

“Good evening,” he said loudly.

The secretary, sitting at the computer on the other side of the hall, didn't even bother to turn her head. The first time around the “czarina,” as she was called, had been a bit stiff, but at least she'd served him up one of her dry courtesy smiles. After all, he wasn't the one who was an hour late and it wasn't his fault if all the chancellor's appointments had been pushed forwards.

Gottardo slipped onto the cracked leather seat of an antique chair in a corner of the room and eyed the reception area. Nothing stirred in the still office air, not a vibration rippled through the taut coils of the czarina's hair.

[...]

A phone rang in a nearby office, but the czarina remained rooted in her immobility.

Gottardo felt an all too familiar twinge, down low, on the right. He pressed a hand to his abdomen and the pain subsided. His mother's dumplings.

He sighed and turned his thoughts away from her and the crazy *Cavaliere* who, along with his book, was the reason for his return to Italy. After so many years in the US, this was supposed to be a new beginning.

When the ringing stopped, it was the ticking of the grandfather clock that made him feel the silence. He jumped from the chair and rushed to the other side of the oversized desk. A Mackintosh stood on its stand, its screen ominously dark. The czarina held nothing in her lap, but her empty hands, and her eyes, wild and unseeing, stared at some distant point.

“Oh Christ,” he murmured to himself as he moved slowly toward her. He tried to swallow, but felt his throat tighten.

“*Signorina*,” he called hoarsely and lightly touched her left shoulder.

In an eerie silence, the czarina bent forward and gathering momentum, her head slammed hard against the keyboard. She dragged it along with her to the ground, while her office chair skidded out from under her. She lay on the floor, her lips parted and her glasses which had slid from her nose, nestled among the tangled strands of her hair. Eyes like reflecting pools proclaimed her astonishment, her outrage. In the renewed silence, the computer beeped awake and Gottardo stared at the long dark streak of blood coming from the czarina's temple.

“Oh Christ.” This time he said it loudly, but there was no one to answer him.

He skirted the desk and headed to the door of the chancellor's office. He pulled it toward himself and the second, inner door yanked shut in front of his face, sucked by the vacuum created by the first door. He stood a moment, breathing hard, one hand in mid-air. Then he grabbed the bronze handle and pushed hard.

Like a fish at a market stall, the chancellor lay on a large, beige rug in the center of the room. Gottardo took a couple of slow steps, bent down, crouching, his attention drawn to the gold chain partially embedded in the heavy folds around the chancellor's neck. He felt his heart beating in his temples as he stared at the violated intimacy of death.

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