

## **The Bookseller's Daughter -- *Episode 2* (continued)**

### **San Francisco – 2011**

#### **Gina**

Sylvia suddenly appeared, striding down the aisle towards me. She was dressed in her light gray, take-no-prisoners business suit that I remember her wearing when she had a crucial court appearance. She had one of those that afternoon. Even if she hadn't sent me the text message, I would have known from the way she walked that she'd gotten her client acquitted.

The hostess was a few steps behind her holding a couple of menus. Sylvia was all hugs and apologies, and within seconds she gathered me, my purse, my book, and my phone, and pointed us towards the back of the restaurant. The hostess had been holding a table along the brick wall at the back of the dining area. Sylvia knew without asking that I wanted the seat with my back to the wall. She'd been around me long enough to know that I liked to see who was coming and going.

"Was that guy trying to pick you up?" Sylvia nodded back towards the bar.

"He thought he was. It's probably a good thing that you showed up when you did. You saved him a lot of embarrassment."

Sylvia gave me one of her warm grins. It was a palette-full of teeth, dimples, and flashing brown eyes. She used to wrap that smile around me and convince me that all was right in the world.

"Not your type?"

"I don't think so."

"You didn't try to charm him with your Italian accent? That always worked with me."

I guess I got a little exasperated. "Give it a rest, will you? The minute I saw him, I already knew a dozen reasons why I wouldn't be interested."

Sylvia brought her lips together with the hint of a kiss. She was wearing a beige blouse under her suit jacket, and I asked her where she bought it. But it made me sad that I had to ask. There was a time about a year earlier when I would have known everything about her clothing. If she wasn't wearing one of the blouses I liked, I would have just walked into her closet and slipped it on myself – no questions asked. But those days were over.

She reached across the table, grabbing my hand, rubbing each finger with soft strokes from her own forefinger and thumb.

I tried to break the spell for the moment. "Shall we get the roast chicken from the brick oven? Two orders of that with the bread salad – you know, like we always do?"

She nodded yes, but she wasn't letting up on me. "Gina, you worry me sometimes."

I just shrugged. Even though our birthdays were only three months apart, she'd taken to being maternal with me.

"What *is* your type?" She was all seriousness. "I don't even know anymore, do you?"

"Maybe, it's still you."

Her smile eased up a bit, as she pursed her lips and shook her head. "You know that's not true."

She stretched the thought a little further. "We had to end it. You know that, as well as I do. The only difference was that you didn't want to talk about it. You were too kind – you didn't want to say something that would hurt my feelings. But we had to make the change that we did."

I knew. I even remembered what she said: "We really don't fit together very well." At the time I thought that was a very polite way – even a delicate way – to put it. But I couldn't argue with her.

"I still love you."

"And I still love you." I knew she meant it.

Sylvia's eyes turned serious and her lips tightened. It was the look she got when she was lining up her facts, ready to make an argument to the jury.

“Gina, we need to talk about this. It’s easier for me to live my life the way I want to than it is for you. I know that, Sweetheart, I really do. My life is open. What I am is what I appear to be. The two fit together – I don’t have to explain anything later on at some awkward moment.”

I must have acted like I was going to object, but she beat me to it.

“I know you’re going to say ‘What about us? How did that happen?’ Well, that was just what it was at that time – it doesn’t go beyond that.”

“My point is that I know how difficult it is for you to find the right relationship. What you are doesn’t fit with everything else. I know that guy at the bar didn’t appeal to you, but what if he did? What would you say to him? How would you . . . “

She was searching for the right word, but I interrupted her. “Maybe I should just start wearing a name tag. It could say ‘My name is Gina and, I’m . . . “

Sylvia stopped me short. There was a flash of anger on her face, and that was mixed with a few hurt feelings. She was trying to be helpful, and I was being sarcastic. And she knew it.

“I’m just trying to help out. Maybe that was a mistake. I know you don’t thrust yourself in front of people, and I respect that. I think that’s one of the things I love about you the most. But at times you seem so lonely and frustrated.”

True.

I don’t know if I was lonely or frustrated at that moment, but I knew what she was talking about. Sylvia was getting antsy – maybe worried that I might start complicating things with her. But I wasn’t going to do that. Our relationship was what it was. It wasn’t going to change, and I wasn’t going to push it. After we split up, she’d gone back to her old girl-friend – the one she’d lived with before we met. Sylvia knew I didn’t think Margo was good enough for her, but she didn’t want me reminding her of my opinion.

However, I wasn't thinking about any of that. I was just reflecting on the fact I was Gina Perini – a bookseller who was lucky enough to have a very talented lawyer as a friend. Sylvia was the one person in my life who knew everything about me. When my life got lonely, she could sense it. When things from the past would dog me, she knew what I was facing. She was the only one I trusted, and every now and then I had to grab that thought and cling to it.

Sylvia gave up for the moment trying to follow my mood shifts.

“Maybe we should talk about something else.”

I nodded in agreement. The waitress came back in time to give us a needed break.

“Let's order some wine and get started on it before the food gets here.”

Hayes Street Books was only a few blocks away, and my apartment was in a flat above the bookstore. To get there, I walked up Gough Street, took a 90-degree turn left, and then went a couple of blocks west on Hayes. It was one of the many things that surprised me about San Francisco – all the streets in the main part of town were at a very logical right-angle from each other. Where I grew up, nothing was like that. The streets meandered around hills, following the whim of a country path, or they traced the edge of a fortification that some warlord had erected centuries ago to keep out the peasants. But San Francisco was part of the New World – in fact, it was as far west as you could go in the New World without falling into the ocean. Back when it was a fresh-faced American city, some very earnest pioneers, who had just marched all the way across the continent, probably thought they should create a nice, rectangular grid like all the other American cities. My guess is that it never occurred to them that superimposing right-angle streets on a city with steep hills would produce a collection of sheer cliffs and roller-coaster streets. It was something that would drive visitors slightly crazy over the next two centuries.

Sylvia offered to walk with me to my flat, but I told her no. She was probably worried about me. There'd been times in the not so distant past when I'd been known to panic without warning. The war that had chased me out of the Balkans had officially ended, but my own personal slice of that bloodletting was far from over. I knew I'd probably be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life. Still, I'd grown calmer about things lately. Maybe enough time had gone by to ease things, or maybe it was just the distance – or maybe I was kidding myself. In any event, the streets of Hayes Valley were filled at that moment with a happy Friday-night crowd. You had a better chance of being smothered by a restless group of 20-somethings who were spread out across the sidewalk than being accosted by an attacker or a bad memory. Besides, I knew it was easier for Sylvia just to walk in the opposite direction from the Zuni Café and grab the BART train. She'd be back at her house in North Oakland in a half hour, and I wouldn't be monopolizing any more of her time. She might even get home early enough to keep Margo from quizzing her about me.

What was my type? I couldn't get Sylvia's question out of my head. I looked into the shop windows along Hayes Street, walking slowly as I pondered the question. There was a sale going on at *Dish*. They had some cute jackets on display, but they still looked like they were out of my price range. I loved the vintage skirt that I'd bought a week earlier at *Ver Unica*, but I didn't see anything like that in the window. What was I looking for in a relationship? I seemed to revel more in discovering clothes than in finding a lover. Maybe I was fated to be a perennial window-shopper.

*Absinthe*, at the corner of Gough and Hayes, had the usual crowd at the bar. It was another favorite of mine and my go-to restaurant if a publisher's rep offered to take me to lunch or dinner. There didn't seem to be anyone of interest in there at the moment. Sylvia thought I needed a more systematic approach for finding companionship, and she was probably right. The normal kind of minglings and mixers don't work very well for me. She said I should set my sights on someone strong, masculine, and confident. But I knew she had it backwards. Men like that scared me. It wasn't that they

frightened me physically. It's just that men who get that immersed in their own maleness wear me down. I can deal with a man's emotional needs – but if his needs are packed away so deep that he doesn't even know he has them, that blocks off any attempt at intimacy. I was slowly starting to realize something about myself, but I wasn't too happy to admit it. I seem to do better with men who were on the brink of falling apart.

I was in an intimate-free zone at the moment. My feelings had been channeled into books, as of late, because they seemed more grateful for my affection. I can get pretty messianic on the subject, which is probably why I was destined to become a bookseller. Usually, I just have to put a book into someone's hand and let him or her touch it. I might sing the praises of the author and give a little teaser about the plot, but I let the book do most of the work. I can count on it cozying up to the customer and saying, "You need me." I let customers rub the cover and riffle through the pages, while I'm putting the idea into their heads that the book should be perched on their bookshelf at home. Put me in a prominent position, the book says, and I will speak to people walking into the room and tell them good things about you. I will be the personification of your excellent taste. By the time we've gone through that little ritual, the book and the customer are usually out the door and happily on their way.

The lights in the store were still on as I walked up. Miriam Brown, my assistant manager, was setting up some chairs in the back. Miriam was our unofficial ambassador to the African-American community a few blocks to the west of us – a group that was growing smaller by the day under the pressures of gentrification. She was also my right arm and, sometimes, the only one who could keep me sane. She was getting ready for a late-morning author event the next day with mystery-writer Cara Black, who would probably draw a crowd for her new novel. Miriam understood the big picture. We had to funnel thousands of inventory items through the door, while fending off the corporate bandits that came at us from every direction. We needed to sell books – *lots* of books – if we were going to survive.

At that time of the evening I usually don't do much more than poke around, walking down each aisle, making sure that the most important books are face-out instead of spine-out. When you manage a bookstore, you can always convince yourself there's something more you have to do – even if you spend the next couple of days un-convincing yourself of the same thing. The staff still remembers the day I marched in and decided to move all of the shelves in the fiction section to another part of the store. But what they remember most is the next morning when I decided it was a bad idea. I had to ask them a bit sheepishly to wheel all the shelves back to their original places.

My apartment is upstairs from the store, and that's both a good thing and a bad thing. The owners of the store also own the building, so when they retired they offered to let me live upstairs as part of the deal for managing the bookstore. There was a promise that they would sell me the store someday, but it was left pretty vague. Nevertheless, the convenience of the deal appealed to me. There was no commute, and I could get downstairs whenever I was needed. As I think back, however, I realize they probably knew me better than I knew myself. If they wanted someone so obsessed with the bookselling business that she'd be there looking out for things around the clock, then that's what they got – me.

Before heading upstairs, I looked at the display in the window I'd put together earlier. It looked good, but I needed to move the books around a bit to get a better lighting-angle. When you're a bookseller, you can turn your passion into a display. So in the window I had Amy Greenberg's "A Wicked War," Adam Goodheart's "1861: the Civil War Awakening," and Adam Hochschild's "To End All Wars." And with them was a big stack of books about the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and all the rest of them. I even found two old copies of Barbara Tuchman's "The Guns of August" and "The Proud Tower" and stuck them in with the rest. Anyone walking by would figure out my passion pretty quickly, but just in case they missed it I propped up a quote from Jimmy Carter's Nobel Prize speech in the middle. *"We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children."*

Why did I become a bookseller? The idea must have planted itself in my mind at a moment several years ago. I suppose it just bubbled its way to the surface later on. I was a teenager at the time – a scared and desperate one at that. The last thing on my mind was my future career.

I was hiding out in Dubrovnik, but the city – I was beginning to realize – was a trap. Even though I'd snuck across the boundary from Bosnia and was then in Croatia, I had no place else to go. It was a dead end. I'd been evading capture for several months, hiding in the back streets, but I feared that my luck had run out. And it wasn't just my own safety I was worried about, because anyone who had been connected with me during those months was in danger. I had to leave Anja and the others. I was making things worse by staying there, because I was putting them in more peril than they already were. Anja had taken Jelena and the others from the place in the mountains where they'd been hiding and moved once again. I was hoping they'd found some place safe. I didn't want to think about what would happen if they were caught.

I wasn't yet Gina at that point in my life – that came later. And as dangerous as it was for me to hide out in the back streets of Dubrovnik, I realize now I was probably safer than I would have been if I had already made that transition. As it was, a lost-looking kid like me was able to wander around for a few days without drawing too much attention. Still I knew I couldn't stay there much longer. The Militia had agents up and down the Dalmatian coast, and they had eyes everywhere. At one point I was sure that someone was following me. The thought of that built my fear to a crescendo. I caught a glimpse of a man taking my picture, but he darted away before I could find out who he was. I was sure, however, he'd be back soon with his friends. The border with Bosnia was just a few kilometers away, and these people weren't going to let an international boundary stop them. The *Komandant* and his friends were close to tracking me down, and I knew they had revenge on their minds. But I had my back to the sea. If I stayed there, they'd find me. And if they found me, I'd be killed.

And even while I was still trying to escape that shooting war, I was beginning to realize I was fighting a mini-war within myself. During my months in hiding, some basic issues about my own identity were starting to force their way to the surface. These questions would come to dominate my life in future months, but at that moment I was just confused and terrified. There was none of the promise – even joy – that would open up to me in later years. Instead, I was just grappling with the deep fear that I was running from something without any idea of where I was going.

It was a strange place to be at that moment. While I was hiding, fearing for my life, I had the sensation of being caught up in a different world. Dubrovnik is one of the world's great cultural treasures, and I was in the middle of a sea of tourists. Each day brought a new group of happy, camera-laden people wandering through the streets, soaking up all of the historic riches. Many of them were probably aware of the war that was going on less than 100 kilometers away, but it didn't seem to affect the enjoyment of the city. Dubrovnik was bombarded for three months in 1991 during the early part of the war. But by the time I was there, it had recovered to the point where it could present its rich, historic face to visitors once again. I didn't belong there, and it was probably obvious to everyone who saw me that there was something about me that was out of place. The city was at peace, and I was still at war. I had to get out of there, and at times escape seemed tantalizingly close. When I wandered near the port, I looked out across the Adriatic Sea and wonder if I could ever to get across the water to safety.

I'd been there a couple of days, when I decided to follow an English-language tour group that was walking around the city, stopping at the various landmarks on *Stradun*, the main street. I worked my way into the fringes of the group. I tried to be inconspicuous. Since I was dressed like a universal teenager – hooded sweatshirt, dirty jeans, and sneakers – I suppose I looked like one of the young stragglers from around the world who wandered through the city. But it was all an illusion. If anyone talked to me for a few minutes, they would probably figure out I was on the run from something. The group I latched on to was mostly older people, walking at their own pace, focusing on the words of the

English-speaking guide. I was listening too, because I was trying to soak up as much English as I could. Somewhere in my mind I knew it would come in handy. But while I was standing at the edge of that tour group, my skin suddenly started to bristle. Someone was talking to me.

My fear blocked out everything. I was sure I had been found out, and I started looking around for a way to escape. It took me a few seconds to realize that the man was speaking to me in English. Then I finally realized that he was introducing himself and his wife, who was walking next to him. But at that moment I was frozen and didn't hear anything he said. To this day, I still don't know his name. I must have nodded something in response, because he kept talking pleasantly. After a minute or so, I realized he wasn't any kind of a threat. He was tall with a thick grey beard, and he had on a broad-brimmed khaki hat with a chin strap. He was wearing a grey shirt and khaki pants that had lots of pockets up and down the legs. His wife had on a sun-dress and a large floppy hat, and there was a camera hanging on a strap around her neck. They both appeared to be in their late fifties, maybe older. They were American tourists, and they just wanted to be friendly.

I realized what had caught his attention. There was book sticking out of the pouch on my sweatshirt, and he had recognized the title. It was a dog-eared paperback copy of Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" that I had picked up earlier that day for next to nothing at a local bookstall.

"Are you enjoying that book?"

I didn't have the heart to tell him that I had just started it and that my English was still not good enough to catch the subtleties of Rushdie's writing. I nodded yes, and he nodded back in satisfaction. We continued to talk a bit while the group was moving on to the next stop, and I fell into a comfortable pace walking between the two of them. He asked me about myself, and I answered with only the vaguest generalities. At one point he wanted to know if I knew about the controversy surrounding that particular book. I told him that I'd heard about it, but the truth is I only knew the sketchiest details.

“There were death threats made against anyone who sold the book. Some of the big outfits wouldn’t touch it, but we decided to carry it.”

I must have looked surprised.

“My wife and I are booksellers in Massachusetts.”

He told me where the store was located, but I don’t remember what he said. I only knew Massachusetts as a blob on a map somewhere across the Atlantic Ocean. At the time, the only thing I could think to ask was whether anyone had attacked them for selling the book.

“We had a couple of threatening phone calls, and someone threw a rock through the plate glass window at the front of the store.”

I guess a bit of alarm showed on my face.

“I know. Maybe we should have been more careful.” He nodded towards his wife who was walking slightly ahead of us.

“But we talked about it and decided there are times when you just have to do the right thing. We boarded up the hole in the glass, and then we put a big stack of The Satanic Verses in the window next to it.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t think I could say anything without giving away too much about myself. The two of them just kept walking, and I kept walking with them.

What did they sense about me? Did my hunger show through on my face? Did they see the fear in my eyes and guess what it was? I didn’t say anything about how desperate I was to get out of there, but I probably didn’t have to. Whatever the two of them may have thought remained unspoken between them. We all just continued to walk, talking only occasionally, as the tour group got closer and closer to the water and their chartered boat. We reached the gangplank, and several of the others in their group started boarding the ship. We were in the middle, and my two companions stood patiently,

waiting their turn. I waited with them. I felt something, and when I looked up I realized she had placed her hand on my shoulder.

If I was going to leave, that would have been the moment. And if they expected me to leave, they would have begun their goodbyes and starting giving me their good wishes. I expected at any minute they would start saying, “if you’re ever in America . . . “ But they didn’t. They just stood there, waiting to get on the boat, not showing the slightest concern that I was still standing there between them. If I’d been in that line alone, I would have been spotted by the dock officials immediately and pulled aside. But standing between them, I looked like a slightly bewildered teenager who was in the middle of a pleasant European vacation with his grandparents.

Once on board, I moved away from them as soon as I could. There was a brief nod between us. They seemed to know that I needed to get out of sight, and they were probably just as happy that I was moving away from them and keeping them out of any trouble. The trip lasted only a couple of hours. At one point I wanted to walk over and thank them, but I knew that would be bad idea. The boat’s next stop was Bari on the Italian side of the Adriatic Sea, and I slipped off as quietly as I could.

I never saw them again. I’ve looked for them at book conventions and trade shows but with no success. They may have retired or gotten out of the business. They wouldn’t have recognized me, because everything about me has changed. But I’d know them. I just wish I could thank them.

Some days I hate what I’m doing. This was one of those days.

We received notice that our worker’s compensation premium would be increased by 6% in the coming year. That news came in a nasty looking white envelope that was lodged under an even uglier envelope from our credit-card processor. That one said that our transaction fee was going up and we would need to purchase new equipment. Both of those bombs landed on my desk in the same week that San Francisco announced an increased fee for the city health plan. The week before our bank had

raised the interest on our line of credit, and P.G. & E. put another charge on our utility bill. And that list of horrors didn't even include the new credit manager at a major publisher who said "she was reviewing our payment terms." Where were we going to find the extra money to pay all this? It wouldn't be from our customers. The price of books is printed on the cover, so there's no wiggle room there. We'd just have to eat it.

We needed more sales. That was the answer to everything – we *always* needed more sales. There'd been five browsers so far that morning, and only one of them had purchased anything. I wasn't happy with that ratio. One customer in particular was starting to irritate me. He'd been thumbing through a biography on the new-arrivals table, and he had been there long enough to arouse my suspicions. A lifter, maybe? He didn't have a booster bag or a jacket with big pockets, so I decided I was wrong about him. But then he pulled a smart phone out of his pocket and aimed it at the book.

He was showcasing us! I'll be damned if he wasn't photographing the barcode and ordering the book from some on-line company. And he was standing right in front of me while he was doing it. What the hell! Was he planning to pay for the lights, the rent, the staff, and all the things we provided just so he could stand there and buy it from somebody else? Of course, not. He was hovering over my carefully arranged display and running the purchase through some soulless computer somewhere off on the cloud. I would have liked him better if he were a thief.

My evil instincts took over. I moved in next to him and dropped a box – quite by accident – that knocked the phone out of his hands. "*Oh, I'm so sorry,*" I told him. "*Let me hold that for you up at the counter while you browse. ....*" He tried to object, but I cut him off. "*No, no, it's no problem. I'm happy to keep it for you.*" Fortunately, I'd picked on a guy who was so sheepish about the whole thing that he was willing to wait and retrieve his phone at the counter a few minutes later – along with his book and his change. I was lucky. When I pulled a stunt like that once before, Sylvia pointed out that the

customer could just as easily have reported it to the police, claiming that I'd stolen his phone. For a few days I waited for him to come back with a cop.

"How do stores make any money selling books?" Sylvia once asked me.

"I'm not sure any of them do."

Given what I'd been through in my life, you'd think that I would be more detached about these sorts of things. But I love the book business, and it pisses me off when everything seems to be conspiring to make it fail. I walked around the store trying to cool off. I finally sat down and watched Morrie Richards, our Director of Children's Events, as he lined up books to read at the next Storytime. He'd been coming in on his own, reading stories to the littlest children, until I finally asked him if he wanted a second-career managing our children's events. He quickly said yes. He'd been bored with his retirement, and the idea of being sort of a troubadour for little kids appealed to him. Within a few weeks he had a gallery of photos that surrounded the section, all of them showing children looking up in rapt attention as the stories were being read. As you looked in their eyes, you could almost see their imaginations begin to soar. That got to me. It made me want to amend what I told Sylvia. "We're not just selling books. We're spinning dreams."

By the time I got back to my desk I was in a better mood. There were a couple of packages with advance copies of new books. That always perked me up. One of life's great pleasures is to open a new book and let yourself be mesmerized by the smell and the feel of it. There was a new John Lescroart book, and I put that next to the latest Lisa See novel – those would both end up on the pile of books next to my bed. There was also a message from our local booksellers association, wanting to know if I'd be on a marketing panel at the fall trade show. I'd probably say yes, since my friends Casey from Bookshop Santa Cruz and Margie from Books, Inc., would be on the same panel. But I didn't know why anyone considered me an authority. I'd been talking about a plan to co-market books with the local shops on Hayes Street, but my idea sounded more successful than it really was.

I was happy to talk at gatherings of booksellers, but that was about as public as I was willing to get. I had good reasons to stay out of view – lots of them. And the next message made me realize I was getting careless. A woman from the Italian Cultural Institute had called. She had heard about Gina Perini, and wondered if she would come speak to a business group of Italian-American women.

No, no, no -- she would not. Gina Perini would be doing no such thing.

The Italian-American woman that the public saw was something I'd created for myself. Gina Perini came into being at a time when my life had bottomed out and I had to start over again. The original version of me was gone – long vanished, I hoped, from the minds of anyone who used to know me. All of this happened when I was a teenager living in Italy, and it seemed simpler to adopt an Italian name to go with my new personality. The *persona* I created at that time has worked well enough in most places, but I wasn't about to try it on Italians. They'd want to know what part of Italy I was from. Which province? Which *commune*? "Perini' – what sort of a name is that? Are you related to the Perinis in . . . " After an hour or so of that kind of friendly banter, the whole story would come unraveled.

When I snuck off the boat in Bari, I had no idea what I would do next. I'd gotten as far as Italy, putting the Adriatic Sea between me and my pursuers, but I hadn't thought beyond that. I had a vague hope that things would get better, and I suppose they eventually did. But before that, they got worse.

A few days after I arrived I made contact with someone I knew living in Bosnia. But once I'd done so, I almost wished I hadn't. The news he had hit me hard. My fears about Anja and the family had come true. They had been taken captive by the Militia, and no had seen them since. It was all second-hand information, and for a moment I tried to deny it as just a rumor. The man I talked to said he hadn't actually seen it himself but had talked to those who witnessed it. Maybe they were wrong. But the more he talked, the more I realized that the little details of the story were too accurate for it to be anything but true. News like that was too serious for anyone to embellish it. A group from the Militia had

surrounded the house where the family was hiding. They'd marched them out at gunpoint and manhandled them as they were tossed into the back of the truck. According to the witness, the *Komandant* himself was there, puffing on a cigarette as his soldiers roughed up the prisoners, finally grinding out the butt with a satisfied grunt as the padlock on the truck was snapped into place. No one had had seen or heard anything of them after that. What more was there to say? We both knew what that meant. They would probably never be seen again.

"What about the baby? Did they take Jelena too?"

No one had seen the baby, he said.

How can that be, I kept asking? A child that young doesn't get up and walk off. "Are you certain? She's only a few months old. Maybe she was being carried by someone, and no one noticed her."

"The baby wasn't there."

The people who saw the incident knew there'd been a small child in the house. They would have noticed. No one saw her then or after that.

I hit rock bottom. During the next few days I sensed that the tentacles of war had somehow reached across the water and were smothering me. I was in a strange country with no papers, no friends, and very little money. The closest thing I'd ever had to a family had now been lost, and what happened to them was partly my fault. There was no future that I could see. I was beginning to realize that my despair had opened up such a big hole in me that I didn't know who I was anymore. There was something going on that I couldn't articulate, and for several days I could do little but hold myself and shiver.

I finally headed north for Rome, because it seemed like the easiest thing to do. I had a sense that Rome was a place where you could find yourself – or get completely lost. I still think all of the world's abandoned people must wander through there at one time or another. Later on, I learned to love Rome, but that wasn't true at first. I arrived there on the run and felt totally helpless. I eventually

learned how to survive. I hung around the buildings of the *Comunita di Sant' Egidio* in the *Trastevere* area, living off the generosity of that group. They were focused on helping refugees, and they must have realized that the sad looking kid sitting in their doorway had escaped from something awful. They kept me alive.

After a few months I found work with a printer who needed an assistant for odd jobs and errands. Paolo worked by himself, but he took me on – no questions asked. There was nothing official about my relationship with him. It was all *lavoro in nero*, as the Italians would put it, “working in the black.” Everything about me was off the books. I had no visa or work permit. As far as the authorities were concerned, I wasn’t working at all – in fact, they didn’t even know I existed. Given the nature of his business, Paolo had a good reason to keep everything *in nero*. Publicity was the last thing he wanted. He called himself a printer, but he was really a forger. Birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, work permits, visas – he could do them all, and he did them well. There’s still some paperwork sitting in an office in Rome that was convincing enough for me to get me an E.U. Passport many months later and a Work Visa for the United States.

Paolo wasn’t the only fraud. I called myself his assistant, but that was just to make me feel better. The exchange rate between us was never spoken, but we both knew what it was. There was sex for food, sex for shelter, sex for medication – sex for whatever I had to have. He had his needs, and I had mine. There wasn’t any serious affection between us. When he needed me, he took me – not roughly or without a bit of kindness, but not with any real love either. At that point, love was just a distant abstraction for me anyway – I doubt if I was even capable of it. I wasn’t proud of my arrangement with Paolo, but it was better than walking the streets. I knew that first hand. During my first, desperate days in Rome, I went out one night on the stroll, walking slowly along the *Via Salaria*, getting set to offer my body to the first taker with a pocketful of *Lire*. But within minutes I got violently sick to my stomach and started to shake. I spent the rest of the night huddled behind a tree.

One afternoon I delivered a packet of some of Paolo's specially-made documents to a bank manager in the *Campo di Fiori*. He looked surprised to see someone who looked like me at the front entrance to the bank. I was wearing jeans and a zippered sweat-shirt that hung loosely over my shoulders. I didn't look much like a business courier. It took him a second to realize why I was there, and then he got a stricken look on his face. He motioned sharply for me to go around and meet him at the back entrance, where I slipped him the paperwork. I knew why he was nervous. I'd looked at the documents as I walked across the *Ponte Garibaldi* on my way to deliver them. One of them was a woman's birth certificate with a German seal on it. I was certain it was a forgery. There were other dubious but official-looking papers in the envelope along with it. He was probably planning to use the paperwork to keep his mistress in the country. By the look on his face, I seemed to have guessed right.

After he unceremoniously slammed the door in my face, I walked away, feeling as insignificant as I was at that moment. I headed past the cafes on *Via dei Baullari*, ending up at the *Piazza Farnese*, plopping myself down against the *Vasca* – the big bathtub-looking fountain in the middle of the piazza. I found a spot between the bicycles and the Vespas, trying to lose myself among the scruffy, lost kids who liked to hang out there during the day. Scruffy and lost – that's how I felt most of the time, but that afternoon my confusion had built to a crescendo. I was unhappy with my life, with my body, with my soul, and with everything around me. I stared at the *Palazzo Farnese*. According to Puccini, that was the place where Tosca shoved a knife in Scarpia's ribs when he tried to rape her. I knew how she felt.

Looking back, it seems clear that the moment in the *Piazza Farnese* was a turning point. Something inside me had opened a door, and a new revelation was waiting to enter. As my eyes wandered around the piazza, I looked over at a café and saw something that changed my life.

Two young women were sitting at a table, talking animatedly. The one on the left – the one who caught my attention – had mid-length brown hair that curled luxuriously over the back of her neck. As she leaned over her espresso cup to say something, she brushed back her hair – not continually, but

often enough to appear that she was following some inner rhythm. I realized at that moment that I was running a hand through my own scraggly hair, trying in some pitiful, subconscious way to emulate her.

The young woman raised her head slightly when she made a point, following the rising timbre of her voice. When her friend spoke, she inclined her head to one side, waiting in that suspended state while the other woman talked. Then she would tilt her head back and break out in laughter. There was nothing forced about her gestures, nothing unnatural. There was an easy fluidity that had me mesmerized. She moved her hand forward until it came to rest on the forearm of her friend. She let it sit there lightly for a few seconds, giving a small, knowing tap or occasionally lifting a finger to wag when she wanted to say something. It was an easy intimacy that plucked at a chord somewhere inside of me.

I moved in closer to hear her speak. She had one leg crossed over the other, and she moved it rhythmically as she talked. It was an unstudied motion that seemed as perfect as all the others. She had a white blouse that was opened down to the third button, and with it was an elegant, understated silk scarf tied around her neck in a kind of casual knot that Italian women seemed to have invented. Her eyes and skin sparkled. She must have taken great care to make everything look so simple. There were probably lotions, hormones, and dozens of other things that she needed to bring herself to that point, but none of that was noticeable in this, her moment of every-day glory. I listened to her voice – a rich contralto that modulated itself into a variety of tones and textures. I tried to imitate the sound in my mind. If I'd gotten close enough to detect the scent of her, I probably would have been overwhelmed.

I was smitten. Later that afternoon, I found some sheer hose in a street market that matched what she had been wearing. I was almost afraid to pick up the package, and by the time I gave the handful of Lire to the proprietor, my palms were covered with sweat. She didn't seem to notice how nervous I was as she handed me my change. I went back to my tiny bedroom and made sure the door was closed. I unrolled the stockings up my legs and became immersed in that new sensation, wondering if that was how they felt when they were on her. It was a feeling of enchantment. For a moment I

imagined myself back at that table with the two women, becoming part of their world. You could call it love at first sight, but that didn't quite describe the feeling. I didn't want to *be with* her. I wanted to *be* her. And from that moment on, I was. Since then, I've often wondered if I had always been like that and just didn't know it. I'm not sure. I only know that on that warm afternoon in the presence of that *signorina* – my unaware mentor – I became Gina.

I had just finished breakfast and was on my way downstairs to the bookstore, when I got a phone call from Rome. It was Paolo. I hadn't talked to him in over a year, and I didn't know what he wanted. It took me a second to get back into the rhythm of speaking Italian, but it was a pleasant sensation. Still, there was an edge to his voice.

After a bit of friendly conversation, Paolo finally got around to the point of his call. He said he'd had "*dei visitatori.*" It wasn't so much the words but the way he said them.

"What kind of visitors?"

"Well, you know, investigators."

"No, I don't know!" I would have to have to pry it out of him. "What kind of investigators?"

"I don't know, for sure. They wanted to know about you. They had badges that they flashed in front of me."

"Were the badges real?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" I was getting exasperated with him. "For god's sake, you've made a whole career out of forging documents and you don't know a phony badge when you see one?"

"*Cara mia!* What was I supposed to do? Grab the card out of his hand and examine it under a microscope? I just wanted them out of there!"

I wasn't going to get anywhere, if I got angry with him.

“Anyway, I don’t think they were legitimate -- they spoke Italian like you do. Americans probably think you sound like an Italian, but an Italian can tell the difference. These guys were from over there – you know, that place where you came from.”

“What did they want?”

“They had a picture of you. They wanted to know if I knew you.”

“A picture? When was it taken?” Fear was erupting in my head.

“It was an old one. You looked the way you did when you showed up on my doorstep all those years ago. You were kind of cute, really.”

I wasn’t going to get into that with him. “Could you tell where it was taken?”

“They didn’t say. But it wasn’t Italy – I know that. You could see the waterfront down at the end of the street, and there was some foreign writing on the shop signs.”

It was the photo – the one I remembered from Dubrovnik.

“What else did they say?”

“Nothing, really. After I told them that I had never seen you before, they just left.”

“How long ago was this?”

“About three weeks ago.”

“And you’re just calling me now?”

I could hear the hesitation in his voice. “I didn’t think it was important. The picture was taken so long ago. No one looking at that picture would connect it with who you are now. You’ve gone through a big change since then.”

The dead air hung between us for a moment. I knew he was waiting for me to talk. He wanted me to ask him why he changed his mind and decided to call me.

“Paolo, what happened?”

He seemed reluctant to answer, and then he switched over to English. I knew what that meant. It would be easier for him to play dumb. “Luca got a call yesterday.”

That was not good news. Luca Martinelli was my physician during the time I was in Italy. He knew a lot more about me than you could glean from an old photo taken in Dubrovnik.

“Was it the same people?”

“I don’t know. It was just a phone call. He said he didn’t ask them any questions. I don’t know – it’s probably better that he didn’t.”

“Did he say what they were calling about?”

“They were asking about someone named ‘Bertani.’”

That hit like a thud. “Gina Bertani” was the name I used when I first changed my name. It was the name on my entry papers for the U.S. The “Perini” part came later. The fear that had been gathering in my head threatened to explode.

“What did Luca tell them?”

“He said he told them nothing at all. He told me that he acted like he didn’t even know what they were talking about. He said they hung up after that.”

“Were they looking for a man or a woman?”

“I don’t know – he didn’t say. He didn’t say much at all.”

“Paolo, that could be important. They weren’t just looking for “someone.” They were talking Italian, for God’s sake – it was either *qualcuno*, a man, or *qualcuna*, a woman.”

“I don’t know.” He was squirming to get off the phone,

“Could you find out and let me know?”

I could hear his face drop over the phone. “I’ll try.”

Sylvia had called me the day before to set up an appointment. She offered to buy lunch, but she didn't say what she wanted to talk about. As I headed downtown I wondered if it might have anything to do with what Paolo had told me in his phone call. I decided it probably didn't – and even if it did, there wasn't much she could do about it. Sylvia was the person you wanted if someone was about to serve you with a subpoena. But if that someone wanted your head served to him on a platter, she wasn't any more help than anyone else.

Her office was in a converted Barbary Coast building just off Montgomery Street. The entrance opened on to a well-manicured alley that sat a comfortable distance between Jackson and Pacific. The whole area oozed a look-at-me Victorian charm that San Franciscans love to display. The bare-brick interior of the waiting room was home to a number of spectacular tinted photos of San Francisco Bay that hovered over the walls with no visible means of support. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century ambiance of the building was interrupted only by a series of modern, crisscrossed metal beams that were firmly anchored to both the ceiling and the floor. Victorian charm was one thing, but everyone in San Francisco remembered that the 1906 fire and earthquake had once leveled buildings like this into rubble. The law firm's name was in brass letters on the wall outside their door: "Crichton, Moss, Harris, & Kaplan" – as in "Sylvia Kaplan," my old girlfriend.

Sylvia had come a long way since the days when we shackled up over the bookstore and she had her files stashed in banker's boxes in our spare bedroom. It was a good spot for her at the time, however, because he loved books. She'd sometimes sneak downstairs to grab Advance-Reading Copies off the receiving desk to get the jump on other readers. For old time's sake, I brought along an ARC of the new Martin Cruz Smith book that I knew she'd want to read. It was the least I could do, since she had offered to buy me lunch around the corner at *Cotogna* restaurant, where we both lusted after their *agnolotti*. Still, dining with her made me a little sad. I realized that the passion between us had migrated from the other parts of our bodies and had settled into our digestive tracks.

Sylvia learned her legal skills in the San Francisco District Attorney's office. And after watching her in action, I realized no one was better at getting a defendant acquitted than a former prosecutor. After a couple of her questionable clients walked out of the courtroom as free men – none too deservedly, in my opinion – she caught the eye of Richard Crichton, who was the go-to guy for every white-collar criminal in town. If you hired Crichton, Moss, Harris, & Kaplan, just about everyone assumed you were guilty – everyone, that is, except the juries. He managed to get most of his well-heeled clients acquitted. Crichton was the face of the firm, but someone else had to do the day-to-day courtroom grind. That job had been passed down from Crichton to Moss to Harris and, now, to my best friend.

Life was good for Sylvia, and I was pleased for her. When I was in a generous mood, I had to give credit to Margo. Sylvia had become more focused in her work since the two of them had gotten back together. They were now starting a family. That was a boundary I had to respect. Their plan, apparently, was for Margo to get pregnant first and then Sylvia would do the same the year after. They wanted their two children to be just a year apart. Margo – ever the child psychologist – thought that would be the best age gap. I had a wonderful vision of Sylvia, when it was her turn to conceive, standing in full-bellied pregnancy in front of a jury, spilling out a heart-felt plea. Margo and Sylvia had worked out an arrangement with a couple of gay men they knew, so that each man would end up being either a father or an uncle to the two children. The day when Sylvia told me about their plan, Margo hovered in the kitchen, probably thinking I was going to say something insensitive. But that wasn't at all how I felt. I admired them for doing what they were doing. I almost offered to contribute to the process, but I knew that wouldn't have gone over very well.

When I got to her office, Sylvia had a large file sitting on her desk. She seemed anxious to get right to it. Normally, we would spend a little time chit-chatting with Cristina Brown, Sylvia's legal intern, who was also Miriam's niece. Since Cristina had worked at Hayes Street Books when she was going to

college, we always had a lot to catch up on. But Sylvia ushered Cristina out of the room quickly so we could get down to business.

She pushed the file halfway across the desk, but then she stopped, apparently unsure that she really wanted to give it to me. As I sat there with an empty, outstretched hand, I suddenly realized what it must be – it was something I had asked her to help me with months ago. She hadn't said anything about it, but now I realized she'd found out something important.

"Gina, I'm going to give you this, but you have to promise you won't do anything impulsive once you see what we've found."

I promised – and I think I even believed it when I said it. But I would have stood on my head at that point to see what was in that file.

"You've found Jelena." It came out as a question, but I was already sure of the answer.

"We're pretty sure the information we have is correct."

"Only pretty sure?"

Sylvia frowned. She was starting to realize that she couldn't get by with ambiguous phrasing – not on this subject.

"Okay, we're as sure as we can be without DNA evidence, and there's no practical way to get that."

"Where is she?"

Sylvia gave a little hand motion that meant that I should slow down for a moment.

"Let's get something straight. I know how emotional this is for you. In all the months I lived with you I learned that much, okay?"

I couldn't argue with her.

“We’ve found her, but that doesn’t mean there’s anything we can do about it.” She looked at me, waiting to see if that would sink in. “We need to decide right now what we can – and cannot – do with this information. Sweetheart, do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

I didn’t, but I said I did.

“We paid an investigation firm a lot of money to put together this report, and I think they did a hell of a job. There’s a lot of stuff in here that makes unpleasant reading, and I’m not sure you’ll want to read all of it. They didn’t have much to work with at first. They took the information you gave us about her disappearance – the date, the place, and everything else – and they worked it from there. They checked the records of every international adoption agency until they had a match. But it wasn’t easy. They knew she was only a few months old at the time, and they only had some general idea of her likely features based on her genetics and the description you gave them. That wasn’t much to go on.”

“And let me say this: they pulled in a lot of favors while they were getting this together. We have to be careful not to cause any problems for the firm with their informants or with their other clients. There are some things we can use and other things we have to keep in the background. Also, our firm picked up the tab for this, so I think we need to be cognizant of that fact.”

Sylvia could see the look on my face as she went through that explanation, and she knew it wasn’t having much impact. Finally, she leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling.

“Why did I even bother with that? I knew it wouldn’t make any difference to you.”

“Can I just see what’s in the file?”

Sylvia shrugged and handed it to me.

I thumbed through the pages, skimming a lot of the background information, until a line on page twelve jumped out at me.

“It says that she was ‘found abandoned outside the village.’ That’s not true. She was kidnapped.”

“I knew that phrase would probably upset you. But if you look at the end of the report and read what they say about their sources, you’ll see that they weren’t trying to investigate the details of what happened. They were focused on finding the right child. They just used the language of what their informants gave them without arguing about it. You’ll find that in a few places.”

“So what do we know about this . . . .” I flipped back a few pages to make sure I had the right name, “. . . this ‘God’s Family Foundation?’”

“That’s the organization that handled the adoption and placed her with a U.S. family.”

“How do we know they weren’t involved in her kidnapping?”

“We can’t be absolutely sure of anything, but this is a pretty large organization that handles a lot of international adoptions. In many cases – particularly in a war-zone – a lot of things can happen before an agency like that gets involved . . . Gina, this was Bosnia, for God’s sake. You told me over and over again what things were like there at the time.”

I thought Sylvia might be trying to convince herself as much as me.

“Look, read the report, you’ll see that were several people that apparently had her in their custody for a short time before the Foundation stepped in. As far as we can tell, there was nothing improper about the adoption.”

The skepticism must have still shown on my face. Her voice dropped a couple of notches.

“When I read this, I knew you’d have that concern. So I asked our investigators if they would do a little more checking on the Foundation. I’ll let you know what they find out, okay”

I nodded my thanks.

“Where is she now?”

“She was adopted by a married couple who were living in South Carolina at the time. They’ve since moved to Indianapolis. Her family life looks stable. The investigators haven’t done an in-depth examination of her adoptive parents, but there doesn’t seem to be any problem. The father’s name is

Allen Wilder, and he's the pastor at The Church of the Kindly Shepherd. It's a prominent church in the community."

I shrugged, and Sylvia picked up on it.

"I know, it's definitely not what you expected, but there it is. Her mother's name is Susan Wilder. As near as we can tell she doesn't have a career of her own but does a lot of work within the Church organization. There are apparently no brothers or sisters.

"And she has a new name, Gina. It's Alexi – Alexi Wilder."

I ran the name through my mind, fighting the feeling that it was somehow intruding upon my memory of Jelena. But as I silently mouthed it a few times, I started to get used to it.

Neither of us said anything for a few moments, but I could sense Sylvia eyeing me, wondering how I was going to respond to all this.

"Gina, I got this information for you, because I know how much it means to you – how important it was for you to find out what happened."

I nodded, quietly mouthing the words "Thank you."

"But I know you, and I know how impulsive you can be." She waited a second for me to deny it, but I couldn't. "Can you please promise me that you won't do anything rash?"

I didn't know what to say.

"I'm sitting here, watching the wheels turn in your head, and I don't know what I can say that you don't already know. Alexi is now a teenager – or maybe you still want to call her Jelena, that's fine. But either way, she's living in a stable family that adopted her years ago in a proper court proceeding. Her life up to now can't be undone. We can't go back and reverse anything, and it would be cruel to try."

"And even if you could, there's the problem of you."

Sylvia caught my attention with that.

“Gina, I love you, but that will only carry you so far. You’ve got some things to think about. I’m not just talking about your lifestyle. That’s never been an issue in my mind – not in this case or in anything else. But you know as well as I do that you can never know what a judge somewhere might say.”

“No, what really worries me is that you’re in the country illegally. Not only that, you’ve told me many times that there are people who would gladly rip you from limb to limb if they could find you. Think about that for a minute. I don’t know of anything that you can do that wouldn’t run the risk of some harm coming to you or to Alexi.”

I nodded. I wasn’t going to argue. If I told her about my recent phone call from Paolo, I knew that she’d probably be even more worried.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful.”