along the cobblestone sidewalks and stopped a few blocks away from Keith's apartment. He spotted a small convenience store, Bingo, and ran in to buy a bottle of wine while Yelena waited outside.

Keith emerged from the shop several minutes later, sliding the wine bottle out of the bag, showing Yelena his choice.

"Unfortunately, I only saw wines from former Yugoslavian countries. So, I bought this Serbian Red Burgundy wine."

Yelena smiled again and whispered, "Thank you. A Serbian wine is perfect."

Once they made it to Keith's apartment, Yelena sat on the couch in the living room.

Keith turned on a little desk lamp, casting the room in dark shadows. Then he turned on his small CD player, and Enigma's third album, *Le Roi Est Mort, Vive Le Roi*, softly filled the room. Next, he lit several fragrant candles and went to the kitchen for two wine glasses and a bottle opener.

The cork moaned and groaned as Keith pulled it out and quickly filled the two wine glasses, filling the room with a fruity, sweet aroma.

Keith handed Yelena a glass and raised his glass for a toast, "Let's make a toast. Tonight is a beautiful night. That I should be so lucky to be in the company of such an attractive young woman."

They softly clanked their glasses. Keith sipped his wine while Yelena gulped half of hers.

The Serbian wine went smoothly down her throat, and she tasted something fruity, something mystical. Then Yelena and Keith began to kiss fervently, uncontrollably again.

Before knowing what happened, Keith and Yelena were lying on his bed with their clothes scattered along the apartment floor. He mounted her, making hot passionate love to her. Yelena didn't remember undressing, or how she moved from the doorway to Keith's bed, but, after each thrust, Yelena felt an explosion of sensation radiate through her body as if an electric discharge surged throughout her body. Each thrust sent a wave of ecstasy through her body, and Yelena quivered from each stroke floating high in the heavens and clouds, far, far away from Bosnia.

The thrusts abruptly ended, and he lay motionlessly on top of Yelena. He then scooted off Yelena and lay beside her. Their perspiration began tickling and cooling their bodies, trying to dissipate their hot passion.

Yelena wanted so badly to whisper in Keith's ear that she loved him. She had fallen for him.

Keith lowered his head and started to nibble and kiss the nape of Yelena's neck, and subsequently, he made his way to Yelena's left ear, whispering into her ear, "I love you, Yelena."

"I love you too, Keith."

Although Keith was not the first man she slept with, he was the first man she fell in love with. The boy who took her virginity in high school was the only one who didn't care what his peers thought – dating a Serbian. Afterwards, he dumped her and told her he could never marry her.

Yelena planted her head on Keith's chest while he embraced her, holding her tightly.

After Enigma had stopped playing, Yelena scanned the room for a clock and spotted one on the wall, seeing midnight was approaching.

"Keith, I must return home. I told my Mom I would not be out so late."

"No problem. I'll take you home."

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“I insist. A gentleman always walks a young lady home or at least calls a cab for her.”

Yelena smile broadened and added, “Thank you for the romantic music and the excellent Serbian wine.”

Then they both slid off the bed to get dressed.

They took a while to reach the street. Every few seconds, they would stop, embrace, kiss. They didn’t want to say good-bye to each other. Yelena wished to taste the sweetness of Keith’s lips...

Yelena’s recollection faded as the driver careened around another dangerous curve, slamming her head against the sidewall again. Then she muttered, “I love you, Keith” while tears flooded Yelena’s eyes. “I love you, Keith. Please save me.”

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## Chapter 7

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I walked straight to this mysterious house. Tonight, on a freezing cold January night, I stood outside this house hiding behind a tree. I hoped I would find Yelena there. Then I could rescue her and take her to America. We will leave Bosnia behind forever.

I reached into my pocket and felt the handle of the gun.

After my colleague's murder – Karl Carlson, I suspected something was wrong in Bosnia, something was wrong with the university. I didn't know why I did it, but I would have coffee or tea at the coffee shops in the northern part of the city, where two murders had occurred, including my friend, Karl. I worked on my lecture notes and waited until 9 o'clock, the time when Yelena finished work.

A couple of days after Karl's murder, Yelena showed me a newspaper article. Another murder occurred during the night that Karl died. Police discovered a transient, brutally strangled with a leather cord, crushing his windpipe and throat.

Police claimed the murders were not connected. However, I found it odd for a city to have one or two murders per year, and then two murders happened on the same night?

I usually roamed that neighborhood within two blocks of the murdered transient, the same neighborhood, where I bought my gun.

On one chilly day in November, a shady-looking Bosnian hood stood silently and watched me walk by. In broken English, the hood asked, "Cocaine." Then a minute later, he whispered, "Ecstasy?"

I stopped. Then I slowly turned to face the hood. I replied with an emphatic "No!"

After a pause, I sarcastically asked, "How about a gun?"

The hood hesitated as he scanned me up and down.

I almost turned, when the hood replied, "What if I did? How much you pay?"

"I'd pay two hundred Euros," I replied confidently, but I didn't know the real street value for a gun, so I threw a number out there, and 200 euros seemed reasonable. Fortunately, I guessed

correctly because the hood happened to have a gun for sale, an old 0.38 Smith and Wesson. I had to pay another thirty euros for a half box of bullets.

I bought that gun immediately. The exchange happened so fast, I thought I dreamed it. Before I could say, 'Thank you,' the hood disappeared into the midst of the night.

I continued meandering through the neighborhoods. I never took my gun with me. I always hid it behind the radiator in my apartment. I didn't want Yelena to know I bought a gun.

I knew Yelena's father died during the Bosnian War, and guns terrified her. However, my inner voice screamed at me that I needed a gun. Harm was racing towards me like an asteroid falling from the heavens. Something was wrong at the Bosnian University of Management, and I was caught in the middle.

Then on one dark night, around seven, on December 3rd, I scored big. I had a perfect view of the street outside while I sat in the back corner of the coffee shop in the shady Northern neighborhood

Constant parades of pedestrians and drivers went by the coffee shop, but they never noticed me sitting in the shadows in the corner.

On that foggy, dark night, I saw Jasmin, the driver, pass by in the university car.

For the Bosnians who owned cars, the cars tend to be old and rusty, and pedestrians would cough and belch as they breathed in the thick oily smoke from the cars' exhaust. Drivers kept the aged relics, left from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Yugo.

My university was big on image and leased brand new Skoda Octavias, which were sleek, silver cars resembling an Oldsmobile sedan.

I gathered my things and started walking around the neighborhood. I walked for hours and didn't spot that silver Skoda. I almost gave up until I spotted a silhouette of a car under a tree. Sneaking closer to a thick oak tree, I found the silver Skoda.

Jasmin parked the car in the driveway, and several large oak trees grew around the property, trying to hide the house. I saw a typical Balkan house, resembling the Italian style. The house

stood three stories tall, had orange terra cotta roof tiles, and painted a pastel yellow. On the front and back of the house, it had large spacious balconies on each floor, except the ground floor.

Approaching the house, I ducked myself into the shadows, hiding behind a large oak tree, studying the large three-story home.

After a couple of minutes, I saw a moving shadow open the door to the second-floor balcony, and someone stepped out.

Jasmin emerged! He pulled out a cigarette and started smoking. He coughed a couple of times as he took a drag on his cigarette. Once Jasmin finished his cigarette, he flicked the butt onto the lawn and walked back inside.

Here I had returned to the house with a gun in my pocket. Death flew around the house, patiently waiting for a customer, and unfortunately, I was the delivery man.

Approaching the front door, I scanned the property for strangers hiding behind the trees. Once at the door, I knocked loudly and shouted in Bosnian, "Police, open up!"

I hoped the occupants could not detect my thick accent.

After several minutes, I knocked again. I held a fake badge in front of the peek hole. I knew it would be a long shot, but I hoped the badge I bought in a toy store would pay off.

A frail, old man opened the door slowly.

His hair, a pure cotton white, stood up in every direction, like a mad scientist. While small, thin, he looked tired as if he hadn't slept well in ages. The old man appeared to be relieved by my presence, like an escaped prisoner who has been on the run for so long; he's actually relieved when the police catch him.

I pointed the gun at him and slid the toy badge back into my coat pocket.

"You can shoot me if you want," the old man snapped in English, "Your accent was as fake as your badge."

Then the old man turned and hobbled slowly up the stairs into the living room.

I entered the home, and cautiously closed the front door. I carefully followed the old man upstairs into the living room and sat directly across from him in an armed chair.

A strong stench of chemicals struck my nostrils in the living room, like walking into a dry cleaner's. I saw several tables with laboratory equipment with an assortment of Petri dishes, beakers, flasks, and containers of chemicals spread across the surface. The table near the old man had a Bunsen burner heating a large flask. The flask contained a clear solution that boiled slowly, and bubbles glided upward toward the glass tubing. Then glass tubing led from the flask to an ice bath.

I pointed the gun at the old man. He began speaking softly, "You can shoot me if you like. However, you should know that would be foolish. You see this flask," he said while pointing at the boiling flask on the table, "That chemical is very explosive. You'll die if you shoot me. This whole house will blow up with you and me in it."

"Who are you?" I snapped.

"My name is Boris. I'm the chemist."

"What are you making here?"

"I make anything Damir wants. Tonight, I'm making methoxy methaline dioxymphetamine."

"What's that?" I asked raising my eyebrows in confusion.

"They call it MDMA for short. On the streets, the kids call it ecstasy. It's very popular with the kids all over Europe."

"Ecstasy?"

"Yes, and the chemical reaction is very dangerous. You shoot that gun in here; we'll both die."

"Damir's a drug dealer?"

"Well, Damir does not sell the drugs, but he's the mastermind behind the operation. Damir, let me say, has his dirty hands in everything around this little town."

My mouth hung low and my eyes flapped wide open. I began thinking. How could a university president be a drug dealer? He became a president of the university, and also a dark lord who controlled the underworld of Tuzla. What a dichotomy?

Boris began chuckling ominously. "I also make methamphetamine or you'd call it simply meth, PCP, and LSD. I also test the potency of the cocaine. Damir buys it from someone

in Montenegro. Damir is such an entrepreneur. Wherever he can make money, he'll be at the center."

"You're very forthcoming. You don't even know who I am."

"It does not matter. Once Damir finds out, we'll both be dead."

"What?"

"Damir will kill us in an instant," and Boris snapped his fingers for emphasis.

"That's completely insane! How could you make drugs for Damir? Don't you worry about the kids you feed your poison to?"

"I worry about it every day, but I had no choice."

"Choice? Everybody has a choice."

Boris just stared at me coldly.

"How many children have you killed?"

"My wife was dying," Boris whispered.

"What?"

I waved the gun intentionally in the air in wide arcs and then pointed it back at Boris.

"Talk! I have plenty of time."

Boris let out a long sigh and began, "Damir tricked me. After the Bosnian War, I worked at the University of Tuzla as a chemistry professor. My salary was very low. My wife became gravely ill, and we needed to buy expensive medication from Italy. I just did not have enough money, and I could not watch her die."

Boris paused for a second. He reached for a teacup that stood near the edge of the table. Boris's hand trembled a little when he lifted his teacup and sipped his tea.

Then Boris continued, "Damir came to me and said he could solve my financial problems. I started making drugs for him. In the beginning, I made good money."

My skin whitened while I shook my head in disbelief. I thought I became stuck in a nightmare. Any minute I would awaken, and the dream would end, but how do you awaken from a dream of reality? The cold reality in Bosnia was university presidents sell drugs; professors manufactured illegal drugs, and

university car drivers murdered honest people and kidnapped innocent women.

“Why does Damir sell the drugs? He owns a university! Isn't that enough?”

Boris chuckled again and added, “It is very complicated to own and operate a business here in Bosnia. A businessman must bribe the politicians, the police, the tax inspectors, and anyone else with sticky fingers. All the government officials stand in line, demanding their cut. This money has to come from somewhere. Then I heard that you professors from America are very expensive. Who knows, Damir hates the Serbs. He's probably financing the Bosnian War machine and accumulating weapons too.”

“What do you mean?”

“During the Bosnian War, the Serbian military brutally raped and murdered Damir's wife, and he has never gotten over it. Damir has several houses scattered around Tuzla in the countryside. I would not be surprised if he's stockpiling weapons. Of course, I only make drugs for Damir, so I don't know anything else about his other activities. In my business, the less you know, the longer Damir lets you live.”

I uttered, “Oh, my God!”

After a minute of silence, I asked, “When you opened the door and saw the gun, you looked relieved. You were happy it was over.”

“I had hoped you would arrest me and then it'll be over.”

“Why?”

“I'm tired. I'm tired of life. I'm tired of Damir and his goons. I'm tired of making drugs. I just want it to be over. I want to get away from Damir, but I am afraid to do it myself.”

“Why are you tired of Damir?”

“He's crazy and impossible to deal with. I know eventually he'll kill me or have one of his goons kill me. If he could find another chemistry professor to take my place, then I am a goner. Who knows what would happen to my body?”

“What do you mean he's crazy?”

“He lost his wife during the Bosnian War. His mind snapped. He thinks the world is out to get him. He tries to squeeze the world for every nickel and penny he can.

Look at me. In the beginning, Damir paid me 5,000 euros each month to make his drugs. He easily makes 10 times that on the black market. Then he started to renegotiate my salary.

Look at the big house! This is not my house, but I’m here 15 hours every day, so Damir started charging me rent.

Last month, Damir didn’t understand why he has to buy the chemicals for the lab. So now, I must buy all the chemicals myself, recycling every one I can. I can’t do anything about it. If I don’t agree, then Damir will kill me.

Each month, my salary becomes smaller. Who knows, I’ll be paying him next year to work for him.” Then Boris burst into a coarse laughter.

“I can’t believe this! This is crazy!” I became dizzy as my mind refused to accept the facts.

“Then wait. You teach for him at his university. Just wait a year. He’ll start charging you for the paper clips, the sips of water out of the water fountain, and your office space. After each month, when you get your paycheck, I guarantee he found another deduction. He’ll figure out something to take away from you.”

I bowed my face down, so my face rested in my hands. I held the gun in my right hand, and I felt the coldness of the steel barrel on my cheek.

After Boris let this information steep in my mind, Boris continued, “Just take this piece of advice. If you have a chance, just kill Damir. Don’t talk to him. Don’t reason with him. Don’t ask him questions. You point that gun at his forehead and pull the trigger; then God will do the rest. If you hesitate, he’ll kill you. I’m positive Damir has killed many people after the Bosnian War. I wouldn’t be surprised if people continued disappearing.”

“I don’t understand.”

My arm became sore, and I laid the heavy gun on the end table. Besides, the old chemist did not appear to be a threat. I wished I could awaken from this nightmare.

“Damir Kovacev is quite psychotic. He isn’t a little deranged, where a few neurons are misfiring in his brain, and God is talking to him. He’s psychotic of the worst degree. He would kill someone just to see if his soul would separate from this body and drift upwards towards the heavens. He would cut someone's head off and drink his blood if he knew it would make him stronger.”

I raised my head again and stared at the old man. I must know. My voice wavered, “I’m dating a Serbian woman. Her name is Yelena, and someone kidnapped her three days ago. Do you know anything about it?”

“I haven’t heard of anything. I’m sorry. If the police haven’t found her, then you’re lucky. Damir hates the Serbs. If she’s still living, then most likely, he sold her to the sex trade.”

“What!” I refused to believe what he said and repeated, “Sex trade?”

“It was very common after the Bosnian War. Many poor Bosnian women were sold to brothels all over Europe. The mafia kidnapped some girls outright while they tricked other girls into prostitution. Poor girls thought they would work in a foreign country, but their employers never specified the nature of the work or their pay.”

“Oh, my God!”

I wanted to lie down on the floor and cry, but my raged had dammed the tears. It’s my fault that someone kidnapped Yelena. If I didn’t come to Bosnia, then Damir Kovacev would never have known about Yelena.

After pausing for several minutes, I asked, “Would you happen to know where Damir might have sold her?”

“They don’t tell me anything. Only thing I know is Damir gets his cocaine from Montenegro. I know he has connections to the Russian mafia. If she isn’t in Tuzla, then she must be in Montenegro.”

“How could I find her?”

“I do know someone who *may* know where Yelena is. I expect Jasmin will be over to check up on me in the morning. Jasmin should know where she is. You confront Jasmin. Then you kill him, afterwards, you kill Damir, and then you go find your

girlfriend. I'll help you. That ecstasy should be done within an hour. Then I'll press the powder into white pills, and I'll clean up all the dangerous chemicals.

Tomorrow morning, you can shoot your gun in here as often as you want and not worry about blowing yourself up. Just point the gun at Jasmin and ask him. Then you kill him!"

I sat in the chair and refused to believe what the chemist told me. I felt my eyelids become heavy as the new information shorted my brain, causing it to shut down. Then I drifted to sleep while sitting in the armchair. My dreams were horrific and troubled. Occasionally, I stirred and screamed obscenities in my sleep.

When I awakened, I had a thick wool blanket draped around me. I stirred a little as the woolen fabric itched my neck and hands.

Boris' smile broadened as he stared at me.

If everything goes to plan, then both Jasmin and Damir will be dead, and Boris becomes a free man. His deal with the devil becomes broken while I send the devil into his lake of fire and sulfur. Boris will become a free man again, and he and his wife can flee Tuzla forever.

Then I drifted back to sleep again.

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## Chapter 8

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Jasmin slept soundly and awakened around 6:00 AM. He reached under his pillow for his gun and examined it. Then he placed the gun on the bed stand.

Before getting up, Jasmin sniffed the new bed sheets and burst into laughter.

Sometimes, a professor would spend the night in another city at the flop house, if they had a morning class at that campus the next day.

For the Banja Luka campus, the administration told Jasmin to buy new bed sheets. Well, in fact, he did. He put the new sheets on his bed while he placed his old, grimy dirty sheets on the bed in the flop house. Then he turned in the receipt to the university administration, so he could be reimbursed.

A professor who taught economics complained to the administration.

Jasmin chuckled under his breath. Didn't the professor know Jasmin was the university president's war buddy? Didn't the professors know the drivers were number two in the organization while the professors were dead last? They viewed the professors lower than the custodians who cleaned the classrooms and bathrooms.

Sometimes the drivers would play games on the professors and observe their responses. The dirty bed sheets were another game to play on those whiny, crybaby professors.

Jasmin walked to the window and glanced outside. Clouds filled the sky and hid the sun while the wind blew drifts of snow across the land.

Usually, Jasmin picked up the professors at 7 a.m. and drove them from Tuzla to Banja Luka. The trip would take four hours for a typical driver, but Jasmin shaved down his time to two and half hours as he raced along the dangerous, mountainous roads in the Balkan Mountains. Around each breakneck curve, the centrifugal force tossed the professors around in the back seat like a sack of potatoes.

However, today, all the professors were on winter break, so he wouldn't be traveling to Banja Luka today. Today, he had errands to do.

Then Jasmin headed for the mirror. He slicked his gray hair back with an old comb with several chipped teeth. Then he changed out of his camouflage pants into his driver's uniform, a brown khakis and a hazel dress shirt, with the university's emblem stitched on the shirt's left shoulder.

Then he slipped on his shoulder gun holster that hung under his arm and retrieved his gun.

He took a last look at himself in the mirror and stuck his thumb up. Then he headed downstairs to get some coffee and a cherry pastry roll.

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I jerked awake, and both my back and neck throbbed in pain. Then I jolted up and looked around while the wool blanket fell to the ground.

I couldn't believe I had slept in the chair in the living room, in Boris' lab. I fell asleep in the enemy's lair. I glanced at the table next to my chair and saw the gun still lying there. Then a strong aroma of freshly brewed coffee assaulted my nose.

My stomach began growling.

Then Boris walked into the room, carrying an old tin tray with a Bosnian breakfast on it.

I saw a *chevapi*, a Bosnian sandwich usually eaten for lunch or dinner, on a plate with a cup of hot coffee and a little container of hot sauce. I rarely eat *chevapi* because the sandwich is too greasy.

Boris set the tray next to the gun lying on the table and said, "Good morning; I thought you would be hungry. I made you a Bosnian lunch, well I mean breakfast. I figure you'll need some energy today."

I replied, "Thank you."

I picked up the fork and removed the top bun. They always fried the buns in a lake of sausage grease. I used the fork to push

the thick layer of freshly, diced onions off the sandwich, onto the side of the plate. Then I used a knife to cut the bread and beef sausages, stabbing at them with the fork. At least the grease from the sandwich would help it slide down my throat better, lubricating my insides.

Boris watched me eat my breakfast solemnly as I gobbled the sandwich.

Then Boris asked, "How's the *chevapi*?"

"The *chevapi* was excellent, but I usually don't eat these because they're too greasy."

"Good. I hoped you would like it. I want you to have plenty of energy today. You have plenty to do."

After I cleaned my plate, except for the small hill of onions to the side, Boris began, "Keith, it's almost time. Jasmin rises early, and I would expect him around seven this morning."

I scanned the room for a clock and saw the hands pointed at 6:40 AM. Then I asked, "What should we do?"

Boris lay out his plans, "Let's start..."

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Jasmin slipped his jacket on and headed out the door.

As he stepped onto the fresh snow, his right boot exploded as his toes poked through the gaping hole, like a tongue sticking out of a mouth.

He returned to the kitchen, grabbed a roll of duct tape, and quickly wrapped his boot with three coils of duct tape. His toes were snugly tucked into the ancient boot. He mumbled smugly to himself, "I should get at least another year out of these old boots."

Then he headed for the door.

Jasmin glanced at the clock, 6:45, and he wanted to be at the chemist's place by seven. He must make sure the chemist produced more products for the consumers. He wanted to keep Damir happy, and keep the money machine running at full capacity.

Jasmin climbed into the big silver sedan and headed over to the chemist's place.

Jasmin pulled into the driveway, and he could see coal smoke billowing out of the chimney while a layer of fresh snow covered everything.

Jasmin scanned the front door and then the yard surrounding the place. He examined the area's foot traffic, a habit he picked up from the Bosnian War. He opened the car door and climbed out. He knew the snowdrifts were good at erasing evidence and traces of footsteps, so he placed his hand on top the gun handle.

Jasmin quickly approached the front door. His heavy boots crunched the soft snow beneath his feet while his right boot would slip in the snow from the layer of duct tape.

Pounding on the door, Jasmin yelled, "Boris, are you there?"

After several minutes, Jasmin banged on the door again.

Then the large deadbolt clanked as someone pulled it back. The door sprang open with Boris holding the doorknob.

"Good morning Boris."

"Good morning Jasmin. Come on in!"

Jasmin entered the house and quickly shut the door. He smelled the remnants of brewed coffee and a homemade *chevapi* as his stomach began growling.

Boris hobbled up the stairs into the living room while Jasmin followed him.

Boris pointed at the empty chair and said, "Please have a seat."

Boris hobbled to the table and pointed at the ecstasy that he packaged into five small packets and said, "I made the ecstasy here. Each packet contains a thousand tiny white tablets."

Jasmin replied, "Good, the boss will be extremely happy."

Jasmin's grumbling stomach interrupted the conversation, and he added, "Did you make a *chevapi* for breakfast?"

"Yes, would you like me to make you one?"

"Yes, that'll be great."

Then Boris returned to the kitchen, and he made rattling sounds as he moved large pots and pans around.

Jasmin leaned back in his chair, patting his stomach as his stomach purred in anticipation.

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Before Jasmin knew what happened, I charged into the room holding a .38 Smith and Wesson. Then I pointed the gun at Jasmin's forehead.

Jasmin laughed and started to get out of the chair.

I pulled the gun's trigger and a bullet whizzed by Jasmin's head. The bullet imbedded itself into the wall and kicked up a little dust as a deafening explosion reverberated in the room.

Jasmin sat down again as he eyed me coldly.

I began, "Jasmin; it's been a week since I last saw you. Buddy, please have a seat. We need to talk. Keep your hands on your knees, so I can see them."

Jasmin obeyed and placed his hands on his knees as he studied Keith.

Gun shivered a little in Keith's trembling hands.

Jasmin was gauging his enemy as he sarcastically asked, "You know Keith, have you ever shot anyone? Have you killed anyone before? I have. I probably have killed thousands during the war, and perhaps a few hundred after the war too."

"Jasmin, I really don't give a shit about killing someone. If you don't answer my questions, then you'll be my first murder. I want to know where Yelena is," I demanded, but the heavy gun trembled in my hand.

Jasmin just smiled.

"Where is Yelena!"

Jasmin replied, "I'm not sure. Maybe I do, maybe I don't. What'll you do if I don't tell you?"

"JASMIN, WHERE THE FUCK IS YELENA? I WILL KILL YOU IF YOU DO NOT TELL ME!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

"I'm not sure Keith. Last I heard; she ran away to Montenegro. She ran off with another man. It's a shame, really. I thought she was a nice girl or at least fuckable for one night."

“What did you say? With whom did she run away? Why Montenegro?” I shouted as rage vaporized the blood traveling through my veins.

“Boss knows someone there. He sold her to someone. She’s the property of some dude in Montenegro, a dude who owns her pretty ass.”

“WHO?” I screamed.

Jasmin continued smiling and studied me carefully.

I felt weak, and I didn’t stand a chance against an ex-soldier from the Bosnian army.

“WHO!!!” I screamed again while my face reddened. Rage wanted to explode out of me.

Jasmin just stared at me.

I fired the gun again above Jasmin’s head.

Then he answered calmly, “His name is Sasha. He’s our Russian connection.”

“Why did you sell her there?”

“Boss didn’t want you dating a Serbian woman. He wanted you to teach and write research papers. Your job is only to the university. Your wife and mistress are the university, not some Serbian whore you picked up at the coffee shop.”

“What the fuck?” I exclaimed while confusion swarmed in my brain like angry bees.

“Your job is the university, nothing more, nothing less.” Jasmin smiled slyly.

“I should shoot you right here and now. Then carry your sick ass outside and burn you alive,” I shouted coldly while rage began pulsating through my brain, clouding my judgment.

Jasmin laughed and replied icily, “Then just do it. Don’t talk about it. Just do it.” Jasmin pointed to his forehead with his index finger and added, “Just do it. Put the bullet right here,” tapping his forehead with his index finger for emphasis.

A fresh aroma of beef sausages sizzling in the skillet filled the living room. Jasmin’s stomach began growling angrily.

“What happen to Karl Carlson?” I demanded.

Jasmin laughed again and muttered, “Oh, Karl. I remember him well. Oh, how could I forget about him? He was such an old horny guy who fucked anything that moved in Tuzla.”

“What happened to Karl?”

Jasmin just shrugged his shoulders.

“What happened to Karl!” I screamed and fired another bullet from the gun.

Jasmin didn’t flinch. He replied, “You’re running out of bullets, Keith.”

“I just need one to kill you. What happened to Karl?”

“Karl discovered information, fatal to his health.”

“One last time. WHAT HAPPENED TO KARL?!!” I screamed.

Jasmin started slowly, “We had trouble with a drug dealer. So Damir went to eliminate him. Damir and Adnan cornered him in a dark courtyard in a residential neighborhood. I stood back in the shadows. Adnan held him, and Damir wrapped his belt around his neck and stood behind him. Then Damir choked him to death.”

“Why did you kill him?”

“A drug dealer was skimming some of our money, so he had to go. No body steals from us.”

“Who was he?”

“Just some piece of shit named Vladimir.”

“What does this have to do with Karl?”

“Karl stumbled across us. He must have taken a shortcut through the courtyard. Adnan and Damir didn’t see him, but I did. He turned and retraced his steps quietly, but I caught him quickly.”

“Then what happened?” I demanded.

“I held him until Damir caught up with us. Damir put his gun to the back of his head and shot him. Then we dumped his body several blocks away and staged it like a robbery. That cheap bastard had only 20 euros in his wallet.”

Then Jasmin burst out laughing that echoed throughout the quiet house.

I couldn’t believe what I had heard.

I faced Jasmin as my eyes widened. Then I stated, “I can’t believe this. The university held a wake for Karl Carlson, and

Damir read a eulogy at the wake, and now you are saying that Damir killed him?"

Jasmin's grin became broader as he stated, "Bingo, you win the jackpot."

"Are you and Damir fucking sick? You murdered him and then held a wake for him?" I screamed.

When Boris stated Damir popped a few screws, he meant it. Damir and his henchmen are some sick bastards.

I remembered Karl's last conversation and funeral well...

...on the night, Karl died; he called me on his cell phone around 9 o'clock. He sounded frantic and scared, out of breath. He saw something too unbelievable. He wanted to meet me in person and said be very careful. Our lives were in danger.

I went to the Wall to meet Karl. The Wall was a rock-n-roll bar located in a basement on the south side of the city. Usually the students and professors stayed away from the place as loud rock music drowned out all conversations.

Yelena and I waited hours for Karl to show up. Around midnight, the dean called me. I ran outside the loud bar so I could hear the dean over loud music. He said Karl was found murdered and demanded to know about Karl's activities, but I replied I didn't know, of course.

That week, the university officials and Bosnian police questioned me. They wanted to know what Karl did on his free time. Did he use drugs? Did he drink too much? Did he visit prostitutes? I screamed "No!" to all of this.

Of course, I knew more about Karl's death than what I let on. I kept Karl's last phone call a secret from everyone except Yelena.

Although his family had flown his body to Oklahoma, the university held a wake for him in the huge auditorium. A large framed picture was placed upon the stage to the right corner while two candle stands with large red candles were placed along both sides of the picture. Flames flickered in sadness as the faculty and students put flowers and wreaths around the picture.

Many of the female students and staff cried while the men seemed confused and walked around in a daze.

Yelena and I placed a bouquet of flowers by Karl's picture and subsequently sat down in the front row.

Then Damir Kovacev gave a short eulogy.

That was the first time I saw the university president.

Damir wore a black Armani suit, and his bald head glistened from the overhead stage lights. Damir began, "It saddens me to be here today. We lost a great professor. Students and staff looked up to him because he was a great teacher who influenced many minds. His absence will never be forgotten while his contribution and hard work to the university will always be remembered. I hope Karl Carlson will rest in peace. That God will look after him. Let us bow our heads in prayer and remember Karl Carlson one last time."

During the eulogy, Yelena held my hand and occasionally squeezed it. Then I would glance at Yelena, and mouth the words, "I love you..."

...Boris entered the living room, holding an old tray with a fresh *chevapi* sandwich in the center.

Before I could react, Jasmin leaped out of the chair and hopped on me.

I pulled the gun's trigger, but the bullet barely missed Jasmin's forehead.

I crashed onto the ground with Jasmin on top of me while the gun slipped out of my hand and landed near the wall.

Jasmin pummeled me in the face with strong punches.

I thought I would pass out as each blow brought me closer to unconsciousness. Then before I knew what happen, Jasmin jumped up quickly and began scratching his face.

Boris hit Jasmin in the head with an iron pan and then splashed a small vial of sulfuric acid into Jasmin's face.

Jasmin began screaming.

"Quick! Get the gun, Keith!"

I quickly rolled over onto my hands and feet, crawling towards the gun. I picked the gun up and turned into a sitting position on the floor, pointing the gun at Jasmin.

Jasmin sensed something was happening while the acid blinded him, burning his skin, blurring his vision. His face started melting like a plastic doll's face submerged in a fire. Then Jasmin reached inside his jacket and pulled the gun out of the holster.

"Boom!" as I pulled the trigger, and the bullet exploded from the gun.

I scooted towards the wall, leaning my back against it.

Jasmin fell down to the ground while a large, red splotch began to spread over the front of his shirt. Then Jasmin died, as God carried him home. Burnt flesh continued filling the air as the sulfuric acid continued to eat away at Jasmin's face.

I tossed the gun down and began sobbing.

"Keith, you did it. You must be strong. You must be tough to get your girl back. Do you want Yelena back? Keith, do you want Yelena back?" Boris screamed as he shook me.

My tears stopped as the word Yelena brought me out of my hysterical state.

"How can I find her? Where do I look?" I looked confused. I had trouble coping with my first murder, and I thought earning my Ph.D. was the highest, most memorable time of my life.

"You already know the answer. First, you confront and kill Damir and then you go to Montenegro. He told you the name. His name is Sasha. How many Russian gangsters could be in Montenegro named Sasha? Boris answered confidently."

"How do I find Damir?" I asked weakly.

"Nobody knows where he lives. However, return to the university. Damir is always at the university. If you see Adnan, you shoot him too. Don't hesitate like you did today with Jasmin. Jasmin would've killed you if I didn't intervene."

I sat leaning against the wall for an hour while my buttocks became numb from sitting on the floor.

Pungent, burnt smell from Jasmin's flesh permeated all the fresh air in the house.

I bent over and vomited the *chevapi* sandwich, forming something that resembled a white, chunky puddle of gravy on the floor.

Boris brought some strong Turkish coffee and held the cup to my lips, so I could drink it. My hand trembled as I reached for the coffee cup.

After a few minutes, the burst of caffeine helped me regain my energy. I started to get up and shake the sleepiness from my legs. I felt pinpricks and numbness in my legs, and the nausea in my stomach began fading and dissipating.

Boris entered the living room again and sat in the armchair across from me.

Jasmin sprawled out on the floor between them. Acid charred his face into a black molten mess, and the room stunk from an acrid, burnt smell.

“What do we do about Jasmin?” I asked, regaining my composure.

“Don't worry about him. Once you leave, I'm going to blow this place up. I'll make it look like Jasmin accidentally blew himself up. Then my wife and I will disappear. We'll flee Tuzla forever.”

I staggered a little when I stood up. Then I grabbed the gun and turned to leave, but Boris quickly got out of the chair and grabbed my hand.

“Before you go Keith, take this with you.”

I glanced down at the bags clenched in Boris' hand and saw five small packets filled with a thousand tiny white pills.

“Boris, I can't take this. I'm not a drug dealer. I don't even use drugs.”

“I'm not asking you to sell it. You may need it in Montenegro. That ecstasy is worth fifty-thousand euros. You can use it for a bargaining chip to get Yelena back. Nobody will help you for free, but you can use this to buy some friends. Most of the women kidnapped from Romania go as cheap as 1,000 euros. I'm sure you hand them these packets to someone, and they will take you seriously. Nobody will help you for free, not in Eastern Europe.”

I reluctantly grabbed the bags. Although I abhorred drugs, I wanted Yelena back. If I had to use 50,000 euros in illegal drugs to get her back, then I will gladly pay the price.

I searched Jasmin's coat pockets and found the car keys to the Skoda in his left coat pocket.

I ran down the stairs and opened the front door. I felt the cold morning air worked magic on my composure as the icy fingers of coldness massaged me and restored my composure.

I ran to the car and first peered in through the dark, tinted windows, making sure no one hid inside. When satisfied no one was there, I went to the car's back and opened the trunk and saw a small, brown, leather brief case.

I placed the bag of drugs in the trunk and then tried to open the briefcase, but the small locks wouldn't bulge. I searched the trunk and found a crowbar. I jammed the crowbar into the closed lips of the briefcase, but it wouldn't fit. Then I pounded the locks using the crowbar as a hammer, and the cheap locks quickly unlatched.

I didn't know what to expect, so I slowly opened the briefcase, expecting snakes to strike. But, instead, I saw three bundles of 100-euro notes instead of slithering snakes.

I quickly grabbed the money and counted it, 30,000 euros.

I slid the money into the front inside pocket of my winter coat and threw the briefcase toward the nearest oak tree. I hid the bags of drugs under the spare tire.

Then I unlocked the Skoda sedan and sat in the driver's seat and I started the car. I honked the horn a couple of times.

After ten minutes, Boris appeared, walking fast. He reached the passenger side, opened the door, and jumped onto the passenger seat. "Let's go now," Boris screamed as he slammed the door.

As I pulled out of the driveway, an explosion ripped through the house, blowing the windows out and tearing a large hole through the back wall. Then flames engulfed the whole house, consuming it within minutes.

"Don't worry about Jasmin. He's gone now."

“Drop me off near the university. I’ll take the bus home and disappear. You go find Damir. If I were you, I would go to the university first. Like I said, don’t talk to him. Just shoot and kill the insane bastard.”

I drove in silence the six blocks into town. Nearing the university, I pulled over to let Boris out.

Boris turned to me, “Keith, thank you for saving me. I pray that you succeed and get your girlfriend back.” Then Boris held his hand out for a handshake. I vigorously shook his hand.

Then the door slammed shut, and Boris disappeared.

I pulled back on the road and headed to the university to confront the president of the Bosnian University of Management.

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## Chapter 9

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Veronika sat quietly in a chair in Damir's office, squirming, shaking, sobbing. Her hands twitched as her body shook uncontrollably. Tears streamed down her face.

Damir stood over Veronika menacingly, screaming at the top of his lungs. His hand and arms flailed wildly as he yelled, "You worthless BITCH! I gave you a simple job, and you FUCK IT UP! PLEASE EXPLAIN TO ME HOW YOU CAN FUCK UP AN EASY JOB!"

Damir's face turned lava red as the volcano erupted at full power. As he screamed, spittle flew from his lips, and some of it landed on Veronika's hair.

His voice rose to a crescendo, "You are FIRED! GET YOUR SHIT AND GET THE HELL OUT OF MY UNIVERSITY! YOU HAVE UNTIL THE END OF THE DAY TO HAVE EVERYTHING GONE!"

Tears flowed heavily down Veronika's face. Then she bolted for the door and knocked over a chair in the process.

Damir watched Veronika flee while a satisfied smile crept across his face. He picked up the chair and returned it to its place. Then Damir sat behind his desk.

His smile deepened because he felt good. He just destroyed a person. Today, indeed, would be a great day.

He grabbed his glass of *Cockta* and gulped down the rest, quenching his parched throat, because all the screaming dried the insides of his mouth.

Once Damir felt refreshed, he opened a folder. He wrote in neat letters, Resumes-HR Manager, on the tab in beautiful penmanship.

Damir began leafing through the stack of resumes. Thirty good applicants were fighting for Veronika's position. He would fatten another calf under his guidance and then lead it to the slaughterhouse.

Just then, Damir's office door opened slowly, and Admir; the computer administrator, walked in.

Rage flared again, and Damir's face turned a deep lava red as the volcano erupted again.

Damir started shaking and trembling with rage.

Admir sat in the chair in front of Damir's desk. He saw the anger in his boss and began to apologize profusely, "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I apologize for my mistake. Please boss, I'm sorry. It'll not happen again. Pleaseeee..."

Damir leaped to his feet as rage coursed through his veins. He felt alive, blinded with the raw energy of a volcano.

Damir sprang like a limber jungle cat and pounced on Admir. Fists flew in a barrage as Damir repeatedly punched Admir in the face, blackening his eyes and busting his lip open.

Admir tumbled to the ground while Damir latched on and continued to pummel Admir's face, hitting him with a right, left, right, again, and again.

After a minute, the rage weakened. Damir came to his senses, and he slowly lifted himself off Admir.

Admir didn't fight back. He lay there and took his punishment like a man. He lay sprawled on his back, breathing slowly. He refused to get up just in case the attack was not over yet.

Damir sat down behind his desk again. He glanced at the man lying on his floor. Blood oozed from several cuts across his face. Then Damir felt pity for him because he treated his employee too harshly. The volcano began simmering down, becoming dormant.

Damir stated in a calm mood, "I'm sorry, Admir. I thought my day was going well. I already fired someone a little earlier, so I met my quota for the week. I only planned to talk to you. Well, I guess we did some talking, in a manly way. When I saw you sit down, the anger shot out of me. Are you okay, Admir? Do you want something to drink? I think I have another *Cockta*."

Admir gargled in a weak voice, "Yeah." He breathed in and out erratically.

Damir opened the small dormitory refrigerator behind his desk and grabbed his last *Cockta*. He opened it with a little pop while the soda began fizzling and bubbling a little. Then he went to Admir and helped him up with his free hand.

He handed the cold drink to Admir, who slowly regained his composure keeping his eyes on Damir to make sure he wouldn't erupt again.

Damir sat behind his desk, smiling. All traces of angry vanished.

Admir inspected the bottle, ensuring Damir hadn't spiked the drink with a poison, or hadn't slid a syringe needle in it. Then he took a large swig, but kept watching Damir.

Damir stated in a calm, peaceful voice, "Good, I won't fire you because I know mistakes can happen. I hope this little talk will straighten you out. Please, in the future, when you spell my last name Kovacev, make sure you write it K - O and not K - E. Do you understand? I cannot let a simple spelling mess up my name or my university's reputation. Do you understand, Admir?"

Admir mumbled again, "Yes sir." Then he took another swig of that *Cockta*.

Damir went to Admir and gently took his hand and led him to the door. Once at the door, Damir patted Admir on the back as he walked out and added in a soft voice, "I'm glad we could have this conversation, Admir. I understand mistakes can happen. Some mistakes are correctable. Let's hope we'll not have another talk like this again."

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I pulled into the parking lot for the State Hospital Complex, where I could hide the car in a sea of cars.

I handed the lot attendant a one-euro coin, and he quickly shoveled it into his empty pocket. "Thank you sir." But I was already out of earshot before the attendant could complete his sentence. I jogged the two blocks to the university.

I dashed to the faculty office first. I needed time to think and collect my thoughts. Approaching my office, I heard sobbing sounds echoing down the hall. As I walked passed Veronika's door, I returned, and stopped in the doorway.

Veronika sat at her desk, removing the pictures and carefully placing them into a cardboard box that once stored paper.

Her face became pale and wet from her tears, and her hair disheveled. She noticed me and tried to compose herself, as she patted at the tears with her shirt sleeve.

I slowly closed her door and sat in a chair across from Veronika and whispered, "Veronika, could we please have a talk?"

"Keith, this isn't a good time," Veronika's voice crackled with sad emotions. She almost lost her composure again as the tears wanted to burst forth again.

"Please, Veronika, it's about Damir."

Veronika grabbed the last picture on her desk, placed it gently into the box and quietly sat down. She didn't look directly at me but stared into space.

"I don't know how to say this, but Damir is an evil person."

Veronika exhaled a sarcastic sigh and shrieked, "That's an understatement."

"May I ask what happened?" I asked kindly, "Please Veronika; this is important to me."

"Damir fired me a little while ago."

"Why?"

"I accidentally stapled a document twice. Damir became upset with two staples in the document. He became quite irrational." Then she imitated Damir's voice sarcastically, "Do you know how much it would cost if you had stapled every document twice? That would add up over the year. I cannot have my employees wasting expensive office supplies."

"I'm so sorry. This is completely ludicrous. What will you do?"

"I don't know Keith," as tears began flowing down Veronika's face again. She continued to stare absently into space.

"Veronika, I'll make this short. Damir sells drugs. He uses the drugs to finance the university. I suspect he may have killed many people too."

"What?" Veronika stopped crying. It felt like someone punched her in the stomach. She stared and studied my eyes, ascertaining whether I was playing a cruel joke on her.

"Do you know anything about this?" I asked seriously.

"No, not the drugs, not the murders."

“What do you mean, not the drugs and not the murders?”

“Damir is very unstable. I heard last year, he threatened to kill the Mayor of Tuzla. Mayor wanted to take the university's building, demolish it, and build a new hotel. Damir was furious. Supposedly, he went with his drivers to the mayor's office and actually threatened him.”

After composing her thoughts, she added, “I also have heard he stole \$75,000 from a relief agency to start the university.”

“I see Damir has his hands on everything. What happened to the case with the mayor?”

“Damir almost got into trouble. He bribed some top officials in the Bosnian government to make the charges go away. Mayor also decided to stay away from Damir and his university, and he wants nothing to do with him, because Damir is too crazy.”

I asked in a soft, sincere voice, “What happened with the relief agency?”

“Well, I heard Damir helped some European relief agency. They helped feed the refugees after the Bosnian War. Damir volunteered as a liaison with the relief agency because he served as an officer in the Bosnian army and was a decorated war hero. Then the relief agency found someone stole some of its funding. They thought it was Damir, but they couldn't prove it. Then suddenly, Damir showed up with a suitcase of money and started this university.”

“Damir is one huge dirt bag. I have never seen such a slimy piece of shit,” I snapped.

I paused for a minute in pensive thought. Then I cleared my throat, “I apologize Veronika for my course language. The more I learn about him, the more evil the man becomes.

Then I know you'll not definitely like this story. Damir's criminal behavior is extensive. I believe he kidnapped my girlfriend. Her name is Yelena, and she's Serbian. I believe one of the drivers delivered Yelena to the Russian mafia in Montenegro.”

Veronika's face writhed in surprise, “Oh no! Say it's not so! That poor girl!”

“Unfortunately, it's true. I'm searching for her.”

“I know Damir hates the Serbs, so I wouldn’t put it past him. I know he does business in Budva, Montenegro. He knows people down there.”

“Budva?”

“It’s a resort town in Montenegro. People say it’s a very beautiful place.”

“Could he have contacts in other cities other than Budva?”

“I don’t think so, Keith. Sometimes, when I contact the drivers, they’re in Montenegro, somewhere around Budva. As far as I know, they never go anywhere else.”

“Do you know where Damir is right at this moment?”

“I left his office a half-hour ago. I imagine he’s still there. Why?”

“I need to talk to him,” while my face twisted into a wicked smile.

“Damir doesn’t allow you to speak to him. He always speaks to you. He has his large driver, Adnan, sit outside his office door, making sure no one enters his office without an appointment. Besides, it’s dangerous to see Damir. He fires anyone who upsets him.”

“I still need to talk to him. I’ll give him my letter of resignation. I decided it’s time to move on. I can’t work for him or his university.”

“Just be careful. I heard rumors that his drivers are armed. Adnan may have a gun. You may need to shoot your way past Adnan, but it was weird today. I haven’t seen Adnan for a few days. Damir must have sent him on an errand.”

Veronika happened to glance down at my abdomen as her eyes widened.

I reshuffled the front of the coat to hide the gun handle.

“Perhaps you can see him without an appointment. Just be careful.”

I reached inside my jacket and grabbed one bundle of euros.

I placed the bundle of money on Veronika's desk and stated, “Veronika, I want you to take this...”

“I can’t take this money, Keith!” Veronika feigned disapproval.

“Please take this money. Besides, this money does not belong to me. I stole it from Damir. Think of it as a contribution to your retirement plan or a severance package. It should be around 10,000 euros. I’m giving this money to you; no strings attached.”

“Thank you,” Veronika replied softly, gratefully. She became mesmerized as she stared at the money.

“I’ll turn in my letter of resignation. You take care of yourself.” I quietly rose from the chair and approach the door.

Veronika's stopped sobbing, and she sat still. As she studied the bundle of money, her smile deepened. Then she snatched the money and tucked it into the inside coat pocket. Then she mumbled to herself, “It’s a nice day after all.”

As I closed the door, Veronika said, “Thank you Keith.”

I went to my office to reload my gun. Then I headed to the administrative office to turn in my letter of resignation.

Walking down the corridor of the administrative wing, I scanned the hall and saw the deserted hallways, vacant desks, and closed doors. Most staff departed for winter break, enjoying time with their families.

All the doors were old covered with a fresh coat of enamel paint, except the last one. I approached the last door where a new mahogany door stood with a polished brass knob. Then I read the golden placket attached next to the door, Damir Kovacev, President.

I quietly approached Damir's Office. I glanced at the vacant desk, next to Damir's door, making sure Adnan was not lurking around.

Once I reached the door, I grabbed the gun's handle and slid the Smith and Wesson from its hiding place. I looked behind me, making sure the coast was clear.

Nobody was here today, leaving the corridor empty.

As I reached for the door handle, my heart rate started to accelerate, and I heard my beating heart as it geared up for action.

I grabbed the door handle tightly and pushed the door open. Door swung inward and banged against the wall. Then I charged in; pointing my gun at Damir's head.

Damir raised his head and stared at me. His smile widened, as he seemed oblivious to the gun. He announced in a civil, respectful tone, "Please come in, Keith. I've been meaning to talk to you."

I glanced down at my hand to make sure I held a gun and not a banana. The gun's polished steel glistened under the office light. I used my other hand to close the door gently and moved to several feet from the front of Damir's desk.

He folded his hands together and rested them on that folder of resumes, still smiling.

I stopped three feet away from the front of Damir's desk and kept pointing the gun at Damir's head.

"Like I said, I've been meaning to talk with you. You're my best employee."

"What," as confusion filled my voice?

"I just saw the student's evaluations from last semester. You have the highest rankings. Students like you. I also saw you submitted a new research paper. I only glanced at the abstract, but the paper looks excellent."

"Where's Yelena?" I asked in a firm, assertive voice.

"I hope you'll continue to teach at the university. I have high hopes for you. You're my best employee," Damir said in a jocund manner.

"WHERE IS YELENA?" My voice began to rise in anger.

"I hope you find Bosnia to be a nice place to live. I hope you'll continue your tenure at the university," Damir stated jovially, completely oblivious to the gun.

"WHERE IS YELENA?" My voice rose to a scream. Emphasizing my point, I used my thumb to pull the gun's trigger back as a metallic click echoed through the room.

"Keith, oh Keith. You're not the first person to point a gun at my head. You just put that gun down and return to your office. Then we'll forget about this little indiscretion. You'll find I can be

a generous, forgiving man. I always take care of my employees, especially my best employees,” Damir stated in a jovial tone.

Keith's face reddened as anger coursed through his veins, “WHERE IS YELENA?”

“Oh, that’s the name of that Serbian bitch? Keith, I didn’t know. Besides, you’re better off with a Bosnian girl. They make better wives than Serbian women. Serbian women are not faithful to their men.”

Anger flooded my conscience. My inner voice screamed – just shoot him. You know where Yelena is.

Then I replied, “WHAT?”

“Serbian women make terrible wives. I can’t have my best employee dating a Serbian woman. So put that gun down and return to your office. Then this weekend, we can go out, and I can introduce you to some nice Bosnian women. Bosnian women are much better than Serbian. Trust me; I know. At one time, I had the most beautiful Bosnian woman. Her name was Emina.”

I shook with rage, “I WANT YELENA! IF YOU DON’T TELL ME WHERE SHE IS, I’LL KILL YOU!”

Damir's smile contorted into a grimace. His voice became cold, emotionless, “Keith; I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I’m asking you one last time. Put that gun down and go back to your office. This is your last warning! Trust me, my friend. You don’t want to make me angry. I can be one vengeful cruel motherfucker!”

Rage boiled in my blood while my reasoning and conscience shut down. I screamed at the top of my lungs, “TELL ME WHERE YELENA IS,” and I shot a bullet above Damir’s head.

Before I realized what happened, Damir hopped onto the desk and leaped onto me, knocking me down.

Fists began pummeling my face.

I shot the gun again, but the punches kept landing on my cheeks, eyes, and chin.

I pulled the gun’s trigger again and the punches stopped.

I pushed Damir off me and scooted away from his body.

A hole formed in the center of Damir's abdomen, and blood began oozing out. His eyes became lifeless as he froze his eternal stare at the ceiling.

Logic and reasoning swam back into my head. I tilted the gun backward to examine it. The gun was hot. Then I saw a wisp of smoke rise from the gun's barrel. Everything seemed surreal, where I became stuck in a bad dream. I hoped this nightmare would end, and I would awaken in a cold sweat in my bed, but the bad dream continued. I must traverse this nightmare until the end. I couldn't awaken yet.

That was reality. I murdered another person.

I scorched my hand when I touched the hot barrel. Then I slipped the gun into my winter coat pocket and approached Damir's desk.

I reached for a Kleenex on Damir's desk. I tipped toed backwards to the office door, keeping my eye on Damir.

He lay in the center of the office motionlessly as a pool of blood widened, growing across the surface.

Once I reached the door, I used the Kleenex to wipe the door handle. Before I shut the door, I studied the spot where I stood in front of Damir, scanning the floor, making sure I didn't drop anything.

I noticed several splotches of blood near the chair in front of Damir's desk. I lifted my arms and then my legs, inspecting them for cuts or injuries. When I was satisfied that it wasn't my blood, I quietly closed the office door and wiped the outside door handle with my Kleenex.

I scanned the corridor, and I didn't see another living soul around. Then I retreated down the corridor and walked outside into the cold January air. I had some errands to complete before heading to Montenegro.

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Admir was working in the building, and he sat in his office four doors down from Damir's. He sat in his chair, nursing his wounds in his office, cursing his boss under his breath.

Admir heard one gunshot follow another and another. The gunshots echoed loudly throughout the whole building. He became frightened. Perhaps the boss and Admir needed another man-to-man conversation again, or a shot into his leg would motivate Admir to be more careful, becoming a better employee.

Admir scanned the room, searching for an exit, but this room had no windows and only one door. Since Admir worked as the computer administrator, he secured his room full of computer servers with no exits. He sat on one side of the office while the computers and routers hummed and buzzed on racks on the other side.

Admir turned the office light off and slowly opened his door, leaving the door slightly ajar. He watched Damir's door open.

A few seconds later, a professor emerged. The professor scanned the corridor and then walked quickly to the exit.

Remaining glued to the spot, Admir shivered in fright. He kept staring at Damir's office door, waiting for that door to open and an insane Damir with a pistol in his hand, running out and start shooting.

After fifteen minutes, Admir walked slowly on his tiptoes to Damir's office door, placing his ear against the door. He couldn't hear anything. Not a peep came from the room.

Then Admir slowly opened the door and peeked inside. His head came in first tilting at an angle and then the rest of his body followed.

Damir lay on the center of the floor.

Admir profusely apologized, "I'm sorry, boss. I didn't mean to awaken you. Please don't beat me again. I'll return when you are in a better mood."

Damir remained still, motionless.

Then Admir noticed the leaking bullet hole in his abdomen and the growing pool of blood around his body.

Admir's smile deepened. He felt much better as his throbbing pain from his bruises and cuts faded away, and he muttered, "Thank you for the *Cockta*, you asshole!"

Admir shut the office door, wiping his fingerprints off the door handle, using his sleeve. Then he returned to his office and

gathered his things. He left early from work in a jovial mood and hummed an old Bosnian hymn, 'Death to the Devil' as he walked out the doors. As far as he was concerned, he didn't hear a peep. He was still on vacation and was nowhere near the university that day; the day someone slew the devil and threw him into his fiery eternal dungeon.

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## Chapter 10

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Adnan drove all night, delivering the cargo as fast as he could. He drove through the Balkan Mountains under a canopy of leafless trees. During a still, winter night, the trees transformed into skeletons, pointing their gnarled twig fingers at the sky. Occasionally, the moon would peek through the clouds, casting dancing shadows from the tree limbs onto the road.

Adnan accelerated around the mountainous curves at 60 miles per hour. He had only one thought in his mind, deliver the cargo safely. Get to Montenegro carefully, quickly.

Occasionally, Adnan would slow down. He drove along this road so often; he knew where all the police hid on the side of the roads. The police weren't the problem as long as the Serbian bitch remained quiet. Adnan would pay his fine in cash.

Around 7 o'clock in the morning, Adnan approached the border between Bosnia and Montenegro. He slowed down and parked his car behind an abandoned building that probably was a store before the Bosnian War. Now, bullet holes decorated the front of the store with numerous holes while a mortar blasted a gaping hole through the roof.

Adnan parked his car in southwest of Bosnia – the poorest area in the country with a dry, arid climate. Somewhere between Sarajevo and Mostar, the lush trees gave away to scrawny brush. Vineyards dotted along the country roads around Mostar as the river fed the thirsty grapes.

This area within the country experienced the worst of the Bosnian War. Soldiers shot up buildings along the countryside covering them with bullet holes. Unfortunately, the poor residents couldn't afford to fix up the buildings.

Adnan turned off the engine. He reached into the glove compartment and removed a semi-clean dishtowel and a bottle of chloroform. Then he exited the car.

Adnan reached the trunk and placed his right hand on the trunk near the key hole. Then he bent over to listen with his right ear.

Everything was quiet until a soft chant reverberated across the hillsides calling Muslims to prayer. Five times every day,

someone climbed the minaret tower of a mosque and chanted a prayer that echoed miles away. Adnan felt a tinge of sadness as the melodious chant penetrated his heart. He wanted to kneel down to pray along with the other devout Muslims, but he had a mission to complete.

After the chant had ended, he drenched the cloth with chloroform, unlocked the trunk, and sprang it open.

Yelena lay still there, sound asleep. Her face looked serene and peaceful while she mumbled, "Oh Keith," in her sleep.

Yelena managed to get her hands out of the thick blanket. One of her hands moved as if she were reaching out for someone, embracing someone in her sleep.

Yelena's eyes fluttered open. Her peaceful face contorted into a frown, and she furrowed her eyebrows as dreams faded into reality.

Then Adnan reached over and placed the cloth over her mouth.

Subsequently, Yelena's frown softened and disappeared. Her eyes became blank, while her eyelids closed, as sleep enveloped her once again.

Adnan studied Yelena's face and then opened the blanket to examine her body. He whispered, "If only you were Bosnian. You would make someone a beautiful wife." Then he folded the blanket over her body again.

He left Yelena's face poking through the blanket as she slept soundly.

Gently closing the trunk lid, Adnan leaned against the car, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and his lighter. He plucked out a cigarette and planted it squarely between his lips.

Lighting the cigarette, he inhaled a large plume of smoke. Then he immediately began coughing. Although southwest Bosnia was much warmer, the air was dry and chilly. Adnan always coughed when he inhaled his first cigarette of the day, but the cool, parched weather exasperated his coughing.

After Adnan had finished the cigarette, he flicked the butt to the edge of the dirt parking lot between a mass of dormant

weeds. As one of Adnan's resting spots, he littered this area with cigarette butts.

Adnan climbed back into the car and returned the cloth and chloroform to the glove compartment. Then he started the car and headed to the border.

Adnan approached the Bosnian customs. He saw this crossing point had little traffic. He glanced at the Bosnian customs, a dark-red shipping container that had a window and door cut out the side. Bosnian blue and gold flag danced and fluttered in the wind on a flagpole next to the building. The Bosnian officials sat around a table inside, drinking coffee.

Adnan slowed the car to a stop.

Ahead of Adnan, a farmer parked his truck that had a severe case of rust leprosy with several bales of hay on the truck's cargo bed. A customs official stood near his door, studying his documents.

Adnan reached over and grabbed his insurance and inspection papers from the glove box. Then he pulled out his driver's license from his wallet.

Bosnians didn't need a passport to visit other former Yugoslavian countries, but he ensured his paperwork was in order.

The farmer started his truck and pulled away. Adnan drove to the same spot the truck had occupied a few seconds ago, and rolled down the window.

"Sir, please turn off the car engine," the officer demanded.

Adnan looked up at the officer, another large guy in full uniform. On his left side, a nightstick and handcuffs dangled from his belt while a Zastava pistol sat in its holder on his right side.

Adnan immediately turned off the car engine.

"May I see your documents?" the officer snapped. Adnan gently handed them to the officer. Customs official began to bark questions as his meaty large hand leafed through the documents.

"Where're you going?"

"I'm going to Budva, Montenegro."

"What's your business?"

"I'm a driver for the Bosnian University of Management. I must pick up some supplies for the university."

“Do you have any illegal contraband?”

“No sir,” Adnan replied with a beaming happy voice and added as an afterthought, “I’m clean. I’m just picking up supplies for the university.”

Officer stopped looking at the documents, and he studied Adnan's face.

Adnan cracked a half-crooked smile, like *Oh, shucks, I’m just an ole, simple Bosnian boy.*

The officer glanced over at the customs building; looking at his empty seat through the open doorway. His mug of coffee was cooling while two customs officers played cards.

Officer handed Adnan his documents and walked back to join his friends at the table.

Adnan’s smile widened, “Thank you, sir.” Then he pulled away.

Next, Adnan drove up a mountainous road to the Montenegrin customs. He saw the farmer drive through the stall.

The wealthy Montenegrin government built a small, plain white building with toll road stalls barricading the road. The Montenegrin red flag waved in the wind as the double-headed, golden eagle emblazoned on the flag flapped its wings.

Montenegro possessed more wealth than Bosnia. The government granted citizenship to anybody who brought more than half-million euros into the country, and the government officials never questioned where the money came from as people carrying suitcases full of cash scuffled through the airport and boat docks. Montenegro became the playground of the Russian mafia and other rich families with dubious pasts.

Adnan pulled up to a stall and stopped at a cross bar that prevented his entry into Montenegro.

A female officer with a clipboard began shouting questions, “What is your purpose for coming to Montenegro?”

Meanwhile, a male officer walked around the car with a flashlight, looking beneath the car.

“I’m here to pick up supplies for the Bosnian University of Management. I’m their employee.’

“How long do you plan to stay in Montenegro?”

“I’m picking up supplies in Budva today and will cross the border again tonight.”

“May I see your documents?”

“Yes, ma'am,” and Adnan handed the documents to the officer.

The officer quickly leafed through the papers and passed them back to Adnan. The officer with the flashlight glanced at the first officer, nodding his head up and down slightly. Then he began to walk away to enter the customs building.

“Before you can drive into Montenegro, you must buy a road sticker.”

“I know, the road tax for Montenegro.” Subsequently, Adnan fished a five-euro note from his pocket and handed it to the officer.

Then the officer placed a translucent sticker on the inside of the car windshield. Afterwards, she added, “This sticker expires in thirty days,” and she reached over and pressed a green button that raised the crossing guard, “Welcome to Montenegro!”

Adnan cracked a smile and added, “Thank you,” Then he glanced at the female officer as she walked away.

Although Montenegro sided with Serbia during the Bosnian War, Adnan didn’t harbor any bitter feelings about Montenegrins. They attacked the Croats in Southern Croatia and not the Bosnians.

Adnan thought he could date a Montenegrin, especially with Montenegro attracting the wealthy from Europe while his country was stuck in poverty and petty politics. He definitely could marry a non-Bosnian, especially if she converted to become a devout Muslim.

Then Adnan drove the car into Montenegro after the female officer tucked her ass safely inside the customs building, out of sight of Adnan's molesting eyes.

Adnan arrived in Budva around 11 o'clock, just in time. Yelena screamed and banged on the car's trunk, but the traffic’s roar muffled her cries for help.

Adnan drove the car to the mountain peak overlooking the bay.

Sasha, an extremely wealthy Russian, bought the whole mountain for himself. He built a palatial three-story white house on the summit with orange terra-cotta tiles covering the roof. A ten-foot high, solid-stone fence surrounded the property. Teams of armed guards patrolled his land, keeping the curiosity of the public away from his property.

Adnan drove to the black, iron-wrought gate that barricaded the entrance. A burly guard left the guard shack and approached the car. Adnan rolled down the window.

“Hello, Adnan, long time, no see,” the guard's features softened as he extended his hand for a handshake.

“Hello, Dmitry. It has been a long time.” Then Adnan gripped Dmitry's hand and firmly shook it.

Yelena banged on the car's trunk and screamed, “HEEELLLPP! HEELLLPP!”

“I see you brought some cargo. Boss is expecting you. Just pull around to the front of the house.”

“Okay.”

Then Adnan drove through the gate and carefully maneuvered around a large water fountain, located in the center of the cul-de-sac. Then he stopped in front of the house.

Sasha stood there with his wild, long, black hair draped over his shoulders. He had a black, neatly-trimmed beard and mustache, while his eyes radiated a savage intelligence.

Sasha wore a white bathrobe that opened slightly, revealing the black swimming trunks underneath. He seemed immune to the climate's coolness with temperatures hovering in the 50s.

Two large bodyguards stood sentry on both sides of Sasha as they held AK 47s slung over their shoulders.

A third bodyguard stood further away, holding a leash to a ferocious German Sheppard. The dog barked maliciously as Adnan climbed out of the car.

Studying the two large bodyguards with the AK-47s, Adnan peered down at his tiny Zastava pistol that he tucked into his coat. He felt a little embarrassed, as if a length of a gun's barrel reflected the size of his manhood.

“Oh, Adnan, dear friend,” Sasha said jovially.

“Hey Sasha, long time no see.”

“When will Damir come down and pay a visit?”

“Damir has been busy. He wants to come, but he’s so busy at the university.”

“I heard you brought me a present?”

“Yes, sir; she’s in my car.” Then Adnan slowly pulled out his car keys being careful not to make quick movements. Sasha’s guards wouldn’t hesitate to riddle him with bullet holes if he reached into his pocket too quickly. Then he opened the car’s trunk.

Yelena bobbed her head up while her dark hair sprayed in all directions, covering her eyes.

Before Yelena knew what happened, Sasha’s bodyguards grabbed Yelena and pulled her out of the car.

Yelena struggled and squirmed to get free, but each guard held her arm and hands in a vice grip. Yelena continued to contort and struggle, but to no avail. She could not break free from these strong, powerful men.

“Boy, she’s feisty!” Sasha exclaimed exuberantly and then added, “Pin her legs; I want to have a look at her. Hurry up. I don’t have all day.”

Sasha studied Yelena’s petite body, like a diamond cutter examining his prized stone. He started with her legs. He sniffed them. Then he continued to sniff Yelena, working his way up. He paused around Yelena’s crotch area, and whiffed strongly and murmured to no one, in particular, “Very nice. Very nice, indeed!”

Then Sasha continued to sniff Yelena until he reached her face. Suddenly, Yelena spat on him catching Sasha by surprise. She screamed, “You dirty, filthy pig!”

Sasha smacked Yelena hard across the cheek, flinging her head sideways. Yelena’s head flew to one side from the powerful blow.

“Take her upstairs to her room,” Sasha snapped at his guards. Then Sasha wiped the dripping spit off his face with the collar of the robe and started laughing.

Afterwards, Sasha said jocosely, “Boy, she’s really a hell cat. We must keep these bitches in line. If we cut them any slack,

they'll think they own the place. I look forward to breaking her in and teaching her some proper manners.”

Adnan began to laugh. At first, his laughter started as a low chuckle that rose to a raucous crescendo.

Sasha flung his hand in a welcoming gesture, bowing slightly, “Come, my friend! Let’s have a drink.”

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Yelena twisted and contorted her body as the guards carried her upstairs to the second floor. Her fight was futile, as if she were a leaf caught in a hurricane’s whirlwinds.

Guards opened a door at the end of the hall, shoved Yelena in, and slammed the door.

Yelena regained her composure and looked around the room. She saw the room had a large queen-size bed with a pink canopy that matched the pink bedspread. A vanity with a large mirror was off to the side, and various makeups covered its surface. She turned her head and saw an adjoining small bathroom and a minuscule closet with several hangers that held lingerie.

Yelena smiled when she saw the window, overlooking the backyard over the swimming pool. She spread the curtains back, revealing bars over the window. Her smile quickly turned upside down into a frown. Then she remembered the grenade.

She pulled the grenade out of her bra and examined it. She was not quite sure how to use it, but she knew the bars would not present a problem.

She hid the grenade inside a shoe in the closet, then investigated the bathroom and closet, searching for an exit out of this nightmare.

As a last effort, Yelena quietly approached the door and turned the knob. Although the knob would turn, the door wouldn’t open. She was locked inside this room.

Yelena sprawled over the bed lying face down, burying her face into a pillow. She began thinking how to escape.

\*\*\*

Adnan sat down on a brown, leather couch in Sasha's den while Sasha went upstairs to change.

Then Sasha returned a few minutes later and trotted behind the bar and politely asked, "I know you must be thirsty. What would you like to drink?"

"I'll take a whiskey on the rocks," Adnan replied politely. He knew from previous experience that Sasha could be a little erratic. One minute, Sasha can be pleasant and normal, and the next, he transforms into a raving lunatic.

Adnan had an excellent view of the swimming pool through the den's sliding glass doors. He noticed two incredibly hot blondes, lying down on lawn chairs, soaking up the morning sun. They lay on their backs, as their swimming suit tops lay on a nearby table. Their bottoms had little fabric, revealing their firm, chiseled bodies.

Sasha brought Adnan's drink over and placed it down on the table in front of Adnan. Next, he asked, "How do you like my swimming pool? It's a hell of a view, isn't it? It costs me a fortune to install a swimming pool on a side of a mountain and enclose it under a sheath of glass. It also costs me a fortune to heat that damn pool during the winter."

"Yes, you got a nice swimming pool," Adnan replied with a beaming smile.

"Would you care for a swim? I swim every morning to stay in shape."

"Nah, I'm not much of a swimmer. We never go swimming in Bosnia," Adnan replied weakly.

"Then how do you like the girls?" Sasha said cunningly. His eyes glinted mischievously and added, "They're beautiful, no?"

"They're quite nice. They're not from Montenegro, are they?"

"Of course not! Those girls are from Russia. Mother Russia has some of the most beautiful girls in the world. Those two out there came from broken homes with families who didn't want

them. From the kindness of my heart, I took them in, fed them, and put them to work.”

Adnan burst out laughing and replied sarcastically, “Gee, what kind of work. Do they cook and clean or work in a store and sell cigarettes and beer?”

Sasha joined Adnan's laughter with his own and then added, “Let's just say their specialty is properly taking care of a man. That's their sole purpose in life.”

Sasha started his discourse, “Russian women are beautiful, the most beautiful in the world. Men from around the world fall in love with them. However, some men don't want wives, but just a little hourly session once or twice a week with a sensual, beautiful woman. So I comply with their demands.

Unfortunately, my clientele has demanding tastes. Sometimes, I have clients who fall in love with one woman and will pay to be with her once or twice a week. Unfortunately, this man is rare.

Then I have the other clientele. They try one dish once or twice, and then they want to sample others. I must stock my whorehouses like a lunch buffet. Unfortunately, men get tired of eating the same meat every day, even very good-looking meat. Some days they like to eat chicken.

That's why I am very pleased that you brought that Serbian girl. I have nothing but Russian and Romanian girls working in my brothels. A Serbian girl will add another flavor, a different taste to the menu. I want to keep my clients happy and content, so they keep coming back.”

“Are we talking about girls or food?” Adnan asked in jest.

“A man needs both to survive, so why not put the two together,” Sasha snapped.

Then Sasha reached into his pocket, pulled out a kilo of cocaine and plopped it onto the table in front of Adnan next to his drink.

Adnan reached into his pocket and pulled out 40,000 euros. He counted it and then removed six thousand euros that he placed back into his pocket.

“I believe you and Damir agreed on 6,000 euros for the girl.”

Sasha stared at him while his eyes radiated a fierce energy.

“C’mon, man. Damir said you would pay six thousand for her.”

“She’s not worth six thousand. Perhaps, five thousand.”

“You know she will generate a hundred times that in cash.”

“If you don’t like the price, I can have my guards place her into the trunk.”

“Alright, alright. Five thousand it is.” Adnan reached into his pocket and counted out a thousand euros. And then he handed it to Sasha.

Sasha grabbed the money and slid it into the large pocket of his pants while Adnan slid the cocaine into his coat pocket.

“Agreed! Thank Damir for the Serbian girl. I owe him one.”

Sasha glanced back at the pool, and then he turned to study Adnan's face.

“Which girl you like out there? Please don't be shy. That's my specialty. I don't want any hard feelings between us.”

Adnan picked up his drink and took a greedy sip, glancing at the two women above the rim of the glass. Then he replied, “It's hard to say. From here, they both look good. I need a closer inspection.”

Sasha jumped out of his chair and strode to the sliding glass door, quickly opening it. He clapped his hands together, “Girls, come here, now! Chop! Chop!”

Two blondes slowly stood upon their feet while their perky breast curved outward.

They both walked to the table and slowly put their bikini tops on. They were not embarrassed as Adnan gawked at their exposed natural breasts. Then they turned and faced Adnan.

Beads of sweat formed on Adnan's face as he became excited. His male organ began to throb and grow eagerly.

Two hot women walked into the den and stood directly across from Adnan. They both placed their right hand on their hips,

thrusting their hips forward, displaying themselves, like a fine slab of meat.

Adnan's crooked smile crept back across his face as he examined up and down their bodies, a wine connoisseur searching for every flaw in a good batch of wine. His male organ throbbed strongly.

Sasha stood next to one of the blondes, using his hand to trace the contour of her body, "Look at her exquisite, hour-glass shape. Look at the supple, natural breast. No silicon, my son. This is all natural. This one here is Svetlana, and that one is Olesya."

Adnan became a little excited. Now, he understood why Jasmin loved coming to Budva. Sasha was the perfect host. You do something good for Sasha, and Sasha will do something good for you.

Sasha pleaded for an answer and asked, "Which one do you like?"

Girls swayed their hips.

Svetlana began sliding her index finger in and out of her mouth rhythmically, slowly, erotically.

Adnan pointed to Svetlana, the more petite blonde with an innocent-looking face. She was so supple and gentle, sliding her finger in and out of her mouth.

"I like the way she looks," Adnan said while his right leg twitched up and down excitedly.

"Good choice! Svetlana is one of my best. Svetlana, you know what to do!" She came over demurely and softly grabbed Adnan's hand. She pulled him off the couch. Then he followed her to a bedroom upstairs.

Svetlana stood in the center of the bedroom while Adnan slammed the door shut, locking it. She knew the drill. This was no romance, no love, no relationship. This was pure, animalistic, hedonistic sex. Svetlana earned the most for Sasha and, with her price tag, men never romanced her or seduced her.

Svetlana looked at Adnan and saw a large barbaric oaf. She knew he probably would not use protection on her like the other men. She had to adjust to no condoms while her clients planted their seeds into her fertile field.

Both Svetlana and Adnan removed their clothes and tossed them on the floor near the bed. Within seconds, both Svetlana and Adnan lay naked in bed together.

Adnan rudely pushed her onto her back and quickly mounted her. He began thrusting hard and wide, while the whole bed rocked back and forth along with her.

Svetlana closed her eyes and pretended she enjoyed it. She moaned and groaned to Adnan's rhythmic barbaric thrusts. She performed her role perfectly, making sure she did not bruise a man's childish ego. One complaint to Sasha, and he would beat her with a belt.

After fifteen minutes, Adnan finished and rolled off her. He instantly fell to sleep on his side, facing away from her.

Svetlana lay back and closed her legs and whispered, "That was fast, big boy. What, no stamina?" Then she struck Adnan's back with her knee.

A loud, long fart blew like a trumpet from Adnan's ass.

Svetlana quickly frowned and jumped off the bed and slipped into her clothes. She quickly scurried out of the room and headed for the bathroom down the hall.

She shook her head back and forth and pouted a little. She remembered when she was a little girl in Russia, and all the other girls made fun of her tattered, hand-me-down clothes in school. She dreamed she would escape the poverty and destitution of her village.

Now, she wore beautiful, expensive clothes. Sometimes she ate at expensive restaurants and rode around in expensive cars, but why did she feel so empty? Why are these rich men and gangsters so rude, so disgusting, so thoughtless? She dreamed of leaving this world behind and traveled to a new world filled with better quality people. How could she start over again?

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## Chapter 11

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I looked both ways before stepping out of the front door of the Bosnian University of Management. I didn't want anyone I knew to see me.

I killed two people today, and my hands and arms trembled in fear, while the Smith and Wesson, tucked inside my dress pants, felt like an ice pack against my skin.

Although the sun was shining, a freezing wind howled as I began walking down the street. It was around noon and many pedestrians walked along the sidewalks. I tried to blend in, so no one would recognize me.

I exhaled plumes of mist, as my breath froze in midair. I walked to the center of town by the water fountain, now covered by a thick tarp.

Sadness tugged at my heart as I looked at the bench where Yelena and I first kissed. At this moment, three teenage boys sat at our spot, playing and jostling each other.

I felt the rage boiling in my veins at Yelena's kidnapping. Rage melted and faded away my fear. I will go to Montenegro and find my girlfriend.

As I made my along the street, I saw the Serbian church where Yelena and I attended every Sunday afternoon. Memories of Yelena and me attending church for the first time flooded my mind...

After I had made love for the first time with Yelena, we bonded together, becoming inseparable. Yelena called me one Sunday morning and asked me to meet her at the Serbian church. I happily complied.

That Sunday was a typical fall day. Green leaves were transforming to bright reds, yellows, and browns. That day was not too chilly, and I only donned on a brown leather coat.

As I approached the church, the bells began chiming. The last of the parishioners entered the church, closing the large, thick wooden doors. Then I saw Yelena standing to the door's side.

Yelena's smile broadened as I approached her. She wore a purple blouse with splashes of bright colors, and a pair of blue

jeans. She pulled her dark hair backed into a braided ponytail. Her black high heels let her stand a little taller.

I looked at the church in awe. The front of the church had a soaring narrow tower that jutted five stories tall with an onion dome on top. On both sides of the tower were smaller towers that were only three stories tall with onion domes. On top of the domes were long skinny crosses that reached for the heavens.

I quickened my pace to a jog and grabbed Yelena in a sweeping, loving embrace. I hugged her firmly and whispered, “Hi, beautiful. I’m glad to see you.” Then I kissed her on the cheek.

Yelena whispered, “Hi Keith,” and pulled away from my embrace. Her face reddened from embarrassment. She said, “Not here, Keith.”

Yelena pointed her index finger towards the sky and added, “Not in front of God’s house. You must wait until after church.”

Yelena didn’t wear a jacket, and she felt a little cold, so I removed my jacket, wrapped it snugly around her, and took her hand. I gestured for Yelena to walk in first as I held the door open.

The chorus of the congregation filled the cavernous hall inside the church. There were no pews, and all the parishioners stood during the service. Yelena grabbed my hand and led me to the far left side.

I stared at the beautiful church with its frescoes of Biblical scenes painted along the walls. The trim around the windows and the crown molding were painted gold, while the walls were painted a pastel blue. Where the three towers stood, I gazed at the open space that reached the onion domes. Under every onion dome were frescoes of angels in the clouds.

The front altar was very elaborate. The priest stood in front of a long table filled with religious objects, many of them golden in color. He also lit numerous candles on gold candlesticks on the table.

I looked above the altar and saw a large statue of Jesus Christ nailed to the cross that jutted from the wall. He was gazing up at the heavens, asking God to forgive us.

Then the chorus became quiet, and the priest started his sermon in Serbian or Bosnian or Croatian, depending on which ethnic group one claimed to belong. The three ethnic groups spoke the same language but their pride demanded that they call their particular dialect their own.

The priest began chanting and held a tall shaft that contained a small bowl with a burning incense. As the priest chanted, he bobbed the shaft up and down, causing the incense smoke to weave convoluted patterns in the air.

I glanced over at Yelena. She smiled at me, squeezing my hand tighter. Then she mouthed the words, "I love you." I blushed a little; then I repeated the same words to Yelena, "I love you, too."

Once the priest ended his sermon, the congregation began to hum the chorus again. Yelena tugged at my hand and led me to the back of the church to a small altar.

A large portrait of the Virgin Mary holding a baby Jesus hung on the wall over the small altar. In front of the portrait was a large stand that held a tray of white sand. People pushed tall, skinny candles into the sand and lit them while saying a prayer to Jesus. I counted 50 flickering candles.

I saw what Yelena wanted. I deposited a one-euro coin into a wooden box near the altar and grabbed two new, unlit candles. Then I handed one to Yelena, and I kept the other one for myself.

Yelena lit that candle using one of the flickering candles and pushed it into the sand. She closed her eyes, and her lips mumbled in prayer. Then she completed her prayer by making the sign of the cross over her heart using her right hand.

I followed suit and placed my candle next to hers, but didn't say a prayer or make a wish. This religion thing was new to me. Then we both exited the church quietly.

Yelena and I walked towards the center of town. When we walked at least a block away from church, I pulled her softly under an oak tree, embracing and kissing her, while leaves floated and swirled to the ground around us, with a fall breeze that tried to cool our moment of hot passion...

I returned to reality as I walked past that tree and continued to the church. I opened the heavy wooden door and entered. The priest had switched off all the lights, leaving it dark inside, empty, devoid of people.

My footsteps echoed loudly. An old woman kneeled in front of the main altar, in heavy prayer.

I approached the small altar in the back, where the painting of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus hung on the wall. Today, only 10-lit candles flicked at the altar.

I instinctively grabbed two unused candles, lighting them, and pushed them into the white sand. I made the sign of the cross over my heart as I mumbled a prayer. Please God, let me find Yelena. That is the only thing I want in this world. Amen.

I turned to leave but stopped. I forgot my donation to the church. I reached inside my coat pocket and retrieved a ten-euro note, slipping it into the donation box.

I walked towards the hospital where I parked the car. My stomach started growling, but I ignored it. I kept walking imperviously to the cold wind that blew in my face.

The skies darkened as the clouds hid the warm sun, and the snow pelted the ground again. Walking past the Bosnian University of Management, I didn't stop to read the marquee as I passed by.

I started feeling weak, like I was ready to pass out. Although I did not want to eat, I knew I must eat, or I would end up at a hospital.

Then I walked to the hip and modern Zaffe Café, located next to a high school, right around the corner from the university. Perhaps it was not a good choice. Students from the university could be there, but I had to get something to eat. I knew the café served an assortment of drinks and a variety of national dishes, especially my favorite – Bosnian pizza.

As I walked through the door, I smelled pizzas baking in a brick oven heated by hickory wood. The wood imbued the pizza with complex sweet bacon flavors.

I walked by the showcases in the front filled with bureks. They reminded me of cinnamon rolls, but I knew they were not

rolled in cinnamon and sugar. The rolls were stuffed with potatoes, beef, or cheese, or any combination of those ingredients.

I sat down at my usual table near the front door. The waiter immediately smiled at me when he saw me. He quickly approached my table and politely asked, "Sir, what would you like?"

I paused for a moment. Then I stated nonchalantly, "I'll take a cappuccino, a pizza with ketchup, and a beef burek, please."

"Okay, sir," the waiter replied, and he quickly turned to get my order. After several minutes, the waiter placed the food on the table.

I sat in deep thought as today's intense events flashed in my mind like lightning strikes in a storm cloud. Although my stomach continued to growl ferociously, I ate slowly, mechanically. I would cut a slice of pizza and use my fork to push the slice around in the ketchup, taking my time. Then I would slowly chew that piece.

I had to chew and swallow slowly, trying not to remember Jasmin's face melting away, or the awful taste in the back of my throat after puking.

A young woman with a high pitch voice shrieked, "Dr. Swanson."

I turned and saw three of my students standing next to my table. I should have known better. I picked the worst spot to have lunch.

Although I had taught thousands of students, I always recognized my good ones bad from the sea of faces. These three were my excellent students.

"Hello," I responded in utter surprise.

"May we join you?" Elmira asked politely.

"Please sit down," I replied in a pretend jovial mood, but not sure if I pulled it off. I had one hell of a day, and I still had at least another nine hours before tomorrow officially started.

Then before I knew it, my three students, Emir, Elmira, and Alma were sitting around the table, occupying the vacant chairs. I taught them international finance last semester.

Emir, the male student, started first, “Thank you, sir, for the course. We learned a lot. Will you be teaching us next semester?”

I looked down at my food. I sliced a piece of the burek, stabbed it with a fork, dipped it in ketchup, and started to chew it slowly in my mouth. I politely held my index finger in the air to give me a chance to chew my food.

After an awkward silence, Alma reiterated the same question with a concerned voice, “Sir, will you be teaching us next semester,” as her eyes became watery and filled with sadness.

I sipped my cappuccino to wash down the burek. Then I cleared my throat and said, “I’m so sorry. The university president and I have a communication problem, so I’m no longer employed at the university.”

The students shrieked in unison “WHHHAAATTT?”

“I’m not sure why, but my services have been terminated. Damir was quite adamant. He doesn’t want me at the university.”

“If it is not so rude, may we ask what happened?”

I stretched back in my chair. I glanced at each student's face, letting out a long sigh. Then I added sadly, “To be honest, I’m not sure what happened. I know my services are no longer required at the university. Damir will find my replacement.”

“What did Damir do to you? He didn’t threaten you, or beat you up did he,” Emir asked politely.

“Damir and I don’t see eye to eye, so one of us had to go. It’s his university, so I’m the one who must go. Unfortunately, Damir and I cannot work out our differences. We are two different people with opposing strong personalities,” I said slowly without emotion, looking down at the table when I said it.

Elmira, the shy one, spoke up, “You’re not the first to have a problem with Damir. I remembered last year when I spoke to an English professor during office hours. We were going over the problems I missed on the exam. Then Damir came in angrily and fired her, yelling at the top of his lungs. Afterwards, Damir returned a couple of minutes later to apologize, because he realized no other professor could teach her courses. Unfortunately, Damir acts before he thinks. We’ve lost many good professors because of him.”

Everyone sighed at the table, feeling horrible. Even Damir's foolish stupidity didn't raise our spirits – his firing and re-hiring a professor after he discovered no one else could teach her courses.

I began again, "I know you're good students. I'm truly sorry, but I can't return to the university. I don't have a problem with you guys, but I must move on. Trust me, if it were not for Damir, I definitely would teach you guys again next semester, but Damir has made it impossible for me to stay."

I sipped my coffee again and added ominously, "Besides, I wouldn't worry about Damir. He has some serious problems at this moment. I'm sure I'm the least of his worries."

Students stood up and each one grinned sadly. Then they shook my hand one by one. Then they left the café quietly.

I shoveled a couple more slices of burek into my mouth, and then gulped down the rest of my coffee. I slapped a five-euro note onto the table and headed for Jasmin's car.

I drove and drove until I found my way to Montenegro. I kept seeing memories of Yelena flash in my mind on the long desolate drive. I didn't know it, but I drove along the same road that Adnan had taken 12 hours earlier.

I reached the Montenegrin border at 8 o'clock in the evening.

On the Bosnian side of the border, the Bosnian officials didn't care. The officials stayed in their red metal container, playing cards and drinking coffee.

One officer glanced at me through the window and waived me through. Only the next Bosnian War would force him out of the safety of the storage container.

On the Montenegro side, the customs officials were much tougher.

As I pulled up to the booth, a customs official barked, "May I see your documents and license?" She stood next to the booth, holding a clipboard. Her demeanor was strict and direct, meaning all business.

I didn't understand because she asked in Serbian. Giving her a quizzical look, I replied in English, "I don't understand."

"May I see your documents and license?" the female officer repeated in English with a thick accent.

"Yes, ma'am."

I pulled my license and passport out of my wallet and then grabbed the papers from the glove box. I didn't know whether the car was legal. My hand trembled slightly as I handed her the papers. I closed my eyes and prayed they wouldn't search the car.

"Is this your car?" she demanded.

"No, it's my boss' car," I mumbled.

"For whom do you work?"

"I'm a professor at the Bosnian University of Management. I must pick up a delivery in Bodva."

I opened my wallet and retrieved my business card. Then I handed the officer the business card with my name and university logo on it.

The officer checked the documents and matched the name to the driver's license, passport, and then to the car documents.

She raised her eyebrows and asked, "Whose car are you driving?"

"It's the university's car. The main driver, Jasmin, is dead tired, so the president asked me to get the supplies."

She continued, "Did you mean Budva?"

"Sorry, but yes."

"You are the second person today to go to Budva from your university."

"Oh," I replied in surprise.

"Sir, may I ask you to exit your vehicle and leave the keys in the ignition."

I slowly climbed out of the car and moved three feet away from it. My mind raced a thousand miles per hour because I had almost forgotten the drugs in the trunk. I looked around to see where I could run to, but damn, it was barren up there.

Then beads of perspiration formed on my forehead as I felt the gun's weight, tucked in my pants. Although my heavy winter

coat hid the bulge, I shivered from the gun's metal like an icicle melting in my crotch.

I begin shivering in fear as the full extent of my crimes struck my consciousness.

The female officer placed the documents and clipboard down on the hood of the car and began searching the driver's side of the car.

A male officer on the other side turned on his flashlight, searching the backseats of the car. Then the female officer pushed a button in the glove box, and the trunk clicked opened.

Both officers approached the trunk and peered inside. The male officer used his free hand to pick up the carpeted cover to the spare tire.

My heart skip a beat, and I almost fainted. Then the officer dropped the cover back into its place and slammed the trunk lid. Male officer exclaimed officially, "The car is clean."

The female officer studied me. I turned pale white while my fingers twitched nervously. I rubbed my sweaty hands on my trousers, regaining my composure.

"Sir, are you okay?" the female officer examined me, squinting her eyes.

"Well, no. I haven't been feeling well. I think I'm coming down with the flu. In all honesty, I also came down to get some rest in Montenegro and relax in a warmer climate. I figured it would help with my flu. Perhaps I'll find a girl, too."

The male officer began smiling and repeated, "A girl, huh?" The female officer shot him a nasty, sour look. Then she returned my driver's license and documents. I climbed back into the car.

"Oh, before you go. You must pay a road tax. Five euros for four weeks."

I absently handed the officer a five-euro note, and the officer placed a sticker on the inside windshield of the car."

The barricade rose upward, and I drove through and entered Montenegro. The male officer waved good-bye and said, "Have fun in Montenegro. Don't be too greedy. Just find yourself one girl and leave the other ones alone!"

I drove and drove and arrived in downtown Budva around 10 o'clock. Driving past a large hotel, I pulled into the parking lot. I didn't think clearly, because I parked the car in the front, so anyone driving through the downtown area could spot the car.

I opened the trunk, pushed the spare tire out of the way and grabbed the drugs. Then I slipped them into my coat pocket next to the money. As I walked to a hotel, my pocket was ready to burst from the heavy weight.

I started sweating in my warm winter coat as a soft tropical breeze blew off the coastal waters while evening temperature hovered above freezing.

I made it to Montenegro. It was time to find my girl.

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## Chapter 12

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Yelena was stranded somewhere in the twilight between sleep and reality. Memories swirled in her mind, giving her a little vertigo. She knew Keith would never find her, nor rescue her. She had to take action in her hands, but what could she do with one grenade?

Yelena knew the kidnapers snuck her out of Bosnia. She saw the healthy orange trees growing in the courtyard with their dark shiny green leaves and the luscious orange fruit dangling from the branches. The orange trees would never survive the harsh Bosnian winters. She knew she was somewhere farther south, possibly as far south as Greece.

Then dreams of her father entered her mind. She hadn't thought of him in years...

As a little girl, he enlisted in the Serbian Army. She only remembered he was very big man, and he was a mechanic before the Bosnian War.

Yelena remembered running up to him, when he came home from work one day. The sun was shining; the sky was a deep blue, and birds were chirping as they perched in the trees. She ran to him with her outstretched hands as she saw him walking up to the apartment building.

Her father reached down to her and lifted her up to the sky. Yelena tried so hard to reach and grab the sun, but before Yelena could grab the sun, her father wrapped her in his arms. Then he lowered her to the ground and tickled her belly.

Then the Bosnian War started, and her father enlisted in the Serbian military or the Yugoslavian military depending whom you ask.

Yelena and her mother were stranded in Bosnian country, in the remote town of Tuzla. Its population had doubled over night as the refugees fled the war zones, somberly trekking there to escape the war's atrocities, with only the shirts on their backs.

Every day, Yelena sat on the couch with her mother's loving hands wrapped around, and they would listen to the radio.

They listened for news about her father and the War, hoping it would end soon, and he would return.

He sent letters home at least once a week. Her mother read the letters so often, they became worn, and started to tear along the folded creases. To this very day, her mother kept those letters, hiding them inside the pages of the thick family Bible. Then the letters stopped coming, and Yelena and her mother became worried.

Yelena learned her father died on January 14, 1994. The Serbian military conquered and captured most of the Bosnian cities except the cities around Tuzla. Tuzla was the last stronghold. The Serbian Army made its push to Tuzla, but it had to conquer Olovo, Bosnia.

The Bosnian army fought back bravely and stopped the Serbs at Olovo, Bosnia, a tiny town with 3,000 residents, sandwiched between Tuzla and Sarajevo. That place became the final resting spot for Yelena's father, where the army buried him in a grave along the mountainside with thousands of other soldiers.

After the Bosnian War had ended in 1995, her mother and Yelena took their first trip to Olovo on a Spring day. As the bus traveled around the mountainous roads, a cold rain fell to the ground. From the bus windows, she saw trees returning to life, and valleys of the Balkan Mountains were brimming with flowers and the fragrance of reincarnated life.

As the bus traversed the long, winding mountain road down to the valley to the center of Olovo, Yelena saw the vestiges of a nasty war, and she shivered at the city's destruction. She saw Olovo had three towering apartment buildings in the center of town that stood 20 stories tall. Soldiers shot out every window in the apartment building along with every window in or near the city. Every building wall was covered with pockmarks from the flying bullets. Here and there, a mortar blasted a gaping hole into a building while bullet shell casings and cigarette butts littered the ground everywhere as soldiers on each side tried to massacre the other side. Thousands of soldiers lost their lives for the Siege of Olovo.

Yelena and her mother walked to the end of town in a long procession. Her mother clenched her hand tightly as they walked and walked.

All Bosnians and Serbs were paying homage to their dead relatives that spring. The procession walked slowly, quietly, under the soft drizzle of cold rain. They approached a pass between two tall mountains.

Yelena looked up at the sky. Rain clouds were floating dark cotton balls, hiding the mountain peaks from view. Then she saw the two cemeteries. The Serbian cemetery started from the pass and went up the Southern mountain, while the Bosnian cemetery went up the Northern Mountain.

Then the procession divided into two lines: Bosnians and Serbs. Even in death, the Serbs and Bosnians refused to mix their races. Survivors buried the two races separately from each other as each race floated to their separate Heaven and to their separate God.

Yelena saw row after row of white crosses that marked the Serbian graves. Each cross had the buried soldier's dog tags draped around it. Some crosses were replaced with carved marble tombstones while other spots were bare as families exhumed the remains and reburied their relatives closer to home.

Yelena and her mother walked up the mountain in silence. They felt a cold rain pelting the ground and heard the weeps from the kneeling sobbing mourners. Occasionally, a mourner would cry out in despair.

Yelena and her mother continued walking along every row. Her mother read every name off the soldier's dog tags as they traversed row after row.

Yelena glanced upward to see how far the cemetery stretched up the mountainside, but she couldn't. A thick wall of fog shrouded the upper portion of the cemetery.

Halfway up the mountain, Yelena and her mother found his grave. Her mother started sobbing loudly while her tears sprinkled the ground along with the raindrops. Yelena quickly joined her as she recognized her father's name on the dog tags, Slobodan Backovich.

Her father shared the first name of Slobodan Milosevic, the leader of Yugoslavia and Serbia who triggered the wave of Serbian Nationalism, and sparked the Bosnian War. Yelena knew her father's name, Slobodan, means a 'free man' in all Balkan languages.

Since that time, Yelena's mother scraped and saved every penny she could save, because she wanted to replace that white cross with a beautifully carved marble tombstone.

Every spring when Yelena was young, Yelena and her mother would make the sojourn to Olovo to mourn the death of her father. As Yelena became older, the trips became less frequent. Then they altogether stopped when Yelena turned 20 years old...

Then Yelena awakened with a stir. She quickly sat up on the bed and remembered every little detail of her dream. She hadn't dreamt of her father in years, and she remembered every minute detail of the cold, rainy, spring day when she first saw her father's grave.

Yelena cried out, "Dad! I may be coming home to see you. If I do, please wait for me. I miss you very much."

Then she fell asleep. Her dreams turned dark and ominous as she ran in the dark while something kept chasing her. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't escape from that thing that was behind her.

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Adnan awakened several hours later. After he had screwed the Russian blonde, he fell asleep, sprawled out across the bed.

He scanned the room for the woman, but she had left a while ago. For a minute, he thought she was a foggy fragment of his imagination, but then he smelled her faint, pungent perfume that clung to the air and bed sheets. Then his smile widened.

Adnan snatched his cell phone from his pants pocket and called Damir to check in. He had to let Damir know that Sasha screwed them out of a thousand euros. He became anxious because

the phone rang and rang, but no one picked up. Damir always answered his cell phone, especially from his war buddies.

Adnan glanced at his watch, almost 5 PM. He couldn't believe he had slept so long, and the boss didn't answer his phone.

Then Adnan called Jasmin. The phone rang a couple of times, and subsequently, a feminine Bosnian recorded voice stated, "The person you are calling has his phone turned off or is out of service range. Please try again later."

Adnan muttered to himself in frustration, "What the fuck?" A foreboding feeling tingled up the back of his spine and chilled the base of his mind. Something felt wrong. He knew that sometimes Jasmin didn't answer the phone, but Damir always answered. Something was wrong. Adnan always could contact one of them, always.

Adnan leaped out of bed and hastily dressed. He glanced at the shower in the bathroom and quickly dismissed it. He should wash off the whore's scent, but he shrugged his shoulders. To hell with it, he must return quickly to Bosnia. He must check up on Jasmin and Damir. They needed him.

Before Adnan could leave, Sasha's bodyguards directed Adnan to the back patio near the enclosed swimming pool.

Sasha donned a flamboyant bright purple shirt with black pants. These rich young Russians dressed in bright flashy clothes that were fashionable a decade ago.

Two hot Russian blondes sat on both sides of Sasha. They both wore black cocktail dresses that fit the contours of their bodies, revealing the women's smooth, milky skin. They glanced in Adnan's direction and looked away, quickly losing their interest.

A cold, calculating Sasha had replaced the earlier friendly Sasha, and he snapped, "Please sit, my friend."

Adnan sat down in the vacant seat directly across from Sasha. Then he stared at Svetlana.

With a blank face, Svetlana pretended not to recognize Adnan, although they mated earlier that day.

Adnan searched her face for any emotion but found nothing. Svetlana seemed not to recognize him. Then Adnan contorted his face in a crooked smile.

Knowing what was going on, Sasha glanced at Adnan's face and then Svetlana's.

A large silver tray laid in the center of the table with a concentric layer of beef prosciutto laid out, like overlapping dominoes. "Ah, you have my favorite. You have prosciutto!" Adnan stated in a cheerful voice.

Adnan pushed his empty plate next to the tray, and used his fork to scoop all the slices of meat onto his plate like a bulldozer. He left the sliced cheeses and green olives behind. Then he began to shovel the meat into his mouth with his hands.

Sasha snapped his fingers, and a butler rushed to the table and immediately poured Adnan a glass of Montenegrin red wine.

Svetlana frowned a little as she watched him guzzling his meat down, like a sea lion swallowing fish after fish at the zoo. Then she sipped her glass of wine, but Adnan spotted her distorted grin behind the wine glass.

Sasha said, "The prosciutto is excellent. I also import Russian sausages and cheeses, which are also good,"

After everyone had finished eating, Sasha cleared his throat, "Ladies, go upstairs and get ready for tonight. You have a long shift in front of you. Before you leave the house, Svetlana, please check up on our new guest. I want to make sure she's okay. Prepare her a plate of food."

Svetlana grabbed a clean plate and began filling it with a sample of everything on the table. Then the ladies disappeared into the house.

Adnan and Sasha sat alone at the table while Sasha's bodyguards patrolled in the darkness, scanning everything around the house.

Adnan looked behind him and saw a large bodyguard standing sentry ten meters away.

Sasha began, "I saw the smile you gave Svetlana. Don't sweat it. She's nothing but a fuck toy, nothing more, nothing less. Of course, she is a very expensive fuck toy. She normally goes for 300 euros per hour. Of course, I hope you didn't plan to marry her or something. That would be dangerous to steal my cash machine."

Adnan almost choked on his food and then burst into a short, soft laugh. Afterwards, he replied, “No, of course not. I have several Bosnian girlfriends scattered around Tuzla. I just wanted something other than Bosnian. She’s definitely not Bosnian. I’m just confused because she pretended not to recognize me, even after I put my cock into her a few hours ago.”

Then Sasha laughed coarsely and added, “Now that we have our carnal pleasures satisfied, let’s talk about business.”

Sasha became serious while his eyes shone with icy coldness. Then he began his discourse, “I’m thinking about expanding my operations to Sarajevo. I want to open several brothels in Sarajevo and sell a little cocaine on the side. We can go into partnership with each other. Damir can supply his other drugs. Then we’ll carve up the territories, so we can extract as much as we can from Bosnia.”

Sasha took a sip of his wine and then continued, “I’m planning to import more talent and muscle and enroll them into Damir’s university. That way, they have legal papers to live and work in Bosnia. The university is a perfect cover. Who would ever suspect a university concealed a major criminal enterprise?”

Adnan’s face became blank and expressionless. Damir warned him about this coming day. Damir knew Sasha would not be content to stay in Montenegro. Eventually, Sasha would reach out with his slimy hands into other countries, like Bosnia.

Adnan knew his Bosnian history well. The Russians always caused problems. A few people in the world knew the Soviet Union created the Yugoslavian war machine. Joseph Tito, the first leader of the Communist Yugoslavia, didn’t construct a military to fight Western Europe or America. Tito built up the military to stop a Soviet invasion. Tito wanted to share his communist paradise equally with Russia, but the Russians wanted to control everything and make all communist states subservient to Moscow. Tito stopped the Soviet aggression with a strong military, a military that led to the nasty Bosnian War.

Adnan knew the Russians invited themselves as friends, and then they took over and ruled with iron fists.

Although his heart began racing and became more nervous, he answered in a mechanical voice, "I must discuss this with Damir. I can't do anything without Damir's approval."

"Of course, I understand. By all means! I hate to discuss business over the phone. That's why I waited until you arrived. Have Damir reply with a yes or no. Just remember, we can make an insane amount of money together. We can carve up Bosnia and become extremely rich men."

Adnan didn't buy a word of Sasha's business proposal. He knew the Russian way of doing business. But he must maintain appearances. He didn't want to piss Sasha off or incite a bitter feud or at least not yet, especially with a person standing behind him holding an AK47.

Adnan raised his wine glass for a toast, "We give a toast to a new business deal. Shall we become rich and grow old together, we'll become the new kings of Yugoslavia."

Then their glasses clinked together, and they gulped down their red wine.

Adnan knew better. This business expansion would lead to war. Damir would not stand to let another gangster enter Bosnia. A war was simmering in the underworld, and the body count would be massive.

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Svetlana entered Yelena's room. She laid on the bed with her face buried in the pillow. She was not sleeping, but she was lost in deep thought. Her cheek pulsated shades of red, where Sasha smacked her.

Svetlana placed the plate of food on the vanity. Then she pulled the chair away from the vanity and sat across from Yelena. Svetlana wanted a heart-to-heart talk with her. She began in a suave, smooth voice, "Hi sweetie, my name is Svetlana."

"What do you want?" Yelena replied with icicles forming in her breath.

"The boss wants me to talk to you. He wants to put you to work as soon as possible."

“I’m not a whore!” Yelena screamed, and then snapped, “I would never sell my body for money.”

Svetlana scolded, “You don’t understand the position you’re in. Sasha is more than a boss; he owns you. You’re his property. He can do anything he wants with you. If you’re smart, you will wise up and go with the program. If you cause problems, then Sasha will tie you to heavy bricks and toss you into the sea. You’ll disappear, and nobody will know where you are buried except for Sasha. So you wise up!”

Yelena looked up from her pillow, and she glared at her guest.

She repeated, “Just go with the program. Montenegro is a beautiful country. You get to go shopping, stroll along the seaside boulevard or ride around in a Mercedes. Sasha will take good care of you. You just let the men do what they want with you. So what if you sleep with a couple of men every day. Just lie on your back and think happy thoughts. Just let your mind go somewhere else. Then once they’re finished, you can enjoy Montenegro. Sasha can be a good master if you obey him and work hard for him. That’s the key to staying on Sasha’s good side. You must work hard for him, so he’ll take good care of you.”

Yelena’s face reddened in anger. She screamed, “I’m not a whore! I don’t have sex for money.”

Svetlana smiled, knowing the first few clients are the toughest. After a week, Yelena would harden as her inhibitions disappeared. She would go with the program. She’ll lie on her back, open her legs, and let any man have his way with her as long as he paid for it.

Svetlana reached out and caressed Yelena’s arm gently and continued, “I know you don’t like it. I can understand. When I first came to Montenegro, I didn’t like it either, but I had no choice. I could’ve ran away and made my way to the Russian Embassy, and begged my government to send me back. I, unfortunately, don’t have anything to go back to. My father is a helpless alcoholic; my mom was placed in a mental hospital, and my brother joined the Russian navy to escape our depressing little town. You see;

Montenegro is not so bad after all, especially if you don't have anything to go back to."

Yelena looked up at Svetlana and stared into her eyes. Her anger subsided a little, but her voice was still obstinate, "I can understand your situation, but I'm not you. I do have someone, and I love him very much, and he loves me. I have someone to return to."

"What?" Svetlana asked in a confused voice. A very unusual story, Svetlana inquired further, "What do you mean that you have someone?"

"His name is Keith. He teaches at a university in Bosnia. We fell in love with each other."

Svetlana noticed the faraway look in Yelena's eyes when she said 'Keith.'

"His name is not Slavic. It sounds like English or American," as Svetlana probed further.

"He's an American."

A surprised look swept across Svetlana's face. She glanced up and down Yelena's body. Svetlana was certain she pegged Yelena for a simple Serbian girl, whose bruises and scars faded from the constant fights and drama of a dysfunctional family. Svetlana knew Yelena was not an ordinary Serbian girl who would choose prostitution rather than return to her family.

Svetlana leaned closer and asked, "How'd you find him?"

"I didn't find him; he found me. I work at a coffee shop in Tuzla, and he asked me out."

Svetlana declared more as a statement than as a question, "Wow, what are the odds of that happening? He sounds like an educated man who happened to wander into a small coffee shop and by chance fell in love with the waitress. It sounds like a Cinderella story."

"I know. It just happened." Then the tears began flowing from Yelena's eyes as she began to think about Keith again.

Svetlana's calculating mind began churning. One thing better than living in Montenegro was finding an American husband, especially an educated, sophisticated, successful husband. She knew about the U.S. divorce courts as all Russian women

know. The law doesn't care how long the marriage lasted. Once the man says 'I do,' the wife becomes entitled to at least half his assets and sometimes more. Svetlana heard a couple of women from her hometown that did exactly that. They married American men and cleaned them out. Perhaps they left some dirty rags under the kitchen sink, but the women took everything else of value.

Svetlana asked sweetly, "May I ask you a personal question?"

"What's the question?"

"How did you arrive in Montenegro?"

"I was waiting for Keith, and these two goons grabbed me and kidnapped me," Yelena moaned, with tears streaking down her face and added between sobs, "Then the next thing I know I'm in a car trunk, and here I am, at this house."

"I'm so sorry," Svetlana said with sincerity. She knew Americans were many things, but the men never sold their girlfriends to the mafia for a little cash. But she knew some Russian men would not hesitate to sell their mate into sex slavery: *Hey honey, let's take a vacation down in Turkey? I know this great spot. You'll love it there and never want to leave.*

Svetlana hugged Yelena and whispered into her ear, "Look; I'm going to take care of you. Please trust me." Then she let go and said, "Please eat and then freshen up a little."

"Wait, don't go yet, Svetlana," Yelena mumbled.

"I apologize, but I must work tonight. I must go down to the hotel for the night. Can I get you anything else?"

"I'm dying for a cigarette. I haven't had a cigarette in days."

"Well Sasha doesn't like it when we smoke. Some clients are so particular about their needs. I'll see what I can do."

Svetlana knocked on the door. Once the door opened, she left the room for a couple of minutes and quickly returned. She placed two Montenegrin cigarettes and a pack of matches into Yelena's eager hand. The brand was Royal Red, and the Montenegrin's double-headed eagle proudly stretched its wings across the front of the pack.

Yelena smiled slightly.

“Please, blow your smoke out the window. I don't want to get into trouble with Sasha. He imposes very strict house rules. He can be a bastard if you break them. Before I go, can I ask you one last question?” Svetlana asked kindly.

“Yes, by all means.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Yelena Backovich.”

Then Svetlana hugged Yelena tightly, and she knocked on the door to leave Yelena's room.

A large bodyguard peeked into the bedroom holding Svetlana by the arm. Once he spotted Yelena, he nodded his head and let Svetlana go. Then he latched the door shut and returned to his chair to read his magazine.

Svetlana saw Sasha standing in the hallway outside of Yelena's door with a mischievous glint in his eyes. He started to unbutton his shirt, getting ready to break in the new girl.

Svetlana approached Sasha and sweetly embraced him. Then she whispered into his ear so the guard would not overhear, “Sasha, she's not ready. That long trip in the trunk messed her up a little. I would give her a couple of days. A couple of days of rest will make the wait worth the while.”

Sasha frowned like a bad boy being punished from playing with his favorite toy.

Svetlana started caressing his crotch and added, “I tell you what. I'll do that thing you like. I'm always ready for you, Sasha. You're the only man who can satisfy me.”

Sasha pushed Svetlana's hand away. Then he ordered, “Svetlana, you need to work tonight.”

Svetlana started caressing his side and after a minute, her hand was back in Sasha's crotch.

This time, Sasha closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

Svetlana whispered, “Sasha, I still have time. Besides if I am a little late, then I can stay over and work a little over time.” Svetlana kept massaging Sasha's crotch while Sasha gritted his teeth in pleasure. Then she led Sasha away from Yelena's room and into Sasha's bedroom.

Svetlana smiled as she led Sasha away. She smiled because she didn't love her job, but she had protected Yelena. Yelena would be safe tonight. She knew nobody touched the new girl until Sasha had his way with her first. Yelena would become her ticket out of this place, a ticket to a better way of life, far away from Montenegro and Sasha.

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Adnan leaned against the hood of the car, smoking his favorite brand of cigarette, *Bosna*. He looked worried. He frantically called Damir and Jasmin, but they weren't answering. Something was wrong. For the first time in his life, Adnan became worried.

He drove the car 30 miles into Bosnia and parked on the side of the road behind the abandoned building. Adnan pulled over because he needed a cigarette. The nicotine would soothe his nerves. He inhaled another puff from the cigarette and held the smoke in, utilizing the smoke to wash the nasty after-taste in the back of his mouth.

Adnan wished he had showered at Sasha's place and brushed his teeth. Although Svetlana was beautiful, clean, and tasted good when he made love to her, as he kissed her up and down her neck and breasts. Now his taste buds had soured. Svetlana left a bad taste in his mouth like food poisoning. The food tasted good going down but then the food turned rancid and bitter as the microorganisms began thriving and growing in the stomach.

Although Svetlana was a 300-euro whore, Adnan shivered in fright, thinking how a 50-euro whore would taste, or which diseases she would leave behind on his body.

The sun had disappeared over an hour ago, and Adnan had a clear view of the road, hiding behind the brush and the abandoned building.

Then Adnan saw an approaching, sleek, silver car while its headlights slicing through the darkness, illuminating the road and surrounding countryside. As the car passed, he recognized

Jasmin's Czech Skoda. However, Adnan didn't see the driver, who seemed smaller than Jasmin in size.

Adnan quickly called Jasmin again, but Jasmin's cell phone was switched off. Then he called Damir, and Damir didn't answer his phone.

“What the fuck?” Adnan shouted angrily.

Adnan flicked his cigarette butt onto the ground, jumped into his car, and followed Jasmin's car into Montenegro.

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## Chapter 13

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My dreams were horrid, as darkness surrounded me. Something was out there. As I ran away, I shot at shadows and followed it with obscenities, but I could never escape. That thing kept coming. I kept running, shooting, and screaming.

Then my eyes flashed open and the dreams melted slowly away. Sweat drenched my body, and I knew. I just knew more people were going to die.

I felt the morning sun warm my exposed hands and arms, blinding my eyes. I sat up confused. Yesterday's events were hazy, confused, like looking through a dirty window, to recover the memories lost in my mind. Then the window opened, and the memories rushed backed. I had driven to Budva, Montenegro, to search for Yelena. I had also shot and murdered Jasmin and Damir.

I scanned the hotel room. I didn't bother to tuck myself under the bed sheets. I lay across the bed, wearing my yesterday clothes.

Although I parked the stolen car at an expensive hotel, I walked around late last night until I found a small hotel near the shore. This hotel was located on the peripheral of the city. Blinded by the darkness of the night, the hotel appeared to be clean, but a little too small. Now the morning sun showed the hotel room's true colors. It was old. Numerous guests had worn down the shag brown carpet by walking from the bed to the door. Around the light switches, the paint had become stained from the many fingers that rubbed against the wall, as they flicked the switch on and off.

I slid out of bed and approached the window. I saw the waves crashing on the rocky shoreline below. Then I glanced back at the bed; at least the bedspread and sheets were clean. Apparently, twenty euros per night didn't buy much in Budva, Montenegro.

I placed the old Smith & Wesson on the nightstand and stacked the ecstasy on the dresser like a pile of bricks near the TV.

I searched the room for a hiding place. Then I noticed the heavy dresser. I pulled it from the wall and saw a small cavity at the bottom, where I slipped the drugs and gun into this tight space. Subsequently, I scooted the dresser tightly against the wall.

I didn't intend to walk around Budva with a gun and drugs on me, but I kept the 20,000 euros in my coat pocket.

I quickly showered and put on the same clothes that I wore yesterday. I did not even bring a toothbrush. I used the warm water to rinse out my mouth and utilized my outstretched fingers of my right hand as a comb to straighten my hair.

I wasn't too concerned about my appearance. I just wanted to blend into the crowds, undetected. I didn't come to Montenegro to party or pick up girls. My only mission was to find Yelena. Someone held her captive here, somewhere in this big, coastal city on the Adriatic Sea.

I left the hotel and walked around the downtown until I reached Old Budva, a five-hundred-year old castle which the residents converted into a shopping mall. It had twenty-foot high walls with turrets spaced every 50 feet. After passing through the gate, I walked along the cobblestone streets and read the names of the various coffee shops, clothes stores, restaurants, and nightclubs. My shoes click-clacked on the cobblestones, while the scrapes from my footsteps echoed along the stone walls.

I walked aimlessly around the streets, hoping to bump into my girlfriend, but it never happened. I never saw Yelena anywhere in Old Budva. While I walked, my stomach growled furiously.

Around noon, I sat at a coffee shop and ordered a sandwich and a Montenegrin macchiato. I felt a rush as the heavy cream carried the jolt of caffeine, while it coated the walls of my stomach.

As I ate and drank mechanically, I noticed two beautiful blonde women shopping in the store next to the coffee shop. They were boisterous and loud. One blonde picked out a slim dark-blue dress and some sexy black lingerie.

After finishing my meal, I stood up to go. The two loud blondes approached me. Then the petite blonde with an innocent-looking face bumped into me, dropping her bag.

I mechanically picked up her bag and handed it to her and apologized, "I'm sorry." Then I walked away before the woman replied in a heavy Russian accent, "Thank you."

I walked around Budva for hours and hours and saw no trace of Yelena. Then I glanced at my watch, almost six o'clock, and I made no progress. I let out a long sigh and continued walking near the large expensive hotel downtown.

Walking by the 10-story, five-star hotel, I noticed a couple of bellhops standing sentry at the front doors. They wore their formal red jackets and crimson caps. I remembered what Karl said how to find the brothels. Just ask the bellhops or the taxi drivers. They know their city well. They cater to the whims and demands of their customers.

I shivered and trembled and reddened a little because I never asked a stranger about brothels. So I kept walking. Then I spotted an approaching taxi. I flagged him down and subsequently, I jumped into the back seat, slamming the door shut.

“Where to, buddy?” the taxi driver inquired enthusiastically as he studied me in his rearview mirror.

“I’m looking for a little companionship,” I replied softly while my complexion reddened more like embers of coals ready to flare up again.

The taxi driver scanned me up and down by tilting his head, while looking through the rear-view mirror, with his mind calculating a fare for his service. Then he said, “Ah, you came to the right place. I know the place for you. What’re you look for? Blondes, ravens, Russians, Romanians, you name it. They’re somewhere in this city. Each have own price.”

“A Serbian woman,” I replied in hope.

“You’re in Montenegro, so plenty of Serbian women are here. Montenegro was part of Serbia before it broke away after the Bosnian War.”

“I was hoping for a brothel, one that caters to high-paying clientele.”

Taxi driver turned his head to take another stern look at me and shook his head apologetically, “You need connections for that type of brothel. Those brothels only serve the rich clientele. You’ll never get in unless you know someone. Someone must vouch for you.”

“Then what do you suggest?” I asked, looking down.

“I could take you to Silicon Valley. It’s located on the eastern part of the city against the mountains. It’s a small area, a city within a city, where you can satisfy all your desires.”

“Silicon Valley? Why do they call it that?”

The taxi driver started chuckling and then apologized, “I’m sorry, sir. We’re so used to that term that we sometimes forget about outsiders. We call it Silicon Valley because all the women get breast implants. In Silicon Valley, all you see are luscious hills and hills made from silicon.”

“Okay, that sounds good, I guess. I should start somewhere,” I reddened a little more. I leaned further back into the seat, so the driver wouldn’t notice me.

The driver studied me and asked, “You look like you’re new to this.”

I turned and began looking out the window.

“That’s okay. That’s the way to go. You go with the flow and have a little fun. The girls can spot a newbie, and they’ll know what to do.”

Taxi driver drove straight along a small road. The he turned right for a block, then a left for two blocks.

I became a little nervous thinking the taxi driver was driving to an isolated area to work me over for a greater cab fare. I looking around the seats for a blunt object – anything I can use for weapon, but the cab was clean. Then I clutched my hand on the door handle, ready to spring if the driver did anything suspicious.

After ten minutes, the driver stopped and pulled to the side of a road near a rundown neighborhood. Then he turned and uttered, “We’re here, sir, Silicon Valley.”

I watched in awe from the back car window. I saw many scantily-dressed women walking up and down the street. Occasionally, men would drive by in a car, yelling catcalls and gesturing lewdly towards the ladies.

I handed the taxi driver a 10-euro note.

He cleared his throat, “Excuse me, sir.” His hand remained in place with the euro note still lying on the center of his outstretched hand.

“I guess that wasn’t enough.” Then I added two more 10-euro notes, forming a small pile on the taxi driver’s hand.

He clenched the money and replied, “Thank you, sir. If you need my services again, I’ll park over there by the bakery shop.” Then he pointed to a shop a block away while he stuffed the money into his front shirt pocket with his other hand.

“Thank you,” I said and exited the cab.

I never saw anything like this. It was a miniature Amsterdam. As I strolled along the street, young women, barely wearing any clothes, sat on stairwells to apartments, smoking cigarettes. They turned their heads and stared at me as I walked by. Many women stood in doorways, and the doors were slightly ajar with red fluorescent lights spilling onto the streets. As I passed by, a woman would raise her leg, showing me how smooth and creamy and inviting her legs were.

I kept walking, avoiding the desperate stares. I guess foreign johns pay better than the locals.

As I walked by a large apartment building with large bay windows, a woman opened the curtains to her apartment window and flashed me her goods. She wore translucent lingerie that revealed her chiseled, firm body. I looked away.

I kept walking and approached an older woman standing in a doorway with the door partially opened. Several red candles flickered as the salty sea breeze blew through her small apartment.

As I walked by, the prostitute asked, “You want a girlfriend for tonight,” in a thick heavy Russian accent.

I turned to study the middle-aged woman, who appeared to be in her late 30s. Although still attractive, she looked worn down from the rough street life. She was an old Chevy truck that could take a beating.

I looked down at my feet and replied, “Perhaps I am,”

The prostitute pushed her door open all the way and exclaimed, “Please come in. I’m at your service.”

I entered the room and sat down on the edge of her bed. I noticed the red thick heavy curtains, the red bed sheets, the red chair cushions. Several red candles were scattered around the

room, flickering. I noticed the prominent color in the room was red, the color of hot passion, love, and uninhibited gratuitous sex.

She shut the door and pushed the curtains completely closed. She turned to me and demanded, "One-hundred euros, for one hour. You must pay up front." Then she held out her eager hand, waiting for that money.

I lifted myself from the bed and pulled a leather wallet out of my back pocket, opened it, removed 100 euros and handed it to her. Then I snapped the wallet closed and pushed it into my jeans pocket.

The prostitute quickly examined the money and then deposited it into a locked metal box on top of her dresser. Then she began taking her clothes off.

I scooted to the bed's edge, looking down, not paying any attention to her. She stopped as her underwear dangled around her knees and looked at me, "Don't you want to have sex?"

"No," I snapped and added, "I just want to talk. I'm not here to have sex with you."

She had an exacerbated look on her face. She studied me, thinking I was a raving lunatic with an axe hidden in my winter coat.

"I just want information. Please sit down."

She put her clothes back on, sat down on a chair, and stated suspiciously, "It's your money. If you don't want sex, then I guess that's your problem. Then let's talk for an hour. You paid for it."

I noticed a bowl of pears on the bed stand. I wondered if she were bored with a particular john, would she reach over, grab a pear, and eat it during sex.

She snapped, "What do you want to talk about?"

"Just hear me out. I know this is an unusual request, so I'll start from the beginning. My girlfriend was kidnapped from Tuzla, Bosnia. I believe my boss kidnapped her and sold her to some person named Sasha in Montenegro. I came down to get my girlfriend back. So, I'm asking you for any information. Do you know where I could find her?" I said with my voice pleading for any knowledge.

“I’m sorry. I know nothing about this. Women here in Silicon Valley are independents. We just pay the police a little hush money, so they leave us alone. We’re not connected to any crime families here. Crime families own the upscale brothels here in Budva. They make much more money from the rich businessmen and government officials. Here in Silicon Valley, we service the workers who can scrounge up a little money and need a little loving from time to time.”

I pleaded, “I believe Sasha is Russian and your accent sounds Russian.”

The prostitute’s face turned ghostly white. She looked away.

“You know Sasha, don’t you?”

She reached into the top drawer in the dresser, pulled out a bottle of water and began sipping it.

“C’mon. You know him.”

“Perhaps.”

“Who is he?”

Then the prostitute replied, “I don’t know his name, but a new Russian gangster came to Budva. He’s bad news. Rumor is he’s into drugs, prostitution, gambling. You name it. If he can make money, he’ll be making it. I heard several people disappeared without a trace. I don’t want to be next.”

“How do I find him?”

“Trust me; you don’t want to find him. He’s somebody you do not want to be friends with. You don’t want to know him or know anything about him.”

“But I have to. I want my girlfriend back. Please, tell me where I can find him. I believe Sasha has her. My evil boss sold her to him.”

“I’m not really sure. I do know someone who’s not happy with Sasha. He might know. Perhaps he can help you.”

“Who is he?”

“I can’t give you any details, but he might be interested. I can refer you to him. He used to be a big shot here in Budva until the Russian took over the town. He’s a Montenegrin, and I used to work for him a couple of years ago.”

“Okay, I would like to meet him. How do I find him?”

“You don’t want to meet these people. Trust me, they’re dangerous.”

“But I need to. I want my girl back.”

The prostitute reached into the dresser drawer, pulled out her lighter, and lit a cigarette.

After she exhaled, she said, “Go to the Renaissance Night Club tomorrow night and ask the bouncer you need to speak to Senad. Perhaps, Senad will see you. Perhaps he won’t. I’ll contact Senad tonight and let him know you’re coming. He’ll check on you before he meets you. What’s your name?”

“Why do you need to know my name?”

“Then I can’t help you.”

I let out a sigh and replied, “My name is Keith Swanson. I’m a professor from America.”

“I need to see some form of identification? You cannot trust anyone these days. Unfortunately, everybody lies in my profession,” the prostitute demanded as she stuck out her empty hand.

“What? Do you work for immigration?”

“Then I can’t help you.”

“That seems a bit too much.”

“How do you Americans say it: I’m putting my neck on the line?”

I pulled my passport from my coat and handed it to her.

She scribbled my name and birth date down on a small piece of paper. Then she scanned the other pages to see where I’ve been. She handed me passport and replied, “Thank you very much, Keith. I’ll make sure I pass this info to Senad. He might help you, or he might not.”

She glanced at the clock on her dresser and added, “We still have some time; do you want to have sex?” Then she pulled her bra down and pressed her breast together like a pet owner dangling a special treat for her dog.

“No, I can’t. I’m in love with another woman. I’m sorry.”

The prostitute reached out to caress my shoulder, enticing me to stay.

“C’mon Keith. She’ll never know. She’ll never find out.”

I quickly ran out the prostitute's apartment and scampered away from Silicon Valley. I had seen enough for one night.

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## Chapter 14

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Svetlana and Olesya were walking along the cobblestone streets in Old Budva, through the old castle. They finished their shopping for the day and planned to return to Sasha's mansion.

Olesya started, "Why did you intentionally bump into that guy at the coffee shop?"

Svetlana replied innocently, "Oh, it's an accident!" Next, she began to giggle and purposely bumped her hip into Olesya's side.

Olesya joined in the laughter.

"Besides, he's a foreigner. I thought I could improve the odds. I smelled a little romance in the sea air."

"You're scandalous, Svetlana!"

"Could you actually marry a foreigner?" Olesya said with a gleeful smile.

"Of course!"

Then Svetlana leaped several steps ahead, turned to face Olesya, and thrust her hips seductively, running her hands up and down her sides and exclaimed, "I'm hot. Look at this body! Any man would be happy to have me."

"We're both gorgeous, but do you think any man would marry us? We don't have glamorous professions."

"Oh, will you stop? It's not like I'm going to list my occupation on a resume. Besides, men are stupid creatures. I'll just say I couldn't stand my rich boyfriend in Montenegro, so I ran away, leaving him. I'll start a new life in another town."

"Yeah, but that guy at the coffee shop looked poor. Didn't you see his clothes? He smelled like he hadn't showered in days."

"So what if he's poor. If he could take me to America, I would still marry him. Besides, how many Russian men shower regularly?"

They stopped walking and began laughing loudly. After the laughter had died down, they continued walking to the car.

Svetlana started talking in a serious tone, "You know, Olesya; we only have a few good years ahead of us. We don't have a good retirement plan. After we become too old, Sasha will kick us on to the street or bury us somewhere in an unmarked grave."

Sasha will find younger, prettier Russian girls to replace us. Besides, I have no intentions working in Silicon Valley. Could you imagine us standing with those nasty whores on the street, selling our bodies?"

Olesya shivered at the thought of standing on a street corner, luring in the johns. She asked, "Why did you buy that new girl a dress?"

"Why not? I have a feeling she'll become my new best friend. I wanted to buy something nice for her."

Olesya turned to study Svetlana's face, "You're up to something? Don't deny it."

"Will you stop!"

Although Svetlana displayed her innocent puppy-dog face, Olesya didn't buy it. She shrieked in a suspicious voice, "You can stop the sad-puppy look. I know you're up to something. I don't know what, but you're up to something. You're never nice to people."

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Adnan followed Jasmin's car to the parking lot in Budva at the only five-star hotel. He pulled the car over on the street and watched Keith Swanson climb out of the car and walk away. Then Adnan began thinking. How in the hell did Keith steal Jasmin's car? Jasmin loved that car, and he would never let anyone touch it, let alone drive it. Keith is too weak to overpower Jasmin.

Adnan parked his car and followed Keith on foot until Keith checked into the Las Palmas Hotel, one of the local dives in town. Although Adnan was not rich, he would never stay at that hotel.

Adnan walked behind the hotel and found a beach chair. He sat in the chair and smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, watching Keith's room. Around three in the morning, Adnan walked to Jasmin's car, popped the hood, and pulled the sparkplug wires out. Then he returned to his car to sleep. Unfortunately, Adnan had only 30 euros to his name and could not afford a hotel for the

night. He thought about using Damir's 5,000 euros, but Damir would kill him if he spent any of it.

Adnan parked his car several blocks away from the old castle of Budva near a park. He slept in the back seat by resting his head against the hand-rest on the back door and lay on his back. He was too big to sleep in the back seat completely stretched out, so he slept with his knees bent. His back screamed furiously, as shots of pain climbed up and down his spine, whenever he scooted a little.

Adnan woke up in the car around noon as the sun shown overhead. He jerked his head up and looked out at the marina filled with yachts. He climbed out of the car, stood up straight, and stretched his back for several minutes, easing the screaming backaches.

Adnan reached for his phone and called Jasmin, whose phone was still out of service range, and then he called Damir, who didn't answer. Next, he reached for a cigarette and started smoking.

Adnan didn't have a full night's sleep last night. As he leaned against the car smoking his cigarette, he saw the two women he met at Sasha's yesterday. Svetlana, whom he screwed, carried a shopping bag. He waved to her as a satisfied grin appeared across his face after seeing one of his conquests.

Svetlana stuck her nose in the air and pretended not to see him. Adnan muttered to himself, "Fucking whore!"

Then the ladies drove away in a sleek red, E-Class coupe Mercedes. Olesya drove, while Svetlana sat on the passenger side. As they drove past Adnan, they glanced at him and began giggling. Then Olesya stomped on the gas pedal and sped away.

Adnan flicked a half-ass wave while his grin widened, and he scratched absently at his crotch, but the women didn't acknowledge his presence. His cell phone began to ring. He quickly flicked his cigarette onto the park's lawn and fished the cell phone from his pocket.

"What the fuck is going on?" Denis screamed. Denis, the chief investigator worked in the Tuzla police department for

twenty years. He was Adnan's contact, and he supplemented his income to look the other way.

Adnan felt sick and placed his left hand on his head in confusion. Then he asked, "I don't understand? I've been in Montenegro for the last two days." The voice in the back of his head kept screaming, "What the fuck? What's going on? Who's doing this?"

"I went to the drug house yesterday. An arsonist burned the house to the ground. We had to wait this morning before we could comb through the ashes. We found a body in the rubble. We are not sure who it is, but from his size, it looks like Jasmin. Then an hour ago, I was called to the university. One of the staff members found Damir in his office. Someone shot him in the chest. We also found a small quantity of cocaine in his office."

"Oh shit! This is bad!"

Denis screamed, "YES THIS IS BAD! I don't have enough authority to contain this. The Bosnia government will investigate these crimes and demand I arrest the perpetrators. The mayor of Tuzla just found about this. He's demanding answers from the police department. A line of reporters is standing outside the university, asking questions about Damir. So, do you have any information about this?"

"Like I said, Damir sent me to Montenegro on an errand. I've been here for a couple of days. I don't know what's going on, but I'm following some leads."

"Then you may want to stay there for a while until this investigation blows over!" CLICK, then the call went dead.

Adnan kicked the car's tire hard with his boot while muttering, "What the fuck?" Then he opened the trunk to his car and popped open the secret compartment that contained his gun. He slipped the Zastava pistol into a shoulder holster and zipped up his jacket.

Adnan lit a new cigarette and began pondering about Keith. He appeared weak, but he turned into something much more. Keith became a much fiercer opponent, and Adnan had been looking for a challenge for quite some time. He clenched his right hand into a fist and smacked the palm of his right hand several times.

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Svetlana returned to Yelena's room. She brought a fresh plate of food and placed it on the vanity next to the plate she left Yelena last night.

Svetlana noticed Yelena barely touched last night's dinner and said sweetly, "Yelena, you needn't starve yourself."

Then Svetlana sat on the chair near Yelena again and placed the bag of new clothes on the bed next to Yelena.

Yelena sat up. She smiled a little at the bag and then kicked the bag away from her.

"Please don't be that way," Svetlana pleaded, "I'm here to help you. You have won me over to your cause. I want to be your friend."

While tears formed in the corner of her eyes, Yelena shrieked, "Then please take me home. Take me away from this place."

"I can't. Sasha will kill me. You ask the impossible."

"I don't want to stay here. I want to be with Keith."

"I know you don't want to be here. At the moment, I'm powerless to help you. In a way, I'm trapped here too. I'm Sasha's prisoner, too."

"I see you bought me clothes, so Sasha must let you leave the house. He doesn't keep you locked up in a room."

"Of course, Sasha lets me leave, but I always return to him. Honestly, I have nowhere to go. I have little money, no passport, no documents, and I don't intend to return to Russia. I'm trapped here just like you, and the bastard knows that."

"Then why are you talking to me? Why are you trying to be my friend?"

"Believe it or not, I want to help you. For me to help you, you must help me. In all honesty, I want to leave this place too, but I must ensure I can get away safely. If Sasha knew I tried to escape, he would kill me and use my dead body as an example to the other girls. So I must be careful."

“How can I help you then? I have nothing to give you.” Yelena said with a puzzled look on her face.

“Like I said before, I have nowhere to go. I have no money, but if I knew someone could help me get away, then I would take a chance. Don't let me sound materialistic, but does Keith have any money?”

“I don't know. He's a professor. He probably makes more than a teacher. I know he's considered rich in Bosnia, but I never asked him. Money never interested me.”

Svetlana's eyes bulged out while she opened her mouth wide. She always sized up a man's net worth. The size of a man's wallet was more important than the size of his manhood. Then she studied Yelena closely. She was a weird bird indeed, not a typical poor Russian girl who is ready to clean out any man who flashes a little money.

“Look, I'll help you, if you promise you'll help me. Does Keith have enough money to help me to relocate? Can he help me buy a new life, a new life far away from Montenegro and Sasha?”

“If I had to guess, then he probably does have some money, but I never asked him.”

Svetlana fished a pen and a small notebook from her purse and handed it to Yelena, “Then write down his number for his cell phone. I'll try to call him tonight.”

“Can you call him now? I want to talk to him,” Yelena pleaded.

“No, I can't. I must talk to him alone. I must be very careful. If Sasha finds out what I am doing, he would kill me. Then he would kill you, too! Sasha kills anyone who disrespects him.”

Yelena quickly scribbled Keith's number on the paper and handed it to Svetlana. She then tore the paper out of the notebook and folded it into a small wad, slipping the wad of paper into a secret pocket located inside her bra. Usually, she stuffed money in that pocket, but today, she stuffed her escape pass for Sasha's prison.

Svetlana stood up and hugged Yelena, and then she kissed her cheek, “Please eat, Yelena.” She placed a couple more

cigarettes into Yelena's eager hand, then left, taking last night's dinner plate to the kitchen with her.

Svetlana stood at the kitchen sink, scraping Yelena's old dinner with a fork into the trashcan under the sink. She turned on the water faucet, grabbed a sponge soaked with dish soap, and began scrubbing the plate.

Someone snuck into the kitchen and quickly approached Svetlana, embracing her from behind. She dropped the plate into the sink and stepped backwards to push away the rude advances.

The eager hands grabbed Svetlana's shoulders.

Svetlana yelled, "Stop it."

"No. You're mine."

"Sasha, please not now. I'm not in the mood."

"I am, so it's not my problem."

Svetlana grinned and closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Sasha's serpent-like fingers snaked and glided along her back.

Her nose itched a little from the chlorine scent covering Sasha's body. He must have completed his morning swim. Sasha began fondling her breasts. She kept her eyes closed and tried to push the mental picture of snakes out of her mind. Sasha's hand brushed accidentally over the wad of paper in her bra.

Svetlana had turned quickly before Sasha realized what he had touched. She started kissing Sasha's neck, ensuring she did not kiss anywhere near Sasha's lips. He would become furious and beat her black and blue. Sasha hated kissing lips. He considered that nasty.

Svetlana continued to kiss his chest, covered with luscious black hair. Then she worked her way down to his crotch area. Sasha thrust his hips forward in throbbing waves of ecstasy as Svetlana performed fellatio on him. Then he opened her skirt, and made love to her on the kitchen table.

Svetlana lay back, opening her legs wide, smiling, letting Sasha have his way with her. She didn't smile from sexual pleasure. She realized her life would be changing. Hopefully, in another week, she'll begin a new life, a life devoid of men and their sick sexual depravities.

After Sasha finished, Svetlana wouldn't let him leave. She wanted to wear him out. She seduced him repeatedly until he couldn't take it anymore. She wanted to dry him up like a withered prune.

After the third time, Sasha pulled away and put his bathrobe back on. He hollered, "Damn girl! What has gotten into you? You're insatiable!" He glanced down at Svetlana as she smiled and wriggled her body seductively.

Sasha turned and stormed out of the kitchen before Svetlana could seduce him again.

Svetlana continued to lie naked on the kitchen table for a few minutes as perspiration covering her skin around her breast and abdomen cooled. Most of the perspiration came from Sasha.

Svetlana continued to smile, lost in deep thought. In another week, she can walk away from Sasha and never see him again. She'll be free. She wasn't giving him good-bye sex. She wore him down so he would leave the new girl alone. Svetlana was protecting her one-way ticket out of the underworld. She crossed her fingers that Keith had better have some money. That ticket for freedom would not be cheap.

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## Chapter 15

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Svetlana headed for the parlor in the *Hotel de la luxure*, the most exclusive brothel in Montenegro. She walked through the entrance of the hotel and then through a large foyer with a circular staircase that meandered to the second floor.

The three heavily armed guards standing by the front door watched her pass by. Svetlana walked past the Madame who stood observantly behind a desk near the lower steps of the staircase.

The Madame glanced at Svetlana and then clocked her into the logbook laying on top the counter. Then she scanned the room for more traffic.

Svetlana wanted to go to her personal room on the third floor, but she knew the Madame would deduct that time from her shift.

Svetlana entered the parlor – a spacious room with a full bar along one wall on the right side, a large stone fireplace, and several French provincial couches forming a semicircle in the middle of the room. Several women sat on the couches or at the bar drinking water. They could only drink Champagne or wine when a customer bought them drinks.

Svetlana shook her head. The parlor effused opulence, wealth, and class. Burning wood in the fireplace would cackle and hiss, heating the room during a winter Montenegrin night. Women sat and waited in this room listening to classical music. Some dressed in French-maid uniforms, while others wore slim, provocative dresses. When they weren't working, they had to stay in the living quarters on the third floor – closet-sized rooms with mattresses laying on the floor.

Johns arriving to this place must have money. Sasha's finest brothel in Budva was not cheap entertainment. Sasha stocked his business with Mercedes and Lamborghinis. If a john wanted a Ford Escort, then he would hop in a taxi and ride over to Silicon Valley.

Svetlana went to the bar to wait for her next customer. The johns would arrive at the hotel and mingle with the available women in the parlor. Here, conversation was free, but, after the john had selected his woman or women, they headed to the

Madame who tabulated his bill. Then the Madame would hand a key to a suite on the second floor.

Svetlana liked the johns who would drop a little money. They would book a luxurious suite with a king size bed, a Jacuzzi, and a fully-stocked bar. Of course, Svetlana knew many customers were cheapskates. They just wanted sex with a beautiful woman. They rented the basic room with a bed, a tiny bathroom, and two complimentary bottles of water.

As Svetlana sat down, the bartender placed a glass of Russian Champaign in front of her. He stated, "From that gentleman right over there."

Svetlana raise the glass for a toast, looked at the man across the room, smiled at him, and took a sip. She studied his face, and he looked vaguely familiar, but she was not sure. Besides, she has been with so many men; she couldn't remember their faces anymore. All men pretty much look the same and pretty much do the same thing in bed. Once in a while, she would get a surprise from an eager gentleman but that was a rare occasion.

The man gave a half salute and then continued talking to one of the woman sitting on the couch. He held out his hand and helped her stand up. Then they walked out of the room.

Svetlana muttered, "I guess not tonight." She continued drinking her wine.

Boy, she had a busy night. By 11 o'clock, she entertained one Montenegrin government official and two old businessmen. She tilted the Champaign glass back and greedily swallowed the remaining, sweet bubbly contents.

Svetlana walked to the foyer and headed to the ladies' room. The Madame looked at her and snapped, "Where are you going?"

"The toilet."

"Don't spend too much time in there." Then the Madame donned a fake smile as a john with another woman approached the counter.

Svetlana walked into the bathroom and walked around the bathroom looking for occupants. She opened the two stall doors and saw they were empty, making sure she was alone in the

bathroom. Next, she locked the bathroom door, went to the last stall, and sat on the toilet. She grabbed the prepaid, untraceable cell phone from her pocket, the one she bought at a newsstand kiosk. She turned on the cell phone and activated it.

Then Svetlana dialed Keith's cell phone number. It rang once, twice, a third time, and subsequently a groggy, "Hello!"

Svetlana hesitated for a few seconds.

Keith repeated "Hello" several more times while each hello became stronger and more frantic.

Then Svetlana asked, "May I speak to Keith, please."

"This is he. May I ask who is calling?" Keith asked in a groggy, confused voice.

"We have a mutual friend, Keith. She's worried about you, and you're worried about her."

"YELENA! WHERE IS YELENA?" Keith screamed into the phone.

In case, someone stood outside the bathroom door, eavesdropping on her conversation, Svetlana soothed and whispered, "Keith, please calm down. I have no time for a long conversation."

"Where is Yelena? Is she okay? Is she alive?" Keith demanded with his voice rising.

She whispered slowly, "At this moment, Yelena is fine. She's doing well."

"When can I see her?" Keith demanded.

"I need to have a private conversation with you in person, and not over the phone. When can you get to Montenegro?"

"I'm already in Budva, Montenegro."

"Really, when did you get here?"

"Yesterday, I came to search for Yelena."

"Keith, I can't talk long. First, you're not to contact the police. Besides, my employer has several policemen on his payroll anyway. This will put Yelena's life into danger. Second, I want you to meet me at the coffee shop in Old Budva at 11 o'clock. Come alone. Go to the first coffee shop to the left after you walk through the main castle gates. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Keith replied in a cheerful voice.

“Make sure you get a table in the back and away from the street.”

Then Svetlana hit the button to disconnect the call. She didn't believe what she did. Her heart raced a little while her palms became sweaty.

Then Svetlana turned the cell phone off, slipped it into her purse, and flushed the toilet. Afterwards, she went to the mirror and dabbed a little makeup on.

Then Svetlana returned to the parlor. She still had another two hours of work. If she were lucky, she could sit quietly at the bar and drink a little more.

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I couldn't believe my luck. Someone has confirmed Yelena was still alive. She was still okay.

I slept soundly that night and then ate a full breakfast the next morning. I felt energized. I knew Yelena and I would be reunited once more. I couldn't wait to see her and scoop her into my hands in a tight embrace.

I went to that coffee shop an hour early and waited. I found the perfect table in the back of the shop.

Around a quarter past eleven, I spotted a pretty blonde walk by the coffee shop. I glanced at her because she seemed so familiar.

She walked by several more times from different directions. Then she glanced hastily in my direction and then quickly scanned the other tables. Then she darted for my table.

Svetlana stood in front of me, looking confused, scared. Then she asked, “Are you Keith?”

“Yes, I am. You must be that mysterious girl who called me last night.” I studied the woman while gears in the back of my mind turned and turned, trying to dig up buried memories of this woman, and why she seemed familiar.

Svetlana sat down with her back to the street. She picked up a menu and perused it. Then she snapped her fingers together

loudly to attract the waiter's attention. She ordered an Earl Gray tea with a dash of lemon and honey.

Svetlana started the conversation first, "At this moment, Yelena is fine, but we must move fast. My employer is extremely dangerous."

I interrupted her, "I know. His name is Sasha, and I've heard a lot about him."

Svetlana raised her eyebrow in surprise, "Very well. I see you're well informed. How did you learn his name?"

"Let's just say his business partner told me his name before he had an accident."

Svetlana raised her eyebrows suspiciously at me. I knew what she was thinking. How could a nerdy, weak professor take on the hardened dangerous criminals of Montenegro?

I hesitated for a minute and added, "Do you think if I gave Sasha some money, he would return Yelena to me?"

Svetlana laughed sarcastically and uttered, "Yeah, sure. Just walk up to his house, ring his doorbell, and ask him. By the way, I would like to buy my girlfriend back. Once he stops laughing, then he'll shoot you, personally."

"I don't see the problem," I pleaded.

"Sasha only plans for the long term. He handles everything through controlled business dealings. Besides, you couldn't afford to buy her back anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"If she earned Sasha 300 euros every night for six nights a week for five years, then we are talking about a large sum of money."

I turned a pale white and spat out a "What?" as more as an expletive than a real question. Then the numbers roiled in my mind, and I blurted, "That's 468,000 euros."

"The sad news is: I'm in the same boat. I will only see a small fraction of that. Plus, I have a terrible retirement plan. Thus, I'm willing to help you both, but it's dangerous for me too. I can sneak Yelena out of the house, but once Sasha finds out, he'll kill me. So I need to escape too. You must help me! I'll agree to help you, if you can help me."

“What can I do for you? How can I help you?” I asked with sincerity as I stared into her eyes.

She stared into my eyes and demanded, “I need money. I need money to start a new life. I need money to get away from Montenegro forever.”

“How much?”

“I think 30,000 euros would cover it.”

“I’m so sorry, miss, but I don’t have 30,000 euros. Right now, I have a little less than 20,000 euros,” I replied, and subsequently, I opened my jacket and partially pulled out the two bundles of blue stacks of money, showing just the edges.

Svetlana's eyes bulged at the size of the money stacks, hypnotizing her, while her curious hand reached for it subconsciously.

I quickly closed my jacket and zipped it up before Svetlana's hand could caress the money.

Svetlana had a faraway, dreamy look in her eyes. Then she continued, “I see. I think I can find it in my heart to accept 20,000 euros. It may be rough, but I think I can do it.”

“Okay, agreed. How do I get Yelena back?”

“That’s the tough part. I’ll find a way to sneak her out. It’ll be tough because Sasha has several armed guards patrolling his house. Once I figure out a way, I’ll call you on the cell phone. You keep your cell phone on and charged. Then you must pick us up. It would also help if you could create a diversion—something that will keep Sasha occupied. He keeps a close eye on everything. I don’t care what you do. Have someone stand outside his gate and shoot at his guards. I really don’t care.”

“Where does Sasha live?”

“I can’t tell you that, not yet. Also, please don’t call me. I can’t have you call me at the wrong time. Just in case, I’ll switch my cell phone off, but I know sometimes a cellphone can turn on as it brushes against something in a purse. Once I have a plan, I will call you, and you must act fast.”

“Okay.”

Svetlana sipped her tea while she kept glancing at me. She kept looking at me as if she knew me.

I blurted, “I think you bumped into me yesterday. You were with some other Russian woman at a store, when I was at the coffee shop that’s further inside the castle.” Then I pointed in the direction of the other coffee shop.

Svetlana began blushing and added, “It’s a small world isn’t it. I vaguely remember bumping into you.”

Svetlana continued drinking her tea. After she had drunk half her tea, she announced, “I’m sorry Keith, but I must return.”

“May I ask what your name is?”

“I can’t. Just call me a friend. Do you want to say anything else to Yelena? She really misses you.”

“Tell her I love her, and I did some really terrible things to get her back. Tell her I lit a candle for us in the Serbian church in Tuzla, the one near the city’s center. She’ll understand.”

“Bye, Keith. Remember, when I call, you must act fast. You must come and get us.”

Then Svetlana gathered her things and quickly disappeared into the noon crowd.

I thought about following her but knew that would be futile. I had no way of busting into Sasha’s house, especially with the armed guards. I didn’t mind dying, but I worried over Yelena’s life. If I died, then surely Yelena would perish, and I had no intentions of leaving Yelena stranded in Montenegro’s underworld. The waiter appeared and placed the bill on the table. The Russian blonde walked away without offering to pay for her tea.

I smirked because I could tell – she always gets what she wants from men. I thought about handing the waiter a hundred euro note out of the stack of money. That way, the mysterious woman left one hell of a tip to the waiter, but my conscience screamed at me not to do this. Sasha also trapped this woman, and she needed the money to buy a new life, so every euro counted.

I pulled out several euro coins and placed them on the table on top of the check. Then I returned to my hotel room.

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Svetlana returned to Sasha's mansion. He fussed over his women's eating habits. He wanted all his women toned, thin, so he hired a professional chef, who prepared Svetlana and Yelena a roasted breast of chicken with slivers of almond, a small mound of mashed potatoes with no gravy, and a tossed salad to the side garnished with a sprig of mint.

Svetlana inhaled her lunch at the counter. Afterwards, she eagerly grabbed Yelena's plate and headed for her room. As Svetlana entered, she saw Yelena sitting at the vanity, fussing with her wet hair. Then she tossed the damp towel onto the floor.

Svetlana sat the lunch down on the vanity and Yelena immediately began shoveling mashed potatoes into her mouth with a fork.

Yelena came out of her shock, and her appetite reawakened. Then she stabbed the chicken with her fork and used a butter knife to cut the meat into small squares.

Svetlana spotted the empty plate from last night's dinner. Yelena was eating again. Svetlana was excited and hugged Yelena tightly, whispering into her ear, "I have good news. I saw Keith!"

Yelena radiated with joy, illuminating the entire room. She dropped the fork onto the plate. Her voice rose with excitement, "Really! Keith is here in Montenegro? Please, Svetlana, don't toy with me. Is Keith really here?"

Svetlana hugged her tightly, "He's actually here. He's in Montenegro. He came here for you and wants you back."

Svetlana hopped up and down, like an excited little girl, and continued, "I arranged everything. I'm going to sneak you out of here. We must be careful. I planned everything meticulously. I must be very careful so Sasha won't find out until it's too late."

Yelena caressed Svetlana's hand affectionately, "Thank you Svetlana. Oh thank you."

Then Yelena's smile soured and asked in a sad voice, "How are you going to do it. I have been studying the guards outside my window. Sasha has 20 armed guards walking around the property with rifles slung over their shoulders."

Svetlana opened her shopping bag and pulled out a shiny dark cocktail dress and a blonde wig, "I went shopping again today

by myself. I figure you're about my friend's size. Her name is Olesya, and she has blonde hair. So, I figure that I dress you up like her and sneak you out tomorrow night. From a distance, the guards wouldn't recognize you."

"Oh, I'm so excited."

Yelena stood up and hopped up and down several times before jumping onto the bed again.

"I know. I'm excited too. I'm a little envious of you. Keith wants you back. He really loves you. He made a romantic gesture in your absence," Svetlana said mischievously, forcing Yelena to beg for this nugget of information.

Yelena pleaded, "Please, Svetlana, don't play with me. What did Keith do?"

Svetlana hugged Yelena again and then added a kiss to the top of Yelena's head. Afterwards, she whispered, "Before he came to Montenegro, he said he went to your Serbian church and lit a candle for you and him at the altar. Then he prayed for you."

Yelena folded her hands over her heart while her cheeks turned a rosy red.

"He really loves you. You're so lucky," Svetlana continued. Then she carefully folded and slipped the skimpy dress and wig into the bag and buried it in the closet under a stack of old shoeboxes, stacking the boxes like bricks over the bag.

"Remember, the wig and dress are in the closet. When I come for you tomorrow night, you put that on. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot, here are more cigarettes. Please don't let Sasha catch you with these." Then she kissed Yelena softly on top of her head again and left the room.

Yelena returned the cigarettes to Svetlana's hand and said, "I don't need these any more." Yelena's cheeks remained red, glowing. Keith came to Montenegro to rescue her.

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## Chapter 16

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I kept my appointment for the Renaissance Night Club and arrived early. The taxi driver dropped me off at the curb. He refused to drive into the parking lot.

As I opened the door, the driver snapped, “Are you sure you want to go in there? I know a much better place, friend.”

I replied, “I understand your concern, but I need to speak with someone here.”

After I had climbed out of the taxi and slammed the door, the taxi driver stomped on the gas pedal, accelerating onto the road, squeaking the tires.

I strolled to the front door where a large bouncer stood next to the door. He frowned at me as I approached. Then I looked up and said, “I need to speak with Senad, please.”

The menacing bouncer nodded his head in approval and opened the door for me. Then he pointed to a group of the tables near the club’s back door.

I gasped for air as the bouncer lifted his arm and pointed in this direction. A bar of soap hadn’t touched the bouncer’s skin in weeks.

I sat at a table for an hour, nursing my drink, a rum and coke. I watched the two ice cubes quickly disintegrate into two white whiskers, floating on top. Bodies gyrated on the dance floor. The Renaissance Night Club had nothing to do with the Renaissance. The customers looked rough, more like a biker bar than something as sophisticated as the Renaissance. Today, the evening tide was high, depositing the floating shit and scum onto the sandy shoreline and into the bar.

I washed the rest of my drink down, and was ready to order another one. The stench escalated as more people found their way onto the dance floor. The place reeked of sweaty leather, cheap alcohol, and old vomit, fossilizing on the dance floor.

Then a large monstrous man, built like a grizzly bear, approached me. He glared down at me and then waved his hand at me, gesturing me to follow. He tucked his dirty hair under a red bandana. I sprang up from my chair and followed in close pursuit.

A large man led me to a back hallway with a single door at the end. Several other sizeable men huddled around the door. As I approached, their raucous laughter and loud voices dimmed to mere whispers. They wore black leather jackets adorned with silver metal pyramid studs, filthy blue jeans, and red bandanas that covered their grimy, greasy hair.

After the large guy and I had reached the door, the large man turned and barked commands at me, "Raise your hands in the air." Then the huge guy proceeded to pat me down, his rude, rough hands searching my body for weapons, like an army of mosquitos searching for the perfect feeding site.

Lucky for me, the Smith and Wesson remained tucked under the dresser in my hotel room. If worse came to worst and no one would help me, I would shoot my way into Sasha's place. Once the large man was satisfied, he opened the door and led me inside.

Another large guy sat behind an old desk while a silent companion stood to his left side. The men stared at me with stone black eyes, filled with intelligence but mixed with a dash of anger and savagery.

I became nervous, thinking I had made a mistake. These guys looked rough. They would have no qualms about beating me to a living pulp, and leaving me to die on a dark, deserted street in the middle of the night.

I sat in an empty chair in front of the desk. The man glared at me. I trembled a little, as my heart began to beat quicker. I tried to talk, but the nervousness drained moisture from my mouth.

I swallowed and smacked my gums a few times, but the words wouldn't come out. They became stuck to the roof of my mouth like peanut butter.

The man behind the desk yelled in sharp angry tones, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Ah, ah, ah," I stammered.

"Well, I'm waiting, God damn it," then the man crossed his arms, glaring at me fiercely. The person standing to Senad's side kept his piercing gaze on me.

I shivered because these men looked menacing, like ex-felons just released from prison. Senad's face was butt-ugly as stubbles of hair protruded from odd places on this face; his brows were one continuous sash; dreadlocks of hair poked from under his bandana, and his face was squished flat. If the man had four legs instead of two, he would be an ugly bulldog.

“I... I... I thought you... could help... meee?”

“What do I look like, a travel agent? How the fuck can I help you?”

I thought about Yelena, and I let out a long sigh. Then I forced the words out of my mouth in one breathe, “My boss kidnapped my girlfriend and sold her to Sasha.”

Man raised his eyebrows a little at the name, Sasha, but he kept silent.

“I believe Sasha is a major criminal here.”

The man replied, “I see we have a common enemy, but I don't understand how I can help you.”

I continued, becoming more confident after each uttered syllable and added, “I thought that since he's your enemy, you could help me. You know that old saying; my enemy's enemy is my friend.”

“I really can't help you. Most people who come to Montenegro have a magical, wonderful experience. Some people don't. Why don't you complain to the Montenegro Tourist Board or go to the Montenegrin police? I'm sure they can help you.”

The man who stood silently burst into laughter. Then Senad joined and laughed at his joke.

“I don't think they can help me. One of his girls had told me that Sasha would not hesitate to kill her. I'm afraid to go to the police.”

Ugly Senad continued, “I understand why you came to me. I checked you out with my contact in the police department, but I don't understand, how can I help you? I don't do charity work. If you look at this place, this place is a shit hole. Sasha took over my business a couple of years ago and pushed me out. I hide here like a scared rat. I can't show my face around in my hometown. If Sasha knew where I was, he would send a couple of goons over to

kill me. Russians are so peculiar about their business. They monopolize everything.”

I wanted to burst out laughing, when Senad said he couldn't show his face around Budva. Having a face like that, the city's animal inspector would capture and euthanize him within an hour.

I hesitated and then I cackled, “I have about 50,000 euros of ecstasy. A person, who made it, told me to bring it here and buy some friends.”

The standing man immediately bent over and began whispering in Senad's ear. Then Senad added, “That certainly changes things. I must discuss this with the crew. Return to your seat in the night club, and I'll give you my decision within an hour.”

Senad came over to me as a gentleman and escorted me to the door. We shook hands, and then Senad patted me on the back as he walked out.

I returned to the nightclub. More bikers, criminals, and sea hags joined the growing, gyrating crowd on the dance floor. They created a strong stench in the nightclub, intensifying along with the humidity level.

This time around, I felt a change in the staff's mood. Before I talked to Senad, suspicious eyes and glances fell on me when I turned my head away. Now I became somebody. Before I asked, a waitress quickly placed a fresh rum and coke in front of me. She yelled above the noise, “It's on the house.”

I took a sip, and the rum and coke tasted better than the last one. I waited for half an hour, and a large guy led me to the office. Senad still sat behind his desk, but three rough looking bikers joined the crowd. They flanked in a semicircle around Senad, leaving one vacant chair for me.

“My friend, Keith, please take a seat. Excuse my rough behavior,” Senad said joyfully. Then he lifted his bottle of beer and guzzled it down. Afterwards, he continued, “I think we can help each other. We can do business together.”

“Thank you, Senad. I was hoping you could help me.”

“We still have a problem. Sasha guards his mansion well. We’ll have trouble driving through the front gate. If we blast our way in, then people will die, including your girl.”

“One of Sasha's women contacted me. She thinks she can sneak my girlfriend out, but the trouble is we need a diversion to keep Sasha occupied. He keeps a close eye on his women and his mansion.”

Senad smiled, “I see. I think we can help you. We can create that diversion for you. If you can get that girl to open the gate before Sasha knows what hit him, then we have a chance. Then you grab your girl and go, and I’ll take care of Sasha.”

All the men smiled and gleamed maliciously, when Senad said he would take care of Sasha personally.

I was happy while Senad and the four silent men stood grimacing. I knew I would get my girl back.

“However, we still have the ecstasy to worry about. You give me the drugs tonight before we plan anything. Is that acceptable to you?”

I hesitated and thought about it for a minute, and then I replied, “That’s fine by me. You can have it.”

“Very well! Faruk will accompany you back to your hotel to get the drugs. Once he authenticates it, then the plan is a go. We’ll help each other. You can get your girl, and I can get rid of Sasha. And Montenegro will be mine again.”

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I couldn’t believe how smoothly the plan was going. Faruk and I returned to my hotel within twenty minutes. Maybe things were going too smoothly.

I pulled out the dresser and began removing the drugs, placing them on the dresser. Faruk's eager hand grabbed the first packet. He opened it and sniffed the contents. Then he removed a vial with a clear liquid and dropped one of the white pills into it. Afterwards, he snapped the lid back on the vial and vigorously shook the bottle. The pill instantly dissolved.

I remained kneeling on the floor by the dresser. I kept my left hand under the dresser while my fingers brushed against the gun's handle. I studied Faruk's face, deciphering his intentions. I did think that Faruk might kill me and steal the drugs. Then Yelena would be forever trapped in Sasha's prison.

The clear liquid immediately turned a luminescent orange-brown, and Faruk instantly called Senad to relay the good news.

"Senad, the test came back positive. It's pure, high-grade shit. We're good to go."

Then Faruk handed the cell phone to me. I reached up and grabbed the phone while my twitching fingers felt the gun in its hiding place. "Hello," I chimed.

"Keith, the plan is in motion. Once that girl calls you and gives you a time, you immediately call me, and I'll send someone over to pick you up. Make sure she opens the gate, and she has your girl with her. Then you grab your girl and run like hell. Do you understand?"

I confidently answered, "Yes sir; I understand." Then I returned Faruk's cellphone.

Faruk slipped the phone into his pocket and took the drugs with him, slipping them into his inside pocket.

I felt the first weight lifted from my chest. The drugs were gone. I hoped the second weight would be removed the next night. I'll have Yelena back, and we can get the hell out of the former Yugoslavia.

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## Chapter 17

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It was 11 AM, and Svetlana and Olesya joined Sasha at the dining table near the swimming pool.

Sasha sat at the patio table near the pool, enjoying his favorite brunch this morning. The chef served hand-rolled Russian crepes, stuffed course ground beef and sour cream drizzled over the top. He greedily crammed his mouth with a crepe one after another. Then he washed it down with a fine hot Sri Lankan tea, splashed with a dollop of milk.

“Good morning, Sasha,” the women chimed enthusiastically.

“Grrrr morning,” he spat between bites of food. Then Sasha grabbed another crepe from the serving plate and inhaled it whole. He quickly washed the crepe down with tea before it became lodged in his throat.

Olesya placed a couple of Russian crepes onto her plate and spread a thick lather of sour cream over the top. She neatly sliced each crepe and began slowly eating them.

Svetlana continued sitting there with an empty plate in front of her while her mind became lost in thought. She pondered how she could broach the subject with Sasha. Then she let out a sigh and leaned closer to Sasha. Svetlana pleaded, “Sasha, I was wondering if I could speak to you alone.”

Olesya eyed Svetlana suspiciously while she scanned back and forth between Sasha’s and Svetlana’s faces.

“Sure, why not? Olesya, give us a couple of minutes.”

Olesya dropped her fork on the plate with a clank and grabbed an apple from the fruit basket on the center of the table. She began nibbling on the apple as she walked away and returned to the house.

Svetlana started immediately, “I’ve been putting in a lot of hours at the hotel. I was wondering if I could have a day off today. I need a little me-time.”

Sasha hesitated. He almost snatched another Russian crepe off the plate, but instead, he withdrew his hand and folded his hands together, placing them on the top of the table. He scrutinized Svetlana closely with fiery intent as he gave Svetlana one-hundred

percent of his attention. He does not cave into the girls, but Svetlana was one of his favorites, one of his top earners.

He continued staring at her.

“Sasha, it’s just one day.”

He lowered his head onto his hands for a minute, and then he raised his head and replied, “Okay, Svetlana, I supposed I can give you a day off. Are you planning on anything tonight? Do you have a hot date about whom I do not know?” He chuckled a little.

Shrill laughter erupted from Svetlana, and she uttered, “Nooooo! I don’t have a date. I had at least three hot dates each day for the past two years. I think I definitely need a break from men. I just need a little me-time.”

Sasha joined her laughter and added, “I see your point. I imagine by now, we men disgust you.”

Svetlana hesitated for a second before broaching a taboo subject. Then she continued, “Well Sasha, I was wondering if it’s not a problem if I could have some of my savings. I thought about buying some expensive jewelry, like a Rolex watch and a pearl necklace.”

“You know I invested your money,” Sasha snapped sharply and added, “I’m looking out for your best interests. When your services are no longer needed around here, I’ll let you cash out.” Then Sasha hastily grabbed another Russian crepe.

Svetlana wanted to laugh, but she restrained her emotions from unwarranted outbursts. She knew the true meaning of Sasha’s retirement plan. When Sasha didn’t need her anymore, she would be swimming far out to the sea wearing cement galoshes.

Svetlana caressed his hand and feigned sincerity, “I think if I wear it at the hotel, the customers will think I’m a princess. It would make me worth more.” Svetlana jingled her body seductively, emphasizing her point.

Greed slowly churned in Sasha’s mind as he poured himself another cup of tea from a glass teapot. After a long sigh, he replied, “I suppose I can give you 5,000 euros. When do you need it?”

Svetlana covered her mouth with a napkin to hide her frown. She worked hard for Sasha for two years for a gruesome six days per week with no vacation time and serviced at least three

customers every single back-breaking day. Sasha rewarded her long, disgusting toils with a paltry 5,000 euros. In Svetlana's mind, she earned Sasha a truckload of money, but Sasha was a greedy, Russian gangster. Of course, she was surprised Sasha would pay her any money.

Svetlana sweetly replied, "This afternoon. I would like to go shopping."

Then Svetlana began caressing Sasha's leg. Her hand stroked back and forth across his inner thigh while every stroke brought her hand closer to Sasha's crotch.

Once Svetlana brushed her hand against his crotch, Sasha pushed her hand away rudely, "I'm sorry Svetlana, but not today. I'm saving myself for someone else. I must break the new girl in tonight, and I need the energy and stamina. I need to put her ass to work, and start making some money from her."

Svetlana feigned a smile at Sasha' schemes, but her inner voice kept screaming at her, *Oh no. Leave the poor girl alone. She's just a simple girl, kidnapped from Bosnia.*

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Senad sent Faruk over to pick me up at 7:00 PM after Svetlana's phone call.

I sat quietly in the front seat blindfolded. The trip lasted roughly 40 minutes. I felt completely lost. All I knew I was somewhere along the wharf in Budva. I heard the periodical wail of marine foghorns in the distance. I also heard a flock of seagulls flying around the coast. The seagulls jostled and gawked as they fought each other over the jumping fish that rose above the water's surface to peek at the sunset.

Then Faruk stopped suddenly, and the brakes of the car squealed loudly. He jumped out and strode to my side of the car. Next, he opened the car door and led me inside a large, cavernous warehouse.

I heard a large commotion of activity inside the warehouse.

Faruk continued leading me towards the center of the warehouse.

Once we reached Senad, he removed my blindfold and simultaneously pulled out my Smith and Wesson from my waist and studied it. Then he placed the gun back into my open hand. I stood in awe and amazement at the scene in front of me. Thirty rough-looking bikers sat on crates and boxes assembling their equipment. Every biker had an M80 Yugoslavian assault rifle. They had remained hidden in old crates since the close of the Bosnian War. The men carefully disassembled and re-assembled the rifles, dabbing the essential parts with lubricant oil and rubbing away the rust.

Once they finished, they stood up and looped a thick, green belt over their chests. In the belt were several assault rifle clips and grenades.

I fumbled absently at the handle of my 0.38 Smith and Wesson, easing my troubled mind from what I saw displayed in front of me. Then Senad called his troops to attention.

Although the troops were former soldiers in the Montenegrin military, their old, tired bodies fell out of routine. Snapping their heels together, while saluting their commander, was discordant and fell out of sync, like a drunk orchestra. However, their eyes glinted with savaged determination.

I shivered a little. I knew some people were going to die tonight. I didn't want to shoot anybody, but I was bringing a small army who would.

Senad turned to me and asked, "What's the message from Sasha's girl?"

Everyone became quiet in the warehouse as furious eyes focused on my words, "She said to meet them at the gate at 10:00 PM sharp and don't be late. Yelena's life depends on it. Sasha's place is the large, white mansion, perched on the first mountaintop outside of Budva. She said any clueless driver could spot it. A long, winding road leads directly to the top of the mountain to his place."

Once I finished, Senad rallied his troops, "Soldiers, tonight we'll have a fierce battle with an old Russian enemy. This enemy, Sasha, came to our city and pushed us to the side like we were dog shit, baking on the sidewalk under the sun. Tonight, we'll take

back our city and get rid of this son-of-bitch Sasha. Tonight, Sasha dies.”

Then a raucous crescendo of cheers and hollers, echoed through the warehouse as the soldiers screamed their approval.

After the screams had died down, Senad continued, “Tonight, we’ll become the kings of the underworld again. We’ll take control of our streets and reclaim our businesses. However, this victory will come at a price. Some of you will not return, and we’ll always remember your sacrifice and blood. You will be memorialized with a picture of you hanging on the wall near the entrance to the Renaissance Night Club. Today, you’ll live as brave soldiers, but some of you’ll die tonight as heroes!”

The roar of the crowd rang out again. All the soldiers held their assault rifles in the air, displaying their bravery and allegiance to Senad.

I stood there apprehensively, thinking to myself, *what in the hell did I just do.*

Then the soldiers began climbing into two old rusty vans, sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall, clenching their assault rifles.

Senad glanced over at me and called, “Are you coming, Keith? Hop in the van in the back with the soldiers. Then Senad climbed into the passenger seat of the other van.

As I huddled for room in the back of the van, the sliding door slammed shut. The ride to Sasha's was excruciating. Stench in the nightclub was a godsend compared to the stench inside the van. Bodies covered and sprawled over every square inch of the van's floor.

All the soldiers were chain-smoking cigarettes, and the metal floor had gaping holes, allowing the exhaust to pollute the already foul air inside the van. I was an insect stuck in an airtight jar, and I was suffocating quickly.

I wrenched and wiggled in pain as the metal floor bit into my ass. As the van hit a bump, the floor took a larger bite of my ass.

As we approached Sasha's mountain, Senad commanded through a walkie-talkie, "Everyone extinguish their cigarettes now and remain quiet."

The vans slowly crept up the mountain with their headlights turned off. We stopped a half-mile away from Sasha's front gate.

One of the soldiers quietly left the van, and he scampered forward on his hands and knees with binoculars in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other. He hid off the side of road under the darkness, getting a better view of the front gate. Sasha's mansion illuminated the dark mountainside like a lighthouse, as one solitary guard staffed the front gate.

Senad's vans hid on the roadside out of view of the guardhouse. Senad planned to strike hard and fast after those gates opened, waiting silently, a rattlesnake hiding behind a rock, ready to strike at its enemy.

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## Chapter 18

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Sasha awakened around 10 PM in his den. He lay sprawled out unconsciously on this brown leather sofa while his head throbbed in pain. He massaged his temple and sat up. What in the hell happened? What were his last thoughts? How did he end up sleeping here so early on the sofa? His mind searched for his last memories before losing consciousness.

Then Sasha noticed the two wine glasses on the coffee table. He drank all his wine while Svetlana never touched hers. He picked up his wine glass and sniffed it. He only smelled the sweet residual of a fine red wine.

Then Sasha picked up the bottle of wine and examined it. He noticed a white substance had settled to the bottom in a thick layer. He swirled the bottle, watching the milky powder whirl at the bottom, like clouds swirling during a spring thunderstorm.

Sasha's eyes widened in surprise, and then he exploded into rage. He became furious while his right cheek convulsed sporadically and violently from a nervous tic. Then he screamed, "That fucking bitch drugged me! I'm going to kill that bitch!"

Sasha opened the safe, hidden behind an oil painting of an 18th Century Street in Moscow, and he grabbed his Stechkin APS pistol, similar to a 9 mm pistol used in the West. "Tonight that bitch dies," Sasha huffed under his breath and stormed up to Yelena's room.

The guard sat on a chair, reading a Russian newspaper, *Pravda* (which means "The Truth" in English). As his nervous tic pulsed wildly, Sasha screamed in rage, "Have you seen Svetlana today?"

The guard trembled in fear when he saw Sasha's red face and his cheek twitching violently. He obediently replied, "Boss, I saw her about 30 minutes ago. She checked up on the girl inside. Then she left a little while later."

Sasha barged into Yelena's dark room. He slammed the light switch on and saw what appeared to be someone sleeping in the bed. He rushed to the bed and peeled back the covers, revealing a mound of shoe boxes and clothes. Yelena had escaped!

The guard began to shake as he peered at the mound of clothes. Sasha yelled at the top of his lungs, "How'd the fuck did the girl get out of here?"

The guard trembled and shook with fear, as understanding pierced into his thick skull. He muttered, "Oh shit. Please don't be angry, boss, but that dumb bitch tricked me."

Sasha's rage increased a few clicks on a seismograph as he screamed, "What? How'd the fuck did she trick you? God damn it!"

"Svetlana checked up on the girl. When she left, she came to me and started rubbing against me. She stuck her tits in my face. I didn't see, but she must have unlocked the door..."

"What?"

"Boss, she said she wanted me right now. She kept touching me. Then she sat on my lap and started kissing my neck. She kept saying she wanted me. So I took her to the bathroom, so we wouldn't get caught. I'm so sorry boss. I'm really, really sorry. I thought the dumb bitch was just horny and needed a fuck!"

Sasha raised his pistol and shot the guard. A round hole punctured the center of his forehead. The guard immediately tumbled onto the floor, dead.

Then Sasha ran downstairs and ran out the front door. He ran to the edge of the cul-de-sac to get a better view of the guardhouse. What he saw disturbed him. He saw Svetlana pull the pin from a grenade and tossed it into the guardhouse. Boom! And the windows blew out of the guardhouse while the inside filled up with white smoke.

Sasha saw the other blonde woman who resembled Olesya, hiding next to the door. He knew it couldn't be Olesya since she had gone to the hotel to work this evening.

"Shoot the fucking bitches, goddamn it," Sasha screamed at the top of his lungs, but to no avail.

Several guards ran to the front yard to investigate the commotion.

Sasha shot at the women with his pistol, but his rage clouded his judgment and his aim. He barely missed them as the

bullets dug into the walls of the guardhouse while the women ran inside.

Then the gates began opening, and headlights appeared quickly in the driveway, as a vehicle sped through the gate.

Before Sasha knew the extent of Svetlana's treason, a small group of armed bikers started jumping out of an ancient rusty van and began shooting machine guns.

Then another van drove through the gates and maneuvered to the backyard.

Sasha ran back inside his house to rally his troops. Sasha looked forward to killing that treasonous bitch, Svetlana, although he puzzled over her actions. He so generously bestowed gifts and respect onto her. Then she turned around and disrespected him. That bitch will pay! That bitch will die!

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I heard an explosion and then a barrage of gunfire from a pistol. Then the large iron-wrought gate slowly opened, and two blondes emerged from the guardhouse.

Vans came to life and lurched forward towards the open gate at a full speed. The first van, where Senad sat in the passenger seat, drove through until it reached the front of Sasha's house. The second van came to a screeching halt at the gate as Senad's men tossed me out through the back doors. Then it careened across the lawn to the back of the house.

Under a crimson, colored moon, a barrage of gunfire tore through the calm night. Then every few seconds, a flash from a grenade illuminated the night in bright flashes. I heard shouts and screams between the gunfire. At some points, soldiers were shooting twenty assault rifles with a barrage of grenade explosions.

Two blondes ran outside the guardhouse and ran for cover around the outside corner of the thick, brick wall. Then I stood up and ran after the women. I saw Svetlana holding the hands of another blonde. I felt apprehensive as if Svetlana had grabbed the wrong girl on her way out.

As I came closer, the blonde's face seemed familiar. Before I had stopped, the blonde hopped into my opened arms and embraced me hard.

She jumped up and down and yelled, “Keith! Keith! Keith!”

Then familiarity flooded my mind; as I held Yelena. I answered her screams with my own, “Yelena! Yelena! I found you!” I held her tightly.

Svetlana interrupted them and shouted, “Well Keith, Congratulations. I see you started the next Bosnian War. When I told you to create a diversion, you really created a diversion.”

Both Yelena and I cried with tears of relief as we held each other tightly while gunfire and grenades invaded the night’s quietness.

Svetlana shrieked, “Well, Keith, I hate to keep bothering you, but you remember our promise? I met my side of the bargain, and now, you must abide by your side.”

Yelena embraced me tightly and wouldn’t let go.

I squeezed my hand into my coat and retrieved the two money bundles.

Svetlana quickly snatched the money out of my hand, and slipped it into a pouch, attached to her belt. Then Svetlana hugged Yelena from her back and kissed the back of her head. After she let go, she whispered, “Good luck to you, Yelena. I wish you the best.” Next, she stared at me, “Keith, you take good care of her. You're holding one in a million. Then she raised her fist at me, “You treat her well.” Then Svetlana sprinted into the darkness directly towards the sparkling city lights of Budva.

Yelena and I never saw her again.

I whispered firmly, “Yelena, we must go now.” Another grenade explosion illuminated the night, as if to punctuate my statement.

Yelena tossed her blonde wig to the ground, and we sprinted down the mountain directly towards the shoreline. From this height, we could see the sandy beach below, as the moon

glimmered off the black, obsidian surface of the Adriatic Sea. We saw the lights from the Budva, twinkling and sparkling in the horizon towards our left.

We ran and ran until we reached a patch of small trees halfway down the mountain. Gunfire stopped several minutes ago, and now, a chorus of police sirens interrupted the calm darkness. The wailing from the police sirens rose and fell in the distance. At one point, it seemed the sirens were coming nearer but then the sirens faded into the night.

Yelena and I paused to embrace each other by the trees. Our moist lips searched for each other, becoming re-acquainted. We kissed for several minutes.

Then Yelena pulled several inches away from me. Her wandering hand found the butt of the gun. She whispered in my ear, ever so softly, "Keith, what's this?"

"I'm so sorry Yelena. I know you don't like guns, but I had to come and rescue you. I planned to use any force I could get my hands on."

"Huh huh! I hate to be a bother," a booming, baritone voice said from a patch of bushes directly behind me.

Then Adnan stepped through the bushes. In one hand, he held a pistol pointed at my back while in the other hand held a lit match that just lit the dangling cigarette in his mouth.

"Well Keith, I must congratulate you. I don't know how you did it, but you did it. Please put your hands up slowly, carefully, or I will be forced to kill both of you now."

Yelena stiffened as I raised my hands and replied, "Adnan; it has been a long time. Don't take this personally, but I was hoping not to see you again. You know I don't work for the university any more. I gave Damir my resignation letter."

"Well Keith, you murdered my two best friends. I don't know how you did it, but they're gone. I received confirmation two days ago."

"I'm sorry about that Adnan, but with all due respect, you guys kidnapped my girlfriend and sold her to Sasha. I figure I would repay Damir's generosity."

“Keith, slowly turn around and step away from your girl,” Adnan demanded as hatred pulsated with shrill undertones in his voice. He planned to murder us while we would watch him do it.

As I slowly turned around, I felt Yelena grab my gun. Then I faced Adnan.

Adnan added coldly, “That small war at Sasha's place was your doing? In some ways, I'm glad. You actually did us a favor. However, you killed my best friend, Damir. I cannot forgive you for this!” Anger and fury sharpened the tones in Adnan's voice.

“I'm sorry about that, Adnan. I don't mean to rain on your parade, but Damir's crazy. Come on, he set up a criminal enterprise around a university,” I uttered, hoping to defuse Adnan's rage with logic.

“I know Damir had his troubles, but he meant well. He founded that university to be his legacy. He wanted to leave something good for this cold, cruel world.”

I burst into laughter, “Damir couldn't manage a hotdog stand, let alone a university.”

Adnan flicked the cigarette into the nearest bush and placed both hands on his gun.

Then Yelena fired the pistol at Adnan. She emptied all six bullets into Adnan's chest. Yelena continued pulling the gun's trigger, but the gun emitted dry clicks as each shell was already spent.

Adnan's face contorted into a shocked look. He looked at Yelena and spotted the gun her hand. Then he fell to the ground dead with a surprised look frozen eternally on his face.

I grabbed Yelena's hand and pulled her forward while the gun fell to the ground near Adnan's outstretched dead hand. Then we ran and ran until we had reached the shoreline.

We embraced each other strongly as the waves splashed rhythmically onto the sandy shoreline.

Yelena began crying while I wiped away her tears. Yelena whispered, “K-e-i-t-h, I s-h-o-t someone!”

“I know, Yelena. It's okay. He was evil, like Damir and Sasha.” Then I held her firmly as her body shivered and trembled.

After several minutes, Yelena came to her senses. She whispered, “What about the police? I’m afraid to go to prison. Keith, I can’t go to prison.”

“Yelena, we’re not caught yet. If the police do catch us, then I’ll confess to all the crimes. You’re innocent.”

“Keith, what about us? What’ll happen to us?”

“Yelena, I’m returning home to America, and I’m taking you with me. I think we have seen enough of Bosnia and Montenegro to last a lifetime.”

Then Yelena and I began kissing again. Afterwards, we both began walking towards the lights of the city while the waves continued to roll softly onto the sandy shores.

I asked in jest, “Yelena, each time I see you, somehow you become even more beautiful. And I want to show my gorgeous woman this excellent little coffee shop in Old Budva.”

“Keith, I don’t think I could drink coffee right now. I think I’ve seen enough for one day. I think I rather be alone with you.”

We continued walking along the beach as the lights and roar of Budva became stronger, brighter after each step.

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## Epilogue

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Yelena and I stayed in Budva, Montenegro for a week.

We met Yelena's mom who stayed several days. Yelena wanted to say good-bye to her.

Then Yelena and I headed to Lyubiana, Slovenia. Along the way, we stopped in Olovo, Bosnia and said good-bye to her father one last time. We had trouble finding his grave as the snow pelted the ground and covered all the tombstones. I held Yelena silently, and she wept as we both stood over his grave.

Then Yelena and I continued to Slovenia. As we approached the turnoff for Tuzla, I stomped on the gas pedal shooting by the turnoff. We never planned to set foot again in Tuzla. We stayed in Slovenia for a couple of months until the U.S. Embassy approved Yelena's fiancé visa. Then we dashed to the airport and hopped on the next plane to the United States.

We settled in Heber Springs, Arkansas, where I accepted a low-paying job at the local university. I taught many courses and worked long hours, but Heber Springs was the perfect place to settle down.

Heber Springs was a small community of 15,000 souls, stranded out in the middle of nowhere, about an hour's drive north of Little Rock. Nothing of any consequence happened there. Both Yelena and I blended in with the locals, occasionally joining the gossip of every little thing that happened in the community.

Heber Springs rarely saw any violent crime except for maybe a drunk driver, who would plow over a stop sign. Unfortunately, Heber Springs had an epidemic, where many stop signs laid on the grass near the intersections.

It took months for Yelena to heal. At first, she was scared to go out by herself, and she wouldn't let me leave her sight, but gradually, she emerged from her protective shell. Closets and car trunks still frightened her, but she would need time for those mental wounds to heal, but I was very patient with her. As she continued making progress, her ordeal in Montenegro would fade in time. Eventually, Yelena would explore the outside. Perhaps, I could enroll her in a couple of courses at my university.

On one early morning, the sun shone through the curtains, illuminating the whole room. I glanced at our wedding photo on the dresser, where we stood in front of the Justice of the Peace, as he united us in holy matrimony.

Yelena awakened and started staring at me. Then we exchanged smiles and began kissing, softly at first, then into explosions of passion and intimacy. While I showered and dressed for work, Yelena had prepared a king's breakfast for me.

Yelena always cooked for me even against my wishes. Sometimes I tried to help her in the kitchen, but Yugoslavian women were so proud, so traditional. She would chase me out of the kitchen with a skillet. Her culture had ingrained the women's role and duties since birth. Yugoslavian women must take care of the household and their men.

Approaching the dining room table, I saw a plate of scrambled eggs sprinkled with diced tomatoes, salsa, and cheese, a side order of two wheat toasts lathered with cream cheese, and a hot cup of American coffee with a dollop of cream. I drank half my coffee in one gulp. The American coffee was not as strong as the Bosnian coffee, but I reverted to the old American lifestyle.

While eating breakfast, I leafed through a newspaper, the *Arkansas Democratic Gazette*. Buried in the business section on the second page, I read the headline, 'Shoot-out in Montenegro.'

I recognized the picture while my face became pale. It was the Renaissance Night Club, and Senad and his gang had a shootout against the police. Five thugs and three policemen were shot and killed during a police raid. This gang had recently gained a stranglehold over the Montenegrin underworld, supplying drugs to all the addicts and operating the city's brothels. The police raided the nightclub to shut the gangster's businesses down.

My eyes bulged out in awe as I read the grisly details. I wondered if Senad had been counted among the dead.

Yelena leaned against the refrigerator, drinking a glass of orange juice. She saw my face become pale as I flipped the page of the newspaper. She asked with sharp tones of concern wavering in her voice, "Keith, what's wrong? What did you read?" She studied me intently.

I snapped the newspaper close, folding it up, and replied, “Oh nothing. I see the stock price is down for Microsoft, and my retirement plan will take another beating.” Then I started chuckling.

Yelena smiled as she studied my face. She knew I had lied. I know I am a lousy poker player. However, we imposed one simple rule in our household. We, under no circumstances, will talk about what happened in Bosnia and Montenegro.

We knew it was wrong, burying those memories into the deep graves in our minds, but not enough time had passed for us to accept what happened to us. Our mental anguish and wounds would take years to heal.

After reading the news story, I estimated Yelena's worth – 20,000 euros in cash, 50,000 euros in drugs, a row of coffins, stuffed with a gangster or criminal, and a long list of less serious felonies. I stared at Yelena, admiring her slim figure, long brunette hair. I wanted to touch her.

“Seriously, Keith, what did you read?” Yelena pleaded gently.

“It’s about Montenegro?”

“Really, anything about us?”

“No, it’s really a boring story. Nothing about us or anyone we knew or could have known.”

Then I approached Yelena and started kissing her.

Yelena let the glass, filled with orange juice fall to the ground, shattering.

Both Yelena and I were oblivious to the world around us as we became lost in our fervent kisses.

I started loosening my tie and unbuttoning my dress shirt while I pulled Yelena towards the bedroom. I wanted to spend more quality time with her before going to work.

“Keith, you’ll be late for work. What about your students?” Yelena teased.

“They can start the class without me. Right now, I want you. A story in the newspaper reminded me of my love for you, and the troubles I went through to get you back. I want to spend more time with you. To hell with my students, they can wait.”

Yelena smiled, which illuminated the room. She began slipping out of her clothes, and she would reward her hero handsomely.

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The Bosnian government wanted the Bosnian University of Management to operate as long as possible. Since many students came from affluent families, they had strong connections to the top politicians in the Bosnian government.

The new university president wanted Veronika to return and promoted her to the executive director, the second highest position in the university. She reluctantly accepted.

Some days, Veronica hated her job, not because of Damir, but because money troubles continually plagued the university. Without that drug money, the university fell on hard financial times and had trouble paying staff salaries. By the end of the school year, half the foreign faculty fled the university. Veronika expected the other half would flee by the end of the next school year, as their tight finances continued.

The police had questioned Veronika, but they let her go after an hour. She only told them that Damir had fired her that day, and she packed her things and left quietly. She didn't hear a gunshot, nor see an upset professor, like Keith Swanson, who submitted his letter of resignation to Damir around the time of the murder. Besides, if the police knew Veronika received 10,000 euros in cash from Keith, then they would demand their cut. Veronika would keep her money because she experienced hell at the university under Damir's stewardship. She intended to keep every penny of it.

Because Damir terrified and intimidated all the university staff, the next president closed Damir's office by constructing a wall over the door. To any new staff, they never knew the wall, which now had a beautiful oil painting of a spring Tuzla countryside, was hiding the door to Damir's office.

Veronika and the veteran staff, at least once a day, would approach Damir's office door. The new staff members mistakenly thought the veteran staff was admiring a beautiful painting of the Bosnian countryside. However, the evil that once lurked through the university hallways was sealed in that room. Even the air around the university became fresher, as Damir's evil stench dissipated at the time of his death.

That new wall became sacred for the staff, instilling inspiration. If God could come down and remove an evil man from the world, then Veronika knew she could rise every morning, come to work, and make a difference.

Veronika would work for the university until it bankrupted. She would be the last person to leave the university's front door and would lock up the university forever, if it came to that.

Then to insult further Damir's untimely demise, the university buried him in a grave in the cheapest cemetery they could find in Tuzla, with a blank tombstone marking his grave. They never would bury Damir next to his beloved Emina in Srebrenica.

Anyone with a run-in with Damir – quite a large crowd – attended his funeral. No one read a eulogy during the wake, but a large joyous party ebbed and flowed with laughter and happiness. Even the Mayor of Tuzla made a quick appearance. He grinned widely. Tuzla's evil man had died, and everybody was happy. No one would miss Damir.

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Admir still worked at the Bosnian University of Management as the chief computer support technician. Since Damir's demise and violent murder, Admir enjoyed going to work. He skipped a step and whistled a happy tune as he headed for his office every morning to clock in for work. He loved his job now, even when the university paid his salary late every few months. Similar to Veronika, Admir would pay a daily homage to the oil painting and wall that hid Damir's office.

After Damir's murder, the Tuzla police questioned Admir for days, locking him in a freezing, dirty cell.

Every few hours, the police captain would enter his cell and interrogate him. Two large guards restrained his hands while the police captain would punch him in the stomach and face repeatedly. The captain's punches became the question marks for his questions.

Admir told him everything, except the professor. He told police the time he stole a candy bar from the store when he was 12, and stole money from his mother when he was 16 to buy a pack of cigarettes. However, he kept his knowledge about the professor to himself. Admir considered the professor a hero, who killed the devil incarnate.

Police reluctantly let Admir go free, and they never apologized to him. They shoved him onto the cold January street. Although they knew Admir's blood had stained the carpet in Damir's office, the police could not link Admir to Damir's death or to the murder weapon.

Then the Montenegrin police recovered the murder weapon that killed Damir, Adnan, and Jasmin. They matched the bullets from that .38 Smith and Wesson to all three murders.

To this day, the police never identified the shooter or shooters or solved the grisly murders of a university president and his two drivers. With Damir's infamous reputation, no one was in a hurry to solve these crimes.

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Svetlana ran away as fast as she could during the night, heading directly for the City of Budva, while its lights illuminated the horizon from a distance. She heard the machine-gun fire and exploding grenades at Sasha's mansion and then the approaching police sirens in the distance. Running until she reached the bus station, she hopped on the next bus to Bar, Montenegro.

Bar didn't attract the tourists, but it was the main seaport of Montenegro, and she planned to travel on its railroads that linked the other major cities of the former Yugoslavia.

Svetlana arrived at the main rail station in Bar at dawn. Standing in line at the ticket agency, she scanned the various destinations. Then she saw a city in Greece listed towards the bottom. She became intrigued and decided that would be her next stop, starting a new life in Greece.

Svetlana roamed the cities of Greece until she reached Athens, but didn't know what to do. She had no education, no skills, so she accepted the only job she could find. She worked at a gift shop at the foot of the Acropolis, directly across from Hadrian's Library.

Svetlana became the best sales person the shop ever employed. Sales doubled after Svetlana started working there as she wooed over the tourists. Young men were particularly susceptible to her sales pitches. She cajoled and sweet-talked the foreigners into buying loads of Greek alabaster statues and trinkets.

Svetlana chose Athens because of its long, rich history. She had read about the Roman and Greek histories, and she would smile as she walked by Hadrian's Library. The Roman Emperor, Hadrian, paid for the construction of Hadrian's Library in 132 AD. At that time, Athens was a Roman province, and the Romans respected Greek culture, arts, and literature, becoming the pinnacle of class and achievement.

Before she entered the shop, she would look on top of the Acropolis at the complex of ancient temples. She loved the old Temple of Athena.

Svetlana often stood outside the door of the shop. She stood by one of the paths that led to the Acropolis. She would smile at the tourists as they walked by, and some tourists couldn't resist her, as they strolled by the gift shop.

Svetlana stayed in Athens because Greek culture fascinated her and she loved the story of Athena, her inspiration. Athena, the goddess of strength, wisdom, warfare, and reasoning, was the daughter of Zeus, and hence the name of the city became Athens, Greece.

After a long day at the gift shop, Svetlana would leave the shop at dusk. Exiting the shop's door, she would gaze up at the Acropolis. Under the darkness of the night, orange lights

illuminated the ancient structures of the Acropolis against the backdrop of the city with its twinkling lights.

When she had a day off from work, she would trek up the Acropolis. She would read a little while sitting on a bench, or sketch a picture, or drink a soda, staring at the Temple of Athena. It became her inspiration, and she often subconsciously scratched the silver medal of Athena, dangling around her neck.

Svetlana simplified her life by giving up the good expensive things in life. No more high-priced clothes, no expensive dinners, no strolling around in style in a new sleek Mercedes. She became frugal and dated a poor American, named John, who studied history at the University of Athens.

John was dirt-poor, struggling to survive in an expensive European city. However, Svetlana didn't mind. She wanted out of Montenegro, and Athens was a world away, starting a new chapter of her life in Athens. She didn't mind riding around in John's broken-down Fiat. As Svetlana and John drove by, the pedestrians would choke from the car's polluted exhaust.

Sometimes, she wondered if she only dreamt she worked as an expensive prostitute in Montenegro. Memories began fading and losing color, like an old photograph.

Sometimes, she went with John down to McDonald's, several blocks away from the Acropolis, the decaying part of Athens. Homeless people slept on the streets while some shot up heroin in direct view of the pedestrians walking by. On the other side of the street from McDonald's, Svetlana noticed the prostitutes standing on the side of the road, luring the johns with their sensual rented bodies. Then Svetlana's memories of Montenegro would flood her mind again with clarity and horror.

She and John would walk around the shops and pedestrian sidewalks that circled the base of the Acropolis when they had some free time together. Occasionally, Svetlana would notice a dirty stare from a well-dressed gentleman as they passed by. Then Svetlana would distract John and glare at the stranger with a sour smile, so John never saw the exchange of angry smiles.

On one occasion, as Svetlana worked in the gift shop, a well-dressed man came in with his wife, son, and daughter. He

asked his wife and kids to wait for him at the outdoor coffee shop, the one across the courtyard from Hadrian's Library.

After his family had walked out of the store, he blurted, "Do I know you? Have we met before?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but we have never met," Svetlana replied, feigning sincerity and confusion.

The businessman persisted, "Have you ever visited Montenegro?"

"I'm so sorry, but I don't know where Montenegro is," Svetlana pleaded innocently, hoping the probing questions would end.

The businessman stopped his interrogation, and instead he strolled around the gift shop and bought 100 euros of statues, including an exquisite marble chessboard with hand-carved pieces.

As Svetlana wrapped his gifts, he gazed and gawked at her suspiciously. Pausing at the door, the man turned and studied her one last time. Then he left and never returned.

Svetlana suspected John would discover her foul past in a matter of time, but she planned to hide it from him as long as possible. Who knew? If John asked her to marry him, Svetlana might say "yes." If she traveled to America, then she could visit Yelena and ensure Keith was treating her right.