

CHAPTER 5

JOESEXY

May 30, 2018

Café de Paris, Monaco

I take out my iPhone and send a text. “*Ciao Amore...* I decided to come in 2 MC. It’s been forever since I last saw you. Café de Paris in 30?”

Less than a minute later, Giovanni answered. “*Si arrivo.*”

In every town, there’s someone who is plugged in to the latest gossip that’s making the rounds about those with power and influence. In every town, there’s a go-to-guy who knows where and how to source anything imaginable, or who has just the connections you need. I’ve been out of circulation lately, and meeting up with Giovanni—or Joe, as his nearest called him—will be like one-stop shopping to catch up on the local dirt.

I arrive early and snag a table that is perfectly situated to watch the comings and goings around the Place du Casino. It’s too early for the Casino to be open for business, and thus, the valets haven’t started their shift; the Bentleys, Ferraris or Aston Martins aren’t idling at the bottom of the marble stairs, and crowds aren’t mounting the steps that lead to its ornate doors.

Directly across the square sits the Hotel de Paris, that grande dame in all her Belle Époque finery; carved cornices, sweeping

staircases of marble, and French doors letting onto wrought-iron balconies reflect the late-morning sunlight. Though the grass in the central island had been mown, weeds show their ragged heads and flourish along the base of the Botero statue; a massive bronze bull pawing and dominating the center. Though it’s the end of May, the ground looked scarred and barren of any bloom.

I’ve just told the waiter for the second time that I will wait to order when Joe arrives, twenty minutes late. I watch him work the terrace: a kiss on the hand like a courtier of old for a woman in her mid-sixties, very *Bon Chic Bon Genre*, her Hermès foulard knotted about her throat, and her helmet of blunt-cut blonde hair not daring to move a centimeter in the breeze; a backslap and abrazo for two sleek and well-fed ministry officials; lingering kisses on each cheek and a discreet fondling of a well-rounded derriere for a thousand-Euro-an-evening working girl, all legs, skyscraper heels and swing of honey-blond hair that swirls about her as she turns to join a table of her sisters-of-the-night for *le petit déjeuner*.

Joe makes his way to my corner table. A shade under six foot, late-thirties and elegant without effort, he moves with an easy, loose-hipped stride. Faded jeans cling low on his hips, his light brown hair brushes the sky blue sweater tossed casually around his shoulders, and white teeth flash bright against tanned skin as he throws his head back in laughter at a comment from a waiter who crosses his path.

It isn’t hard to see how he’s gotten his nickname, “Joesexy.” He radiates sexual magnetism; both men and woman seem to be attracted to him in equal measure. This is a man who enjoys life, almost as a gourmand savors a fine meal, and can make the most risqué conduct seem like good old-fashioned fun. I once heard someone say that Giovanni was so persuasive, he could corrupt the Pope.

The youngest son of a wealthy, well-connected Italian family, he’d studied law at Padua University. I trust him completely and know if I finally decide it’s time to cut and run, Giovanni would

help me with connections to get out of town. Or, if I decide instead to stay here in the south of France, he'd be an invaluable resource.

"Hello, Handsome, I see you haven't lost your touch." My spirits are already lifting, now that I'm up close and personal to all his warmth and devastating male charm.

"*Anche tu*, you look like you're doing better. I was worried about you, *cara*." His gaze searches my face to confirm his first impression, before looking deeply into my eyes. Although Giovanni cultivates an air of a bon vivant, and naughtiness always simmers close to the surface, he's a man of great depths and discernment; very little gets by him.

"What would you like to drink, Maya? I need a stiff Bloody Mary."

"Uh-oh...Someone have a late night? Must have been a good party," I laugh. "*Perché no?* I'll have one, too. I always feel like I'm on holiday with you," But looking closer, I notice a slight puffiness under his hazel eyes, and he seems a shade paler under his golden tan.

As he turns to signal the waiter to take our order, I also notice a line of worry furrowing his brow, and I realize under the cheerful repartee he's coiled tight. Like the police at the checkpoint, he too seems to be scanning the faces of the pre-lunch crowd on the terrace, as though searching for someone in particular.

Something definitely seemed to be off this morning, and glancing around I see an unusual number of hard young men, some in pairs, well-dressed as though for a business meeting, seated at tables scattered throughout the café, or more casually attired, discreetly loitering in various parts of the square. There's a certain alertness in the way they hold themselves; an awareness in their cold stare that take in everything going on about them betrays their professional training. Most likely undercover operatives of the *Sûreté Publique*.

"Joe, do you know the Russians who jumped from the Mirableu last night?" I see my query startles him. He drains his glass in one

long swallow before signaling the waiter for two more. He takes a moment to collect himself before answering, and I see emotion moving in his hazel eyes—a bone-aching weariness, or maybe just regret.

"*Si cara*. I knew Sacha and his family very well." He whispers so softly, it seems like his voice comes from somewhere deep inside his pain. "He was a client of sorts, besides being my friend. And no, I wasn't with him at the Casino last night, before you ask."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Joe. I don't know what to say... nasty business with the kids. I don't understand that."

"I know you don't understand. How could you? It doesn't make sense. Sacha loved his family. He would never do anything to harm them. There's something more going on. He was doing everything to get them to safety. Sacha didn't play for high stakes, and whoever is spreading the rumor that he jumped because of massive losses at the Casino is creating a smokescreen to hide behind. I think he had something pretty explosive on someone big. They didn't go off that balcony willingly. I'd take odds on that."

Then he whispers one word, almost like a curse, "Slava," then adds, "I know he's behind Sacha's death. I'm not going to let him get away with it!" And I realize my friend Giovanni is swimming with some very big sharks.

All kinds of frightening rumors swirl about a man like Slava. The one that seems to have stuck, probably because it's based on truth, is that during the years when Slava was consolidating his power and wealth, he was Vladimir Putin's unofficial right-hand man. Slava has never held any public office or run a ministry, preferring to operate in the shadows. Yet no one would dispute that his influence reaches into the upper echelons of the Kremlin, and he's known to be ruthless in his business dealings.

A couple of summers ago, I'd been invited by an acquaintance, a Bosnian party girl named Tasha, to a fête thrown by one of the Russian oligarchs. It started off on a 150-meter-ice-breaker disguised as a floating palace, anchored in front of the owner's villa,

the Château de St. Hospice, in St. Jean Cap Ferrat. Of course, there were the ubiquitous mounds of the finest caviar from Ossetia, an unending stream of ice-cold vodka, fountains of champagne, piles of Peruvian Flake, and quite possibly some of the most stunning women on the planet.

Most scraped in just under six-foot, their long limbs and curves clad in transparent wisps of haute couture fashion, their wrists and earlobes weighed down by some very serious bling. Slavic cheekbones and smoky eyes slanting upwards spoke of Tartars and Genghis Khan in their distant family trees. They strutted around on diamante-encrusted heels or draped decoratively on the arms of the owner and his guests.

It was my first time ‘Partying with the Oligarchs’, and I couldn’t help being astonished by the ostentatious display of wealth in the décor, artwork and toys that embellished their lifestyle. By midnight, when the night sky lit up with fireworks commanded by our host, a Ukrainian industrialist named Dmitri Rosnov, the majority of his guests were well on their way to being stinking drunk.

The former Soviet Union bred exquisite young women—that I don’t dispute. I wondered if the radioactivity released by the meltdown of Chernobyl had mutated their DNA and created in the women a generation of Slavic Amazonians.

As for their male counterparts—whether it was the shape of their heads, their height and breadth, their sloping shoulders and shambling gait, the suspicious and bloodshot eyes, or the undefined doughy features—somehow or other, the radioactivity had transformed them into lumbering bears.

By 2 a.m., my first impression of an ursine confabulation was confirmed as, under the sultry summer heat, quite a few of the guests had stripped down to their briefs or their nasty bits for a Midsummer’s Eve dip in the pool and Jacuzzi on the play deck. The tufts of hair sprouting from shoulders and feathering down backsides and chests in matted pelts was evidently a badge of masculine pride. Apparently “manscaping,” or Brazilian back-waxing,

had yet to catch on in their neck of the woods. And the hairiest grizzly of them all was Slava.

I’m not sure how it happened, but at some point, Tasha and I were photographed, each perched on one of Slava’s massive thighs, crushed in a bear hug against the pelt of man-hair interspersed with tattoos of the Russian mafia, the Vorovsky Zakov, that decorated his chest, while he waved a bottle of Belvedere in each paw, drunkenly singing along to the music blaring in the background.

A few minutes afterwards, Tasha sent a copy of the photos to my iPhone and surprised me when she whispered conspiratorially, “You could get a million dollars for those photos from the tabloids in Moscow.”

“You’ve gotta be joking. Who the hell is this guy?” And from Tasha, I heard for the first time the rumors about the hard and hairy man, Slava.

Not long after, the party disintegrated into drunken mayhem. The jovial Slava of a short time before became surly and belligerent as he slammed back shots of vodka. You could see in his eyes he was just waiting for the slightest provocation to set him off.

The last I saw of him, he was in a half-circle of men on the aft deck, jabbing his finger into the chest of one of them, his face red with rage. I’d just stepped into the tender to return to shore when I heard what sounded like a bottle smashing into someone’s head and the meaty thud of fists and feet meeting flesh. No one spoke as we cast off, but a voice pleading for mercy floated after us over the water, all the way back to the dock.

The next day, I called Tasha and asked her if it was really true that the pictures could be sold for the kind of money she mentioned.

“Yes, Maya, but I won’t let you do it. This morning when I got up, I deleted the photos, and you should, too.” she confirmed.

“Come on, Tasha, you couldn’t use a half a million? Hell, I could. If he’s that big of a deal, he shouldn’t be so indiscreet—taking pictures with complete strangers—should he?” I was half-joking, not really believing in that kind of payday.

“Yes, you really could get that kind of money. But I like you. You’re my friend, and I won’t let you do it. Don’t you understand? If you sold those pictures, they would kill you. I’m dead serious.” She wasn’t messing around. I could hear the fear threading through her voice.

After that night, friendship blossomed between us. We might have been from different worlds; she’s wild and can drink me and most men under the table. Growing up in war-devastated Sarajevo would have made anyone half-crazy, but Tasha, besides being a knockout, is street-smart and as I found out, extremely loyal. Like Joe, once you became a part of her extended family, she would have your back in any dark alley.

I never deleted them. I still have those pictures from that night with Slava hidden away in a safe place at home. Tasha, dark tresses falling to her waist while she pressed a kiss to Slava’s cheek; me, a deer caught in the headlights, with a “what-the-fuck-am-I-doing-here?” expression frozen on my face. But snapshots like these wouldn’t give Joe any leverage against Slava.

Meanwhile, I know how Giovanni’s mind tracks, he’s going to get to the bottom of his friend, Sacha’s death, and extract revenge on whoever the perpetrator turns out to be. But Slava is close to being untouchable in Monaco. Giovanni will be stepping into very dangerous territory if he tries to bring Slava down. For that kind of big game hunting, he needs a rocket-propelled missile. Joe will only get one chance. If only wounded, Slava will stomp Joe as easily as an enraged bull-elephant crushing an ant.

I can’t stand the thought of losing anyone else. I cover Giovanni’s hand with my own. “You’re not thinking about doing anything stupid are you, Joe? That’s just crazy shit, if you think you can take revenge. You can’t touch Slava.”

“*Cosa sta pensando, cara?* I don’t have a death wish. However, I owe it to Sacha to investigate his death. He was my friend. I need to know what Sacha had and on who. Then, we’ll see if there’s anything I can do.”

He keeps his voice low, while scanning the terrace. I follow his gaze and in a flash of insight, I realize that those hard, young men I assumed worked for the *Sûreté Publique* of Monaco don’t really look French. They must be Slava’s henchmen!

They’ve obviously been specially trained to blend in. And it seems instructed in manscaping, because they don’t stand out by being particularly ursine in neither manner nor appearance. However, from their numbers and intimidating presence, it appears the Russian bear has found a new habitat. A power shift is taking place, Slava’s rumors seem to have basis in reality.

“Joe, these men...” I gesture to the security muscle surrounding us before adding, “They work for Slava, don’t they?”

“Yes, I’m sorry to say,” Giovanni answers with a grimace of distaste. “Every week Slava’s been bringing in more and more operatives to consolidate his power base and increase his influence.”

Currently, the French guarantees the security of Monaco’s borders, but the Prince is said to be distracted by the death threats against his family and the imminent birth of the heir. It’s been a difficult pregnancy for the Princess. She hadn’t been seen in public for months now.

The Prince is well-loved by his people, But power loves a vacuum, and it looks like Slava thinks he’s the man to fill that vacuum. It probably won’t be a coup d’état exactly; something more reminiscent of a Nazi-Vichy collaboration is in the works. Slava can supply all the security any Prince would ever need, protect his family and preserve the status quo in the Principality. He has the resources and manpower at his fingertips. He has vast sums of money at his disposal and can buy and sell the ruling House of Monaco many times over.

Slava always prefers to operate in the shadows, so Monaco could still have its beloved Prince as a figurehead. He knows how to play on weaker men’s fears; the murderous horde is at your door, but there’s safety assured in the embrace of a benevolent bear.

“Joe, I can’t believe the Prince would even be considering doing business with Slava.”

“I don’t know if he really is going to have a choice. The French are overwhelmed defending the Security Zone. The Prince needs to find allies he can trust—and quickly—if he has any hope of countering Slava’s power grab.”

“Mary Mother of God, any fool knows you never make a deal with a devil you meet at the crossroads. No matter how sweet or seductive it sounds. Once you’re in bed together, no amount of blow jobs will satisfy him; the only thing he’s interested in is your soul.” I shake my head in exasperation.

If Slava does become the power behind the throne, Monaco would become Slava’s private gulag. Who’s to say his ambition and thirst for power would stop there? I live just down the road. From Monaco he’ll cast a big shadow, and it won’t be long before he is the de facto boss of the whole Côte d’Azur. Suddenly, the hordes at the door don’t sound so bad.

Giovanni’s voice interrupts my analysis of Monaco’s political climate “You know Maya, giants do fall.” The mischievous twinkle is back in his eye.

“I know, darling, but that usually involves beanstalks or sling-shots,” I answer. I can’t help smile seeing Giovanni’s natural optimism once more resurfacing. “I take it you’re not going to leave this alone. Okay then, David, how can I help you slay Goliath?”

“No *cara*. This isn’t your fight. I can’t let you get involved. If Slava does take over, I think you should give serious thought about going to join your sister Leah. This is not going to be a safe place for someone without family, for someone all alone.”

“Joe, I can’t argue with your logic. But leaving France is a one-way ticket; there will be no coming back. Leaving aside the price for a ticket to New York from Nice, there are so many desperate people fighting to leave; it might take six months before I could get on a flight. Moreover, no one even knows if in six months

there will still be commercial flights or if America will let them land.”

“Those are all real problems, but you can’t stay! Let me think about it. I might be able to help you get back to America.”

“Yeah, but flying into a hell-hole like New York, unarmed and alone—Joe, that would be like checking into the psycho-ward, except that all the paranoids and psychopaths will be on their home turf and armed, and I won’t.” I finish my drink in one swallow as I warm to my subject.

“And arriving in New York won’t get me to safety with Leah. I still have to find a way to cross the killing fields the rest of the States has become. What I need is a friend with a G5 or a Bombardier, who could drop me off in Oregon, or at the very least open the hatch as they were flying over and let me parachute down. Or maybe there’ll be a wagon train heading west, like in the old days, that I could join?”

“Maya, it doesn’t sound like you want to leave! At least promise me you’ll think about it.” His exasperation changes to realization. “A friend with a G5 or a Bombardier! You know... you just might have given me an idea.”

“Ok, ok, I promise I’ll think seriously about it, but I can’t leave just yet. Joe, I want you to help me with something first.” Taking a deep breath, I continue: “I want you to help me find Julian.”

“Maya, are you sure? The way he left you, afterwards you were a mess. It’s taken you this long to come back. Do you even have an idea where to start, or even if Julian wants you to find him?”

“No, I don’t know the answer to any of those questions. But can’t you understand? I can’t leave without trying.”

Of course, I’m not going to tell him about Victoria the psychic and her claims about bonds of love that can’t be broken, or her prophecy that I will never know happiness until I’m back in Julian’s arms. I won’t admit to anyone my insane and romantic

delusions about soul mates, destiny and happy endings. Most of the time, I can't even admit them to myself.

"Let me think...Where was the last place you heard from him?"

"I think he's in Marseille. I just don't know with any certainty. He's somewhere out there in all that mess. His mother is in Marseille, sick, last I heard."

Of course, the old witch always played the sick card when she wanted to have her baby boy drop everything and run to her side. "That's probably where we should start looking; out there in the badlands around Marseille."

"Ok, if I do this, you have to promise me that you'll let me also start looking for a way for you to get to Leah. I'm serious. I don't think you can count on Julian. He left you, and he's not tried to contact you in months. I don't see why you won't at least move into Monaco. I can find you a place to stay. It's getting too dangerous, living in your villa in France alone."

I know not to push it any further today; at least I got him to grudgingly agree he would start the search. But living in Monaco—maybe very soon under Slava's iron fist—would be like living in a cage. I'd rather take my chances in France.

"I want you to come with me in a few of weeks to an event: on June twenty-first, there's going to be a Midsummer's Eve party given by Sheik Sakr bin Zayed from Abu Dhabi. There are some people I want you to meet. Maybe they can help you out."

"To find Julian?"

Giovanni doesn't even need to answer; the look he gives me says it all. I get it—this will be a part of the quid pro quo. He will only help me look for Julian if he knows I'm making an effort to get to safety.

It's been so long since I've put on a party dress and kicked up my heels. Though, I can't help thinking the old saying, "Nero fiddled while Rome burned," applies to Monaco. The party here is still swinging; collective denial reigns. It might be fun. So when in Rome...

"It's a deal." I stick out my hand. I know Giovanni isn't above emotional blackmail and manipulation if he thinks it's in my best interests. I also know, however it plays out, he won't let me down.