



Searching for Stolen Love

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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.

Searching for Stolen Love
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Chapter 1 – The First Day on the Job

Fox sat in the armchair in his apartment, watching the swirling snow blow outside through the large bay window, with a 0.38 Smith and Wesson lying next to him. Reckless thoughts flashed through his mind like a springtime thunderstorm. The icy, cold gun was sandwiched between his left leg and the chair, and he shivered a little from its coldness. He had never owned nor shot a gun before, but he planned to kill Damir and Adnan and Jasmin, maybe not in that order, but he 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 streets were deserted, like they were during the peak of the Bosnian War in 1995. The January snow covered the town in a fog of whiteness and pushed the people into their homes, seeking out the heat of their radiators.

Fox looked down to study his muscular left arm, flexing his muscle several times. He spent hours pumping iron in the gym. He remembered when he was in high school, the other kids always called him a nerd, among other names, and sometimes he would arrive home with a bloody nose, torn clothing, and scraped knuckles. Then he discovered the school's weight room. With every repetition he did, he became bigger, overcoming every insult, every bloody nose, and every black eye. Then one day, the kids stopped calling him a nerd and left him alone. He wasn't athletic, but he was big enough where others left him alone. Bullies only pick on the weak.

Fox should have been happy because the semester had ended; he had a whole month off before the spring semester started. But he sat in this chair, thoughts swirling in his mind like the blowing snow outside. Some thoughts were dark and a little scary. Hell, his thoughts were scary since murder is an evil business.

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

Fox looked down at the gun with the cracked handle and observed several nicks and scratches on the metal. He traced the handle's crack with his index finger and wondered about the gun's journey through life. How many people did this gun kill? Did a soldier use this gun during the Bosnian War? Were any victims innocent? But those questions were irrelevant. This gun had one more mission in life before it would retire.

Fox pointed the gun at the opposite wall. His hand trembled under the cold weight. Under his breath, he mumbled, "Bang! Bang!" as he pretended to shoot the wall but didn't pull the trigger.

Fox had never killed anyone before. Maybe he bloodied a couple of noses or blackened someone's eye or two, but he never started those fights, but masculinity demands a man must finish those fights. Then he had heard many stories about Damir and his drivers. They were war heroes who knew how to use guns and how to kill people. Their secret business was murder.

Fox's hand trembled and shook as he held the cold gun. Coldness terrified him 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 dissipates in all directions from a cooling dead body. He doesn't want to be condemned to eternity in a freezing hell, but he has no choice. Damir, Adnan, and Jasmin must die!

Fox always hid this gun behind the radiator under the window. Because he knew someone from the university searched his apartment weekly when he taught a class in another city. The president kept everyone under close scrutiny.

At first, Fox was confused and thought his mind was playing tricks on him, exhausted from teaching and the long hours traveling in the car between cities. His 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 he returned to the apartment, he noticed a cigarette butt right outside his apartment door, and he smelled the faint stench of its smoke in his apartment. Then he 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*.

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

Fox remembered the first day he arrived at the Bosnian University of Management...

... on a pleasant August day. The summer's savage heat baked all the concrete buildings as the birds flew farther north to escape the heat. As he approached the building, he 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 for top students."

Fox 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 while his large drivers, Adnan and Jasmin, guarded his office door, stopping any unexpected visitors from popping in.

Fox had never met the president, but on his first day he paused in the foyer, studying his large portrait that hung on the wall. He wore an Armani suit with a politician's beaming smile, sitting behind a large mahogany desk. He held a pen in his right hand and appeared to have just signed some important document that would garner the fledgling university some more prestige. As he 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.

Fox found it odd that he had never met the university president, and yet he planned to kill him. He thought that Damir Kovacev was doing well for his country, but during his first semester of teaching, he 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, Fox didn't know this since he was eager to start teaching and thought he could educate the future leaders of Bosnia. However, he 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 him as he walked into a deserted house when he was seven to prove his bravery to his classmates. Everything felt wrong, dead wrong. It slapped you in the face when you walked through the front door. Something evil lurked in those places, but it could not be described with just an odor.

When Fox walked through the front doors every morning, he felt a cold, ghostly tingle caressing his shoulders and back. Sometimes, he glanced at the president's portrait, and his two black eyes stared back with a haunted look.

Fox met Karl Carlson at the university, a sex-crazed political science professor from Oklahoma. He was nearing 60 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. Deep wrinkles covered his face as they connected the dots to his grandfather's portrait. His skin hung down in flaps on his cheeks and chin as gravity pulled and tugged his skin towards the ground.

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

Fox grabbed his hand and vigorously shook it. "I'm doing well. My name's Fox. 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," Fox said as he patted his black briefcase for emphasis.

Fox sat at a corner desk with a window view of the courtyard. Then he 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.

Karl continued, "How about I take you out for dinner tonight, babe?"

Veronica turned to face him. "Sure let's go. Please bring your Ukrainian wife. I would like to talk to her."

Karl smirked, "I won't tell if you don't. She's enjoying the farm life in Oklahoma." 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. However, under no circumstances would she entertain going out with a creepy, old married man.

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

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

Fox 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’s okay. But I’m still getting used to my surroundings.”

“Great! I just wanted to welcome you to the university and schedule a meeting with you. The Bosnian government requires many documents. I’ll 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 of the office, he began salivating a little.

Fox sat down and caught Veronika sneaking another glance at Karl. He didn’t know it at the time, but Bosnian women competed fiercely for single men with jobs. Although Veronika was still attractive, age slowly advanced across her fertile orchard while the available men remained hidden. She had better odds catching a shark in the salt pond on the city’s northern side than finding a single, employed man. The young, single women snatched and married the good men quickly.

Fox 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, and 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 he 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 Fox burst into laughter again.

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

“Bosnia is different. 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.”

Fox began frowning. He asked while his 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 Fox walked the four blocks to the city’s center.

Fox stared in awe as he swiveled his head back and forth to study the Hungarian architecture while they walked to the city’s center. Tuzla remained untouched by the commercialization of the West. Fox 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 19th century would still recognize all the streets and places.

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

Fox 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 Fox walked past the Grand Fountain, which sprayed water six feet into the air. Then they stopped at a coffee shop with 20 tables and chairs outside in front of the White Palace. They sat at a table closest to the water fountain so they could enjoy the cool September air.

The sun felt a little tired today. Although the sunlight struck their hands and back, the soft rays lacked any strength. They heard a faint rumbling of thunder in the distance as storm clouds gathered on the other side of the mountains.

Then Fox noticed a waitress moving from table to table. Her dark hair dangled halfway down her back. Her face was creamy, smooth, and youthful, and she had the brightest blue eyes. She wore faded blue jeans that outlined the shape of her legs. He wasn't attracted to her figure but to her demeanor. She smiled radiantly, reflecting her enthusiasm for the world. She had only begun her travels down the stressful, winding 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 particularly 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. The 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 city's northern edge. 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,” he whispered. He wanted to ensure the next table patrons couldn’t hear their conversation.

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

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

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

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

Fox glanced up at her and fumbled his words as they became glued to the back of his throat. Then in a quick succession, the words came out. “I’ll take a cappuccino,” Fox said confidently.

She cracked a smile and stared at Fox for a moment. Then she returned to the café’s interior to prepare their 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, and then he has trouble finding replacements. Twenty Bosnians aren’t lining up to take our jobs, at least not yet.”

“WOW! I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Also,” Karl stopped.

The waitress approached their table, carrying a tray with their drinks. Then she placed the mugs on the table and the receipt near Karl. She put an ashtray on the receipt so the breeze wouldn't blow it away. Then 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 his beer but didn't list your cappuccino on the receipt.”

Fox snatched the receipt and read it. Sure enough, the waitress didn't charge him for that cappuccino. He 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.”

Fox squinted his eyes and frowned. Then he 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. Then the next day, the employment director fired her. Of course, last year, it was Selma and not Veronika. The university president fired Selma two months ago. Like I said, the university goes through employees, like a baby going through clean diapers.”

“Damn!” Then Fox sipped his cappuccino.

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

“Just like their cigarettes too.”

Fox 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 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 Fox saw the waitress again and waved at her to come over, “Miss! Oh, Miss! Please come here,” as his voice found more confidence.

As Yelena trotted to the table, her smile deepened.

Fox 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 Fox added, “May I ask what your name is?”

Yelena turned to face Fox, 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 another two months to get her phone number, and then a year for the first kiss.”

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

Then Karl blurted, “Yeah, the machine is busted, alright. I think you have caught her eye. She likes you; so, you have a challenge facing you.”

Then they exchanged chuckles again.

“Well, I do like challenges. Anyway, he 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 in 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'm not interested in taking off my clothes in front of a strange woman, a woman whom I don't know."

Fox reddened a little because he had never been to those places, but he must admit the curious monkey was sitting on his shoulder, and he wanted to know. As Fox finished his cappuccino, he looked his friend in the eyes and asked, "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 cute young 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 a room, and had the 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 this 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."

Fox paused for a minute to collect his thoughts and then asked, "What's the wildest time you ever had at a brothel?"

"That's hard to say. The 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."

They both erupted into laughter again.

Then Fox continued, "That seems so unnecessary. Go through all the rituals 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!"

Fox continued his probing, "What's the weirdest time you ever had with a prostitute?"

"The 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 hungry because I took too long to finish."

They both exchanged laughter again.

Several Bosnian males sitting at the next table stared at them.

"Okay, let's change the topic."

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

They finished their drinks, and Yelena returned to serve a new table of young, obnoxious Bosnian men.

Fox glanced 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 he 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. She has piqued my curiosity. Besides, if she doesn’t want to charge me for coffee, I’ll give her the money as a tip. I have a feeling that this will be my favorite coffee shop. Of course, it’s the only coffee shop I have been to, but I rank this one at the top of my list.”

Walking away from the cafe, Fox turned and glanced at Yelena. Then she noticed and returned the glance to Fox. Like a lightning flash, she grinned at him facetiously and raised her eyebrows. Then her frown softened into a smile. She raised her hand and waved goodbye so the other patrons could not see her hand.

Fox nodded his head forward and back slightly, acknowledging her wave. Then he turned and walked away. He knew he had plenty of time to chase after Yelena. He didn’t plan to return to the bad U.S. economy anytime soon with empty job interviews and forgotten resumes ...

Fox came out of his daydream.

He shivered from a cold draft that had found its way through the cracks and crevices around the window, and the wind had forced the cold inside.

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

Then Fox reached for his cold gun...

Chapter 2 – Yelena’s Precarious Predicament

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

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 budge. She turned and tapped the next wall. Then the next. Finally, she knocked on a thick, wooden door. She looked down and saw a line of light, illuminating the door’s bottom.

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 the 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. The knob turned, but the door remained locked.

Yelena clenched her hands into fists and pounded on the door. She struck the door with the bottoms of her fists while screaming, “Let me out of here...”

After several minutes of pounding, someone kicked the bottom of the door while the door shook 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 could only hear the TV in the background, which sounded like a soccer match.

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

The man screamed, “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.

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 abducted 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 kept them hungry.

Yelena remembered her last thoughts before being kidnapped. She had planned to meet Fox at the large water fountain in the city center at 9 PM after work.

Yelena had been excited all day, and she couldn't wait to see Fox. Her boss noticed her excitement and let her leave early from work. She smiled deeply, rushed out the door, and sat on the bench to wait for him. She shivered as she waited on the cold bench, and the bitter cold burned 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, Fox's university. One man neared his 60s with all grey hair, while the other was in his 20s and appeared to be a muscular, dumb village boy.

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

Yelena leapt 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. Then darkness swallowed her. Then she awakened in this dark closet.

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

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

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

She met Fox in late September as the nights stretched longer, and cold winter snuck closer each day. As nature's artist threw paint onto a green canvas, the trees transformed into a canopy of browns, reds, oranges, and yellows. Vibrant colors filled the surrounding mountainsides. Then in a Bosnian winter, the artist added the final brush strokes and covered 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, and she enjoyed toying with them.

Yelena saw the door open, and Fox and his old friend, Karl, walked into the cafe. They sat at a free table near the entrance, and Fox 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 grabbing the doorknob. He squinted at Fox and clenched his fists.

Fox said, "Sorry, but I'm not looking for trouble." Then Fox 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 smiled at them at first, but then her smile contorted into a frown. If Teah were a traffic light, wrecked cars would litter the intersection. Nevertheless, the men quickly returned to their guy chat. They were not drunk enough to get insulted by a woman.

"No, I think they're Americans. They come to the café often and speak English," Yelena replied while looking down at the table.

Teah glanced at Karl and Fox 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. He looks to be the same age as my grandfather."

"Ah, it must be the younger one, then."

Yelena looked down at the table again.

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

Yelena picked a loose thread, pulling it from her blue jeans, and letting it fall 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 personal servant and work twice as hard in this café to support him."

Teah began laughing, nodding, saying, “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 could 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. Then smoke plenty of cigarettes to ensure one gets lung cancer before age 40.

“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, and I love 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 budged 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 possible. By the way he looks, I doubt he’ll survive another 10 years. If he spends too many nights here in this coffee shop, he’ll be dead from lung cancer in five years.”

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

The 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. I’m going home if I don’t see you in fifteen minutes.”

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

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

Fox 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, looked sophisticated, and smiled when Fox looked in her direction.

After several minutes, Yelena saw Karl and Fox huddle together as they moved their chairs together and whispered into each other’s ears. Then Karl quickly pointed in Yelena’s direction and nodded his head. After an eternity, Fox 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 stoic, like a stray animal ready to dart into a speeding car to show how strong and powerful the animal was.

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

“No.” Yelena took another puff from her cigarette. Then she turned away from Fox and exhaled her plumb of smoke. She knew

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

Fox slowly sat in the chair and scooted closer to the table. Yelena sat still and wondered if she should be mean or nice.

Fox grinned and asked, "Do you come here often?"

Yelena knew Fox was joking because he came to her café 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. Usually, 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 Fox 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 yearly 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. She doubted her long hours toiling at the café would add up to 1,000 euros yearly.

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’re so friendly.”

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

“Huh?” Fox uttered while his head jerked.

“I’m Serbian,” Yelena said, studying Fox’s face to see if his expression had changed. However, it didn’t. Fox didn’t care about her nationality, unlike Bosnian men.

Races were not permitted to mix in Bosnia. 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.”

Fox laughed, and Yelena joined him.

Fox 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,” Fox 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 Fox’s face.

“I teach at the Bosnian University of Management.”

Yelena saw the university many times while walking 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?”

Fox smirked and looked downward.

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

Fox looked at Yelena and said, “It has nothing to do with Bosnia. It’s just that 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 Fox. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t have picked Bosnia either.”

Then they exchanged laughter.

Then Fox 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 and control your own destiny.”

“Exactly.”

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

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

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

Fox looked at her and asked, “I would like to call you?”

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 Fox, 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 Fox.

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

“Bye,” Fox replied loudly and confidently with a sly smile. He smiled like his soccer team had just won the World Cup.

Perhaps she could fall in love with Fox, 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 listen to what they were saying, scheming, but she only heard muffled voices.

She thought about Fox. 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 had already paid for the Bosnian War, a war that was not hers, a war that took her father and over half the men from her village.

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.

Chapter 3 – Another Day in the Office

Damir sat behind the director's desk at a university branch in Banja Luka, Serbian territory. He removed his thick leather belt and meticulously cleaned and lubricated 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 read his magazine again.

Damir glanced 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 could still fire artillery without 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 Serbian 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 whizzing 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. A true man, a true soldier, uses his hands to take another life.

Of course, Damir was always careful and left no clues behind, and the police never solved those crimes, and they never will. Damir was way too clever for the police.

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 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,” Damir said, shaking his head back and forth, enjoying the rush. He pinched his nose, ensuring every minuscule coke was 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 needed help with the employees and professors, especially the whining professors. He studied every page, searching for new pointers and tips to motivate his employees. A good ole kick in the ass by a heavy boot worked well in his youthful days, but these whiny, crybaby professors would quit and place their stories on the internet.

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 his boot goes up their ass.”

Damir smirked and returned to reading his book. Great minds think alike.

The university was 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 while a bit of 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, leaving the office and 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 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 expensive American professors to Bosnia.”

“I know, sir, but as I already explained, I’ll 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 this 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 a touch of anger with 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 silently enjoyed their coffees 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 Jasmin had returned to the office, Damir and he 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 Bosnian 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 ten 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 firm, 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, and snow pelted the ground. Several inches of snow had already accumulated on the car. Jasmin walked to the back of the car and...

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 budge. 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 trunk 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 trunk 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, leaving a clear path to his spot. 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 area, 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 dead.

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 chunks 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 the 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 and protect him from Damir and his men.

Then a 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. His lungs screamed in pain.

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 large 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 against the tree and inhaled another drag from his cigarette. Holding the smoke in, he let peace and serenity soothe him.

Branko 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.

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 spit on Branko. One of the soldiers unzipped his fly and urinated on Branko's face. Afterward, 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 and turned him into a hunk of 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 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 walked 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."

Chapter 4 – Yelena Has Disappeared

Fox awakened in his chair and reached for the gun. It was time to go. He pulled the hammer back, flipped out the cylinder, and spun it, checking every hole to see if it had a slug of death. Satisfied, he closed and locked the cylinder.

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

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

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

After he had walked her home, he kissed her gently and said goodnight. As he held Yelena tight, and their tongues swirled and chased each other in their mouths, he 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 him again and went home. Whenever he met her, he could smell the faint scent of Chanel...

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

He missed his Serbian girl, and he must find her. Most likely, someone will die tonight.

He kneeled down onto his knees and folded his two hands together for prayer.

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

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

Before Fox closed the front door to his apartment, he turned to take a final panoramic view. He planned never to see this apartment again. He only lived there for four and a half months, but the short duration became filled with sweet memories of Yelena and him. If he had never found Yelena, he would have never wanted to enter this cold, empty apartment again.

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

A thick, smoky fog blanketed the whole city. He 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. He smelled a hint of sulfur from the coal smoke, and he coughed a little here and there as it suffocated his lungs. However, sulfur is the smell of the devil, and it’s time to do the devil’s work.

Then he didn’t know it, but he was not even sure where he was walking. He happened to walk to the damn water fountain – the same fountain where he was supposed to meet Yelena three days ago.

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

...he was supposed to meet Yelena at the water fountain at 9 o’clock, but he 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 icy roads.

But Yelena was not waiting at the fountain.

Then he walked to her coffee shop. He 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 together for warmth, drinks, and cigarettes.

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

Fox screamed above the loud music, “Have you seen Yelena?” The manager could not speak English, but he recognized Fox. The patrons and owner of the café knew Yelena was dating him.

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

“Thanks,” Fox replied apologetically.

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

He 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 he lifted it to his nose, he smelled the faint scent of Chanel.

He immediately shoved the scarf into his winter coat pocket and called Teah on his cell phone.

Teah answered on the second ring.

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

“Who’s this?”

“Fox, Yelena’s boyfriend.”

“Oh Fox. 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 overtime.”

“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.

Fox sat on the cold bench and waited for Teah. She arrived fifteen minutes later, and they 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 Fox found the scarf. Then he pulled the scarf out of his pocket and pointed at the spot where he found it.

They separated and searched the plaza for clues, then branched out into the surrounding neighborhoods to look for Yelena.

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

They 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 they went inside, they 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 walls in many areas, and

the floor looked dirty and grimy because no one had washed it for at least a decade.

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

As the policemen's heads turned, Emir continued, "I would like to report a missing person. Her name is Yelena Backovich; she's 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 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, Fox pulled the scarf out of his pocket and held it up for the policemen to inspect.

Teah pleaded 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 to leave his desk's warmth.

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 an unwinnable case.

Fox clenched his teeth and slanted his eyes. Then he slapped the countertop with both hands. He 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, “Fox, we must go.” Teah and Emir grabbed each Fox’s hands and led him out of the police station.

Teah, Emir, and Fox left the police station disappointed. They would have to search by themselves without the aid of the Bosnian police.

Fox felt like he swallowed a large boulder, and stomach acid gurgled to the back of his throat. He didn’t know why, but he 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.

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

The next day, Teah and Fox searched for Yelena again. They met at the bench where he found Yelena’s scarf. They moved away from the bench in concentric circles, first covering the plaza. Then they walked between the buildings in silence.

They 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 he hadn’t found that scarf, it appeared as if Yelena never existed.

After several hours, the harsh cold forced Teah and Fox into a coffee shop. Teah ordered an espresso and Fox a cappuccino.

As they waited for their drinks, Fox 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.”

Fox felt sullen and depressed but continued, “Who would kidnap Yelena? Who would do such a thing?” He pounded his 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?” he snapped. He didn’t ask a question about the university, but he just wanted to confirm his 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 rumors about Damir, the university, or his drivers?”

“I’m sorry, Fox,” Teah replied softly, reaching for his hands and doing her best to soothe him. I haven’t heard anything about the university. The only thing I heard was Damir was a war hero and a successful businessman.”

“That’s it.”

“I’m sorry Fox.”

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

Fox was jolted out of his memories. He pulled Yelena’s scarf out of his pocket and took another whiff.

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

He discovered only one clue. He found a house. That house must be keeping secrets. Maybe he’ll find Yelena there, and they can be together again. Then he felt the budge of his gun under his coat. Unfortunately, someone must die tonight.

Chapter 5 – Running Some Errands

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

Jasmin backed the car to a loading dock around the 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.”

They carried the crate to the car and positioned it on the back bumper while Jasmin fished the car keys from his pocket and opened the trunk. Then they carefully slid the crate into 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 quickly, 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. His black French poodle barked and hopped up and down excitedly as he opened the door a little.

“Now boy, did you miss your papa?”

The poodle sat beside Damir’s foot, wagging its tail furiously while Darmir 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 beside 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.

Adnan sat on a chair with a serious, contemplative expression 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. A man cannot be righteous with a closet full of dead bodies.

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. Angry sex is better than cold pizza.

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 opening and shutting and dishes moving around.

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

Jasmin glanced at the closet where Yelena was held captive. As he approached the door, he unzipped his jeans and unfastened his belt. 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 should 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 house's warmth. 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 discreetly zipped up his pants.

"Boys, did I miss something?"

Jasmin looked at the boss and kept quiet. He looked embarrassed, like a pupil the teacher had 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 and cap and sat on the couch. Jasmin joined them, sitting on Damir's other side.

"How's that Serbian slut?" Damir asked in a good mood.

"She's doing well," Adnan replied. "I gave her some food a little 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 freezing, 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, 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 trunks of citizens of former Yugoslavia as long as they didn’t look suspicious. One literally needed a 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 would 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 considering about paying Dr. Swanson a bonus for his hard work. I think a two-thousand-euro bonus would be nice. He worked hard for me this past semester, and he should be rewarded. And his girlfriend would help pay for his bonus."

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. 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. Afterward, he removed it from the heat for a few seconds and 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 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 had worked their 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 dropping the professors off at campus, I drive by the 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 we have a campus 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 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.

“Ppppsssst,” Jasmin added, starting to laugh louder. He was weak. It would be more of a challenge to shoot at a barn blindfolded.”

Damir added, “He didn’t pose a challenge. The 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 his 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 from the hallway closet. Then they started chuckling again.

Damir came into the living room again with a bit of white dust surrounding his left nostril. 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.

Chapter 6 – Falling in Love

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 gave away. She pushed in a little and pulled it out carefully. The nails were pried loose, and 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 are 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 Fox’s apartment.

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

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 thought she was 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!” Like a bell on its last rungs, the sounds possessed a metallic hollow ring.

Yelena was confused.

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

The 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 Fox. She remembered the first night when she and Fox kissed. The first night, they made love, hot, passionate love. She began to daydream about Fox...

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 would 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. She thought she was an average attractive girl but, in this dress, she looked ravishing.

Yelena sat at the bureau and dabbed a little makeup, a little eyeliner, and a couple of pats of blush upon her cheeks. She rolled a cherry-colored 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 good.

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 not to smoke tonight. She wanted her breath to remain fresh and pristine. Fox was becoming more interesting, so who knew what events would unfold tonight? But a breath that smelled like an ashtray would not help.

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

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. "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, kissed her mother's cheek, and added, "I know, Mom, bye." She dashed for the door before her mom could ask more probing questions or lock her up in the bedroom for the night.

Yelena met Fox at the water fountain in the center of town. He came early and sat on a bench near the 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. A blind man strolling by could tell he was a foreigner.

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, Fox."

"So—how're you doing?"

"I'm doing well."

"Are you hungry? Thirsty?" Fox 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?" Fox repeated.

Yelena scooted closer to Fox, 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 Fox's arm.

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

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

Fox gazed at her blue eyes and whispered softly, "Yelena, you look really beautiful tonight."

Then he caressed 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 Fox 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. Fox'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, Fox retreated and lifted his head while Yelena opened her eyes.

Fox was different from the Bosnians because they were rough and to the point. A Bosnian man's kiss was like a suction hose pulling on her lips.

Fox fondled Yelena gently, softly. At that point, she knew she loved him.

They sat on the bench and watched the sunset. The sun emanated a spectrum of colors, yellow, orange, and red, transforming the clouds into pink-orange hues. Then the colors darkened until the mountains hid the sun.

During the sunset, Fox 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 Fox’s ear, “I don’t want to be around people, not tonight. I just want to be with you, only you.”

Fox relaxed a little and uttered, “Oh, okay. I can get some wine at the store. Maybe we can have 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 Fox’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 Fox’s apartment, which was seven blocks from the center of town.

They hid in the shadows when Yelena and Fox approached a dark alley alongside a building. They kissed passionately, holding each other tightly, oblivious to strangers walking by.

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

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

“Unfortunately, I only saw wines from the 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 Fox’s apartment, Yelena sat on the couch in the living room.

Fox 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 RoHe 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 Fox pulled it out and quickly filled the two wine glasses, filling the room with a fruity, sweet aroma.

Fox 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. Fox 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 Fox began to kiss fervently, uncontrollably again.

Before knowing what happened, Fox 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 Fox’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 to dissipate their hot passion.

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

Fox 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, Fox.”

Although Fox 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. Afterward, he dumped her and told her he could never marry her.

Yelena planted her head on Fox’s chest while he embraced her, holding her tightly.

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

“Fox, 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’s smile broadened, and she 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, and kiss. They didn’t want to say goodbye to each other. Yelena wished to taste the sweetness of Fox’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, Fox” while tears flooded Yelena’s eyes. I love you, Fox. Please save me.”

Chapter 7 – The Mysterious Yellow House

It was a freezing cold January night, and Fox walked straight to this mysterious yellow house. He stood outside, hiding behind a tree, hoping he would find Yelena there. Then he could rescue her and take her to America. They would leave Bosnia behind forever.

Fox reached into his pocket and felt for the gun's handle.

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

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

The police claimed the murders were not connected. However, he found it odd for a city to have one or two murders per year and that the two murders happened on the same night several blocks apart.

Fox usually roamed that neighborhood within two blocks of the murdered transient, the same neighborhood where he bought his gun.

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

Fox stopped. Then he slowly turned to face the hood. He replied emphatically, "No!"

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

The hood hesitated as he scanned him up and down.

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

"I'd pay two hundred euros," Fox replied confidently. Still, he didn't know the actual street value for a gun, so he threw a number

out there, and 200 euros seemed reasonable. Fortunately, he guessed correctly because the hood happened to have a gun for sale, an old 0.38 Smith and Wesson. Fox had to pay another thirty euros for a half box of bullets.

Fox bought that gun immediately. The exchange happened so fast, Fox thought he dreamed it. Before he could say, 'Thank you,' the hood disappeared into the night's fog.

Fox continued meandering through the neighborhoods. He never took the gun with him. He always hid it behind the radiator in his apartment. He didn't want Yelena to know he bought a gun.

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

Then on one dark night, around seven, on December 3rd, Fox scored big. He had a perfect view of the street outside while he 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. Still, they never noticed him sitting in the shadows in the corner.

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

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

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

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

Jasmin parked the car in the driveway, and several large oak trees grew around the property, hiding the house. He saw a typical Balkan house, resembling the Italian style. The house stood three stories tall, had orange terra cotta roof tiles, and was painted a pastel yellow. On the front and back of the house, there were large spacious balconies on each floor, except the ground floor.

Approaching the house, Fox ducked into the shadows, hiding behind a large oak tree, and studied the large three-story home.

After a few minutes, he 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 several times as he puffed on his cigarette. Once Jasmin finished his cigarette, he flicked the butt onto the lawn and walked back inside.

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

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

Fox hoped the occupants could not detect his thick accent. After several minutes, he knocked again. He held a fake badge in front of the peek hole. He knew it would be a long shot, but he hoped the badge he 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 and thin, he looked tired, as if he hadn't slept well in ages. The old man appeared relieved by his presence, like an escaped prisoner on the run for so long; he was relieved when the police caught him.

Fox pointed the gun at him and slid the toy badge back into his 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.

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

A pungent stench of chemicals struck his nostrils in the living room, like walking into a dry cleaner's. He saw several tables with laboratory equipment and an assortment of Petri dishes, beakers, flasks, and containers of chemicals spread across the table's 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. The glass tubing led from the flask to an ice bath.

Fox 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?" Fox 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?" he asked, raising his 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 grubby little hands in everything around this little town."

Fox's mouth hung low and his eyes flapped wide open. He 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. I also make 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 doesn’t matter. Once Damir finds out, we’ll both be dead.”

“What?”

“Damir will kill us in an instant,” 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 have no choice.”

“Choice? Everybody has a choice.”

Boris just stared at Fox coldly.

“How many children have you killed?”

“My wife was dying,” Boris whispered.

“What?”

Fox waved the gun intentionally in the air in wide arcs and then pointed it at Boris again.

“Talk! I have plenty of time.”

Boris let out a long sigh and began, “Damir tricked me. After the Bosnian War, I worked as a chemistry professor at the University of Tuzla. My salary was meager. My wife became gravely ill, and we needed to buy expensive medication from Italy. I just did not have enough money, and I couldn’t 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 the 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.”

Fox’s skin whitened while he shook his head in disbelief. He thought he had become stuck in a nightmare. Any minute, he 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 sold 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, adding, “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 must 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 wouldn’t 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 this business, the less you know, the longer Damir lets you live.”

Fox uttered, “Oh, my God!”

After a minute of silence, Fox 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 escape Damir but 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’m 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 had to buy the chemicals for the lab. So now, I must buy all the chemicals myself, recycling everything I can. I can't do anything about it. If I disagree, then Damir will kill me."

The old man chuckled and added, "My salary becomes smaller each month. Who knows, I'll pay him to work for him next year." Then Boris burst into coarse laughter again.

"I can't believe this! This is crazy!" Fox became dizzy as his 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 water sips out of the fountain, and your office space. After each month, when you get your paycheck, I guarantee you'll find another deduction. He'll figure out something to take away from you."

Fox bowed his face down, allowing his face to rest in his hands. He held the gun in his right hand, feeling the coldness of the steel barrel on his cheek.

After Boris let this information steep in Fox's 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."

Fox's arm became sore, and he laid the heavy gun on the end table. The old chemist did not appear to be a threat, so Fox wished he 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 to 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."

Fox raised his head again and stared at the old man. He must know. Fox's 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!" he refused to believe what he heard and repeated, "Sex trade?"

"It was widespread 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!"

Fox wanted to lie on the floor and cry, but his rage had stopped the tears. It's his fault that someone kidnapped Yelena. Damir Kovacev would never have known about Yelena if he didn't come to Bosnia.

After pausing for several minutes, Fox asked, "Would you happen to know where Damir might have sold her?"

"They don't tell me anything. The 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, afterward, 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 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!”

Fox sat in the chair and refused to believe what the chemist told him. His eyelids became heavy as the new information shorted his brain, causing it to shut down. Then he drifted to sleep while sitting in the armchair. His dreams were horrific and troubled. Occasionally, he stirred and screamed obscenities in his sleep.

When Fox awakened, he had a thick wool blanket draped around him. He stirred a little as the woolen fabric itched his neck and hands.

Boris’s smile broadened while staring at Fox.

Fox thought that if everything went according to plan, then both Jasmin and Damir would be dead, and Boris would become a free man. His deal with the devil will become broken when Fox sends the devil into his lake of fire and sulfur. Boris would become a free man again, and he and his wife could flee Tuzla forever.

Then Fox drifted back to sleep again.

Chapter 8 – Bye, Bye Jasmin

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 at a flop house in another city if they had a morning class at that campus the next day.

The administration told Jasmin to buy new bed sheets for the Banja Luka campus. 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 to 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 as lower than the custodians who cleaned the classrooms and bathrooms.

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

Jasmin walked to the window and glanced outside. Clouds filled the sky, hiding the sun, while the wind blew drifts of snow across the land. Everything was covered in a shade of gray.

Usually, Jasmin picked up the professors at 7 AM and drove them from Tuzla to Banja Luka. A typical driver would take four hours for the trip, but Jasmin shaved down his time to two and a 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. 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: brown khakis and a hazel dress shirt with the university's emblem stitched on the shirt's left shoulder.

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.

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

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

Fox's stomach began growling.

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

Fox saw a chevapi, a Bosnian sandwich usually eaten for lunch or dinner, on a plate with a cup of hot coffee and a small container of hot sauce. He rarely ate chevapi because it was too greasy.

Boris set the tray next to the gun 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."

Fox replied, "Thank you." He picked up the fork and removed the top bun. They always fried the buns in a lake of sausage grease. He used the fork to push the thick layer of freshly diced onions off the sandwich onto the side of the plate. Then he 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 his throat better, lubricating his insides.

Boris watched Fox eat his breakfast solemnly as he 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 hope you will like it. I want you to have plenty of energy today. You have plenty to do.”

After Fox cleaned his plate, except for the small hill of onions to the side, Boris began, “Fox, it’s almost time. Jasmin rises early, and I would expect him around seven this morning.”

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

Boris lays out his plans, “Let’s start...”

Jasmin slipped his jacket on and headed out the door.

As he stepped onto the fresh snow, his right boot exploded, and 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. His toes were snugly tucked into the ancient boot. He mumbled smugly, “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 produces more products for the consumers. He tried to keep Damir happy and keep the money machine running at full capacity.

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

Jasmin pulled into the driveway, and he saw coal smoke billowing out of the chimney. At the same time, a layer of fresh snow covered everything.

Jasmin scanned the front door and then the yard surrounding it. He examined the area's foot traffic, a habit he had 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 of the gun handle.

Jasmin quickly approached the front door. His heavy boots crunched the soft snow beneath his feet while his right boot slipped 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 a little, and Boris peeped through the crack.

"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 growled.

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 pleased."

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, making 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.

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

Jasmin laughed and started to get out of the chair.

Fox 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 Fox coldly.

Fox 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 Fox.

The gun shivered a little in Fox's trembling hands.

Jasmin was gauging his enemy as he sarcastically asked, "You know, Fox, 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," Fox demanded, but the heavy gun trembled.

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!" Fox screamed at the top of his lungs.

"I'm not sure Fox. 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. You can't trust these Serbian women."

"What did you say? With whom did she run away? Why Montenegro?" Fox shouted as rage boiled the blood traveling through his 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?” Fox screamed.

Jasmin continued smiling and studied Fox carefully.

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

“WHO!!!” Fox screamed again while his face reddened. Rage wanted to explode out of him.

Jasmin just stared at him.

Fox fired the gun again above Jasmin’s head.

Then Jasmin 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 slut. He wanted you to teach and write research papers. Your job is only for the university. Your wife and mistress are the university, not some Serbian whore you picked up at the coffee shop.”

“What the fuck?” Fox exclaimed while confusion swarmed in his 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,” Fox shouted coldly while rage began pulsating through his brain, clouding his 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. He added, “Just do it. Put the bullet right here,” tapping his forehead with his index finger for emphasis.

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

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

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

“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?!!” Fox 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. Nobody 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?” Fox 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, which echoed throughout the quiet house.

Fox couldn’t believe what he had heard. He faced Jasmin as his eyes widened. Then he 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 broadened as he stated, “Bingo, you win the jackpot.”

“Are you and Damir fucking sick? You murdered him and then held a wake for him?” Fox screamed.

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

Fox remembered Karl’s last conversation and funeral well...

...on the night Karl died, he called Fox 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 in person and said be very careful. Our lives were in danger.

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

Yelena and Fox waited hours for Karl to show up. Around midnight, the dean called Fox. he ran outside the loud bar to 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 him. They wanted to know what Karl did in his free time. Did he use drugs? Did he drink too much? Did he visit prostitutes? Fox screamed “No!” to all of this.

Of course, Fox knew more about Karl’s death than what he let on. He 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 vast auditorium. A large framed picture was placed on 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 image.

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

Yelena and Fox placed a bouquet of flowers by Karl’s picture and sat in the front row.

Then Damir Kovacev gave a short eulogy.

That was the first time he 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, and his contribution and hard work to the university will always be remembered. We 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 Fox's hand and occasionally squeezed it. Then Fox would glance at Yelena as she mouthed the words, "I love you..."

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

Before he could react, Jasmin leaped out of the chair and hopped toward Fox.

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

Fox crashed onto the ground with Jasmin on top of him while the gun slipped out of his hand and landed near the wall.

Jasmin pummeled Fox in the face with strong punches.

Fox thought he would pass out as each blow brought him closer to unconsciousness. Then before he knew what happened, Jasmin jumped up quickly and scratched 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, Fox!"

Fox quickly rolled onto his hands and feet, crawling towards the gun. He picked the weapon 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 and 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.

Fox pulled the trigger as the bullet exploded from the gun, “Boom!”

Fox scooted towards the wall, leaning his back against it.

Jasmin fell to the ground while a large, red splotch spread over the front of his shirt. Then Jasmin died, as God carried him home. Burnt flesh filled the air as the sulfuric acid ate away at Jasmin’s face.

Fox tossed the gun onto the floor while in a daze.

“Fox, you did it. You must be strong and tough to get your girl back. Do you want Yelena back? Fox, do you want Yelena back?” Boris screamed as he shook Fox.

Fox’s tears stopped as the word Yelena brought him out of his hysterical state.

“How can I find her? Where do I look?” Fox looked confused. He had trouble coping with his first murder, and he thought earning his Ph.D. was the highest, most memorable time of his life.

“You already know the answer. First, confront and kill Damir, and then 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?” he 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.”

Fox sat leaning against the wall for an hour while his buttocks became numb from sitting on the floor.

The pungent, burnt smell from Jasmin’s flesh permeated all the fresh air in the house.

Fox 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 his lips so he could drink it. His hand trembled as he reached for the coffee cup.

After a few minutes, the burst of caffeine helped Fox regain his energy. He started to get up and shake the sleepiness from his legs.

He felt pinpricks and numbness in his legs, and the nausea in his stomach began fading and dissipating.

Boris entered the living room again and sat in the armchair across from Fox.

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?” Fox asked, regaining his 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.”

Fox staggered a little when he stood up. Then he grabbed the gun and turned to leave, but Boris quickly got out of the chair and grabbed his hand.

“Before you go, Fox, take this with you.”

Fox glanced down at the bags clenched in Boris’s 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 as 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 these packets to someone, and they will take you seriously. Nobody will help you for free, not in Eastern Europe.”

Fox reluctantly grabbed the bags. Although he abhorred drugs, he wanted Yelena back. If he had to use 50,000 euros in illegal drugs to get her back, then he would gladly pay the price.

Fox searched Jasmin’s coat pockets and found the car keys to the Skoda in his left coat pocket. He ran down the stairs and opened the front door. He felt the cold morning air work magic on his composure as the icy fingers of coldness massaged him and restored his composure.

Fox ran to the car and first peered in through the dark, tinted windows, ensuring no one hid inside. When he was satisfied no one was there, he went to the car's back, opened the trunk, and saw a small, brown, leather briefcase.

Fox placed the bag of drugs in the trunk and then tried to open the briefcase, but the small locks wouldn't budge. He searched the trunk and found a crowbar. He jammed the crowbar into the closed lips of the briefcase, but it wouldn't fit. Then he pounded the locks using the crowbar as a hammer, and the cheap locks quickly unlatched.

Fox didn't know what to expect, so he slowly opened the briefcase, expecting angry snakes to strike. But, instead, he saw three bundles of 100-euro notes instead of slithering snakes.

Fox quickly grabbed the money and counted it, 30,000 euros. Then he slid the money into the front inside pocket of his winter coat and threw the briefcase toward the nearest oak tree. He hid the bags of drugs under the spare tire.

Fox unlocked the Skoda sedan, sat in the driver's seat, and started the car. He 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 Fox 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."

Fox drove in silence the six blocks into town. Nearing the university, he pulled over to let Boris out.

Boris turned to Fox, "Fox, thank you for saving me. I pray that you succeed and get your girlfriend back." Then Boris held his hand out for a handshake. Fox vigorously shook his hand.

Then the door slammed shut, and Boris disappeared.

Fox pulled back on the road and headed to the university to confront the president of the Bosnian University of Management.

Chapter 9 – A Meeting with the President

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. Spittle flew from his lips as he screamed, and some 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, knocking over a chair in the process.

Damir watched Veronika flee, a satisfied smile creeping 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. Always start the day with a hot cup of freshly brewed coffee and absolutely destroy someone. Today, indeed, would be a great day.

Damir grabbed his glass of Cockta, a Bosnian soda beverage, 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 suitable 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. Pleeeasee..."

Damir leaped to his feet as rage coursed through his veins. He felt alive, blinded by the raw energy of a volcano. And that energy must destroy something or someone.

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. The ground protected part of his body.

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 weekly quota. 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. 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 ensure he wouldn't erupt again.

Damir sat behind his desk, smiling. All traces of anger vanished.

Admir inspected the bottle, ensuring Damir hadn't spiked the drink with poison or slid a syringe needle in it. Then he took a large swig but watched Damir with one eye.

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. In the future, when you spell my last name Kovacev, please 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, 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 said softly, "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. Next time, I may get angry."

Fox pulled into the parking lot for the State Hospital Complex, where he could hide the car in a sea of cars. He handed the lot attendant a one-euro coin, which he quickly shoved into his empty pocket. "Thank you, sir." But Fox was already out of earshot before the attendant could complete his sentence.

Fox jogged the two blocks to the university. He dashed to the faculty office first. He needed time to think and collect his thoughts. Approaching his office, he heard sobbing sounds echoing down the hall. As he walked past Veronika's door, he 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 was disheveled. She noticed him and tried to compose herself, patting at the tears with her shirt sleeve.

Fox slowly closed her door, sat in a chair across from Veronika, and whispered, “Veronika, could we please have a talk?”

“Fox, 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, gently placed it into the box, and quietly sat down. She didn’t look directly at Fox but stared into space.

“I don’t know how to say this, but Damir is evil.”

Veronika exhaled sarcastically and shrieked, “That’s an understatement.”

“May I ask what happened?” Fox 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, Fox,” 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 his eyes, ascertaining whether he was playing a cruel joke on her.

“Do you know anything about this?” he 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. The 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 disappear. The mayor also decided to stay away from Damir and his university, and he wants nothing to do with him because Damir is too crazy.”

Fox asked softly, sincerely, “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 dirtbag. I have never seen such a slimy piece of shit,” Fox snapped.

Fox paused for a minute in pensive thought. Then he cleared his 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, Fox. 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," Fox said while his 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, ensuring 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 is 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 his abdomen as her eyes widened.

Fox rearranged the front of the coat to hide the gun handle.

"Perhaps you can see him without an appointment. Just be careful."

Fox reached inside his jacket and grabbed one bundle of euros. He placed the bundle of money on Veronika's desk and stated, "Veronika, I want you to take this..."

"I can't take this money, Fox!" Veronika feigned disapproval.

"Please take this money. Besides, this money does not belong to me. I stole it from Damir. Think of it as contributing 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," Fox said, quietly rising from the chair to approach the door.

Veronika's stopped sobbing and 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, "It's a nice day after all."

As Fox closed the door, Veronika said, "Thank you, Fox." He went to his office to reload his gun, then to the administrative office to turn in his letter of resignation.

Walking down the corridor of the administrative wing, he scanned the hall. He 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 and covered with a fresh coat of enamel paint, except the last one. Fox approached the last door, where a new mahogany door stood with a polished brass knob. Then he read the golden placket next to the door, Damir Kovacev, President.

Fox quietly approached Damir's Office. He glanced at the vacant desk beside Damir's door, ensuring Adnan was not lurking around. Once he reached the door, he grabbed the gun's handle and slid the Smith and Wesson from its hiding place. He looked behind himself, making sure the coast was clear.

Nobody was here today, leaving the corridor empty.

As Fox reached for the door handle, his heart rate started to accelerate, and he heard his beating heart as it geared up for action.

Fox grabbed the door handle tightly and pushed the door open. The door swung inward and banged against the wall. Then he charged in, pointing his gun at Damir's head.

Damir raised his head and stared at the gunman. His smile widened as he seemed oblivious to the gun. In a civil, respectful tone, he said, "Please come in, Fox. I've been meaning to talk to you."

Fox glanced down at his hand to ensure he held a gun, not a banana. The gun's polished steel glistened under the office light. He used his other hand to close the door gently and moved several feet from the front of Damir's desk.

Damir folded his hands and rested them on that folder of resumes, still smiling.

Fox 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 Fox's 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?" Fox 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?" Fox screamed as his 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?" Fox screamed again. Emphasizing his point, Fox used his thumb to pull the gun's trigger back as a metallic click echoed through the room.

"Fox, oh Fox. 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 care for my employees, especially my best ones,” Damir stated in a jovial tone.

Fox’s face reddened as anger coursed through his veins, “WHERE IS YELENA?”

“Oh, that’s the name of that Serbian bitch? Fox, 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 Fox’s conscience. His inner voice screamed – just shoot him. You know where Yelena is. Then Fox 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 we can go out this weekend, 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.”

Fox 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, “Fox, 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 Fox’s blood while his reasoning and conscience shut down. Fox screamed at the top of his lungs, “TELL ME WHERE YELENA IS,” and he shot a bullet above Damir’s head.

Before Fox realized what happened, Damir hopped onto the desk and leaped onto him, knocking him down.

Fists began pummeling his face.

Fox shot the gun again, but the punches kept landing on his cheeks, eyes, and chin.

Fox pulled the gun’s trigger again, and the punches stopped. He pushed Damir off him 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 Fox's head. He tilted the gun backward to examine it. The gun was hot. Then he saw a wisp of smoke rise from the gun's barrel. Everything seemed surreal as he became stuck in a bad dream. He hoped this nightmare would end soon, and he would awaken in a cold sweat in his bed, but the bad dream continued. He must traverse this nightmare until the end. He couldn't awaken yet.

That was reality. Fox murdered another person.

Fox scorched his hand when he touched the hot gun barrel. Then he slipped the gun into his winter coat pocket and approached Damir's desk.

Fox reached for a Kleenex on Damir's desk. He tipped toed backward to the office door, keeping his eye on Damir, where he lay in the center of the office motionlessly as a pool of blood widened, growing across the surface.

Once Fox reached the door, he used the Kleenex to wipe the door handle. Before shutting the door, he studied where he stood in front of Damir, scanning the floor and ensuring he didn't drop anything.

Fox noticed several splotches of blood near the chair in front of Damir's desk. He lifted his arms and legs, inspecting them for cuts or injuries. When he was satisfied that it wasn't his blood, he quietly closed the office door and wiped the outside door handle with his Kleenex.

Fox scanned the corridor, and he didn't see another living soul around. Then he retreated down the corridor and walked outside into the cold January air. He had some errands to complete before heading to Montenegro.

Fox had just killed his second victim.

Admir was working in the building and 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 and become 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, ran out, screaming.

After fifteen minutes, Admir strolled 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! Rest in peace!"

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. Bye bye Damir and good riddance.

Chapter 10 – Delivering the Cargo Safely

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, causing tree limbs to cast dancing shadows 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 shake hands with the police officer and 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. 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. 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 grapevines.

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 it near the keyhole. 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. Adnan would have time to pray later.

After the chant had ended, he drenched the cloth with chloroform, unlocked the trunk, and sprang it open.

Yelena lay still, sound asleep. Her face looked serene and peaceful, and she mumbled, "Oh Fox," 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.

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 straggly 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 little traffic at this crossing point. He glanced at the Bosnian customs, a dark-red shipping container with a window and door cut out of the side. The 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, which had a severe case of rust leprosy and several bales of hay on its 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.

The 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 the counter 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 since Montenegro attracts the wealthy from Europe while his country is 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 trunk of the car, 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 curious eyes 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. The 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 large palatial 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 farther 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 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 is so busy at the university.”

“I heard you brought me a present?”

“Yes, sir; she’s in the trunk.” 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 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 robe’s collar and started laughing.

Afterward, 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.”

Yelena twisted and contorted her body as the guards carried her upstairs to the second floor. Her fight was futile, like a leaf caught in a hurricane’s whirlwinds.

The 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 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. 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, he could be pleasant and normal, and the next, he could transform 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 quite 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 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. I try to help people whenever I can.”

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 added, "Let's just say their specialty is properly caring for 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 warehouses 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 your car trunk."

“Alright, alright. Five thousand it is,” Adnan said and reached into his pocket and counted out an additional 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 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 on 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 in anticipation.

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. If you do something good for Sasha, 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 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!"

Svetlana came over demurely and softly grabbed Adnan's hand. She pulled him off the couch. Then she led him 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; with her price tag, men never romanced or seduced her. The men tried to plant as many seeds into her as they could.

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 flawlessly, making sure she did not bruise a man's childish ego. One complaint to Sasha was that 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, 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 wanted to get Adnan's seeds out of her as fast as she can.

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 traveling to a new world filled with better-quality people. How could she start over again? Where can she find decent men who would dote on her.

Chapter 11 – Fox Arrives in Montenegro

Fox looked both ways before stepping out of the front door of the Bosnian University of Management. He didn't want anyone he knew to see him.

He killed two people today, and his hands and arms trembled in fear, while the Smith and Wesson, tucked inside his dress pants, felt like an ice pack against his skin.

Although the sun was shining, a freezing wind howled as he walked down the street. It was around noon, and many pedestrians were walking along the sidewalks. Fox tried to blend in so no one would recognize him, but he still stood out as a foreigner.

Fox exhaled plumes of mist as his breath froze in midair. He walked to the town center by the water fountain, now covered by a thick tarp. Sadness tugged at his heart as he looked at the bench where Yelena and he first kissed. At this moment, three teenage boys sat at their spot, playing and jostling with each other.

Fox felt the rage boiling in his veins at Yelena's kidnapping. The rage melted and eliminated his fear. He will go to Montenegro to find his girl.

As he made his along the street, he saw the Serbian church where Yelena and he attended every Sunday afternoon. Memories of Yelena and Fox attending church for the first time flooded his mind...

After Fox made love for the first time with Yelena, they bonded and became inseparable. Yelena called him one Sunday morning and asked him to meet her at the Serbian church. He happily complied.

That Sunday was a typical fall day. Green leaves were transforming to bright reds, yellows, and browns. It was not too chilly, and he only donned a brown leather coat.

As Fox approached the church, the bells began chiming. The last parishioners entered the church, closing the large, thick wooden doors. Then he saw Yelena standing next to the door.

Yelena's smile broadened as he approached her. She wore a purple blouse with splashes of bright colors and a pair of blue

jeans. She pulled her dark long hair back into a braided ponytail. Her black high heels let her stand a little taller.

Fox gawked at the church in awe. The front of the church had a soaring, narrow tower that jutted five stories tall and had 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.

Fox quickened his pace to a jog and grabbed Yelena in a sweeping, loving embrace. He hugged her firmly and whispered, “Hi, beautiful. I’m glad to see you.” Then he kissed her on the cheek.

Yelena whispered, “Hi, Fox,” and pulled away from his embrace. Her face reddened from embarrassment. She said, “Not here, Fox, not at God’s place.”

Yelena pointed her index finger toward the sky and added, “We’re outside of God’s house. You must wait until after church.”

Yelena didn’t wear a jacket, and she felt a little cold, so he removed his coat, wrapped it snugly around her, and took her hand. He gestured for Yelena to walk in first as he 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 his hand and led him to the far left side.

Fox 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 gold, while the walls were painted a pastel blue. Where the three towers stood, he 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 before a long table filled with religious objects, many of which were golden in color. He also lit numerous candles on gold candlesticks on the table.

Fox looked above the altar and saw a giant 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, Bosnian, or Croatian, depending on which ethnic group one claimed to belong to. 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 containing a small bowl with burning incense. As the priest chanted, he bobbed the shaft up and down, causing the incense smoke to weave convoluted patterns in the air.

Fox glanced at Yelena. She smiled at him, squeezing his hand tighter. Then she mouthed the words, “I love you.” He blushed a little and repeated the exact words to Yelena, “I love you, too.”

Once the priest ended his sermon, the congregation began to hum the chorus again. Yelena tugged at his hand and led him 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. A large stand in front of the picture held a tray of white sand. People pushed tall, skinny candles into the sand and lit them while saying a prayer to Jesus. Fox counted 50 flickering candles.

Fox saw what Yelena wanted. He deposited a one-euro coin into a wooden box near the altar and grabbed two new, unlit candles. Then he handed one to Yelena and kept the other for himself.

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.

Fox followed suit and placed his candle next to hers but didn’t say a prayer or make a wish. This religion thing was new to him. Then they both exited the church quietly.

Yelena and Fox walked toward the center of town. When they walked at least a block away from the church, he pulled her softly under an oak tree, embracing and kissing her. At the same time, leaves floated and swirled to the ground around them with a fall breeze that tried to cool their moment of hot passion...

Fox returned to reality as he walked past that tree and continued to the church. He opened the heavy wooden door and entered. The priest had switched off all the lights, leaving it dark inside, empty, devoid of people.

Fox's footsteps echoed loudly. An old woman kneeled in front of the main altar in heavy prayer.

Fox 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.

He instinctively grabbed two new candles, lit them, and pushed them into the white sand. He made the cross sign over his heart as he mumbled a prayer. Please, God, let me find Yelena. That is the only thing I want in this world. Amen.

Fox turned to leave but stopped. He forgot his donation to the church. He reached inside his coat pocket and retrieved a ten-euro note, slipping it into the donation box.

Fox walked towards the hospital, where he parked the car. His stomach started growling, but he ignored it. He kept walking impervious to the cold wind that blew in his 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, he didn't stop to read the marquee as he passed by.

Fox felt weak, like he was ready to pass out. Although he did not want to eat, he knew he must eat, or he would end up at a hospital. Then he 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 he had to get something to eat. He knew the café served an assortment of drinks and a variety of national dishes, especially his favorite – Bosnian pizza.

As Fox walked through the door, he smelled pizzas baking in a brick oven heated by hickory wood. The wood imbued the pizza with complex, sweet bacon flavors.

He walked by the showcases in the front filled with bureks. They reminded him of cinnamon rolls, but he knew they were not

rolled in cinnamon and sugar. The rolls were stuffed with potatoes, beef, cheese, or any combination of those ingredients.

Fox sat down at his usual table near the front door. The waiter immediately smiled at him. The waiter approached his table and politely asked, “Sir, what would you like?”

Fox paused for a moment. Then he 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 his order. After several minutes, the waiter placed the food on the table.

Fox sat in deep thought as today’s intense events flashed in his mind like lightning strikes in a storm cloud. Although his stomach continued to growl ferociously, he ate slowly, mechanically. He would cut a slice of pizza and use his fork to push the slice around in the ketchup, taking his time. Then he would slowly chew that piece.

Fox had to chew and swallow slowly, trying not to remember Jasmin’s face melting away or the awful taste in the back of his throat after puking.

A young woman with a high-pitched voice shrieked, “Dr. Swanson.”

Fox turned and saw three of his students standing next to his table. He should have known better. He picked the worst spot to have lunch.

Although he had taught thousands of students, he always recognized his good and bad ones from the sea of faces. These three were his excellent students.

“Hello,” Fox responded in utter surprise.

“May we join you?” Elmira asked politely.

“Please sit down,” Fox replied in a pretend jovial mood, but he was unsure if he had pulled it off. He had one hell of a day and still had at least another nine hours before tomorrow officially started.

Before he knew it, his three students, Emir, Elmira, and Alma, were sitting around the table, occupying the vacant chairs. He had 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?”

Fox looked down at his food. He sliced a piece of the burek, stabbed it with a fork, dipped it in ketchup, and chewed it slowly in his mouth. He politely held his index finger in the air to allow him to chew his food before answering questions.

After an awkward silence, Alma reiterated the same question with a concerned voice: “Sir, will you be teaching us next semester?” Her eyes became watery and filled with sadness.

Fox sipped his cappuccino to wash down the burek. Then he cleared his 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 shrilled 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?”

Fox stretched back in his chair. He glanced at each student’s face and let out a long sigh. Then he 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,” Fox said slowly without emotion, looking down at the table when he said it.

Elmira, the shy one, said, “You’re not the first to have a problem with Damir. I remember last year when he 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. Afterward, Damir returned several 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—his firing and re-hiring a professor after he

discovered no one else could teach her courses—didn't raise their spirits.

Fox 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."

Fox sipped his 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 his hand one by one, and they left the café quietly.

Fox shoveled a couple more slices of burek into his mouth and then gulped down the rest of his coffee. He slapped a five-euro note onto the table and headed for Jasmin's car.

Fox drove and drove until he found his way to Montenegro. On the long, desolate drive, he kept seeing memories of Yelena flash in his mind. He didn't know it, but he drove along the same road that Adnan had taken 12 hours earlier.

Fox 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 Fox through the window and waived him 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 Fox approached 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.

Fox didn't understand because she asked in Serbian. Giving her a quizzical look, Fox replied in English, "I don't understand."

“May I see your documents and license?” the female officer repeated in English with a thick Slavic accent.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Fox pulled his license and passport from his wallet and then grabbed the papers from the glove box. He didn’t know whether the car was legal. His hand trembled slightly as he handed her the papers. He closed his eyes and prayed they wouldn’t search the car.

“Is this your car?” she demanded.

“No, it’s my boss’ car,” he mumbled.

“For whom do you work?”

“I’m a professor at the Bosnian University of Management. I must pick up a delivery in Bodva.”

Fox opened his wallet and retrieved his business card. Then he handed the officer the card with his name and the university logo on it.

The officer checked the documents and matched the name to the driver’s license, passport, and 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,” Fox replied in surprise.

“Sir, may I ask you to exit your vehicle and leave the keys in the ignition.”

Fox slowly climbed out of the car and moved three feet away from it. His mind raced a thousand miles per hour because he had almost forgotten the drugs in the trunk. He looked around to see where he could run to, but damn, it was barren up there.

Then beads of perspiration formed on his forehead as he felt the gun’s weight tucked in his pants. Although his heavy winter coat hid the bulge, he shivered from the gun’s metal like an icicle melting in his crotch.

Fox began shivering in fear as the full extent of his crimes struck his 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.

On the other side, a male officer turned on his flashlight and searched the car's backseats. Then the female officer pushed a button in the glove box, and the trunk clicked open.

Both officers approached the trunk and peered inside. The male officer used his free hand to pick up the carpeted cover of the spare tire.

Fox's heart skipped a beat, and he almost fainted. Then the officer dropped the cover back into its place and slammed the trunk lid. The male officer exclaimed officially, "The car is clean."

The female officer studied Fox as he turned pale white, his fingers twitching nervously. He rubbed his sweaty hands on his trousers, regaining his composure.

"Sir, are you okay?" the female officer said after examining him, 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 smiled and repeated, "A girl, huh?" The female officer shot him a nasty, sour look. Then she returned his driver's license and documents. Fox climbed back into the car.

"Oh, before you go. You must pay a road tax. Five euros for four weeks."

Fox 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 Fox drove through and entered Montenegro. The male officer waved goodbye and said, "Have fun in Montenegro. Don't be too greedy. Just find yourself one girl and leave the other ones alone!"

Fox drove and drove and arrived in downtown Budva around 10 o'clock. Driving past a large hotel, he pulled into the parking lot. He didn't think clearly because he parked the car in front of the

hotel so anyone driving through the downtown area could spot the car.

Fox opened the trunk, pushed the spare tire out of the way, and grabbed the drugs. Then he slipped them into his coat pocket next to the money. As he walked into the hotel, his pocket was ready to burst from the heavy weight.

Fox started sweating in his warm winter coat as a soft tropical breeze blew off the coastal waters while the evening temperature hovered above freezing.

Fox made it to Montenegro. It was time to find his girl.

Chapter 12 – Yelena Remembers Her Father

Yelena was stranded somewhere in the twilight between sleep and reality. Memories swirled in her mind, giving her a slight vertigo. She knew Fox would never find her nor rescue her. She had to take action with her hands, but what could she do with one grenade?

Yelena knew the kidnapers had snuck her out of Bosnia. She saw the healthy orange trees growing in the courtyard, with their dark shiny green leaves and 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, she remembered her father enlisting in the Serbian Army. She only remembered him as a very big man and 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 chirped 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 she could, 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 on whom you ask.

Yelena and her mother were stranded in Bosnia, in the remote town of Tuzla. Its population had doubled overnight as the refugees fled the war zones, somberly trekking there to escape the War's atrocities with empty pockets and only the shirts on their backs.

Every day, Yelena sat on the couch with her mother's loving hands wrapped around her, 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 that 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 mass 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 town center 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. At the same time, 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 in 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 strolled, quietly, under the soft drizzle of cold rain. They approached a pass between two tall mountains.

Yelena looked up at the sky. Rain clouds floated like 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 marking 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. Cold rain pelted the ground, and they heard the weeps of 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 of 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 like 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, which means 'free man' in all Balkan languages.

Since then Yelena's mother has scraped and saved every penny she can because she wants 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 on the bed and remembered every detail of her dream. She hadn't dreamt of her father in years, and she remembered every minute detail of that 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 chased her. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't escape from that thing that was behind her. She had no way out and nowhere to go. She was trapped.

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 had 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. It was 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 several 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 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 could always 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 soon 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 affluent young Russians dressed in colorful, 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 empty 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. He definitely planted some seeds in her field. 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 happening, Sasha glanced at Adnan's face and then Svetlana's.

A large silver tray was laid in the center of the table, and a concentric layer of beef prosciutto was 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 shoveling 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 as she watched him guzzle his meat down, like a sea lion swallowing fish after fish at the zoo. Then she sipped her glass of wine, but Adnan noticed 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 leaving the house, Svetlana, please check on our new guest. I want to make sure she's okay. Prepare her a plate of food."

Svetlana grabbed a clean plate and filled 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. That would be dangerous to steal my cash machine."

Adnan almost choked on his food and burst into a short, soft laugh. Afterward, he replied, "No, of course not. I have several

Bosnian girlfriends scattered around Tuzla. I just wanted to sample something different 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 considering expanding my operations to Sarajevo. I want to open several brothels in Sarajevo and sell a little cocaine on the side. We can work together. 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 sipped his wine and 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 to countries like Bosnia with slimy hands. Sasha plans to invade Damir's territory, and Damir will ultimately disappear once Sasha has everything under control.

Adnan knew his Bosnian history well. The Russians always caused problems. A few people 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. However, 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 Adnan's heart began racing and becoming more nervous, he answered mechanically, "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, so 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'll carve up Bosnia and become wealthy 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 guard 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.

Svetlana entered Yelena's room. Yelena lay on the bed with her face buried in the pillow. She was not sleeping, but she was lost in deep thought. Her cheek pulsed 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 to have 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, 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 your position. Sasha is more than a boss; he owns you. You’re his property. He can do anything he wants with you. You will wise up and go with the program if you’re smart. 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 glared at her guest.

Svetlana repeated, “Just go with the program. Montenegro is a beautiful country. You can go shopping, stroll along the seaside boulevard or ride 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 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 were 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 gently reached out, caressed Yelena’s arm and continued, “I know you don’t like it. I can understand. I didn’t like it when I first came to Montenegro, but I had no choice. I could’ve run 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 have nothing to return 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 Fox. 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, ‘Fox.’

“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 sure she pegged Yelena for a simple Serbian girl whose bruises and scars faded from a dysfunctional family’s constant fights and drama. 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 stated, rather than ask 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 Fox 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 lasts. 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 who did precisely 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 Fox, and these two goons grabbed me and kidnapped me," Yelena moaned, with tears streaking down her face. She 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 bit of 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 freshen up a little."

"Wait, don't go yet, Svetlana," Yelena mumbled.

"I apologize, but I must work tonight and go 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 several 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, and 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 shut the door and returned to his chair to read his magazine.

Svetlana saw Sasha standing in the hallway outside Yelena’s door with a mischievous glint in his eyes. He unbuttoned 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 worthwhile.”

Sasha frowned like a bad boy being punished for playing with his new 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, I can stay over and work overtime.” 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.

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 concerned.

Adnan 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 and brushed his teeth at Sasha's place. Although Svetlana was beautiful, clean, and tasted good when he made love to her, 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 it 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. Adnan shivered at the thought.

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 with 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.

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. What the fuck is going on?

Chapter 13 – Adventures in Silicon Valley

Fox's dreams were horrid as darkness surrounded him. Something was out there. As he ran away, he shot at moving shadows and shouted obscenities at them, but he couldn't escape. Those things kept coming. He kept running, shooting, and screaming.

Then Fox's eyes flashed open, and the dreams melted slowly away. Sweat drenched his body, and he knew. He knew more people were going to die.

Fox felt the morning sun warm his exposed hands and arms, blinding his eyes. He sat up, confused. Yesterday's events were hazy and confused, like looking through a dirty window to recover the memories lost in his mind. Then the window opened, and the memories rushed back. He had driven to Budva, Montenegro, to search for Yelena. He had also shot and murdered Jasmin and Damir. He was also unemployed. He wondered if he should put that on his resume – I shot and killed my last boss. When can I start?

Fox scanned the hotel room. He didn't bother to tuck himself under the bed sheets. He lay across the bed, wearing his clothes from yesterday.

Although Fox parked the stolen car at an expensive hotel, he walked around late last night until he found a small hotel near the shore. This hotel was located on the city's outskirts. 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.

Fox slid out of bed and approached the window. He saw the waves crashing on the rocky shoreline below. Then he glanced back at the bed; the bedspread and sheets were clean. Twenty euros per night wasn't enough to buy much in Budva, Montenegro.

Fox placed the old Smith & Wesson on the nightstand and stacked the ecstasy on the dresser like a pile of bricks near the TV.

Fox searched the room for a hiding place. Then he noticed the heavy dresser. He pulled it from the wall and saw a small cavity at the bottom, where he slipped the drugs and gun into this tight space. With a thick layer of dust, the maid had not cleaned under the dresser in decades. Subsequently, he scooted the dresser tightly against the wall.

Fox didn't intend to walk around Budva with a gun and drugs on him, but he kept the 20,000 euros in his coat pocket. He quickly showered and put on the same clothes that he wore yesterday. He didn't bring a toothbrush. He used the warm water to rinse out his mouth and used his right hand's outstretched fingers as a comb to straighten his hair.

Fox wasn't too concerned about his appearance. He just wanted to blend into the crowds undetected. He didn't come to Montenegro to party or pick up girls. His only mission was to find Yelena. Someone held her captive here, somewhere in this big, coastal city on the Adriatic Sea.

Fox left the hotel and walked downtown until he reached Old Budva, a five-hundred-year-old castle that the residents converted into a shopping mall. It had twenty-foot-high walls with turrets spaced every 50 feet. After passing through the gate, he walked along the cobblestone streets. He read the names of coffee shops, clothes stores, restaurants, and nightclubs. His shoes clicked on the cobblestones, and the scrapes from his footsteps echoed along the stone walls.

Fox wandered the streets, hoping to bump into his girlfriend, but it never happened. He never saw Yelena anywhere in Old Budva. While he walked, his stomach growled furiously.

Around noon, he sat at a coffee shop and ordered a sandwich and a Montenegrin macchiato. The heavy cream carried a jolt of caffeine while coating his stomach walls, causing him to feel a rush.

As Fox ate and drank mechanically, he 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 his meal, he stood up to go. The two loud blondes approached him. Then the petite blonde with an innocent-looking face bumped into him, dropping her bag.

Fox mechanically picked up her bag, handed it to her, and apologized, "I'm sorry." Then he walked away before the woman replied, in a heavy Russian accent, "Thank you."

Fox walked around Budva for hours and saw no trace of Yelena. Then at almost six o'clock, he glanced at his watch and made no progress. He sighed and continued walking near the large, expensive hotel downtown.

Walking by the 10-story, five-star hotel, he noticed a couple of bellhops standing sentry at the front doors. They wore formal red jackets and crimson caps. He remembered what Karl said about how to find the brothels: Just ask the bellhops or the taxi drivers. They know their city well and cater to their customers' whims and demands.

Fox shivered, trembled, and reddened a little because he had never asked a stranger about brothels. So he kept walking. Then he spotted an approaching taxi. He flagged it down and jumped into the back seat, slamming the door shut.

"Where to, buddy?" the taxi driver inquired enthusiastically as he studied Fox in his rearview mirror.

"I'm looking for a little companionship," he replied softly, his complexion reddened like embers of coals ready to flare up again.

The taxi driver scanned Fox up and down by tilting his head while looking through the rearview 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 are you looking for? Blondes, ravens, Russians, Romanians, you name it. They're somewhere in this city. Each has its own price."

"A Serbian woman," he 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 that caters to high-paying clientele."

The taxi driver turned his head to take another stern look at Fox 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?” he asked, looking down.

“I could take you to Silicon Valley. It’s located in the eastern part of the city against the mountains. It’s a small area, a city within a city, a place where you can satisfy all your desires.”

“Silicon Valley? Why do they call it that?”

The taxi driver chuckled and 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,” Fox said as he reddened a little more. He leaned back into the seat so the driver would stop glancing at him.

The driver studied Fox and asked, “You look new to this.”

Fox 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.”

The taxi driver drove straight along a small road, then turned right for a block and left for two blocks.

Fox became a little nervous, thinking the taxi driver was driving to an isolated area to work him over for a greater cab fare. He searched the seats for a blunt object—anything he could use as a weapon—but the cab was clean. Then he clutched his 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.”

Fox watched in awe from the back car window. He 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.

Fox handed the taxi driver a 10-euro note.

The driver cleared his throat, "Excuse me, sir." His hand remained in place, and the euro note remained in the center of his outstretched hand.

"I guess that wasn't enough." Then he added two more 10-euro notes, forming a small pile on the taxi driver's hand.

The driver clenched the money and replied, "Thank you, sir. If you need my services again, I'll park 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," Fox said and exited the cab.

Fox never saw anything like this. It was a miniature Amsterdam. As he strolled along the street, young women, barely wearing clothes, sat on stairwells to apartments, smoking cigarettes. They turned their heads and stared at him as he walked by. Many women stood in doorways, and the doors were slightly ajar, with red fluorescent lights spilling onto the streets. As he passed by, a woman would raise her leg, showing how smooth, creamy, and inviting her legs were.

Fox kept walking, avoiding the desperate stares. He guessed foreign johns pay better than the locals.

As Fox walked by a large apartment building with large bay windows, a woman opened the curtains to her apartment window and flashed her goods. She wore translucent lingerie that revealed her chiseled, firm body. Fox looked away.

Fox 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 Fox walked by, the prostitute asked, "You want a girlfriend for tonight," in a thick, heavy Russian accent.

Fox turned to study the middle-aged woman, who appeared to be in her late 30s. Although still attractive, she looked worn down from her rough street life. She was like an old Chevy truck that could take a beating, but her engine could still run.

Fox looked down at his feet and replied, "Perhaps I am,"

The prostitute pushed her door open and exclaimed, "Please come in. I'm at your service."

Fox entered the room and sat down on the edge of her bed. He noticed the thick red curtains, the red bed sheets, and the red chair cushions. Several red candles were scattered around the room, flickering. He saw 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 him, demanding, "One hundred euros for one hour. You must pay upfront." Then she held out her eager hand, waiting for that money.

Fox lifted himself from the bed, pulled a leather wallet out of his back pocket, opened it, removed 100 euros, and handed it to her. Then he snapped the wallet closed and pushed it into his 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.

Fox scooted to the bed's edge, looking down, not paying attention to her. She stopped as her underwear dangled around her knees and looked at him, "Don't you want to have sex?"

"No," he snapped, adding, "I just want to talk. I'm not here to have sex with you."

She looked exasperated. She studied him, thinking he was a raving lunatic with an axe hidden in his winter coat.

"I just want information. Please sit down."

She put her clothes back on, sat on a chair, and said 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."

Fox noticed a bowl of pears on the bed stand. He 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?" he said, 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 there in Budva. They make much more money from 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 occasionally."

Fox 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, and gambling. You name it. If he can make money, he'll make it. I heard several people disappear 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 was a big shot here in Budva until the

Russians took over. 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. She exhaled and 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."

Fox sighed and replied, "My name is Fox 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 his 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 I'm putting my neck on the line?"

Fox pulled his passport from his coat and handed it to her.

She scribbled his name and birth date on a small piece of paper. Then she scanned the other pages to see where he'd been. She returned the passport and replied, "Thank you very much, Fox. I'll make sure I pass this info to Senad. He might help you, or he might not. There are no guarantees."

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 breasts together like a pet owner dangling a special treat for her anxious puppy.

"No, I can't. I'm in love with another woman. I'm sorry."

The prostitute reached out to caress his shoulder, enticing him to stay.

“C’mon Fox. She’ll never know. She’ll never find out.”

Fox quickly ran out of the prostitute’s apartment and scampered away from Silicon Valley. He had seen enough for one day.

Fox ran down the street until he spotted the taxi parked by a bakery. He waved to the taxi driver, sitting at a small table on the street, drinking an expresso with a half-eaten croissant on a small plate.

Chapter 14 – Svetlana’s Escape Pass

Svetlana and Olesya were walking along the cobblestone streets of Old Budva, past the old castle. They had 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 giggled 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, 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 will 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 seriously, “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 onto 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 of 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, and 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 suspiciously, "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. I know you don't buy gifts for people."

Svetlana looked at Olesya with a sly grin.

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 Fox Swanson climb out of the car and walk away. Then Adnan began thinking. How in the hell did Fox steal Jasmin's car? Jasmin loved that car, and he would never let anyone touch it, let alone drive it. Fox is too weak to overpower Jasmin.

Adnan parked his car and followed Fox on foot until Fox checked into the Las Palmas Hotel, one of the local dives in town. Although Adnan was not wealthy, he would never stay at that hotel. Turning on the hotel room's light in the dead of the night would cause the cockroaches to scatter.

Adnan walked behind the hotel and found a beach chair. He sat in the chair and smoked a pack of cigarettes, watching Fox'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 handrest on the back door and lying 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 shone overhead. He jerked his head up and looked 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. Then he called Damir, who didn't answer. Next, he reached for a cigarette and started smoking.

Adnan didn't have a whole 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 a past conquest.

Svetlana stuck her nose in the air and pretended not to see him. Adnan muttered to himself, "Fucking whore! Be that way."

Then the ladies drove away in a sleek red Mercedes E-Class coupe. 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 supplemented his income to look the other way when Damir conducted his business.

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 unsure who it is, but it looks like Jasmin based on his size. 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 out about this. He’s demanding answers from the police department. A line of reporters is 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 happening, but I’m following some leads.”

“Then you may want to stay there until this investigation blows over!” CLICK, and 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 of 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 Fox. He appeared weak, but he turned into something much more. Fox became a 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.

Svetlana returned to Yelena's room. She brought a fresh plate of food and placed it on the vanity beside the plate she had 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 Fox."

"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."

"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. My prison does not have walls, but the warden is very strict."

"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, puzzled.

“Like I said before, I have nowhere to go. I have no money, but if I knew someone could help me get away, I would take a chance. Don’t let me sound materialistic, but does Fox 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, not a typical poor Russian girl ready to clean out any man who flashes a little money.

“Look, I’ll help you, if you promise to help me. Does Fox 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, he probably has some money, but I never asked him.”

Svetlana fished a pen and a small notebook from her purse and handed them to Yelena. “Then write down his cell phone number. 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 cautious. If Sasha finds out what I’m doing, he will kill me. Then he would kill you, too! Sasha kills anyone who disrespects him.”

Yelena quickly scribbled Fox’s number on the paper and handed it to Svetlana. She then tore the paper out of the notebook. She folded it into a small wad, slipping the wad of paper into a secret pocket inside her bra. Usually, she stuffed money in that pocket, but today, she stuffed her escape pass from Sasha’s prison.

Svetlana stood up and hugged Yelena, kissing her cheek. “Please eat, Yelena.” She placed a couple more cigarettes into Yelena’s eager hand and 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. Sasha had house workers to maintain the place. Still, Svetlana was used to washing the dishes with an

alcoholic father and older brother who were allergic to housekeeping.

Someone snuck into the kitchen and quickly approached Svetlana, embracing her from behind. She dropped the plate into the sink and stepped backward to push into 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, closed her eyes, and tilted her head back. Sasha's serpent-like fingers snaked and glided along her back.

Svetlana's nose itched slightly 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 didn't kiss 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 Sasha opened her skirt and let him make 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. She could start a new life in a new town and country.

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 tried 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 covered her skin around her breast. Most of the perspiration came from Sasha.

Svetlana continued to smile, lost in deep thought. She can walk away from Sasha for another week and never see him again. She'll be free. She wasn't giving him goodbye 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 Fox had better have some money. That freedom ticket would not be cheap, and Fox would have to pay to get his girl back.

Chapter 15 – Svetlana Meets Fox

Svetlana headed for the Hotel de la Luxure parlor, the most exclusive brothel in Montenegro. She walked through the hotel's entrance and 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. 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 on top of 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. Sasha calculated every second of her work shift, looking for ways to deduct her salary, if one could call it that.

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. They weren't allowed to get drunk, one of Sasha's strict rules.

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 lying on the floor.

Johns arriving at 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, he would hop in a taxi and ride to Silicon Valley. The girls had to exude class.

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. The conversation was free here, but after the john had selected his woman or woman, they headed to 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 bare room with a bed, a tiny bathroom, and two complimentary water bottles.

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 raised the glass for a toast, looked at the man across the room, smiled, and took a sip. She studied his face, and he seemed vaguely familiar, but she was unsure. Besides, she had been with so many men that she couldn't remember their faces anymore. All men looked the same and did 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 women 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 had entertained one Montenegrin government official and two old businessmen. She tilted the Champaign glass back and greedily swallowed the remaining sweet, bubbly contents. She hoped the Champaign would wash off the nasty men's scent.

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, ensuring 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, which she bought at a newsstand kiosk. She turned on the cell phone and activated it.

Then Svetlana dialed Fox’s cell phone number. It rang once, twice, a third time, and subsequently a groggy, “Hello!”

Svetlana hesitated a few seconds.

Fox repeated “Hello” several more times, and each hello became stronger and more frantic.

Then Svetlana asked, “May I speak to Fox, please.”

“This is he. May I ask who is calling?” Fox asked in a groggy, confused voice.

“We have a mutual friend, Fox. She’s worried about you, and you’re worried about her.”

“YELENA! WHERE IS YELENA?” Fox screamed into the phone.

In case someone stood outside the bathroom door, eavesdropping on her conversation, Svetlana soothed and whispered, “Fox, please calm down. I don’t have time for a long conversation.”

“Where is Yelena? Is she okay? Is she alive?” Fox demanded with his voice rising.

She whispered slowly, “At this moment, Yelena is fine. She’s doing well.”

“When can I see her?” Fox demanded.

“I need to talk privately 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.”

“Fox, 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 in 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,” Fox 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. If Sasha knew, she would be dead. Sasha does not tolerate insolence. Insolence is fatal.

Then Svetlana turned the cell phone off, slipped it into her purse, and flushed the toilet. Afterward, she went to the mirror and dabbed a little makeup on. She smiled at herself. Her freedom ticket has been set into motion.

Then Svetlana returned to the parlor. She still had another two hours of work. If she was lucky, she could sit quietly at the bar and drink a little more Champagne.

Fox couldn’t believe his luck. Someone has confirmed Yelena was still alive. She was still okay.

Fox slept soundly that night and then ate a full breakfast the following day. He felt energized. He knew Yelena, and he would be reunited once more. He couldn’t wait to see and scoop her into his hands in a tight embrace.

Fox went to that coffee shop an hour early and waited. He found the perfect table in the back of the shop.

Around a quarter past eleven, he spotted a pretty blonde walk by the coffee shop. He glanced at her because she seemed so familiar.

She walked by several more times from different directions. Then she glanced hastily in his direction, quickly scanned the other tables, and darted for his table.

Svetlana stood in front of me, looking confused and scared. Then she asked, “Are you Fox?”

“Yes, I am. You must be that mysterious girl who called me last night,” Fox said as he studied the woman. Gears in the back of his mind turned and turned, trying to dig up buried memories of this woman and why she seemed familiar.

Fox started to rise, but Svetlana quickly sat down and 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 Grey 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.”

Fox interrupted her, “I know. His name is Sasha, and I’ve heard much 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 Fox. He knew what she was thinking. How could a nerdy, weak professor take on the hardened, dangerous criminals of Montenegro?

Fox 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 said, “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, he’ll shoot you personally.”

“I don’t see the problem,” he 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.”

Fox turned a pale white and spat out, “What?” as more an expletive than an honest question. Then the numbers roiled in his mind, and he 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?” Fox asked with sincerity as he stared into her eyes.

She stared into his 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,” Fox replied. Subsequently, he opened his 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.

Fox quickly closed his jacket and zipped it up before Svetlana’s hand could caress the money.

Svetlana looked far away and dreamy. 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 can work with 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 to 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 off my cell phone, but I know sometimes a cell phone can turn on as it brushes against something in a purse. I will call you once I have a plan, and you must act fast.”

“Okay.”

Svetlana sipped her tea while she kept glancing at Fox. She kept looking at him as if she knew him.

Fox 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 farther inside the castle.” Then he 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, Fox, 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 two candles for us in the Serbian church in Tuzla, the one near the city’s center. She’ll understand.”

“Bye, Fox. 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.

Fox thought about following her but knew that would be futile. He could not bust into Sasha’s house, especially with the armed guards. He didn’t mind dying, but he worried about Yelena’s life. If he died, Yelena surely would perish, and he had no intention 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.

Fox smirked because he could tell – she always gets what she wants from men. He thought about handing the waiter a hundred euro note out of the stack of money. That way, the mysterious woman gave the waiter one hell of a tip, but his conscience

screamed at him not to do this. Sasha also trapped this woman; she needed the money to buy a new life, so every euro counted. Starting a new chapter in life is not cheap.

Fox pulled out several euro coins and placed them on the table next to the check. Then he returned to his hotel room.

Svetlana returned to Sasha's mansion. Sasha fussed over his women's eating habits. He wanted all his women toned and thin, so he hired a professional chef. The chef 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. Afterward, 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 Fox!"

Yelena radiated with joy, illuminating the entire room. She dropped the fork onto the plate. Her voice rose with excitement, "Really! Is Fox here in Montenegro? Please, Svetlana, don't toy with me. Is Fox 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 will plan everything meticulously. I must be cautious 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 she asked in a sad voice, "How are you going to do it. I have been studying the guards outside his 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. Fox wants you back. He really loves you. He made a romantic gesture in your absence," Svetlana said mischievously, forcing Yelena to beg for this information.

Yelena pleaded, "Please, Svetlana, don't play with me. What did Fox do?"

Svetlana hugged Yelena again and then added a kiss to the top of Yelena's head. Afterward, she whispered, "Before he came to Montenegro, he said he went to your Serbian church and lit two candles 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 her head again.

Yelena returned the cigarettes to Svetlana's hand and said, "I don't need these anymore." Her cheeks remained red and glowing.

Fox came to Montenegro to rescue her. She planned to quit smoking.

Svetlana left the room.

Chapter 16 – The Renaissance Night Club

Fox kept his appointment for the Renaissance Night Club and arrived early. The taxi driver dropped him off at the curb, refusing to drive into the parking lot.

As Fox opened the door, the driver snapped, “Are you sure you want to go in there? I know a much better place, friend.”

Fox replied, “I understand your concern, but I need to speak with someone in there.”

After Fox had climbed out of the taxi and slammed the door, the taxi driver stomped on the gas pedal, accelerating onto the road while squeaking the tires.

Fox strolled to the front door, where a large bouncer stood. The bouncer frowned at Fox as he approached. Then Fox looked up and said, “I need to speak with Senad, please.”

The menacing bouncer nodded in approval and opened the door for him. Then he pointed to a group of tables near the club’s back door.

Fox 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.

Fox sat at a table for an hour, nursing his drink, a rum and coke. He 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.

Fox washed the rest of his drink 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 that fossilized on the dance floor.

Then a large monstrous man, built like a grizzly bear, approached Fox. He glared down at him and then waved his hand at Fox, gesturing him to follow. The large man tucked his dirty hair

under a red bandana. Fox sprang up from his chair and followed in close pursuit.

A large man led Fox to a back hallway with a single door. Several other sizeable men huddled around the door. As he 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 Fox reached the door, the large man turned and commanded, "Raise your hands in the air." Then the huge guy patted Fox down; the large guy's rude, rough hands searched Fox's body for weapons, like an army of mosquitos searching for the perfect feeding site.

Lucky for Fox, the Smith and Wesson remained tucked under the dresser in his hotel room. If worse came to worst and no one would help him, he would shoot his way into Sasha's place. Once the large man was satisfied, he opened the door and led Fox inside.

Another large guy sat behind an old desk while a silent companion stood beside him. The men stared at Fox with stone black eyes, filled with intelligence but mixed with a dash of anger and savagery.

Fox became nervous, thinking he had made a mistake. These guys looked rough. They would have no qualms about beating him to a living pulp and leaving him to die on a dark, deserted street in the middle of the night.

Fox sat in an empty chair in front of the desk. The man glared at him. Fox trembled a little as his heart began to beat quicker. He tried to talk, but the nervousness drained moisture from his mouth.

Fox swallowed and smacked his gums several times, but the words wouldn't come out. They became stuck to the roof of his mouth like peanut butter.

The man behind the desk yelled in sharp, angry tones, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Ah, ah, ah," Fox stammered.

"Well, I'm waiting, God damn it," then the man crossed his arms, glaring at Fox fiercely. The person standing to Senad's side

kept his piercing gaze on him, like studying a new, strange insect that flew in from the window.

Fox 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... he thought you... could help... meee?"

"What do I look like, a travel agent? How the fuck can I help you?"

Fox thought about Yelena and let out a long sigh. Then he forced the words out of his mouth in one breath, "My boss kidnapped my girlfriend and sold her to Sasha."

The man raised his eyebrows at the name Sasha but remained silent.

"I believe Sasha is a major criminal here."

The man replied, "We have a common enemy, but I don't understand how I can help you."

Fox 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've 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 several years ago and pushed me out. I hid 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."

When Senad said he couldn't show his face around Budva, Fox wanted to laugh. Having a face like that, the city's animal inspector would capture and euthanize him within an hour.

Fox hesitated, and then he 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 nightclub, and I'll give you my decision within an hour."

Senad approached Fox as a gentleman and escorted him to the door. They shook hands, and Senad patted him as he walked out.

Fox returned to his original seat in the nightclub. More bikers, criminals, and sea hags joined the growing, gyrating crowd on the dance floor, creating a pungent stench that intensified with the humidity level.

This time around, he felt a change in the staff's mood. Before he talked to Senad, suspicious eyes and glances fell on him when he turned away. Now, he has become somebody. Before he asked, a waitress quickly placed a fresh rum and coke before him. She yelled above the noise, "It's on the house." Fox left Senad's office alive, so he must be somebody.

Fox sipped, and the rum and coke tasted better than the last. He waited half an hour, and a large guy led him to the office. Senad still sat behind his desk, but three rough-looking bikers joined the crowd. They flanked Senad in a semicircle, leaving one vacant chair for Fox.

"My friend, Fox, please take a seat. Excuse my rough behavior," Senad said joyfully. Then he lifted his bottle of beer and guzzled it down. Afterward, 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 girl out, but 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. Then you leave Montenegro and don’t come back.”

All the men smiled and gleamed maliciously when Senad said he would take care of Sasha personally.

Fox was happy while Senad and the four silent men stood grimacing. Fox knew he would get his girl back while a battle was brewing in Montenegro’s underworld.

“However, we still have the ecstasy to worry about. You give me the drugs tonight before we plan anything. Is that acceptable to you?”

Fox hesitated and thought about it for a minute, then 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’s a go. We’ll help each other. You can get your girl, and we can get rid of Sasha. And Montenegro will be mine again.”

Fox couldn’t believe how smoothly the plan was going. Faruk and Fox returned to his hotel within twenty minutes. Maybe things were going too smoothly.

Fox 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. Afterward, he snapped the lid on the vial and vigorously shook the bottle. The pill instantly dissolved.

Fox remained kneeling on the floor by the dresser. He kept his left hand under the dresser while his fingers brushed against the gun's handle. He studied Faruk's face, deciphering his intentions. Fox did think that Faruk might kill him 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 Fox. He reached up and grabbed the phone while his twitching fingers brushed the gun in its hiding place. "Hello," he chimed.

"Fox, the plan's in motion. Once that girl calls you and gives you a time, you immediately call me, and I'll send someone to pick you up. Make sure she opens the gate and has your girl with her. Then you grab your girl and run like hell. Do you understand?"

Fox confidently answered, "Yes, sir; I understand." Then he returned Faruk's cell phone.

Faruk slipped the phone into his pocket and took the drugs with him, slipping them into his inside pocket.

Fox felt the first weight lifted from his chest. The drugs were gone. He hoped the second weight would be removed the next night. He'll have Yelena back, and they can get the hell out of the former Yugoslavia. Maybe one day, Fox will write a story about his adventures in the former Yugoslavia.

Chapter 17 – A Small Army Prepares for Battle

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 with course ground beef and sour cream drizzled over the top. He greedily crammed his mouth with crepes 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 with tea before it 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 from the table’s center. 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. 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 is one of his favorites and top earners.

He continued staring at her.

“Sasha, it’s just one day.”

Sasha lowered his head onto his hands for a minute, then raised his head and replied, “Okay, Svetlana, I suppose 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 said and 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 considered buying expensive jewelry, like a Rolex watch and a pearl necklace.”

“You know I invested your money,” Sasha snapped sharply, adding, “I’m looking out for your best interests. When your services are no longer needed 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 swim far out to the sea wearing cement galoshes.

Svetlana caressed his hand and feigned sincerity, “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 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 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 need energy and stamina. I need to put her ass to work and start making some money from her."

Svetlana feigned a smile at Sasha's 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.

After Svetlana's phone call, Senad sent Faruk over to pick Fox up at 7:00 PM.

Fox sat quietly in the front seat, blindfolded. The trip lasted roughly 40 minutes. He felt completely lost. All he knew was that he was somewhere along the wharf in Budva. He heard the periodic wail of marine foghorns in the distance. He 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.

Faruk stopped suddenly, and the brakes of the car squealed loudly. He jumped out and strode to Fox's side of the car. Next, he opened the car door and led Fox inside a large, cavernous warehouse.

Fox heard a large commotion of activity inside the warehouse.

Faruk continued leading Fox toward the center of the warehouse.

Once they reached Senad, he removed Fox's blindfold, pulled his Smith and Wesson from his waist, and studied it. Then he placed the gun back into Fox's open hand.

Fox stood in awe and amazement at the scene in front of him. Thirty rough-looking bikers sat on crates and boxes, assembling their equipment. Every biker had an M80 Yugoslavian assault rifle, which had remained hidden in old crates since the end of the Bosnian War. The men carefully disassembled and reassembled the rifles, dabbing the essential parts with lubricant oil and rubbing away the rust.

Once the men finished, they stood up and looped a thick, green belt over their chests. In the belt were several assault rifle clips and grenades.

Fox fumbled absently at the handle of his 38 Smith and Wesson, easing his troubled mind from what he saw displayed in front of him. 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 out of sync, like a drunk orchestra. However, their eyes glinted with savage determination.

Fox shivered a little. He knew some people were going to die tonight. He didn't want to shoot anybody, but he was bringing a small army who would.

Senad turned to Fox and asked, "What's the message from Sasha's girl?"

Everyone became quiet in the warehouse as furious eyes focused on his 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 Fox 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, Senad continued, “Tonight, we’ll become the underworld kings 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; 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’ll die tonight as heroes! We shall become the new leaders of Montenegro.”

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.

Fox stood there apprehensively, thinking what he had just done.

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 at Fox and called, “Are you coming, Fox? Hop in the van in the back with the soldiers. Then Senad climbed into the passenger seat of the other van.

The sliding door slammed shut as Fox huddled for a room in the back of the van. The ride to Sasha’s was excruciating. The 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. Fox was an insect stuck in an airtight jar, suffocating quickly.

Fox wrenched and wiggled in pain as the metal floor bit into his ass. As the van hit a bump, the floor took a larger bite of his ass.

As they approached Sasha's mountain, Senad commanded through a walkie-talkie, "Everyone extinguishes their cigarettes now and remains quiet."

The vans slowly crept up the mountain with their headlights turned off. They stopped a half-mile away from Sasha's front gate.

One of the soldiers quietly left the van, scampered forward on his hands and knees with binoculars in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other, and hid off the side of the road under the darkness, getting a better view of the front gate. As one solitary guard staffed the front gate, Sasha's mansion illuminated the dark mountainside like a lighthouse.

Senad's vans hid on the roadside out of view of the guardhouse. After those gates opened, Senad planned to strike hard and fast, waiting silently, like a rattlesnake hiding behind a rock, ready to strike at its enemy.

Chapter 18 – Mayhem at Sasha’s Place

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.

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 thick layer of white substance had settled to the bottom of the bottle. He swirled the bottle, watching the milky powder swirl 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* (“The Truth” in English). As his nervous tic pulsated wildly, Sasha screamed in rage, “Have you seen Svetlana today?”

The guard trembled in fear when he saw Sasha’s red face and 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, slapped 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 feared 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 his 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.

Sasha ran downstairs and 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 throw it into the guardhouse. Boom! The guardhouse’s windows blew out 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 that 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 woman 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.

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 shooting machine guns.

Another van drove through the gates and maneuvered to the backyard.

Sasha ran 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!

Fox heard an explosion and then a barrage of gunfire from a pistol. Then the sizeable iron-wrought gate slowly opened, and two blondes emerged from the guardhouse.

The vans came to life and lurched forward towards the open gate at full speed. The first van, in which 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 Fox 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. Fox 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 for cover around the outside corner of the thick brick wall. Then Fox stood up and ran after the women. He saw Svetlana holding the hands of another blonde. He felt apprehensive as if Svetlana had grabbed the wrong girl on her way out.

A bullet whizzed by Fox's head. Fox turned to look but did not see who shot at him.

Fox ran outside the gate and away from the gunfire. As he approached the two blondes, the blonde's face seemed familiar. Before he had stopped, the blonde hopped into his open arms and embraced him hard.

Yelena jumped up and down and yelled, "Fox! Fox! Fox!"

Then familiarity flooded his mind as he held Yelena. He answered her screams with his own, "Yelena! Yelena! I found you!" He screamed as he held her tightly.

Svetlana interrupted them and shouted, "Well, Fox, 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 Fox cried with tears of relief as they held each other tightly while gunfire and grenades invaded the night's quietness.

Svetlana shrieked, "Well, Fox, 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 Fox tightly and wouldn't let go.

Fox squeezed his hand into his coat and retrieved the two money bundles.

Svetlana quickly snatched the money out of his 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, Svetlana stared at Fox, "Fox, you take good care of her. You're holding one in a million. Then she raised her fist at him, "You treat her well." Then Svetlana sprinted into the darkness directly towards the sparkling city lights of Budva.

Yelena and Fox never saw Svetlana again.

Fox whispered firmly, "Yelena, we must go now." Another grenade explosion illuminated the night as if to punctuate his statement.

Yelena tossed her blonde wig to the ground, and they sprinted down the mountain directly towards the shoreline. From this height, they could see the sandy beach below as the moon

glimmered off the black, obsidian surface of the Adriatic Sea. They saw the lights from Budva twinkling and sparkling on the horizon towards their left.

They ran until they reached a patch of small trees halfway down the mountain. The gunfire stopped several minutes ago and was replaced with a chorus of police sirens interrupting the calm darkness. The wailing from the police sirens rose and fell in the distance. It seemed the sirens were coming nearer at one point, but they faded into the night.

Yelena and Fox paused to embrace each other by the trees. Their moist lips searched for each other, becoming re-acquainted. They kissed for several minutes.

Yelena pulled several inches away from Fox. Her wandering hand found the butt of the gun. She whispered in his ear, ever so softly, "Fox, 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 behind Fox.

Then Adnan stepped through the bushes. In one hand, he held a pistol pointed at Fox's back while in the other hand held a lit match that just lit the dangling cigarette in his mouth.

"Well, Fox, 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 Fox raised his 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 anymore. I gave Damir my resignation letter several days ago."

"Well, Fox, 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 girl and sold her to Sasha. I figure I would repay Damir's generosity."

“Fox, slowly turn around and step away from your girl,” Adnan demanded as hatred pulsated with shrill undertones in his voice. He planned to murder them.

As Fox slowly turned around, he felt Yelena grab his gun. Then he faced Adnan.

Adnan added coldly, “That small War at Sasha’s place was you’re 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,” Fox 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.”

Fox laughed, “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 weapon 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 in her hand. Then he fell to the ground dead with a surprised look eternally frozen on his face.

Fox grabbed Yelena’s hand and pulled her forward while the gun fell to the ground near Adnan’s outstretched dead hand. Then they ran and ran until we had reached the shoreline.

They embraced each other strongly as the waves splashed rhythmically onto the sandy shoreline.

Yelena began crying while Fox wiped away her tears. She whispered, “Fox, I shot someone!”

“I know, Yelena. It’s okay. He was evil, like Damir and Sasha.” Then he 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. Fox, I can’t go to prison.”

“Yelena, we’re not caught yet. If the police catch us, I’ll confess to all the crimes. You’re innocent.”

“Fox, what about us? What’ll happen to us?”

“Yelena, I’m returning home to America and taking you with me. We have seen enough of Bosnia and Montenegro to last a lifetime.”

Then Yelena and Fox began kissing again. Afterward, they both began walking towards the city lights while the waves continued to roll softly onto the sandy shores.

Fox said in jest, “Yelena, each time I see you, somehow you become even more beautiful. And I want to show this gorgeous woman this excellent little coffee shop in Old Budva.”

“Fox, I don’t think I could drink coffee right now. I think I’ve seen enough for one day. I think I’d rather be alone with you.”

They continued walking along the beach as the lights and roar of Budva became stronger and brighter after each step.

Epilogue

Yelena and Fox stayed in Budva, Montenegro, for a week.

Yelena's mom came to Budva and stayed for several days. Yelena wanted to say goodbye to her. Then Yelena and Fox headed to Lyubiana, Slovenia. Along the way, they stopped in Olovo, Bosnia, and said goodbye to Yelena's father one last time. They had trouble finding his grave as the snow pelted the ground and covered all the tombstones. Fox held Yelena silently, and she wept as they both stood over his grave.

Yelena and Fox continued to Slovenia. As they approached the turnoff for Tuzla, He stomped on the gas pedal, shooting by the turnoff. They never planned to set foot again in Tuzla. They stayed in Slovenia for several months until the U.S. Embassy approved Yelena's fiancé visa. Then they dashed to the airport and hopped on the next plane to the United States.

They settled in Heber Springs, Arkansas, where he accepted a low-paying job at the local university. He 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 in the middle of nowhere, about an hour's drive north of Little Rock. Nothing of any consequence happened there. Yelena and Fox 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 were 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 Fox 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. He was very patient with her. As she continued making progress, her ordeal in Montenegro would fade in time. Eventually, Yelena would explore the outside. Fox could enroll her in a couple of courses at his university.

One early morning, the sun shone through the curtains, illuminating the whole room. Fox glanced at the wedding photo on the dresser, in which they stood before the Justice of the Peace as the judge united them in holy matrimony.

Yelena awakened and started staring at Fox. Then they exchanged smiles and began kissing, softly at first, then into explosions of passion and intimacy. While he showered and dressed for work, Yelena had prepared a king's breakfast for him.

Yelena always cooked for Fox, even against his wishes. Sometimes, he tried to help her in the kitchen, but Yugoslavian women were so proud and traditional that she would chase him out of the kitchen with an iron skillet. Her culture had ingrained the women's roles and duties since birth. Yugoslavian women must take care of the household and their men.

Approaching the dining room table, Fox saw a plate of scrambled eggs sprinkled with diced tomatoes, salsa, and cheese, a side order of two wheat toasts slathered with cream cheese, and a hot cup of American coffee with a dollop of cream. He drank half his coffee in one gulp. The Bosnian coffee was stronger than the American coffee, but he reverted to the old American lifestyle.

While eating breakfast, he leafed through a newspaper, the Arkansas Democratic Gazette. Buried in the business section on the second page, he read the headline, 'Shoot-out in Montenegro.'

Fox recognized the picture, and his face became pale. It was the Renaissance Night Club, and Senad and his gang had a shootout with 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.

His eyes bulged out in awe as he read the grisly details. He wondered if Senad was counted among the dead.

Yelena leaned against the refrigerator, drinking a glass of orange juice. She saw Fox's face become pale as he flipped the newspaper page. With sharp tones of concern wavering in her voice, "Fox, what's wrong? What did you read?" She studied him intently.

Fox snapped the newspaper closed, folding it up, and replied, “Oh, nothing. I see Microsoft’s stock price is down, and our retirement plan will take another beating.” Then he started chuckling.

Yelena smiled as she studied his face. She knew he had lied, and she knew he was a lousy poker player. However, they imposed one simple rule in their household: They would never talk about what happened in Bosnia and Montenegro.

They knew it was wrong, burying those memories into the deep graves in their minds, but not enough time had passed for them to accept what had happened. Their mental anguish and wounds would take years to heal.

After reading the news story, Fox 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. Fox stared at Yelena, admiring her slim figure and long brunette hair. He wanted to touch her.

“Seriously, Fox, what did you read?” Yelena pleaded gently.

“It’s about Montenegro?”

“Really, anything about us?”

“No, it’s really a boring story. It doesn’t involve us or anyone we knew or could have known.”

Then Fox approached Yelena and started kissing her.

Yelena let the glass, filled with orange juice, fall to the ground, shattering.

Yelena and Fox were oblivious to the world around them as they became lost in their fervent kisses.

Fox loosened his tie and unbuttoned his dress shirt while he pulled Yelena towards the bedroom. He wanted to spend more quality time with her before going to work.

“Fox, 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 his students, they can wait.”

Yelena smiled, which illuminated the room. She began slipping out of her clothes, and she would reward her hero handsomely.

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 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 into a hard financial times and had difficulty paying staff salaries. Half the foreign faculty fled the university by the end of the school year. 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 Fox 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 Fox, 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 only saw the wall, which had a beautiful oil painting of a spring Tuzla countryside hanging on it. The evils hiding behind the door to Damir's office were sealed from the public.

Veronika and the veteran staff would approach Damir's office door at least once a day. 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, Veronika knew she could rise every morning, come to work, and make a difference.

Veronika would work for the university until it went bankrupt. She would be the last person to leave the university's front door and, if necessary, lock the university up forever.

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. The staff ensured those two would never be buried together.

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. Good riddance, Damir, you were one sick puppy.

Admir still worked as the chief computer support technician at the Bosnian University of Management. Since Damir's demise and violent murder, Admir enjoyed going to work. He skipped 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. Like 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 punched him in the stomach and face repeatedly. The captain's punches became the question marks for his probing questions.

Admir told him everything except the professor. He told the police about 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.

The police reluctantly let Admir go free and 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.

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 those crimes.

Svetlana ran away as fast as she could during the night, heading directly for the City of Budva. 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 tourists, but it was the main seaport of Montenegro, and she planned to travel on its railroads, which linked the other major cities of the former Yugoslavia.

Svetlana arrived at the central 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 she didn't know what to do. She had no education and no skills, so she accepted the only job she could find. She worked at a gift shop near the Acropolis, directly across from Hadrian's Library.

Svetlana became the best salesperson 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 many Greek alabaster statues and trinkets.

Svetlana chose Athens because of its long, rich history. She had read about the Roman and Greek histories and would smile as she walked by Hadrian's Library. The Roman Emperor, Hadrian, paid for the construction of Hadrian's Library in 132 AD. Athens was a Roman province at that time, and the Romans respected Greek culture, arts, and literature, becoming the pinnacle of class and achievement.

Before entering the shop, Svetlana would look at the complex of ancient temples on top of the Acropolis. She loved the old Temple of Athena.

Svetlana often stood outside the shop door. 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 city became Athens, Greece.

Svetlana would leave at dusk after a long day at the gift shop. 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, 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. No more high-priced clothes, no more expensive dinners, no more 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 through the city, the pedestrians would choke and cough from the car's polluted exhaust.

Sometimes, Svetlana wondered if she only dreamt she worked in an expensive brothel 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.

When they had some free time together, Svetlana and John would walk around the shops and pedestrian sidewalks that circled the base of the Acropolis. 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 across the courtyard from Hadrian's Library.

After his family had left 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 soon, 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, she could visit Yelena and ensure Fox was treating her right.

The End.

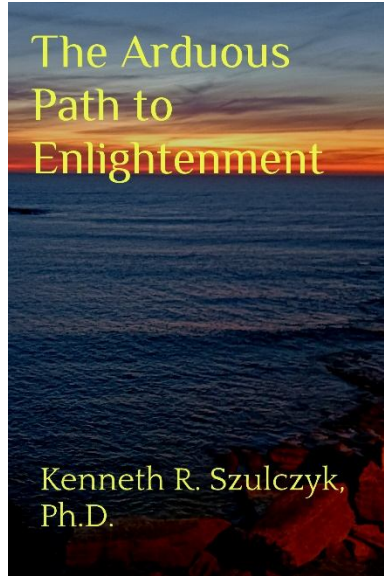
About the Author

I was born in a small town in Michigan, filled with the noises of factories. While growing up, I witnessed factory closures, which brought high unemployment and few economic prospects. I left the town to pursue my dreams and enrolled in a university. My education opened the door to the world, where I graduated with a Ph.D. in environmental and natural resource economics from Texas A&M University. With my degree, I traveled and lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Kazakhstan, Morocco, Malaysia, and the United States. Currently, I teach economics and finance at a small university in Morocco. Despite my humble beginnings as a poor boy from Michigan, I am doing alright. I am living life to the fullest.

Other books from the author:

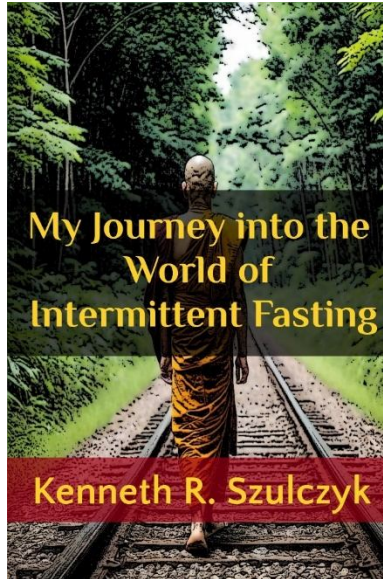
The Arduous Path to Enlightenment

As human beings, we often ponder upon our existence on this earth and ask ourselves why we are here. We search for answers through various religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. They share a common theme where God wants us to use all our talents and become closer to Him. We examine methods like fasting, meditation, lucid dreaming, sensory deprivation, and mind-altering drugs such as psychedelics and marijuana to explore our minds and awaken our spirituality. We delve into the deep depths of our minds and psyches to gain greater awareness and uncover hidden aspects of ourselves. Through this journey, we discover our true selves and purpose in life while traversing the path to enlightenment.



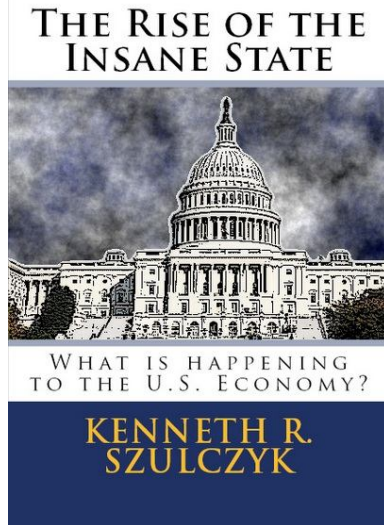
My Journey into the World of Intermittent Fasting

Intermittent fasting is a journey with many twists and turns. We may not be exploring ancient stone ruins in the jungles of Cambodia or savoring the exotic flavors of spicy Thai cuisine from the food carts on the streets of Bangkok. However, fasting is a journey to a healthier body. In this book, I take you on this journey, sharing practical insights and tips on all aspects of fasting. I've distilled my knowledge and extensive research into an easy-to-follow guide, including 50 practical tips on fasting, exercise, and nutrition. My book is a tool that can help you discover the power of intermittent fasting and unlock the doors to a healthy, long life.



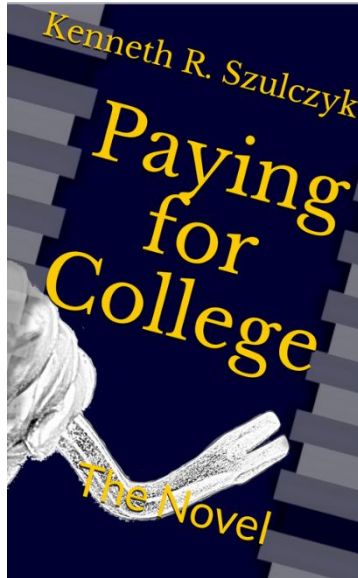
The Rise of the Insane State – What is Happening...

This book offers a comprehensive view of the U.S. legal system, explaining the relationships between the people, businesses, and their government. It's not filled with complicated statistics or high-level economic jargon. It's written for any intelligent person who wants to understand why a government takes over its economy. The book uses numerous examples and cases from the United States, but these ideas can apply to any country. It's a book that makes complex concepts accessible and understandable.



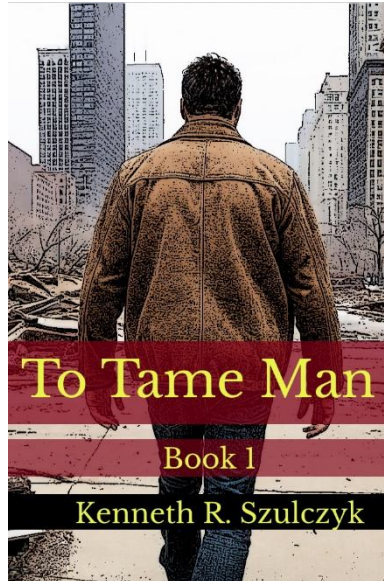
Paying for College – The Novel

Brothers, I only wanted to attend a university and escape a small town with no job prospects or future. But every time I opened my mailbox at the dorm, I pulled out another tuition bill with a looming due date. So, I had to do the unthinkable—break a few rules and do some insane things. Then everything just became crazy.



To Tame Man

The United Federation of Cities has been at peace since the Great War, and one of its great cities, Chicago, has experienced no violence, no crime, and no murders in 68 years. Then Susan, the director of the Male Processing Unit, ran out of Growth Inhibitor 37, and several males, including Brown 447, didn't get their treatment. Unfortunately, Brown 447 shows an uncanny intelligence and rises up and challenges the society of Chicago. Mayor Lilith and the Mayor's Guards must restore the social order and return law and order to Chicago.



The Second American Revolution – The Building of an Empire

As a child, Jerrick Ray Davis dreamed of delivering powerful speeches to the people. He also dreams of building an Empire across the North and South Americas. These are not simple daydreams but ideas that map out Jerrick's destiny. Jerrick rises out of the wreckage and devastation of the Michigan economy and turns his dreams into reality. Jerrick Davis and his political party, the National Workers' Party, took over the United States government and the rest of the Americas. Jerrick Ray Davis becomes the most powerful man in the 21st century, and the world trembles at his sight. Jerrick Ray Davis also makes a promise to the people. After the 2008 Financial Crisis, he will put all Americans back to work. Good-paying jobs will be plentiful again. Of course, Jerrick Davis puts everyone back to work, building his Empire. This story is about Jerrick Ray Davis' life from early childhood to rising in power. Please read this story with caution; we may be all toiling hard on Jerrick Ray Davis' Empire. As

Jerrick Ray Davis says, “All Americans will be united under one flag.”

