

The BMW stayed within the 25 mph speed limit as it went down 14th street, crossed Pennsylvania Avenue, passed City Hall in the Wilson Building and then paused in the middle of the street with its left blinker flashing to signal a turn towards the Reagan Building's entrance gate. "Just imagine if I were trying to do this in Rome. There would be curses, gestures, and honking in protest. Instead, in Washington DC, the capital of the nation and for a little longer of the entire world, everyone just lines up and waits." This was going through Michael Bardi's mind as he waited for the oncoming traffic to let up. A woman driving a Mercedes SUV motioned and let him turn left.

"Here comes the prescribed ritual," he said to himself. A gigantic security guard indicated where he must stop, before the barrier. The guard holding a mirror mounted on a pole approached the car and began inspecting its undercarriage. Then he made a gesture indicating that the trunk should be popped open. Michael did as required. This was followed by a check of his driver's license. Once the inspection was over, the guard returned to his booth, pushed the button that lowered the barrier and pointed towards where Michael should park. There was a long winding descent. "There's no place to park today," Michael thought. "They've abolished the valet service and now I have to hunt for a space. There's one." He parked near the elevator, paid at the meter machine, and made a note of his parking spot on the receipt.

Michael took the elevator to the lobby. Now he had to figure out where the meeting was being held. He followed the signs for the pavilion. It was 5 p.m., the time of day when civil servants start leaving for home. Rush hour traffic over the bridges to Virginia and Maryland would be at a crawl for a few hours. Then Washington would go back to being a sleepy town. There was no comparison with New York, but Michael Bardi liked it, at least he did for the few days he spent there when not traveling around the world.

"I've got to ask someone, I'm getting lost." Finally he got some help from a young security officer who led him down a hall and pointed at a door. On the other side was a middle aged secretary, apparently annoyed at having to work overtime and at the thought of her long commute home. She gave him a once over, checked for his name on a list, and asked for identification. Michael showed his driver's license and that seemed to pacify her. "Michael Bardi has arrived," she announced over the intercom. "Send him in" a raspy voice replied.

A heavy mahogany door opened electronically. The woman led Michael down a short hallway with dimmed lighting. Michael watched as she scampered along in her stiletto heels. "A few years ago she must have been something. Nice legs," he thought. As if she had read his thoughts and obviously sensing his gaze, the woman accentuated the swaying of her hips. They came to another heavy door. It opened and in the entrance stood a six-foot tall, blond, athletic young man dressed in a dark suit and stripped tie.

"How are you, Mr. Bardi? I am Mark Friedman, assistant to the President. Please follow me." The two men went down another short hallway that led them to the meeting room: the office of main partner of a law firm with 500 attorneys. The room had solid wood furniture, leather chairs, and olive green wallpaper echoing that of George Washington's home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. Table lamps cast rays of soft lighting. Four people were seated around a small table on which was a silver tray with a crystal pitcher of water and glasses.

The most authoritative looking of the four was Paul Kidman, the executive partner of a large and very prestigious law firm. He smiled coldly at Michael and motioned for him to sit at the table. "Finally, he has arrived. Let's make room for him," he said in an acid tone of voice.

At first Bardi felt like saying that the appointment had been set for 5 and if he had been delayed it had only for a few moments while trying to find the meeting. Then he thought better of it. Michael knew it was just a case of someone in power who couldn't resist throwing around his weight. Michael's role was to be the sacrificial lamb.

Everyone stood and followed Kidman into a small elevator hidden behind a bookcase. A few second later the elevator door opened and Michael realized they were on the building's subterranean level. Kidman pulled out a key and opened a metal door next to the elevator. They entered an almost completely bare room. All it had was a table and a dozen wooden chairs. The walls were an anodized dark gray color.

"Well," said Kidman, "let's begin by reviewing where we stand. I will start by telling our guest that we are in a Faraday Cage. A copper mesh surrounds us and no one can hear what we say. As for what is about to happen, I must admit that I am very worried because we risk losing everything. Sherman, you go first."

Sherman was a skinny and the type of guy who tries to hide his baldness with an intricate comb over. He had the high-pitched voice typical of people who panic when they have to speak in front of their boss.

"If the tabloids print that when the President's marriage was going through a rough patch he turned to the well-known Madam, Jeane Pallettieri, and she provided him with her prettiest escort, it's all over. To date we've been able to block the story, but it's becoming increasingly difficult."

"We all know the scandal sheets will have a field day," added Mark Schwartz, who was seated next to Kidman. "All projects will stop. The President will be forced to resign to avoid being impeached like Clinton."

Kidman, with a degree of irritation, interrupted him, and turning towards Michael said, "We asked you to meet with us today and for the time being drop all your other assignments. Why? Because you have more than one passport. But what also interests us this evening is – let me phrase this correctly – your experience with similar situations in Italy. I fully realize that moral standards in Europe, and particularly in Italy, do not correspond to the ones

in America. Here public opinion does not accept extra-marital affairs on the part of politicians and consequently any transgression is pounced upon by the opposition."

Michael Bardi tried to get comfortable on his hard chair. He cleared his throat and replied, "We can count on the tabloids running with the story. In Italy or France no one would pay any attention. Sure people are interested in the sex lives of celebrities or politicians, but they don't provoke condemnation. Perhaps because most Italian or French men can't help thinking, 'wish it were me!' They admire someone who is surrounded by beautiful women. It doesn't matter if they were paid for – in fact that makes it even better because it is a demonstration of superior wealth."

Paul Kidman took a long drag on the electronic cigarette he hoped would allow him to cut down on his two packs a day habit. "Listen Bardi, you're not telling us anything new. We read the papers and we know about the sex parties in Italy and all the rest. What we are asking for tonight is your opinion as both a European and an American on this whole mess concerning the President."

Michael Bardi hated him and the other characters in the room. But they paid him well for his services, so it would not have been a good idea to betray any irritation. "In my opinion" he said, "the best thing to do would be to have the President go on national TV and address the American public by saying: 'My marriage went through a rocky period. I found out that my wife had become infatuated with someone on her security detail. But I did not want to end our marriage, especially because of our children. In a moment of weakness I turned to a woman. I later discovered that she is an escort and had been paid by the political opposition to cause me harm. They are experts at that kind of thing, even if they deny it. My behavior did not in any way influence my work or my political decisions. This is my second term in office and together with my Cabinet I have succeeded in restoring faith in America and with it millions of jobs. I am now asking you to demonstrate your faith in me. We Americans are an understanding and forgiving people, and I ask you for forgiveness.' *That*, is what I think the President should say."

"You are saying that," interrupted Kidman "because you are half Italian and a Freemason as well."

"Excuse me," replied Michael, "what does my supposed or true membership in that organization...."

Paul Kidman turned towards him with a self-congratulatory sneer on his face. He was pleased at having ruffled Michael Bardi's composure. He enjoyed, and was good at, putting people on the defensive. It was as if he was saying, "Look I know lots about you." It almost always gave him an advantage in the exchange and threw his opponent off guard. "Let me explain," he added. "Tolerance is a fundamental virtue for you Freemasons. But politics in America takes no prisoners and woe to the defeated. Your hypothesis does not convince me. That's why we must take immediate action."

He poured himself a bit of water while his nervous assistants looked at him worriedly.

"The only solution" he concluded, "is to neutralize the people involved: the escort and the Madam. Someone has to go to Boston and try and find that bitch. Same goes for the escort who apparently lives somewhere in Virginia."

Michael Bardi double locked the door to his studio apartment on Hoban Street, right at the entrance to long-winding Rock Creek Park. He got into his BMW and headed off towards Canal Road. It was 10 AM, so he had already missed the bottlenecks caused by heavy commuter traffic from Virginia over Key Bridge and other access roads into America's political and administrative capital. There was nothing he could do about all the cars on the Whitehurst Freeway that cut through the chic neighborhood of Georgetown.

As he drove, Michael Bardi reviewed the images passing before his eyes. Georgetown: it existed before there was a nation's capital. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal: a massive 185-mile long project first envisioned by George Washington that became obsolete with the advent of the railroads. The Key Bridge: named after the author of the national anthem. He crossed the bridge and continued onto I 66, the bane of existence for the thousands of Northern Virginia commuters who work for the federal government, the World Bank, the Monetary Fund, and all the foreign embassies.

Michael thought about how convenient it was for people to live in Virginia, where the houses were bigger, and nicer, and cheaper than in DC, and let the residents of the capital cough up the taxes to pay for all the services commuters enjoyed while in the city. Well, then the price paid was being stuck in traffic for hours on I 66.

Once on the highway, Bardi made sure not to go over the speed limit, as Virginia was notorious for its heavy fines. You had to look out not only for state troopers and their radar guns, but traffic con-

trol surveillance by air and reports of aggressive driving sent by other people on the road as well. He set his cruise control at 60 miles an hour. His BMW was the type of car that led its drivers to go fast without even realizing it. After all, it had been built in Germany, a country where there were no speed limits at all on many highways. He passed the turn off for Dulles International Airport and continued down I66 until exit 49 for Gainesville, Warrenton and the forests of Culpepper. It was early May and Virginia's natural beauty was at its height.

Michael Bardi engaged in the typical thoughts, memories and experiences that pass through the mind of anyone on a long, solitary drive who wants to avoid nodding off, particularly when sleep deprived or, as in his case, when jet lagged.

The area was full of farms and enormous multi-million dollar estates with their own landing strips. The owners were usually part of a close circle of equally wealthy friends, with their own private planes and horse stables. "She must be a bitch to be a millionaire," mused Bardi. He remembered the case of an heiress who had fallen in love with an Argentine polo player. In the best of Latin traditions, he was very macho and constantly cheated on her. He also conned her out of millions of dollars. One day, in a fury, the heiress grabbed a rifle and shot him dead. She was given a slap-on-the-wrist sentence, consisting in sixty-one days to be served in a local jail. She was locked up in a cell/bedroom/apartment, and every day her butler brought in her favorite food that she generously shared with her fellow detainees. After only fifty-one days the heiress was released and returned to her mansion. "Just goes to show how true it is that there is no such thing as equal justice," Michael thought, with a smile.

He continued driving through the woods, enjoying the beauty of the landscape, and his BMW's ability to smoothly handle the curving road. When he reached Jeffersonton, he saw the sign for the Tuscan View Farm. The reference to Tuscany was due to the fact that an Italian couple from Arezzo had owned the estate for several decades and then sold it to a local attorney who cared more about land than the legal code. Despite having been sold several times over, the estate maintained its original name.

Michael Bardi drove through the estate's gate and followed the drive up to the villa. He decided to park near the swimming pool, as he had glimpsed someone sitting near it.

"Hello and welcome. Come join me..."

Michael pushed open the gate and moved towards the pool area. Then he stopped. A beautiful blond wearing – for lack of a better term – a tiny string bikini was climbing out of the pool. She had blood red lips and very white teeth. She said: "You made it. Let's sit under the umbrella."

"Don't act like a jerk and put a leash on your hormones," was the message sent by the rational part of Michael's body to the part below his belt.

"Jeane Pallettieri called me from Boston to tell me she had given you my address. But she didn't say why you wanted to see me. All she said was that it's very important. She also said to expect a handsome young man. She was right," said the Blond with a malicious smile as she crossed her long, wet legs.

Michael Bardi took a deep breath, smiled back, but in a friendly way, and replied, "Perfect. So you know more or less everything. Just like I know everything, or almost everything."

"Can I get you some lemonade?" asked the Blond.

Bardi nodded yes. The Blond poured two glasses and added, "Tell me why you are here and why it is so urgent."

Michael began speaking. He told her there were troubles ahead for the nation and for someone who had been close to the President. That he and only a few others knew of her involvement, a purely professional involvement... etc.

The young woman listened carefully. She had a perfectly oval face crowned by wet golden hair from which drops of water fell on her barely covered breasts.

"Michael," she said, "I still do not understand why you are here. Yes I am an escort. Do you want to hear my story? Relax, it won't be a sob story."

Michael was enthralled – and not only by the young woman's beauty. The warmth of her personality attracted him, which he felt certain was not solely based on her professional talent. He brought the glass of lemonade to his lips and smiled while motioning that she should continue.

"There's not a lot. A magna cum laude degree in economics from Harvard, then a MBA from Georgetown University. Should I go on?"

"Yes, please do."

"I started out like many career women. I was full of enthusiasm and was ready to compete with both men and women, and above all with myself, to show my true value. Then I was thrown into the meat grinder. Every company where I worked, the men, often backed up by jealous women, showered me with breathless admiration, but only because they wanted to go to bed with me. And then when I didn't they would conspire to set me up for a fall.

I made it to being CEO of a mid-size company in California. But even my secretaries had been turned against me. They wanted to make me sign shady documents. Luckily I found out in the nick of time. The movies? That's not me, plus in Hollywood you have to start giving it away from day one, as a young girl, to the right people and at the right time. I was too old and, above all, too smart. And, as you must know, that is a serious handicap for a woman, especially if she is good looking. So, I picked my current career. I chose the right clients – ones I like and ones with lots of money."

Michael Bardi listened in total fascination, captured by her story and her provoking – but in no way vulgar – body language.

"Continue?" asked the Blond, while pouring him more lemonade.

Michael nodded yes as he fought off a tidal wave of hormones.

"After all, there isn't much difference with a date. You go to the appointment knowing that if you like each other you will end up in bed either at your place or his. I accept invitations for dinner at elegant restaurants where I make a great impression. Look, it's not just physical beauty. I can carry an intelligent conversation. I'm not a dummy. I've met a lot of powerful men who turned out to be impotent. I've never engaged in any kind of Sado-masochism. If I don't turn on a man, he should find someone else. I am offering my mind as well as my body. That's it. Satisfied? Are you personally interested? I cost a lot, but I'm willing to give you a discount."

Michael replied with a wide smile that was warmly reciprocated.

The phone rang and the Blond answered. Michael heard the

sound of a woman crying, but couldn't make out what she was saying. The Blond's expression darkened as she listened. "Oh My God!" she exclaimed. Then she hung up.

"That was a friend in Boston," she said. "A few hours ago Jeane Palletieri went jogging in a park. Two men assaulted and stabbed her numerous times before running away. She just died at a hospital from loss of blood. It was early morning and no one had heard her screams. This is horrible."

Michael noticed that while the lovely woman facing him was very upset, she had not shed a tear. The Blond as if on remote control raised the carafe of lemonade and refilled his glass. Then she said, "Excuse me. I feel cold. I'm going to change."

Michael settled into his pool chair. He began sipping his lemonade. It really hit the spot as it was warm despite being early May. The chair began to rock. The earth began to move. He became aware of a ticking sound. "Was it a gigantic woodpecker...?" No, it was the chattering of his teeth.

The water in the swimming pool started churning around him, as if he was drowning in a vortex. He couldn't move. He was paralyzed and frightened. The sun umbrella closed and pointed straight at his face, like a spear. He was about to be impaled. He tried to scream, but his voice sounded like the squawking from the intercom of the Boss's secretary. Then a gray veil was pulled over his eyes and he fell into a deep sleep.

When he woke up and looked at his watch, he realized that two long hours had gone by from when the escort had drugged him. A note was paper clipped to his shirt.

"Dear Michael – I apologize for this unorthodox farewell. I just met you and I don't know if I can trust you. But it is clear that I have to disappear. I am in danger. Just as Jeane was. But now she can't harm anyone. Until we meet again somewhere. Olivia."

When Michael made it home a few hours later, he saw that someone had smashed a window and broken in. His studio had been burglarized. His laptop and PC were gone. Drawers had been emptied onto the floor. He also found what looked like a cigarette butt. He sniffed it, it was primo grade marijuana.

