

Capova, Por Favor

Josef Novotny had been an attorney all his life – maybe even from before he was born. A natural negotiator, he'd have arranged an easier childbirth for his mother if he'd had a cell phone in the womb.

For as long as he could remember, he'd worked in his father's office, running errands, cleaning up, making photocopies. Eventually, he'd spent all school breaks there, working for a minimal wage and, at the same time, learning his father's business. Now, nearing middle age, Josef was still as satisfied working at the office as he'd been as a boy running to fetch coffee for the secretaries or delivering messages to other businesses in and around Prague. The only difference was that now he was the boss.

His law firm was devoted to only one task – managing the Capova Family Trust, one of the largest and wealthiest privately held conglomerations in the world. Created generations before by one of the early partners from whom Josef's great-grandfather had inherited the business, the trust effectively broke apart the wealth that had belonged, for all the years prior, to the Count Capova of that generation.

If the trust had not been created, Count Capova would be one of the richest people on the planet. But the trust hid this enormous wealth by dividing it among its members, while permitting the whole to be managed efficiently.

Josef was tall with round, soft cheeks, making him appear heavier than he was. His hair had been dark but was now gray where it met his flesh. He kept himself in good shape. To maintain his trim figure, he walked back and forth to his office twice each day. He played golf and tennis every week at the country club and he swam at a nearby pool. He used his car only when the weather was bad.

Josef's office was just off Prague's old town and had no name or marker on the door – nothing to identify who or what occupied the ancient, five-story building where a lone security guard admitted Josef and staff members. Anyone without an appointment was turned away.

All of his firm's resources went into managing the Capova Family Trust. Although the attorneys in the office were permitted to accept cases for family or friends, as their area of expertise allowed, the firm didn't solicit new business. Josef referred most outside requests to other firms – firms belonging to legal colleagues who returned these favors with favors of their own. His pool membership, for example, was a gift for referring a Japanese investor.

Of course, the fact that this was the firm's only business generated rumors. His friends believed he worked for the Mafia. His staff wondered who the Capovas were, or had been, as most assumed that they were all now dead and that Josef alone possessed their riches. Disregarding the maintenance expenses associated with their protected lands in the mountains, the property rents and leases, and even the natural gas reserves, one question remained unanswered: why was there no historical information about them?

There were no photographs or birth certificates on file – nothing to prove that anyone from the Capova family actually exists. The only proof lay in the firm's archives, in which are stored the signature of all previous, and the current, Count Capova.

As for the nobility of the title, it was so ancient that copies of the original documents from King Stephen's court were available only on microfilm. But it was the enormous wealth, maintained within a variety of investments in numerous world markets that kept Josef's staff so busy.

Marina Novak was Josef's primary legal assistant. An excellent lawyer, and his most trusted staff member, she was on her way to becoming the firm's first partner in almost fifty years. That she had spoken to Capova family members over the telephone was not a fact shared over the water cooler.

The other lawyers, paralegals and various administrative staff members who handled investments, leases, purchases and transfers of assets to the Orient, Europe and the United States, all assumed that there were no living Capova family members. Signed documents proved nothing except the existence of a pen and paper. People hide behind legal personas, like the Capova Family Trust, and many in the office assumed that it was Josef himself who hid behind this one.

They were all very soon to be re-educated.

This particular afternoon found Josef returning from lunch which he ate at home. His long-time chef also strove to ensure that Josef maintained his trim figure.

Josef's wife of twenty years, Rodina, passed away four years ago. A heart attack struck her down in the middle of shopping and she'd been dead for several minutes when the sales assistant found her in the dressing room.

Short and plump, Rodina had been a whirlwind of energy, maintaining Josef's house, managing his charitable interests and sitting on the boards of several of Prague's important artistic councils. Of course, when asked, she denied any knowledge of Josef's business, waving her hand in the air dismissively, "I know nothing of such things." But in actuality, she understood that Josef maintained the wealthiest trust fund in Europe and – possibly – the world.

She did not know *why* there were no people named *Capova* visiting Prague or flaunting their assets. She simply knew that Josef's job was to preserve their wealth and to protect their anonymity, as she did herself when the Capova Family Trust supported a favorite charity or built a new wing on the hospital. She was there, along with Josef, to represent the wealthy, mysteriously reclusive benefactors.

Josef deeply mourned the loss of his bright, sweet wife. But, at the age of 54, and still interested in the needs of the flesh, he'd finally decided to take matters into – or out of – hand. He had contacted a very discreet, very expensive consultant who discussed his interest in the opposite sex, or more specifically, in sex. Without any negotiating, she had matched him up with one of her *girls* – a woman in her mid-thirties named Britta.

Britta was tall and willowy, a Nordic beauty, with a low voice and blond pubic hair. She didn't remind Josef of his sweet Rodina at all, yet she satisfied the urges that all men feel and that, he reasoned, he had handled on his own long enough. His most recent encounter with Britta had been highly satisfying and he smiled in recalling it, at the same moment he buzzed at the heavy glass security door of his office building.

The security guard, surprised by the unusually pleasant expression on the face of his employer, smiled in return.

As Josef entered the main foyer, he replaced his gray tweed suit jacket, pausing for only a moment to wrestle it over his right shoulder. He adjusted his tie and stepped off the elevator on the main floor to be greeted by a cool, modern décor in soothing colors of beige and gray. The only obvious indication of the longevity of his firm was the ancient, hand-carved, wooden desks and bookcases scattered throughout the office.

The receptionist, Jana, lifted her head, hoping for a moment of Josef's extremely valuable time.

"Sir," she whispered when she'd successfully attracted his attention. "You told me that if anyone called on the old line and asked for Capova that we should never hang up on them." Her eyes pleaded for confirmation and Josef complied with a gracious nod of his graying head.

"This man says 'Capova, por favor.' I think that's Spanish. Do you want me to call Stefano?"

Josef opened his palm for the handset.

"Hello?"

"Capova, por favor."

"Si," said Josef, having now expended his knowledge of the language. Fortunately, Stefano arrived and Josef repeated, "Por favor..." Turning to Stefano he asked, "How do I say one moment, please?"

Stefano reached for the phone and Josef handed it over reluctantly.

"Hola! ¿Quién es este?"

"Malvo."

"Malvo?" Stefano repeated.

"Si. Malvo Posvic."

Stefano continued in beautifully accented Spanish and after listening to the reply he said, "This man says he is of the Andes mountains and demands to speak to a Capova." He raised his eyebrows, expecting Josef to dismiss this statement, and the caller, with an aggravated wave of his hand.

Josef did not.

Josef's face became a mask which effectively hid his concern and relief because he knew that the person on the other end of the line must be of the lost South American Capovas, now, possibly, found at last.

He stared at Stefano very seriously and said, "We need to take this call in private. Tell him to wait and nothing else. Understand?" Pointing at Jana, he said, "Move this to my office. I will pick up there and then Stefano will hang up. Do not lose this call."

Jana's heart raced in the acknowledgment that her existence depended on her ability to accomplish this one task. She said briskly, "Yes, sir."

Another secretary had paused in reception long enough to witness this exchange and Josef cast a glare her way, causing her feet to hurtle her off to her office.

Josef was listening on the speaker phone to a tirade of Spanish when Stefano entered the office. "Ask him to repeat it."

Stefano translated instantly in a quiet monotone as the voice on the phone continued its litany. "His village was burned to the ground. He does not know where they are. He has been wandering a long time. In the United States. Something about a large phone." He glanced at Josef and lifted his brows. "He wishes to speak to Count Capova. He wants to know if Lorand is still alive."

Josef spoke quietly to Stefano as though someone might overhear. "What is his exact location? Determine what that is so we can set up a meeting point. If he is near Washington, DC, I am able to send a Capova to fetch him within one day. Twenty-four hours. Or the rising and setting of one sun. Just make him understand."

Stefano was again surprised by this response. No one at the company had heard even a rumor of a corporeal Capova. To promise one within 24 hours was a wonder beyond Stefano's ability to maintain his composure. He gaped at Josef, his mouth open.

Josef, also barely able to maintain his composure, gasped in humor and relief. "Tell him," he said, urging Stefano with a small push of his hand.

Well, Josef thought, this incident won't stay secret for very long but may help dissolve some of the rumors. That they're deformed, that they're all dead and I alone own the trust – that the voices on the phone asking for Marina are criminals.

Josef knew, too, that Stefano, being single, would be in great demand over the next few weeks as he doled out this story like currency.

Josef turned to the window, ignoring the incomprehensible exchange between Stefano and this missing relative. Gazing at the sidewalk below, his eyes followed the Greek key design of the cobblestone beneath his window. A workman was repairing several holes that had appeared in its pattern. He wondered if the beauty of the cobblestones, combined with the dangers of twisting high-heeled ankles, outweighed the efficiency of poured concrete.

His thoughts once again pursued Britta's lovely form. Her ankles were quite beguiling, as were her legs, her rear ... He considered, *What would 'Dina think?* Then put the thought out of his head. He acknowledged his well-practiced ability to do that so easily, turning his thoughts from the pain of her loss, at least in relation to this one thing. Rodina was not here, he reasoned. He had to do something.

Josef had no children. He'd never been too busy to make love to his wife but she had been too busy to conceive. They'd discussed it more than once – why the children had never come – but they'd never done anything about it. "One day," she often said. But that day had never come.

A tiny bundle of energy, Rodina had maintained Josef's household and social life in perfect order – one of organization and comfort. But with no children. *Maybe that was the problem*, he mused. Children are messy. Was that the reason she'd always taken time with him in bed? Oh, she'd enjoyed it, he was sure, but perhaps she'd seen it as a duty and one she had time to fulfill because they had no children. He worried she'd felt guilty.

Had she ever initiated the sex? He tried to remember and decided that the action spoke for itself. It hadn't been important then and it wasn't now.

Josef was not the sort of person to obsess over unimportant or unreasonable worries. Nor was he a snob about things like personal wealth. He grew up in a prosperous family and continued his father's work for the Capova Family because he enjoyed it. The money he also enjoyed, but had never thought too much about it. Rodina had managed his budget and had never complained or asked for more.

Josef remembered the day he'd overheard two of his staff discussing the wealthiest woman in America. She was named "Oprah". When he'd deciphered, from their discussion, who she was and how she'd amassed her fortune, he hadn't been surprised. She was *nouveau riche* – the lovely French term for newly acquired wealth.

On the other hand, the Capova's fortune was old money, an ancient wealth from before the time of the earliest law firm. Josef stored documents signed by *Count Capova* that dated back over two hundred years.

In fact, it was one of the early Counts Capova that had divvied up the family's fortune and permanently established The Capova Family Trust. At that time, there was only one Capova family – all living in one locale in the mountains that now divide the Czech Republic's southern borders from Slovakia.

But that long-ago Count had fathered two sons – two sons who grew up and argued and fought and eventually decided to separate entirely. As a result, that Count split the trust fund, creating two branches, East and West, permanently severing investment administration, yet apportioning profits equally between them. Each branch was managed similarly and partook of the same investments.

More than twenty years ago, the West branch discontinued collecting the portion allocated to expenses and upkeep. Josef didn't know why and wasn't certain the reason had ever been documented within his firm's files. It hadn't mattered because these funds remained in trust and were continually invested, along with the funds from the East branch. Yet there the fortune sat, unclaimed.

If it were proved that this Malvo from the Andes village was, as he'd just stated, the only remaining member of the West branch, he was very, very wealthy. Wealthier than Oprah.

"A map!" Stefano hissed, distracting Josef from his ruminations.

Josef stepped through the side door of his office to find his Private Secretary, Fili. "Stefano needs a map of the United States, do you have one?"

As always, his most efficient secretary immediately pulled a fold-out map from her drawer. "Ignore the marks," she said. "I was thinking of a vacation."

Josef smiled in thanks and spread the map open on his desk. Stefano searched the eastern coastline until he found what he was looking for. He laid a finger on the paper and continued speaking.

Josef pulled his cell phone from his pocket to dial Lang. *No*, he thought, *I might need to notify the jet first*. He returned the phone to his coat and waited impatiently for Stefano to identify Malvo's location. He hoped this could be accomplished without obtaining further help – involving more of his staff. Apparently it could because Stefano was writing on Josef's desk pad.

He turned to Josef and asked, "He has agreed on a meeting place for tomorrow. Do you wish for me to keep him on the line any longer?" He passed the pad containing the location to Josef who scanned it quickly.

"Ask him if he's well. If he'll be safe until tomorrow."

Filli stuck her head in the door. Josef glanced up and shook his head. She disappeared and the door shut behind her.

Stefano said his farewell and hung up the phone. "*Si*, he'll be safe".

Josef thanked him; confident they'd done all they could. He'd have to talk to Lang – *first* to Lang. And then to Lorand.