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South Island

Max had a good laugh. Cook had his mind made up. Even though there were only five on board - fresh fish was on the menu and fresh fish it would be. Cook was busy spreading out dough for fresh biscuits and was about to fry new potatoes when Max stuck his head through the galley door. He looked up "Make yourself useful my fisherman friend. I have five trout filleted and breaded. Add the pepper and lemons and do the cooking. Where did our crew and passengers go?" Max peppered the fillets - squeezed fresh lemon juice over them and placed them one by one into an oiled frying pan, "Into town for an early dinner. How long do you cook them?" "Like you - until they're a golden brown."

Captain Potz stuck his head through the galley door, "Dinner ready? We load in an hour." Cook opened the oven door and hauled out a pan full of biscuits, "Make yourself useful. Break 'em apart and put them in a basket. Potatoes are done and our fisherman can carry the fish to the wardroom in his frying pan. I'll bring the coffee and we can dine as soon as we want to." Cook looked at the wall clock, "We're dining early - it's only four bells."

After dinner - Potz asked Max to step outside. Max lit his pipe, "What do you want from me?" "Fleming telephoned early this afternoon. He has his seaplane on the way with a special passenger. He wants you to make sure she has a good voyage. Said she doesn't want to

be bothered by the other passengers - so you're it."

"A lady? Who is she and why is he sending her?"

"Don't know why and I don't care. Her name is Natasha Noscent. The first name ought to tell you where she's from."

"A Russian - a Russian lady. Ian should have told me."

"She was just as much a surprise to him as she is to you.

All I know is she's high priority cargo."

Potz looked over the rail, "They're beginning to load."

"Do you want to watch from here or in the hold?"

"From here. How come we're loading in daylight."

"Look around - the area is clear. We'll depart early - as soon as I have Ian's passenger on board."

"What about your crew and the other passengers?"

"As soon as we button up - I'll have my Second go find them. If he can't - we'll sail without them."

Max called Ian from the pay phone on the dock, "We're loaded and ready to go. All we need is your passenger. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Found out about her after you left. Is everything okay at your end?"

"I'm concerned about Green passengers being on board with our cargo."

"Don't worry - they're good cover. The authorities will leave a Green ship alone - especially when it has passengers on board."

"What am I supposed to do with your special lady? Am I to make the initial approach?"

"No - wait until she approaches you. And Max? Make sure our Indian friends know how to operate the farm machinery."

"With those folks there's no guarantee, but rest assured I'll give it a try."

Touch down on Christchurch Harbor - to Natasha was like landing on a pile of moving bricks. Her flight from

Wellington was uneventful - except for this unscheduled landing at Christchurch for a minor engine problem. Natasha wondered why the pilot insisted she stay on the plane while he made an animated phone call from the dock. Her flight - or fight defense was rising - until the copilot whispered, "It's his bookmaker. Changing a few bets on the matches tonight."

"Matches?"

"Cricket and Rugby."

Natasha said, "Oh," but did not understand except that it was non threatening.

If the landing at Christchurch was rough - the one in Akaroa Harbor was more of a controlled crash. Max stepped outside the wardroom to see where the water sonic boom he heard was coming from and stayed to watch as Fleming's son-in-law taxied his seaplane to the warehouse platform. He was more than an interested bystander as Natasha disembarked, "Ian was right - this ones a knockout. Legs are a bit wobbly. Can't blame her. That damn son-in-law of Ian's can scare the bejesus out of the Pope."

Natasha walked to the gangplank - stopped and looked up at the ship, "*Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* - where have I heard that name before? God - what a rust bucket. Looks more like death warmed over than life after death."

Potz met her at the top of the gangplank, "Soon as you're settled in I'll sail. My Second Mate will show you to your cabin."

"I am starved. We had an unfortunate delay in Christchurch and I missed dinner."

"I'll have Cook fix you something. Stop in at our wardroom after you're settled in."

"May I have a pot of tea?"

"English breakfast."

"Yes and sausage - link sausage. We'll talk later. Is Max

on board?"

"He's the one hanging over the rail - staring at you with his mouth open."

"Have Max meet me in your wardroom," she looked at her watch, "In thirty minutes."

Natasha motioned for the Second to put her luggage down in the middle of the room, "You may leave now." She did not care for his open mouth - lapdog look. Natasha locked the door behind him and looked around, "I didn't expect this much luxury on a ship that looks - so scruffy. I need a shower and a change of clothes." She looked at her watch, "I have time." Natasha opened her suitcases and unloaded her clothes into the closet and sea chest. She took her toilet articles into the shower room - turned on the water - undressed and stepped in - turning the faucet from tepid to cold. After two or three minutes - she turned the faucet to warm and soaped down. Rinsed and refreshed - Natasha stepped out of the shower - dried her hair first and then - vigorously toweled her body. She turned her clothes over with her toe, "They must be washed. I can still smell - what is it? I know Curry smoke." She dressed and walked first to the laundry and then to the wardroom.

Max had chosen a table close to the centerline of the ship. From past experience - this was the position of least motion - even when tied at the dock. Max really needed a drink, "Cup-a tea will have to do. I must get a-hold of myself. My nervousness is beginning to show. Sailing with a ship full of Green fools must be my punishment for living too rowdy a young life."

Natasha entered the wardroom and walked directly to Max's table, "Max Lax?"

He stood up and offered his hand, but she did not take it. Natasha sat down, "Ian sent me. Is that tea?"

"English breakfast."

"Fetch me a cup and tell the cook I am ready for a platter of sausage and rolls."

"We have fresh trout."

Natasha stared at Max and he jumped to her command like a schoolboy who had fallen asleep in class.

He returned with a pot of fresh tea and a basket of warm biscuits, "Sausage will be up in a minute or two."

Natasha poured a mug full and added sugar, "What kind of sausage?"

"Only kind we have in New Zealand - mutton."

"Sheep?"

"Yes - it's not bad. You remind me of someone - an American movie star - Grace - can't remember her last name."

"Kelly and I've seen her movies. There is a resemblance, but I am Russian - not Irish-American. My name is Natasha."

Cook appeared with a plate of link mutton sausage, "Is everything satisfactory?"

"I will let you know after I finish the sausage. I will require at least one platter of sausage a day."

"I have enough on hand until we reach Fiji. I'll restock there."

He walked away - wiping his hands on his apron. Natasha speared a link with her fork - bit off an end and tasted it like a wine connoisseur sniffing the cork from a new bottle. She bit the other end - swirled the remnants in her mouth and speared another link.

Max watched - his mouth open as Natasha devoured link after link of mutton sausage - like a carnivore devouring an antelope - grease dripping from her chin. He looked away - until he heard a groan of satisfaction and a fork clank on an empty platter. Natasha wiped the grease from her chin, "Will you be leaving the ship at Fiji?"

Max was worried. He wondered, "Does Ian have another surprise for me?" He replied, "After our Indian friends complete training - I'll fly back to Wellington. I have a few loose ends that need tying up."

"I understand we have a stop planned at Norfolk Island on our way. Have you been there before?"

"Yes - it used to be an Australian prison island for hard-core criminals."

"Were you in prison there?"

"Of course not - I'm a Kiwi and Norfolk Island hasn't been a prison for years."

Max took another sip of tea, "The British moved the Bounty descendants from Pitcairn to Norfolk Island. I have a bit of business to attend too with them."

"I remember reading about them. Isn't there an inbreeding problem?"

"A little. Norfolk belongs to Australia now - they're the ones with a problem."

"Why are we stopping?"

"Don't know why. Captain Potz said we had too."

"How long will we stay?"

"A couple of days. Go ashore if you've a mind too."

"I just might."

"The old prison and the Norfolk pines are worth a trip."

Natasha knew the answer, but desired to regain control,

"Is Potz familiar with your delivery to Fiji?"

"He has responsibility to deliver and train."

"Why are you sailing along?"

"Ian ordered me to go. I'm his insurance policy. Why are you coming along?"

Max realized - too late he had spoken out of turn.

Natasha stood up, "I want to thank our Cook for preparing an excellent out of order dinner. He is a great cook. Will you share another pot of tea?"

Max had stepped in it once, but even he knew when to say,
"Yes - I would."

Natasha returned empty handed. Max stood up as she sat down, "No more tea?"

"Cook is brewing his own special blend. It will be out in a minute."

Max was curious, "Have you ever dealt with the likes of Captain Potz and his Green friends?"

"I've seen the results of Green efforts in Europe, but no - I've never been directly involved. Our Captain is a great supporter of liberal causes. I might have seen him at one of our workshops. Are you concerned about him?"

"No, but I am concerned about our Green passengers. I don't care to work with rank amateurs."

"Get used to it - Max. It's our brave new world. We're forced to travel the same communal path. Remember - our Greens are like lemmings. All we have to do is prod them in the right direction and they move the way we want them too - like Japanese tourists on vacation. It is always easier to exploit those driven by good intentions. Who contributes the most pollution?"

Max hesitated - not knowing, but answered anyway, "The Americans?"

"No - my country and China. And do the Greens hound us?"

"No - of course not. I do agree with you on one thing. Our Green friends are - as you say - rank amateurs, but controllable."

"And this group?"

"I wouldn't worry - they're whale watchers. Did you feel that? Is the ship moving?"

"Engines have turned over. We're about to get underway. Do you want to watch the Captain's deck clowns go through their departure antics? It can be a three ring circus."

Natasha rose from her chair, "I need some air. We can

continue our conversation outdoors in private - at the ships rail."

The deckies didn't disappoint Max - with three falls and one long slide into a bulkhead - *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* was underway in style. Natasha laughed, "I see what you mean."

"And that's the crew - not our Green passengers."

As the ship moved slowly out into the channel Natasha whispered, "I want your candid opinion of our Indian comrades in Fiji. My briefing at our Embassy in New Delhi was inadequate. And tell me what you know about Chief Seru Bau."

"Jaws - Diesel and Minnow?"

"I do not know them."

"Those are my nicknames for Jawa Motila - Rajiv Desaij and Krishna Minnon."

"How well do you know the man you call Minnow?"

"Not well - not well at all. Jaws and Diesel jump to his commands, but I've never been honored by his presence. I'll be up front with you. I don't care for Jaws. I think he is an ass."

"And the one you call Diesel?"

"Jaws works for him. Diesel does nothing to improve the situation - so he shares part of the blame. I don't trust these folks. They lack staying power and they don't pay attention to details."

Natasha turned away and smiled - pleased with Max's response. Composed - she turned back, "The problem stems from their religion - reincarnation. If things don't work out in this life there is always hope in the next."

"Do you still support the overthrow of Fiji's government?"

"Me? As you say - I could care less."

"How about your government?" Natasha knew the answer was no, but remained evasive - surprised at Max's insight, "We do and we don't. We will support one if it begins."

Max listened - knowing he was over his head discussing politics with a Russian and a lady at that. He was a doer - not a thinker. Natasha watched Max's face as he stood at the rail - staring at the land as they moved further out to sea. She couldn't help, but think, "It would be a waste of our resources to eliminate this hard working Kiwi. He knows nothing of the source of our water - Max is a bucket carrier. I will enjoy his company while I can. He might provide insight about this strange land and I must learn more about Fleming's habits."

She didn't mention the worry of threats of exposure from Fijian socialists, but saw no harm in confiding in Max. It would keep him disarmed. She continued, "I have specific instructions on what to do if your Fiji Indian fail again." Max knew when to back down, "My instructions are to respond to your wishes. Ian asked that I leave you alone. So - if you need me - I'm here. If not - we're strangers. You and me are riding on the same wave as far as Ian's Indian friends are concerned. They are a worthless lot." Natasha watched as this unknowing fool walked to the wheel house, "Poor Max - he'll never see New Zealand again."

Max opened the door, "Did all of your passengers return in time?"

"Every single one."

"It is to your great misfortune that two of your deck crew returned - too."

"They'll learn. If not we'll have entertainment. My Second will keep them away from sharp objects and ropes. What did Ian's friend have to say?"

"Not much - just sea stories and such. How long do you plan for your layover at Norfolk Island?"

"Forty-eight hours - maybe a little longer. We'll anchor out in Sydney Bay. You can go ashore if you wish."

"Might take you up on it. We have some minor loose ends I

can tie up. Why are we stopping there?"

"Our Green passengers requested it."

"You enjoy sailing close to the rocks - don't you?"

"I'll see you at breakfast. You can't complain about my ship Cook's meals."

"He's a bewdie - your Cook is."

Max turned in early, but could not sleep - tossing and turning until well past ten. Unable to sleep - Max got out of bed and showered - dressed and walked the deck - returning to his cabin shortly after midnight. And when he finally fell asleep - he dreamed again - of a giant smiling Tiger Shark with a hunger for Kiwis.

Natasha's evening platter of sausage kept her red devils away - or it may have been a talking Tiger Shark -

"Snow Shark, Listen to a Polynesian God. You may think you are chosen to eliminate Max, but you cannot and will not. Mali says he is mine in two or three days. How do I dine on Kiwi? Let me count the ways."

Natasha half awake - tossed and turned - wondering, "A shark paraphrasing Shakespeare? No it cannot be" and returned to the arms of Morpheus as her ship continued to sail to Max's destiny - Norfolk Island.

Suva - Fiji

Bobbie Jean had been away for two days, but to Johnny it seemed like a year. When Penelope and her Mother flew back to Hungary after returning from the voyage to the Yasawas - Johnny could read a moving script on Fiji's sand. Bobbie Jean - no longer threatened by another tigress - heard the call of hearth and home. Her maternal instincts surfaced,

"Are you sure it's all right with you? I'll stay on if you want me too."

"You need to be home with our boys. School starts next week."

"Are you certain Pat Penny stayed on?"

"As soon as his wife and daughter flew out - Pat returned to his catamaran. Last time I checked - *Happy Hour* was tied to the dock in Suva Harbor."

"Is he a threat to you?"

"I'm not hunting him - he's not hunting me and we're both working for Chief Bau."

"And Benny. What is it you Air Force types say?"

"Watch my six."

Johnny sat twiddling his thumbs - the computer system design he was sent to support no longer needed his assistance. Chief Bau had his men inside and outside Motila's warehouse. Until the new computer system arrived - he was a fifth wheel. He spent the morning sleeping in and the afternoon reading. Make work activity didn't rush in like atmosphere filling a vacuum, but it helped delay the onslaught of loneliness. Nightfall and a transpacific telephone touch with Bobbie Jean delayed another onslaught until morning. The Viti Levu bartender walked out on the verandah, "Colonel Ropp?"

"Yes?"

"You have a long distance telephone call."

Bobbie Jean asked, "How is whale watching?"

"Boring - if the new system doesn't come in soon - I'm flying home."

"Is our dearest friend still living aboard?"

"We are all vegetating here. Has the snow melted?"

"From the roads - not from our lawn."

"I leave for Australia in a couple of days."

"Call when you know where you're staying."

Two weeks of hotel living had turned a great vacation into the pits. Johnny began to feel like a mental patient trapped inside a claustrophobic ward. He was ready to go - anywhere. And that was to be his next trip - anywhere in Australia. A vacation in Fiji? A great place to relax - to get away from it all had worked. Johnny had transitioned from a physical state of semi hyper to one of being bored silly. A phone call interrupted his rapture of non bliss. He laid his book down and picked up the bedside phone.

Tupelo asked, "Did Chief Bau pass on my message?"
"About my visit down under? I'm still waiting for your instructions."
"Second biggest lie - they're in the electronic mail. You can pick up your message at the local Police Station. I sent it in care of Chief Bau."
"What's happening at the fort?"
"Besides baby-sitting a boondoggling Lieutenant Colonel - I barely escaped disaster here."
"Has our favorite General slipped another cog?"
"More like stripped all of his gears. He's hearing voices again."
"That's not unusual - for someone in DIA."
"It is if one hides in his bedroom closet at home and acts on their advice."

Johnny decided to insert a sharp needle, "Do you have a few voices left over in our General's empty office?"
"Touché!"
"Tell whoever's voice in charge - I'll return as soon as I complete my visit down under."
"In your dreams. Return to Fiji after your sojourn in Australia - I have work for you."
"Fiji's computer system is ready."
"It's out at your old office undergoing testing. Tell the Chief we have a present for him. We're loading data on his

part of the world to save him time. We'll provide data updates via SATCOM if he wants them."

"What happens if our data erases his?"

"That's why you get the big bucks. Work out a fix."

"Thanks a lot. How soon can we expect it?"

"By the time you return - his gear should be on the way. Oh - we have a contractor coming along to hook it up - to provide technical support. Your job is to provide training and operational support."

"Do you have the technical guy's name?"

"That's up to the contractor."

"Tell the voice in charge I'm coming home as soon as I'm finished here or in three weeks - whichever is sooner."

"Not until you finish your job." "

Which is?"

"Do the right thing."

"Where have I heard that before?"

Johnny rented a motor scooter - rode to Suva and stopped at the docks to see if Pat Penny's catamaran was still tied up. It was - clean as a whistle. If Pat Penny was under surveillance - he couldn't tell. The whole scene looked laid back - tropical. Pat was sitting at the helm caressing a mug of coffee, "Haven't seen you since Bobbie Jean flew back to Virginia."

"Pentagon ordered me to hang around until Chief Bau's new computer system is installed. Did your family arrive safely back in Hungary?"

"Without a hitch."

What he didn't say was - he was deeply worried about his daughter's mental health. So much so - he sent Penelope home before she could carry out her plan to eliminate Johnny and his wife. She was finding pleasure in what Pat considered business. His prime directive - never mix the two had been violated.

Pat continued, "Not the Viti Levu, but my Cat will do. Chief asked me to nose around and that's damn hard to do from a hotel suite."

"I know a lot of folks who would change places with you in a New Jersey minute."

"New Jersey?"

"Thirty seconds quicker than New York. I stopped by to let you know that I'm going down under tomorrow."

"Sydney?"

"Only passing through on my way to Canberra."

"Why don't you let me buy dinner tonight at your hotel."

"Is this business or pleasure."

"Both - Viti Levu has the best Chef in town. On the verandah at six?"

"If your buying."

"Dinner is on me - you pay for drinks."

Johnny rode his scooter along the dock to the bay side of Motila's warehouse, "Empty of life - nothing unusual going on here." He rode around on the side street and stopped in front of the tea house across the street, "Guards inside the perimeter - patrolling inside the fence. Same number as last time. He looked up and down the street, "No one is watching. Hope Chief Bau knows what he is doing."

Johnny saw the glint. Looked like it flashed off the glass of a pair of binoculars, "Motila isn't letting the grass grow - I'm being watched." He rode on to the police station thinking, "If I wasn't under surveillance before - I am now."

Lieutenant Matuku looked up from his desk, "Any word on when our data automation system will arrive?"

"Should be here in a week. It's undergoing integration and testing at the Paddock in Virginia. We're giving you a bonus. CIA is loading data for your area. They'll provide

updates - if you so desire."

"I appreciate your people loading data."

"Even though it may be out of date?"

"It will give us a base line to start from. Even on Fiji - data loading is not a popular sport. But for now - we'll take a rain check on CIA updates. I don't want their data to erase mine."

"I told my contact the same thing. He told me to fix it. If you store it in parallel with yours and manually input what you need - it can be done. Don't let it come in on automatic. Better to hand massage it in."

Matuku smiled, "Like talking about caging a tiger before seeing its size. Tell you what - we'll run a test and see if it works. Then we'll decide. Do we still get CIA's promised technical support?"

"They're sending a contractor along with the system. I'll provide training and operational support. Where do you want your terminals?"

"At our desks. We'll need ship locations."

"Noncombatants only."

"We will appreciate any data on merchant ships sailing in our area - or enroute to our ports."

Johnny nodded and turned to leave. Lieutenant Matuku stopped him with, "When you get to Australia - say hello to Wing Commander Stubbington for me. He helped train most of my men. We have a high regard for Stubbs."

"Stubbs and I go back a few years too. Good troop. How did you know I was going to Australia?"

"I have your instructions on my desk."

He handed the message from Tupelo to Johnny -

For Lieutenant Colonel Ropp

Releasable to Fiji Constabulary

Air Force Ops requests that you travel to Canberra and discuss joint air training ranges with RAAF. See if a joint low level bombing - electronic warfare range is feasible. Bring back their thoughts. No commitments. Travel is funded by Ops. They request that you be frugal.

Tupelo

Johnny handed the message back to Matuku, "I'll leave in the morning. Shouldn't take long. I'll hurry back in time to help with your installation."

"I met your wife. You're in a hurry to return home."

"You broke the code. Will you let the Chief know?"

"He booked a seat for you on Quantas."

"Can I use your secure phone? I have to ring up Ching-Chang in Hawaii."

"It's in my outer office."

Johnny asked, "Is Ching-Chang in?"

"No - he's out of pocket. At an off-site at Kuilima Resort with his Secretary."

"When will he be back?"

"Two or three days. Sooner if his wife catches him."

"Sorry I called. Who is this?"

"Kalani - I'm wearing my consultant hat while Ching-Chang is out screwing around. I got your list of names. They're all bad guys. I sent the details out yesterday. Chief Bau should have them in a couple of days. I hear your going to Australia. Give my regards to Wing Commander Stubbington."

"He gets around."

"He was assigned to the Joint Staff at Camp Smith. Good troop. Almost forgot - give my regards to Squadron Leader Glider Glasgow - too."

"I've worked with them both. They're at the top of my list. Where are they stationed?"

"Last time I talked with them they were at RAAF Richmond."

did. We have not seen him since. Why do you ask?"

"Kalani believes it's their Hawaiian Shark God."

"Has fishing suffered in Hawaii?"

"No one is catching fish."

"Kalani is right."

"He said we're in for rough sailing."

Pat Penny walked out on the Viti Levu verandah - quickly - head down like a man on a mission - boring in on Johnny, "Sorry I'm late. Had to catch a taxi. Not many around my part of the docks. They hang around the airport and hotels."

"That's where the fish are. What'll you have?"

"A vodka martini - shaken - not stirred with five small onions in it. What kind of beer is that?"

"Brass Monkey."

"Never heard of it."

"East coast of Australia. Freemantle Aussies know their way around a brewery. When will you be leaving?"

"Not until Chief Bau says he no longer needs me."

"What are you doing for him?"

"Has me wandering the docks - looking for scuttlebutt. Have you heard anything from Hawaii?"

"Are you still worried bout your disappearance?"

"Yes."

"You can stop worrying. You've been declared dead. No one is looking for you. Biggest problem is fishing on Oahu. Its gone south with their Shark God. Kalani claims you stole him away."

"My friendly Tiger? A genuine monster - that one is. He's hanging around Norfolk Island, but don't ask me how I know. You don't want to hear about my nightmares."

The waiter brought Pat's martini and another Brass Monkey for Johnny, "Will you be dining out here?"

Pat nodded, "Yes. We'll eat dinner on the verandah."

Johnny filled his glass, "Is your wife staying in Hungary?"

"Not right away. She's flying back to our cottage on the Ogeechee. Putting it up for sale and shipping our furniture to storage. Had to get legal papers to declare me dead."

Johnny wondered, "How about your trawler?"

"Still docked in Annapolis. Patricia is having it moved to the Mount Vernon Yacht Club. We'll live aboard when we visit the States."

"Moving out of Georgia for good?"

"My best friends are dead at the hands of Russian assassins. Those bastards might come looking for me - so it's Hungary - or my boat."

"Kalani asked me if I knew about the disappearance of half-a dozen Fiji socialists. I told him I haven't heard a thing at the Police Station."

"Did you ask Chief Bau?"

"No - I just found out. Do you know anything about it?"

"Kalani must be drinking too much home made okolehao."

"Okolehao? Okole means rear end and hao is tin or steel."

"Hawaiians have a way with words. Hammered on your ass by moonshine made from Ti roots."

"You didn't respond to my question. What do you know about Fiji's disappearing six?"

"I don't have the foggiest where they are."

"Don't ask?"

"Don't tell. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat a shark. Missed lunch."

Pat signaled to their waiter, "Menus? We're ready to order."

Their waiter smiled, "Right away."

Johnny asked, "Have you discovered any scuttlebutt that might interest me?"

"I've nosed around the docks asking about Kiwis. Only one anyone knows is a fellow by the name of Max Lax. I checked him out. He works for a major construction company out of

Wellington New Zealand owned by another Kiwi - Ian Fleming." Johnny began to smile, "First the vodka martini and now the author. Are we playing a game called Spies-Are-Us?"

"That's his real name. There's no connection to the Bond books."

"What's the significance of your Kiwis?"

"Ian Fleming is in tight with Fiji's Indian socialists. He pours a lot of cement and asphalt in the South Pacific."

"Is he an honest businessman?"

"If he ran a butcher shop both thumbs would be on the scale. The current Fiji government had to redo every bit of the work he did here. Asphalt was bonded with sand as a filler. If the cement specs called for three inches - he poured two. Fleming's company has so many false fronts and names - it's almost impossible to nail him down. Chief's Uncle - the Prime Minister sent them packing when he took control. It's almost a lead pipe cinch that Fleming is the one behind the weapons Chief Bau confiscated."

"Are they on to you?"

"They're too busy trying to locate six missing middle men."

"Be careful - they don't play by our rules."

Pat smiled - thinking, "Neither do I and that's what is catching them off guard." He mentioned, "Max Lax has been in town. Idiot was driving a Morgan. Stuck out like a whore in church."

"So he's the one. Saw the Morgan. I'd love to have one of those."

Their waiter arrived with soup and salad.

Pat set his fork down, "Not a bad salad. When is your computer system supposed to arrive?"

"Within a week. It's the same as the ones we installed in our detachments."

"The one supposed to create a paper-less environment."

"I know what you're driving at. We almost eliminated bond paper for typewriters, but we doubled our use of computer

paper. Did you ever use one of the terminals in Munich?"

"Never - I lost my position and retired before those damn things took over. I've used several in Hungary - at the restaurant and at the Villa. Damn things can retrieve all right, but someone has to dumb-finger information into them."

"It will help the Chief's people correlate data on the bad guys. A simple match can save a lot of time."

As their waiter brought in the main course - Pat asked, "What did you order?"

"Roast pork with Fiji's famous pepper plant sauce. And you?"

"I have a craving for the Chef's link sausage."

Johnny put his fork down and pushed his chair back, "Don't think I can eat any more. What plans do you have for your catamaran?"

"Haven't given it a thought. Got her on the cheap at a fire sale in Honolulu. Shouldn't lose much if I sell her here."

They remained silent as their waiter poured coffee. After he left Pat continued, "I'm living rent free at the dock. I would just as soon live on board for now. I'm in the middle of Suva and connected - doesn't get any better. Folks around Suva's docks are pleasant and friendly - easy to talk to. We watch out for each other. Might even move here after this is over. How about you? Are you about ready to hang it up?"

"Didn't know it showed. Don't tell Benny - I'll be gone by spring."

"He's grooming you for better things."

"Cold war is over and so are Cold War warriors. Hard to tell who the enemy is today. Small countries know we won't nuke them - so they keep twisting our tail."

"You're certain you don't want to be the tail?"

"Roger that. Time for me to hit the sack. I have an early flight out of here."

"Give me a call when you get back in town. Things are beginning to boil. We may be out of here sooner than you

think."

"For it's Tommy this an Tommy that?"

"An' chuck 'im out - the brute."

Outback - Australia

Johnny was out of bed and into the shower on the third ring of his wake-up call. After a quick shower and shave he packed his suitcase - for what he hoped would be a five day trip to Canberra. "I'm late" He dressed and walked quickly to the lobby, "No time for breakfast. I hope Aussies can cook."

His taxi was waiting at the hotel entrance, "Running late. Can you get me to the airport in time?"
"No problem - Governor. I'll call ahead. Which airline?"
"Quantas to Sydney. Chief Bau made reservations."
"They won't close the door until you're aboard."

Johnny ran across the tarmac and climbed on board. The stewardess closed the door with a smile, "G'day Love. So you're our VIP. Looks like you're shooting through this morning. No worries - we're only a few Roo hops from Sydney. Would you care for a cup-a coffee or tea?"
"Coffee - are you serving breakfast?"
"You'll find a menu with a giant Roo on the cover inside the pouch on your seat back. Buckle in. I'll take your order when I bring your coffee. Our tucker is fair dinkum."

Johnny buckled in with a grin - thinking of an Irish author's comments about America - two peoples separated by a common language, "He missed Australia. However - if George Bernard Shaw understood Irish Celtic - he'd understand this strange language called Strine." He looked over the menu,
"This is new - I have a choice."
The stewardess brought his coffee, "I'll take your order."
"Can I mix and match?"

The stewardess stopped on her way back up the aisle to ask, "How do you like our eggs?"

"Taste like you're Chef mixed in a little bit of everything, but Roo."

"Too right. Aussie swagmen mix whatever they have on hand and fry it in a pan over an open fire."

"Next to their billy-boil?"

"Don't come the raw prawn with me. You speak Strine."

"Not really - I only know the words to Waltzing Matilda."

She smiled, "Too right. You look like you need a magazine."

"Before you leave what's a swagman and a coolibah tree?"

"You really don't know Strine. He's a tramp under the shade of a eucalyptus tree." She handed Johnny a copy of the London Economist, "After a vacation in Fiji - this will bring you back into the real world."

Johnny read awhile and then folded the magazine on his lap, "Something about riding in an airplane that makes me want to close my eyes." He opened his eyes as the pilot extended airplane speed brakes marking the beginning of a gradual turning descent into Sidney's Airport.

Johnny thanked the stewardess for her attention - walked to the waiting room pay telephone and dialed the Intelligence Section at Richmond RAAF. The Intelligence Watch Officer answered with British Commonwealth correctness and courtesy, "Wing Commander Stubbington and Squadron Leader Glasgow? I'm sorry - they're no longer stationed here."

"I'm on my way to your Defence Headquarters in Canberra. Will they know where they're stationed?"

"Yes - that's their new assignment. Can I pass along your name?"

"Tell Stubbs - Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Ropp will be in late this afternoon. I'll ring him up - tomorrow."

"Will do - Sir. Are you flying - or driving?"

"Driving."

"You won't get in until late. I'll let Stubbs and Glider know you're on the way."

Johnny walked to the main terminal and checked in at the rental car counter. The promised two door sedan was waiting. He asked, "What's that metal guard across the front?"

"A Roo guard. They have a tendency to bounce off our bonnets when we least expect them."

He studied the map of Sydney - before driving out the gate. The attendant had assured him, "You'll have no trouble making it to Canberra before the restaurants close. Watch out for Roos."

The airplane bangers were still weighing heavily on top of Johnny's stomach. It would be tea time before hunger struck again. Sydney - like most major metropolitan cities would not be easy to leave. A short distance from his location on Princes Highway - he turned west on Canterbury. After that it got tricky. Canterbury had three names - including Milpera and Newbridge. Johnny smiled to himself, "123 in McLean all over again. First it's Chain Bridge - then Dolly Madison - then Maple Avenue - Chain Bridge again and finally Ox Road. Tucker Tubbs couldn't find Texas and will never find his way around Virginia. And I won't find my way out of Sydney if I don't keep my mind on where I'm going."

When Newbridge changed names to Hume Highway - Johnny knew he was on the outskirts of Sydney and at the beginning of the Outback. The next major town was Goulburn. The drive was uneventful - except for an occasional bounding marsupial. Johnny's mind wandered, "Wonder why I'm out here? Fiji certainly doesn't need me. Chief Bau is doing fine on his own. Fiji's socialists don't stand a chance with him at the helm. The new data automation system? More bells - whistles and smoke for Fiji. I hope Lieutenant Matuku uses our hierarchical algorithms for his indications and warning thresholds. He has all the data he needs to make it work."

General Fallon never did understand. When we attempted to explain it to him - he wouldn't listen. Instead he asked for red - yellow and green lights. Red for war and green for peace. Wish it was that simple, but it's only an analyst's tool - to warn - tell them to sit up - take notice and dig deeper. Whoops - I almost missed the road sign with the distance to Goulburn. Now I have to convert meters to miles. At least another hour. Need to stop for a cup of coffee and stretch. Driving west into this afternoon sun is something else. Talk about crystal clear skies."

"I must be operating on two separate mental levels. Haven't paid a bit of attention to where I'm going. Now that's a mystery worth solving. How we're able to keep a car on the road when our mind is wandering all over creation. Well - I'm not concerned with Chief Bau's ability to quell an insurrection. It won't happen on his watch. He has the men - the equipment and the will. That's all anyone needs. If the Royal Fijian Military is anywhere near as well organized and lead - Fiji's socialists won't stand a chance. Wonder what happened to the gang of six? Lieutenant Matuku didn't say a word. And there's nothing in the local newspaper. How did Kalani know? And Pat Penny didn't deny his involvement - just brushed me off. There's no doubt in my mind. Bet he and Penelope had a field day, but when? Had to be on their Christmas voyage. Why hasn't a body washed up or a grave been found? They're experts at their job. Why am I out here? No reason - unless it's another one of Benny's little tests."

As the sun dropped lower on the horizon and the heat grew in intensity - sun glasses helped. But not much - the sun's reflection off the hood was still blinding. Johnny followed the road signs into Goulburn. He stopped for petrol - coffee and a chat. Goulburn looked a lot like the villages of western Nebraska. Johnny felt like he was in a time warp.

Returning to a small midwestern town in America - circa 1938. He breathed in the hot - smog free air, "Healthy - everyone must live to be ninety here."

The Aussie rest stop attendant laughed, "We just look that way - livin' out here is one hot sun bake."

"Might be true, but you folks are the friendliest people I've met outside of Nebraska."

"Where is Nebraska?"

"North of Kansas."

"Wizard Yank - got to be apple if they're living just north of Oz."

Johnny asked, "How much time is it to get to Canberra?"

"If you shoot through - you'll be there before the Pubs close."

On the other side of Goulburn - the highway changed names again - to Federal Highway. Johnny drove and drove and drove through brown scenery on a highway - reminiscent of Arizona Highways - with heat rising in waves above the asphalt. He remembered, "What were those comments written on a menu of that restaurant with the same name as the country I'm driving through? Went something like:"

"Blazing through the Outback - beyond 'the black stump - as they call it - a real sun bake. On the way to Canberra - saw two great gray Roos - one a real boomer - three wallabies and a dingo. All trying to catch a ride into town."

Johnny saw a Roo or two and his fair share of wallabies, but not one dingo dog. And he could see almost forever, "A lot like New Mexico - wide open with many shades of brown and damn little green except for the scrub.

Johnny tuned his mind to business, "Vacation is over. RAAF Electronic Warfare simulators? Wonder if the RAAF has

any and if they do - are they like ours?" He switched gears - searching his memory banks, "Electronic Warfare simulators aren't that complicated. And the only ones I have to scout out are the ones used for live operations - when planes fly with active or passive EW gear. Makes sense - when an aircraft flies a missile - gunnery or bombing range mission if it tests its radar detection gear and its jamming systems. Pilots wouldn't slight a defensive advantage to save time and money - or would they? Fighter bombers carried their EW systems below the wings in bolt on pods. If the designer took EW into consideration - a smart mount would be internal - so aircraft performance wouldn't be degraded. If I recall my B-52 days - we had radar simulators at our bomb plots. Fairly simple signal generators in those days. Has to be a lot more complicated today. If our Pacific Rim forces are going to use a joint range - we'd have to generate more complex wave forms. Still have to simulate radar pulses - continuous wave CW - amplitude modulation AM - frequency modulation - FM and more complex signals - like pulse Doppler - frequency agile - PRI agile - chirp and phase modulated signals. Not an easy task when we have to simulate antenna scans and patterns - such as circular - raster - conical - or electronic."

Johnny finished his carryout cup of coffee, "Glad I'm not in that business. Hardware is too hard to get right. That's why missiles have such a high failure rate. At least EW simulators are needed for only one simple requirement - to duplicate a threat system. One that's attempting to find us so they can shoot us down. Maybe I'm not thinking right. It's not that simple. To do the complete job - a simulator has to generate signals at wartime density - simultaneous multiple threats."

Johnny sat straight up - a big gray bomber Roo hopped in front of his car - just missing his Roo guard. He breathed

easy, "Two simulators come to mind. I must be losing it if I can remember nomenclature like the AN/MPQ-T3A - multiple triple A threat simulator at the Eglin test range in Florida. And who could ever forget MUTES - the AN/MSTT1A multiple threat emitter system SAC used to test its bomber EW systems. Now that it's Air Combat Command - is it still around? What Ops has in mind may be something I've never heard of. Or on the drawing board. Or gone the way of the EW Aggressor Squadron. The one John Corder set up. Hope light the fires - kick the tires - fighter pilot mentality hasn't taken over again. Better make a mental note to wander down to the land of the Purple Water fountain and find out what gear they're using - if any."

Johnny put his mind back to driving, "Sun is setting. Canberra will probably look like Dallas on the horizon. Damn - forgot about the Surface to Air - SAM fire control emulator and the AN/MSQ-T43 modular threat emitter. How in the world can I remember all of this technical jargon and forget names?"

Johnny breathed a sigh, "Canberra's lights are up ahead. Looks like a lit up camel in the desert." He drove to the outskirts - stopping at a petrol station for gas and directions. The attendant answered, "Capitol Park Royal? Good hotel - Mate. It's on Nourthbourne Avenue Braddon. Follow your nose to the tallest buildings downtown. Not many Yanks drive over from Sydney. Meet any Roos?" "One almost got me outside of Goulburn." "Not bright around cars. Our Roos show no fear. Was he a boomer?" "He was a big one all right."

The Park Royal was right where the attendant said it would be. Johnny checked in, "When do you serve dinner?" "Tucker's in an hour. Our Pub's apple if you're not looking

for something fancy."

Johnny checked his watch, "Too late to call my contact at your Defence Headquarters?"

"Right you are - Mate. We're not at war."

Johnny took the elevator to his room - unpacked his suitcase and hung up his clothes. He showered - set his alarm clock and hopped into bed, "An hour nap and I'll be ready to have a go at it again."

The Desk Clerk was right about the hotel PUB. It was filled with a rowdy bar crowd watching an Australian Rules football game on the telly. Australian Rules is an exotic mixture of Soccer - Rugby and Demolition Derby with bodies instead of wrecks - played without helmets - or pads. Rugged - more than a few teeth would be missing on both sides by the time this match would be decided. Johnny ordered Fish & Chips and a pint of Dominion Bitters to wash it down.

One taste of the fish and Johnny gave it four Roos up. It was hard to leave his new found companions. It turned out to be great fun just watching and listening in. He turned down an offer to play darts with, "I don't think your Publican wants any more holes in his walls. I'll buy a round if you'll just let me watch." Johnny finished a third pint and returned to his room. He new his limit and he had passed it. He looked at the phone, "Better call Bobbie Jean and let her know where I am or I'll be in hot water."

After last night's Fish & Chips at the Pub - Johnny was greeted this morning with a queasy stomach. Two aspirins later - he discovered that Wizard Yank was a complement. After a breakfast of Outback eggs - bangers and tomato juice - he was ready to drive to Defence Headquarters - where he was greeted at the door by none other than - Wing Commander Stubbington, "Lieutenant Matuku said you were on the way." "Its been a long time - Stubbs. Where's Glider?"

"Back in Jolly Ol' attending RAF Staff College. If you're ready - I have a meeting set up with my Staff."

"Hope it's a small audience."

"You don't know how few people we have in EW. We can all sit around a small card table. Only time our pilots think about electronics is when they wonder if the ice box light stays on when the door is closed."

When Johnny quit laughing - he added, "Got a whole list of folks who send their regards. Kalani and Matuku for starters and a whole slew of guys back at the Pentagon. You get around."

"My wife says the same thing."

"Have a bit of data to dump, but it won't take long. Ops asked me to do a preliminary. Won't trust me with sharp objects - or money."

"If you're looking into what we have - it won't take thirty minutes. We've given up on live EW testing."

After a lot of give and take they came to preliminary agreement before noon. Stubbs was not happy, "Our current operational training tests every system - except EW. We need all the help you can give us."

"What's the problem?"

"Money - bloody money. My gear is the last on and the first off."

"Until airplanes get shot out of the sky."

"By then - it's too late. How would you like to take a trip with me to our Electronics Research Laboratory?"

"Where and when?"

"Near Adelaide. We can fly out in an hour."

"Where is Adelaide?"

"It's a port city on our southern coast about five-hundred miles west of Melbourne. Only one problem this time of the year."

"What's that."

"Flies come in from the Outback and we're their tucker - eat you alive. I'll make arrangements for a flight over the Outback out of Laverton. Give you a bo-peep at our training areas."

"How long will we be away?"

"I've got a weeks worth of work at the Lab. You can get your bo-peep over in a day and fly back tomorrow."

Johnny looked out the back windows of Stubbs staff car as they drove to Salisbury, "Thought you said your Electronic Lab was Adelaide?"

"Close - it's in Salisbury - outside of Adelaide. We call Salisbury the gateway to Woomera - Alice Springs and Ayer's Rock. All of our favorite tourist areas. That's why almost all of our entire population lives on the coast. You'll enjoy seeing our lab. We've moved from wire wrap to microelectronics."

Johnny enjoyed the visit, but was anxious to return to Fiji - complete his work and fly home. An overnight stay at Laverton RAAF - a round-robin out over the Outback to Aussie low level flight training areas with - as Stubbs would say - a bo-peep at Woomera and Alice Springs and Johnny had seen enough, "Your Outback has a lot in common with our deserts of California and Nevada. We can fly almost anywhere out here and not disturb a soul."

"Not true - Yank. Our sheep Station folks might take exception to a buzzing or two by your airplanes. If we develop a joint training range - we'll have to negotiate with a few land owners."

Stubbs flew back to Salisbury and Johnny boarded a flight to Canberra. He looked over his notes and the packet of maps and conditions Stubbs had provided for him to take back to the Pentagon. Johnny wasn't sure if it would work, "Aussies are damned independent. It'll take the fog bound

people at our State Department to work it out and they've been known to screw up more than a peace or two. Aussies can provide a range - facilities and airspace. We'll have to come up with the gear and share the costs. My job was to see if it is doable and it is. Hope our Pentagon warriors don't screw this one up. It doesn't pay to rip off - or jerk our Aussie friends around. They're not a bunch of fools like their Kiwi neighbors. It's a refreshing change to work with rugged individualists instead of a nation full of antinuclear socialist sheep. Wonder why the Kiwis sold out. Maybe it's in their water. Well - if Australia is Oz - New Zealand is through the looking glass."

Johnny returned to his hotel before the Pub's kitchen closed down for the night. He had meat pie and beer before turning in - insuring a peaceful nights rest. He was on the road to Sydney long after daybreak - cursing himself for not flying in. He knew one thing for sure, "After I turn my data over to Ops - I'll never see this issue again. The only thing I'll be asked for is perfect Intelligence. Hope their Action Officer doesn't attempt to make a career out working this issue. And gold plating will kill it for sure. He drove into the rising sun - thinking, "My timing is all off. It's morning over - afternoon back."

Johnny called his airline - Qantas - to check on his flight before turning his rental car in. His flight had been scrubbed because of aircraft problems. He'd have to stay over until morning, "Good - I can try that hotel on the inner harbor and kick back." After checking in - his first call was to Bobbie Jean, "I'll return in less than three weeks." "Where are you now?" "At my hotel in Sydney. My flight was scrubbed due to maintenance problems." "Are you on the inner harbor? There is an excellent seafood restaurant there, but I can't remember its name."

"That's a lot of help. How long is Nanny staying on?"

"Until you return."

"Isn't that an inconvenience?"

"Not really. She has her own business here - don't you remember?"

"The restaurant in DC?"

"She has it almost straightened out and is thinking about expanding into Maryland."

Johnny's second call was to Tupelo, "I'm finished here. Does Ops want me to hand carry my report or send it in from Fiji?"

"Mail it into me."

"Do they want a verbal?"

"No."

"Suspensions confirmed. What did the Ops Colonel say?"

"Butt out. Our mutual friend wanted me to warn you about a certain Grace Kelly look alike that might be in your area."

"Is she after Three Penny?"

"No - he's no longer an item of interest - for now. And you have a special visitor arriving."

"Who?"

"Don't ask."

"Don't tell."

*"I thought it would," said the [Cheshire] Cat
and vanished again. Alice waited a little
while - half expecting to see it again, but it
did not appear and after a minute or two
she walked in the direction in which the March
Hare was said to live. "I've seen hatters before -"*

9

Norfolk Island

The *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* plowed through elongated swells - bouncing around like a child riding a hobby horse on top of the Tasmanian Sea. Natasha caught herself as she lurched upward. She braced - hanging onto both sides of her bunk - swearing in Russian, "Who's driving this rust bucket?" She sat up and looked outside through her porthole, "I can't see a thing. It's pitch black - as black as a Siberian coal miners ass at midnight." She glanced at the ship's Chelsea clock on the wall, "Five a.m. and I can't get back to sleep. Even if this garbage scow lacks stabilization - I can take a freshwater shower. If I brace myself against the wall or is it called bulkhead?"

She stepped into the shower, "One advantage to sleeping naked - among others." Natasha's hair was still damp after she towel dried it with a second towel. She combed it, "I'll let it air dry outside on deck" and dressed in dungarees and sweater.

Natasha stepped outside into a mild summer ocean breeze, "This is quite a change from Moscow's static electric dry winter air." Refreshed by the breeze - she stopped in the wardroom for a cup of tea. She poured from a pot - warming on a burner on the sideboard, "Ugh - this has been standing here too long." She added sugar and drank English Breakfast tea from her mug - etched deep with mahogany ribbon stains. She made a face after the second sip and emptied both the mug and pot. Natasha boiled water for a fresh brew.

She carried her tea to the wardroom, "Now this is a proper pot of Russian tea." She looked up and noticed two rough looking deck hands staring at her. Her eyes narrowed, "Have either one of you ever gone for a four day ocean swim in seas this rough."

They both looked quickly away - leaving her alone. She poured another mug of tea, "Now this is the Russian way." She opened the door to the galley.

Cook looked up, "Fresh bread and strawberry jam to tide you over until bangers are cooked."

"Bangers?"

"Sausage."

"I'll have a platter full." As an afterthought, "With three eggs. I'm starved. It must be the sea air."

Natasha carried a plate of bread and jam to the wardroom and sat with the Captain. He looked up, "You're up early. Sorry about rough seas. I don't have very good stabilizers on my ship. I plan to drop anchor in Sydney Bay in a couple of hours."

She looked puzzled, "Australia?"

"They own it. Not the city. Sydney Bay off Norfolk Island. Mind if I have a mug of your tea?"

She poured, "Cook's first pot of tea this morning took the enamel off my teeth."

"It sets around too long. Most of our passengers drink coffee. Is our cabin to your liking?"

"My accommodations are suitable. Is Max up?"

"Hangin' his head over the rail. Max doesn't sail well.

He's going to pilot my whale watchers ashore on a Zodiac this morning. Care to go along?"

Natasha wanted too, but a voice inside her head said, "No."

Cook carried s breakfast platter of sausage and eggs to the table. Captain Potz smiled in admiration, "You are more than a day sailor."

"Won't be - if the seas stay this rough."

Under the best of conditions - anchoring out in Sydney Bay requires first rank seamanship to keep a ship off the rocks. Captain Potz was at the helm - taking no chances. Natasha - warmed by her enormous breakfast and a brisk walk around the deck - poured a fresh mug of tea to carry to the rail. She stood amidships - the prime location to counter pitch and roll. Braced against the rail she watched as Captain Potz brought *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* to anchor. She had hoped for a thunderous tropical dawn, but was greeted by low gray morning clouds - from horizon to horizon. The ship slowed as it approached a speck under the forefinger of God. Norfolk Island - a spit of land on the horizon - gradually growing into an island - barely visible through the morning mist.

Natasha closed her eyes - trying to remember - the scene unfolding in front of her was reminiscent of ... She opened her eyes, "Now I remember. I was on a fishing boat - sailing out of Komandorsky on the Bearing Sea to the Semichi Islands. It was a cold summer day then - too. I was on a training mission for The Central Committee and a collection mission for KGB. A monotonous sail for most, but not for me. I wrapped my bare skin in the cool fog filled days and nights like a Czarina wraps herself in furs." She smiled in satisfaction, "And the fishing boat Captain - he was my first - overboard at midnight - right after our embrace - his throat cut - unable to scream for help." Natasha had goose pimples - her memory caressing the thrill of the kill.

Just below the surface of Sydney Harbor - looking up at the rail was a friendly competitor,

"So this is the famous Snow Shark. I wonder if she sees me? Quite a beauty. She reminds me of a famous actress. The one I saw on the screen - against the bulkhead of the Helo Pad - on that Destroyer outside Pearl

Harbor. Cary Grant and ? No matter. Where is Max? I have not eaten in - how many days? Three - four - it feels like more - in anticipation. And I skipped a feeding frenzy. An ono Japanese fisherman. He dined on sushi soaked in soya. I hope my attack is clean and quick. Max deserves it. I have grown to like him - but orders are to be followed. They have Zodiacs! I'll be damned if I'll bust my teeth on one of those. A Dolphin attack - bump and run and then I'll organize a feeding frenzy."

Natasha held onto the rail - looking down at the giant Tiger Shark, "You are a big one my friend. Are you the one who visits me in my dreams?"

A deck hand walked up, "Excuse me Ma'am. Captain sent me. Wanted to warn you to hold on tight to the rail. We'll be in rough seas for awhile. Did you see the dorsal fins?"

"Why yes - thank you. What type of shark do you have in these waters?"

"Mostly Tigers - Ma'am and on occasion a Great White."

"I noticed a large shark off our port bow that looked to be eighteen feet long. I didn't know that Tigers grew that large."

"It's a Great White - Tigers don't grow that big."

Natasha stayed at the rail as the ship slowed - edging closer to Norfolk Island until the black volcanic cliffs loomed above - out of the morning mist and fog. As the *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* slowed - two dominate hills - three-hundred feet high came into view. Not mountains, but viewed from the deck of her ship - imposing.

As Captain Potz brought *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* to a full stop - Natasha turned away from the sea and looked in the direction of clanking anchor chains. She turned back toward starboard where the morning light seemed brighter.

She judged correctly, "We have anchored off the southern end of Sydney Bay. His crew has improved - no one fell overboard today." She laughed, "If one did - he wouldn't last long. I have read of this place. Now I remember - when I was a young student studying English at the Andropov Institute - I read Mitchener's novel about the South Pacific. He mentioned the sharks - too. This bay is teeming with dorsal fins. More than I can count. I've never seen this many before. Maybe - I will push one deck hand overboard - just for the sport of it - I could study how they kill their prey."

Just then Max appeared from the wardroom - full of mutton sausage - with the smile of an innocent - looking for all the world like a sacrificial lamb.

The deck crew untied and dragged a large Zodiac to the port side elevator - its outboard motor flipped up toward the sky. Max entered - his fingers wrapped around the outboard motor handle. Four of five whale watchers followed - two on each side. Captain Potz rejoined Natasha at the rail, "Sure you don't want to go ashore?"

"Haven't you noticed all of those dorsal fins?"

"They won't bother anyone in a Zodiac and I don't see any - now."

"Which one of the Green ones isn't going?"

"My laundry person."

Natasha looked out on Sydney Bay - once teeming with sharks. Now it seemed now strangely empty of life. The elevator stopped when the Zodiac floated away in the bay. Max's outboard sprang to life as he pressed the electric starter.

Max maneuvered around the ship - getting a feel of his craft - before opening the outboard up and steering toward the concrete dock. At the halfway point - Natasha saw a

giant dorsal fin - growing in size - gaining in speed - boring down on Max's Zodiac.

Captain Potz called out, "Max! Look out - to your starboard." Max could not hear above the noise of his outboard motor or see out of the side of his head. Natasha watched with professional admiration as the Tiger swam toward the Zodiac at flank speed. Just before the collision - two of the Greens rose up and screamed - to no avail. The Tiger Shark drove the point of its nose into the starboard underside of the Zodiac flipping it up into the air - perpendicular above the waves.

Five souls flew up - up - up into the air as a hundred dorsal fins converged. The giant Tiger Shark made a high speed turn - rolling on its back - leaping into the air - catching Max at his midsection in its jaws. The outboard prop - out of the water - screamed - as did Max. The outboard came to silence - without a hand on its tiller and the top half of Max continued to scream as it disappeared into a sea of red foam surrounded by dorsal fins. A feeding frenzy had begun.

Natasha rested her forearms on the rail - watching as one by one the other four passengers disappeared into a sea of red foam.

Captain Potz whistled, "In all my years at sea - I've never seen anything like this."

Natasha bubbling over with excitement was exhilarated, "A wonderful kill - quick - clean - efficient and the cleanup - as fast as any I've ever seen. That shark is a wonderful killing machine!"

Captain Potz wondered, "Did you notice? The giant Tiger didn't join the others in devouring Max."

"Not unusual. Max ate mutton sausage for breakfast. Our Tiger may not have cared for fermented mutton."

"He was pleased with his work - even did a victory roll."

Potz returned to business, "I have four letters to write to relatives and a radio call to Ian."

"Write your letters, but do not call Mr. Fleming - not right now. I will tell you when it is safe to do so." What she didn't say, but thought, "Max was a dead man anyway. One less to eliminate on this trip." She did say, "Watching this feeding frenzy has given me an appetite. I hope Cook has not run out of Italian sausage."

"He knew your wishes. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all - this is our New World."

Captain Potz answered, "Order."

"We'll meet in the wardroom after I freshen up."

Natasha walked into the wardroom greeted by the aroma of Italian sausage from the galley. She sat down across from Captain Potz. She whispered, "Why have you attached yourself to the Greens?"

"It was not my choosing. I was ordered to do so by your people - KGB. I am to be a governor on their socialist engine. My Control said - and I quote, 'Take this position or become a sleeper.' Since I wanted to sail - there was no other choice."

"Do you have specific orders?"

"Save the whales and support the Green's socialist causes, but keep them under control."

"And wait for orders?"

"Yes - what are yours?"

"We are no longer fueling the antinuclear movement."

Potz took a sip of tea and replied, "My Green friends have a life of their own. And Fleming has commercial reasons to agitate them. Their idealism - stirred up - can become irrational and difficult to control. As long as you let me sail under the Southern Cross and I'm allowed to run a little commercial enterprise now and then - I'm a happy man. With all of your oil and coal - why have you withdrawn support for

the antinuclear activity?"

"We are not opposed to it. I do not know or question. Do you have my weapons?"

"They are strapped under your bunk."

"Is that all?"

"For now. Did you retrieve your Zodiac?"

"Yes - will you need one?"

"Yes and a bicycle."

Cook carried in a platter of sausages and a loaf of hot whole grain Russian black bread to Natasha. She buttered a slice of bread and speared the top link, "If he could only make them squirm - like Max's intestines - this would be the end of a perfect day." Natasha took a bite and then another - finishing the link before refilling her mug with tea, "With food like this - I could sail with you forever."

Inside his head Potz was thinking, "Natasha is a conundrum inside an enigma. And colder than a shark's snout. She stood by the rail with that smile - full of joy as the sharks devoured four Greens and poor Max. It was almost as if she willed the sharks to finish Max. I'll miss him. Max is the only practical person I've dealt with in this God forsaken country of sheep and cowards. Why couldn't we align ourselves with the Aussies. Now there's a nation with a set of balls."

Natasha asked, "Did you say a set of balls?"

"I was thinking of the Aussies. I'd rather work with them than Kiwis."

"Help yourself to the sausage before I eat it all."

Natasha finished the last link - careful not to wallow in the grease as she wanted too, "How long do you plan to stay here?"

"My plans were for two days."

"I'm anxious to move on to Fiji. My reason for being here is in the sharks' stomachs of Sydney Bay. Give me a good reason

why we should not leave tomorrow morning."

"Norfolk Island is my cover - a diversionary tactic before I sail to Suva Bay. Both anchors are secure on the bottom and my ship is riding steady."

"Your plans have changed. We will depart tomorrow before ten in the morning. The precise time is of your choosing. I will test fire my weapons tonight."

"I must go ashore and explain our departure."

Captain Potz rode up the hillside - through the Norfolk Pines in an open jeep of World War II vintage. He stopped at his contacts island hut. He drank coffee and made small talk - as always, but with impatience. His contact finally spoke, "We are concerned. How many did you lose to the sharks?"

"Five, but we saved the Zodiac."

"I am sorry that Max Lax is dead, but there is nothing either of us can do about it."

"Will your people mention this incident to the Australians?"

"No - we have too many that are afraid to come here because of our sharks."

"None of this will go into my Captain's Log."

"We have been hosts to a giant Tiger Shark in our Bay - off and on for over a month."

"He left after the attack."

"Do you not think this is strange?"

"Yes."

"We do too, but we do not dwell on it. The omens are not right. We will not do business on this trip."

"I understand."

As Captain Potz rode down the hillside - the evening fog moved in from the ocean toward Norfolk Island. He boarded his Zodiac for the *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection*, "I'm glad we'll be leaving in the morning. This island has an aroma of funk mixed with mildew." He untied his Zodiac and steered it toward his ship - noticing, "The sharks are gone."

As the sun rose - Natasha entered the wardroom for breakfast. The aroma of Italian sausage from the galley was almost overpowering, "This trip is better than I envisioned. I have seen a competitor kill at close range and this Cook can cook!" She poured tea into an almost clean mug and sat next to the Captain, "How soon will we get underway." He looked at his watch, "In an hour."

"Have you eaten?"

"I had breakfast while my Mate made arrangements for our departure. Were the weapons to your satisfaction?"

"Yes - but I prefer to store them somewhere else."

"I'll place them in the hold - on top of a beam where they will be safe."

Cook carried in another platter of sausage and a loaf of fresh hot Russian black bread to Natasha, "Is there anything else you need?"

Natasha looked at the Captain.

He nodded, "We'll have a pot of fresh tea and I'll have a small plate of sausage."

Natasha placed her hand over his, "Make that a large platter. He will need strength for the days ahead."

Suva - Fiji

Johnny didn't expect to be greeted at the airport, but he was. Lieutenant Matuku met him on the tarmac, "Small island community - Colonel. We used our new computer system to track you as a test."

"It arrived?"

"Two days back. Your folks did a good job. All we had to do was plug it in and load our data."

"How did it tell you I was arriving on this flight?"

"Didn't - I stumbled across your name on the manifest. We run a check on arrivals - searching for revolutionaries and socialists."

"And I fit in which category?"

"The first. We have a common friend visiting us."

"Is it your installer? Tupelo said he had a surprise."

"Do you remember a Mr. Benny Barnes? He is our installer."

Johnny placed his luggage in the open trunk and turned - his mouth open, "Where is he staying?"

"Chief Bau thought you would be surprised. At your hotel - the Viti Levu. He's there now. We finished our final checkout early this morning. We worked most of the night. I have a letter for you."

Lieutenant Matuku handed Johnny an envelope and walked to the drivers side. Johnny got in on the passenger's side - opening the envelope - wondering, "Why would CIA send Benny out here? A vacation? Or is something important going down out here?" The note was short -

"Meet me at the Verandah bar at four - Lucky. We'll talk over drinks,

Benny

Lieutenant Matuku knew, but asked anyway, "Is it important?"

"Only if you want to join us for drinks this evening."

"Thank you for your kind offer, but I must decline. My wife has other plans. I hope you understand."

"I do. Mine hates surprises - too."

"Will Mr. Barnes be upset?"

"No - it's just as well. Benny turns walking the dog into a mystery. May I see your computer install?"

"Our pleasure. We are quite proud of it."

"Have you received any data on the weapons shipment?"

"Nothing positive, but we have a suspect ship."

"Is it from New Zealand?"

"Yes - a Green ship named the *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection.*"

"And you think they're running guns?"

"Yes - you couldn't find better cover in the South Pacific."

"They'll scream bloody murder if you interfere."

"Therein lies our problem."

"Can we drive past Motila's warehouse."

"Not in this car - we are close to resolving our socialist problems. Chief Bau wants to keep them complacent."

Johnny looked at the boxes and crates stacked around Lieutenant Matuku's offices, "Benny didn't do a very good job. He should have cleaned up."

"I asked him to leave the packing material until we made sure it works and we give your system our stamp of approval. And if we have to ship back parts for replacements."

"Is it running?"

"Like a charm."

"If CIA did their job when they loaded data for you back in the States - your hardware should be burnt in. But - your right - never know for sure. Do you mind if I take a test drive on your keyboard?"

"Be my guest."

"I'll test a few of our programs and we'll see."

Johnny ran through all of the programs in less than an hour, "Looks good to me. How about training?"

"Works like the internet. My men are toying with your programs."

"My job is finished. I'm out of here."

"Not so fast. Chief Bau requests that you hang around until I'm satisfied my men are ready to fly solo. You won't have to train, but you can answer questions when they come up."

"I'll stay, but from what I've seen your troops have our operating procedures down pat."

Lieutenant Matuku stopped Johnny as he walked out the door, "Chief Bau has a rental car for you and Benny parked

out back."

Johnny laughed out loud when he saw the car, "Where did Chief Bau get this relic? From rent-a-wreck?"

It was Lieutenant Matuku's turn to laugh, "He knew you and Benny would stick your noses into sticky wickets - where they don't belong - so he decided to cloak you in anonymity."

"I can drive past Motila's warehouse?"

"Any time you want too, but don't make a habit of it."

Johnny transferred his luggage from the trunk of Matuku's car into the back seat and started the engine, "Looks bad - runs great."

Lieutenant Matuku stopped him before he drove away, "I forgot to tell you. The Viti Levu Resort has requested you park this vehicle in an inconspicuous place." Lieutenant Matuku was still laughing as Johnny drove away.

Old espionage habits die hard. Johnny drove south to the warehouse district on the docks and took a short jog by Motila's warehouse. He noticed a slight increase in activity and made a mental note to discuss it with Pat Penny. He thought about driving to the docks, but decided against it, "Someone might identify this car and associate Pat with me. Lets see if this wreck can make it back to my hotel."

Johnny stopped in front of the Viti Levu and gave the keys to the Doorman, "Where do you park a junkyard classic?"

"At another hotel" was not the answer he was looking for.

"This car belongs to Chief Bau" did.

"I'll park it out of sight. Stop by my desk and I'll let you know its hiding place when you want to use it. I'll have a bellhop get your luggage." He opened the trunk, "Where is it?"

"In the back seat."

"You're luggage doesn't match the car."

"Neither does my wife

As he checked into the resort - the Desk Clerk handed him an envelope from Benny. He opened it. The note inside was the same as the one given to him by Lieutenant Matuku. Johnny walked to his bungalow, "Not only is Benny shifty and crafty and bears watching - he is thorough - or else he's lonely for my company."

Johnny tipped the bellhop and began to unpack. He laid out his clothes for the evening - which was not difficult. Loose fitting tropical clothes were appropriate attire in the tropics and a necessity on Fiji. Especially when southern hemisphere trade winds failed to bring afternoon relief from tropical heat and humidity.

Johnny called Bobbie Jean in McLean, "Looks like I'll be home sooner than expected. I've wrapped up most of my work."

"How soon?"

"Ten days or less."

"Have you run into an old friend?"

"If it's the same one - I meet him on the verandah at four."

"He called before he left here. Any message?"

"He wanted to be the one to tell you."

"Whatever it is - do you approve?"

"It's your call. I can live with your decision."

Johnny hung up after being brought up-to-date on their boys and the weather - which was typical Virginia - winter rain - wet and cold. He showered - dressed for dinner and checked his watch, "I'm running late."

Johnny stopped inside the outside bar and looked out on the verandah. Benny was sitting at a table - his back to the hotel - staring out over the ocean. Johnny ordered a Swan Premium beer from Australia and carried it to the verandah. He tapped Benny on the shoulder, "Strange place for a you to call a meeting."

Benny almost jumped out of his shoes, "I do need a vacation. Can't remember when someone snuck up on me without me hearing them like you did."

"The Koro Sea at sunset can be a mesmerizing experience."

"And our standard dress - long sleeved white shirt and tie - dark blue trousers and English leather shoes are too warm for these tropics. I see you've gone native."

"Not all the way - haven't had any long pig - yet. Loosen your regimental tie - or better yet take it off - along with your shoes and socks and you'll feel more comfortable."

Benny asked, "How was your trip to Australia?"

"Not bad. Aussies are great hosts. Met some old friends and got a job done. As usual - not appreciated by my Ops counterparts."

"Situation normal."

"All messed up. I got back early and you came in early and beat me here. How did the installation go?"

"A piece of cake. Plug it in and turn it on."

Benny signaled for a waiter, "I'll have another Bloody Mary." He looked at Johnny "and another one of those funny looking Aussie brews. Put it on his tab." Benny sighed, "Wish I'd brought along a pair of shorts. I'm cooking out here. Any air-conditioning inside?"

"You'll adjust. Trade winds strengthen as the sun goes down. Take off your shoes."

"Think I will."

Benny reminisced, "Loading the remaining software took a bit of time, but Matuku's folks were a big help."

"I'll bet. You're lucky if you didn't get your fingers caught in the keyboard."

"True, but I'm recommending your system for all of our field offices. The self contained uninterrupted power source is worth the price of admission. Need it out here and in

countries where my Company people are stationed. Quality control at the local power stations isn't an everyday thing. Smooths out the spikes and changing phases. Did you test it?"

"Ran all of the programs this afternoon. It's up and running. Our hosts should be pleased."

"I think they are, but they don't trust my Company. Won't until they're sure we didn't imbed something inside the system."

"Did you?"

"In Fiji?"

Johnny laughed, "Right - the correct answer is a question - 'what for?'"

They remained silent while their waiter delivered drinks. When he was out of hearing range - Johnny fished, "Bobbie Jean said you had a surprise for me."

"That's not why I came out here, but yes. You're no longer attached to me - you're one of us at the Directors request."

"I'm out of the Air Force?"

"Active duty like me - you'll transfer to the Reserves."

"What if I don't want it?"

"Give it a trial spin. You can leave anytime - if you change your mind."

"What did Bobbie Jean say?"

"You've got a winner in that lady. She said it's up to you."

"That wasn't much of a surprise. What did you really come out here for?"

Benny drained the rest of his drink, "To see a Russian lady."

"Natasha? Is she after Pat Penny?"

"Yes and no."

"Was that an answer?"

"Yes. A blonde lady matching her description flew out of Moscow to Sydney - by way of New Delhi and Singapore. She

was last seen boarding a Green ship in New Zealand."

"I know the ship - the *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection*."

"How did you discover her name?"

"It wasn't me. Lieutenant Matuku did - using our merchant ship program. He said it's heading for Suva and running," Johnny looked around to see if they were being monitored, "Guns."

Benny nodded in the affirmative and changed the subject, "My ass is sore. Lets take a walk along the beach - where the surf will cover our voices." He stood up and led the way - barefoot, "I hopped the MAC flight that was bringing your computer system in. Got it to land here on a flight from American Samoa to Sydney after a two hour stop in Honolulu. Not much sleep along the way."

"That's because you're a pilot. Navs don't have trouble sleeping on an airplane. We have enough surf noise. Now - what were you going to say?"

"Natasha is heading for Suva."

"Do you know why?"

"Haven't the foggiest - unless it's a wet procedure on Pat Penny."

"I don't think they know he's here."

"They might - it was part of his programming."

Johnny stuck his toes in the surf, "Chief Bau is expecting a shipment of weapons from New Zealand."

"Using a Green ship is pretty effective cover. But - I can't believe they'd waste their number one assassin on a simple weapons shipment. Our contact on Norfolk Island said they anchored out in Sydney Bay and lost five passengers to sharks."

"Natasha?"

"Death follows her around, but our man said sharks. No foul play involved. Their Zodiac was attacked by a real giant of a Tiger and capsized. Said it was quite a feeding frenzy."

"Does Chief Bau know your real purpose for being here?"

"No and neither do you."

"Don't ask?"

"Don't tell."

"If Natasha isn't coming here for Pat - can you offer up another reason?"

Natasha may be part of a cleanup effort. Might have sent her to take care of Comintern leftovers - or she may be in trouble back home."

"You're going to turn her."

"Always looking for a new insight."

Johnny's stomach clock went off, I'm hungry. Are you ready to dine?"

"On the verandah?"

"Excellent Chef here - Portuguese cooking - so don't ask for extra hot seasoning."

"I made that mistake my first night here. Damn near burned my tongue off." They ordered another round of drinks while looking over the menu.

Johnny asked, "Do you know anything about the gang of six?"

"You mean the missing Fiji socialist middle managers?"

"You know."

"Only that they're away at an off site on a visit to India."

"Pat's family returned to Hungary."

"Penelope - too?"

"Especially Penelope. Are they connected?"

"You want to know if I'm connected. Well - I'm not. I loaned Pat out to my friend - Chief Bau. And I wouldn't ask him if I were you."

"I won't. I still haven't figured out your involvement with the assassination of the JCS Chairman."

"We weren't and I wasn't."

"You didn't interfere."

"Part of our Charter. We're not allowed too - so we didn't."

"Convenient and to your advantage."

The waiter brought another round of drinks and took their order. Benny smiled, "That was quite an open ocean sail - Pat Penny made. Thought he may have, but he hasn't lost it. He's helping Chief Bau on his socialist problem. Oh - do you still have my Tabua?"

Johnny handed it back, "I have one of my own and so does Pat. Is Tupelo really a Sergeant?"

"Yes - he was and he is now."

"And he's one of yours."

"I'll give you an answer you already know. He's ours and he's under cover. He took my place in your General's office."

"Why were you there?"

"To keep you Air Force types in line. Must be the water. Pin a star on one of you and you go a little crazy."

The waiter brought their salads. Johnny asked, "Does the current General know?"

"No - he does not, but it doesn't matter. We're withdrawing Tupelo. Langley is no longer afraid of a rogue operation."

"Where is he going?"

"He'll be your boss."

"Has the Company got both oars in the water?"

"Cold War is over. We're still in search of guidance from our politicians. So - we're floundering in search of our next Intelligence mission."

"Thought it would be terrorists - that kind of thing."

"If that's the case - I'd start by looking inside our own State Department."

"Or the White House."

Benny drained his drink, "The winds of change are a-blowing and we're left hanging without a weather vane. But - when I put on this suit I took an oath not to get into policy or politics. I give my input and go on about my business."

"The cottage industry that grew up around our Foreign Policy

establishment is flapping like flounder out of water. Must be a thousand four story red brick buildings just outside the beltway shaking these days. Lots of paper pushing Foreign Policy experts will be looking for work."

"If we ever have an administration that makes its employees responsible for their own decisions all of those red brick buildings will collapse."

After their waiter left and they tasted the main course - Benny smiled, "He is an excellent cook. And you and me? We're so much in agreement we're beginning to sound like a Greek Chorus. For every decision we make today - we pay five consultants to certify what we're doing is the right thing. Which - since we are paying them - they do. Multiply each of our decisions by the cost of five man years and you have the income base for Virginia - Maryland and Washington DC."

"I've always wondered - we pay contractors and consultants to do our work when our job descriptions say were the doers."

"Inside and outside and all around the beltway lies a strange new world."

Benny asked, "Have you run across a Kiwi called Max Lax?"

"He was here awhile back. He works for Ian Fleming out of New Zealand."

"He was the one steering the Zodiac that capsized off Norfolk Island."

"He's shark bait?"

"The first one to go under during the feeding frenzy."

Pat Penny entered the outside bar and walked to the doorway leading out to the verandah. Johnny dropped his fork - waved and smiled at Benny, "We have a mutual friend. Do you mind if he joins us?"

Benny had that pained expression on his face. Like someone caught in a crossfire without a bullet proof vest. He

reluctantly stood up and called out, "Pat - Pat Penny. Why don't you join us. We're about finished with dinner and on our way to after dinner drinks."

"By your pained expression - Benny - I can tell you didn't expect to see me here."

Benny sat down, "It's my turn. I deserve a surprise or two now and then. Johnny scared me out of my wits - sneaking up on me earlier and now you. I was going to stop by your boat in the morning."

"You are getting old. I remember when no one alive could creep up on you."

Pat ordered a vodka martini - shaken - not stirred and sat down at their table.

Benny asked, "What brings you to the Viti Levu?"

"I had dinner with Johnny here the night before he left for Australia." He gave Johnny a dirty look, "You were supposed to call me when you got back."

"Matuku picked me up at the airport. Wanted to show off his new data automation system. Good news - Chief Bau loaned us a relic. Didn't want to get you identified with it and us at the docks. Might blow your cover."

"And you're with Benny?"

Benny left a message for me with Chief Bau to meet him here. I was going to stop by and see you in the morning."

"I called the Chief. He said you were here. Didn't mention Benny, but that's to be expected."

Benny asked - again, "I'll start over. What brings you to the Viti Levu?"

"I heard on the dock that a Green ship is coming in - minus five passengers. Max Lax - a Kiwi Johnny and I have been keeping track of - was dinner for Norfolk Island Sharks."

Johnny asked, "Was one of them your Tiger Shark?"

"He was the main instigator."

"Is he still around?"

"Don't ask me how I know, but he's on his way back to Hawaii at flank speed."

Benny rolled his eyes upward, "You two have been out here too long. You're beginning to believe Polynesian Myths."

Pat looked at Johnny, "Don't ask."

"Don't tell."

Benny smiled, "and don't know."

Pat stared at Benny, "Are we all square?"

"Has Chief Bau released you?"

"Not yet. Will he turn on me?"

"Never - play along. When the Green ship leaves - he'll request that we leave - too."

Pat smiled, "Just as I expected. We're his insurance policy and you're not answering my questions."

Benny looked Pat in the eye and snarled, "We'll discuss our arrangements in private."

Johnny got up, "Got to see a man about a horse. I'll be gone for ten minutes."

Benny looked at Pat, "Are you ready to retire?"

"To be honest - I'm not sure. Each time I try to kick back and drop a line in the water someone out of my past jerks it out and me back in. I have a problem."

"What is it?"

"My daughter - Penelope. She's beginning to enjoy our work."

"That's not a good sign. I'm glad you informed me. When we leave here - have her take a year off. Get her deeply involved in your Villa."

Pat sipped at his drink, "How about the Russians?"

"Don't worry about them. They think you're dead, but."

"But - what?"

"There is a Russian lady aboard the Green Ship."

"Is it the same one Johnny blocked into the Potomac?"

"It is."

"I should have eliminated that bitch on the spot."

"No - she wasn't on your list and ..."

"You're trying to turn her - aren't you?"

"This discussion is above both our pay grades. I don't know why she is coming here. We do not have a meeting."

"Are you certain that she is not after me?"

"Nothing is certain. When her ship comes in - you'll be at a safe house."

"Is she that good?"

"She's better than that."

Johnny returned with a fresh brew in his hand, "Okay to rejoin you old farts?"

Benny nodded, "Yes and Colonel?"

"I can only guess what's coming."

"We were young once - too and you - you insolent bastard will be older than dirt in the not too distant future. Remember - we're not old we're vintage - well aged - a bit slower, but still at the top of our game."

"Touché!"

Pat asked, "Mind if I order while you two fight. The Chef here is Cordon Bleu and I'm tired of my cooking. You've been dining here for weeks," he said to Johnny. "What do you recommend?"

"Lobster. I eat it every third night. Any more and I'd blow up like a balloon." It's the best I've ever had."

"I had enough of those crusty red things on our Christmas sail to the Yasawas to last a lifetime."

"The chicken is first rate."

"Think I'll have the Portuguese sausage. Keeps those hairy red devils away."

Johnny asked, "Hairy red devils?"

"Don't ask."

"And I won't tell."

Benny sipped on fifty year old cognac - his source of all knowledge and opined, "Pat - if I was the Black Widow's target - she'd arrive and be gone before me or anyone in our business knew about it."

Pat answered, "Agree - if it was me doing the job - I wouldn't arrive on a slow boat from New Zealand."

Johnny laughed, "You arrived on a slow boat from Hawaii."

"But - my target or anyone living here wouldn't know I was coming. I didn't file an itinerary. And if I did file a route - I'd disguise myself as a transpacific sailor. How many notches does she have on her belt?"

Benny answered, "We can only estimate. Our best guess is twenty-six."

"You know - I can take her out before she attacks me."

"We don't want her eliminated."

"I've got a problem. Being on the defensive is not my cup of tea."

"You may wish to visit another island when her Green ship anchors."

"Bau - I'll visit the Chief's Father on Bau. He invited me to come visit once my work was done. No one could arrive there without being noticed."

Johnny asked Pat, "Did you discover anything new while I was away?"

"More activity around Motila's warehouse and I mentioned the Green ship. I briefed Chief Bau yesterday."

Benny asked, "Did he let you know his plans?"

"He'll let the Greens transfer the Kiwi weapons to Motila's warehouse. Doesn't want to board a Green ship unless it's absolutely necessary. As soon as the weapons are secure and his Indian friends breath easy - Chief Bau will move in. My bet is - it will happen between midnight and two in the morning."

Benny nodded, "Free weapons and amunition."

"And no one will know - except the bad guys."

Benny signaled to the waiter for more Cognac, "Another beer - Johnny?"

"I'm going to switch to coffee."

Benny asked, "Did you discover anything new about Fiji's Indian problem?"

Johnny answered, "Fiji got lucky - they're fragmented by religious differences. The only glue is a common tie to socialism and their Indian homeland. Chief Bau is concerned they'll overcome their differences and present him with a unified front. Pat - what are your plans?"

"As soon as Chief Bau releases us - I'll sell my Cat and return to Hungary."

Johnny sensed he was no longer wanted - or needed, "It's been a long day. I'm going to hit the sack. You two can swap spy stories without my company."

As Johnny walked back inside the hotel bar - Benny smiled, "He stuck us with the check. Tell me more about your daughter. What tipped you off?"

"She was making plans to eliminate Johnny and his wife."

"You're right. I would be concerned about her - too. Did she have a reason?"

"A woman scorned is one hundred percent emotion and zero percent reason."

"Ropp is a married man with a family. His wife is beautiful - pleasing and has more money than you and me put together and with your money - that's a lot."

"Penelope was never turned down by anyone before. She couldn't handle it."

"You ought to arrange a marriage."

"Her Mother tried, but our girl is strong willed."

"I'm glad you told me. No matter what happens - keep her on the shelf for awhile. When she regains control - let me know. She's too valuable an asset too waste. How about a tour of your boat in the morning?"

"Nine too early?"

"See you then - I'm going to bed and work off my jet lag. My body is somewhere between here and San Francisco."

Johnny was on his second cup of coffee by the time Benny appeared for breakfast. Benny ordered and poured, "Didn't expect to see Pat Penny so early and on his terms. Did you make an appointment with Chief Bau?"

"His Secretary said he'd be in his office all day. Said to drop in - he'll see us. Do you want to come along?"

"Promised Pat I'd take a look at his Cat this morning. Can you give me a ride to the docks in our rent-a-wreck?"

"If I know you - you'll ask to be dropped off close, but not too close - so no one will see us together."

"You're beginning to learn our craft."

"Do you have plans for me after I finish here?"

"School - then an assignment."

"I thought you said Tupelo was going to be my new boss?"

"You're mine for now. Later - we'll see."

Benny stirred his coffee, This island called Bau. Can Chief Bau control access?"

"Where did you get your Tabua?"

"In Europe - from the Chief's Father. It's a long story."

"Bau is not only an island - it's a village - an extended family. No one person - or a brigade will get to Pat there." Benny gave the waiter his breakfast order.

Johnny waited until they were alone, "Will you stay on after we're done here?"

"I leave with you. You and Pat watch the Kiwis - Indians and the Green Ship. My job is the Russian lady."

"On the job training for me. Mind if I get hypothetical?"

"It's the only way you're going to learn."

"You're here to make sure Natasha doesn't eliminate Fiji's government leaders."

"You're learning. They haven't gone after anyone since JFK -

except the Pope and they botched that."

"How about the sleeper program?"

"Three Penny? Pat is the only one who escaped to execute his program and that was a mistake. They got sloppy and then they attempted to rectify a past error. Do you want to begin earning your pay and alert the Chief?"

"I'll advise him of your concern. Does he need to do anything special?"

"Tell him I recommend a guard on his key leaders as long as the Green ship is in port."

"Will do - have you talked with him?"

"Yes and his Father. You hit the sack early last night. You only gave me a partial on your view of Fiji. My Director wants a first hand report on how they're doing."

Johnny was surprised. He didn't expect to be asked his opinion. Unprepared and partially informed - he dove into to these murky waters in spite of his better judgment, "From my contact with Fiji's leaders and being out among the people - I'd say their government is pretty solid. It has the full support of the Fijians. They aren't sacrificing their heritage for a Hershy bar and a Coke. To be honest - I expected a Third World banana republic dictatorship. That tells you how little I know about Fiji and its people. From what I've seen - New Zealand is the Third World country - being run like a banana republic with a socialist dictatorship. If Fiji solves its ethnic Indian problem - they'll be the shining star of the South Pacific."

"What about the Russians?"

"Haven't seen any residual influence here. Got to see a man about a horse. I'm going to my room. Give me a call when you're ready to go to the dock."

The doorman rolled his eyes upward, "I'd prefer not to have our valet drive your wreck to our front entrance." He handed Johnny the keys, "It's parked under cover in our side

lot - by the kitchen. Place the cover on the grass beside the car. I'll have someone pick it up. When you return - park it in the same place."

Benny laughed, "It must be a piece of work." And when Johnny pulled the cover off - Benny laughed again, "It is a piece of work. Is it clean enough to sit in - or should I go back inside for a towel?"

"Clean enough. Hop in - I'll have you at the docks before the mildew smell soaks through your clothes."

Johnny stopped one street before the docks, "What do you think of Chief Bau's car?"

Benny hopped out smiling, "Looks like hell - runs great. I'll walk to Headquarters after I'm done here. Will you be there?"

"In Lieutenant Matuku's office playing with his new toy - if he'll let me."

Benny walked away - whistling - down the street toward the docks as the rent-a-relic rolled away.

Chief Bau's Secretary looked up from her desk, "He'll be with you in five minutes. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"Yes Ma'am - plain if you don't mind."

"Neat coming up."

"I notice you have one of the new computer terminals on your desk. Are you an analyst - too?"

"I will be after I input all the data I've been handed by the Chief. So far it's been a lot of extra work. When does it save me time?"

"Most systems are time consumers, but it has a great word processing function."

"One out of five isn't bad." A light lit up on her phone,

"You can go in now. The Chief is ready for you."

Chief Bau motioned for Johnny to sit down, "How was your trip to Australia."

"Wish I was younger - it would have been a lot of fun.

Stubbs sends his regards."

"A fine English type fellow - that Stubbington. Why do you want to see me?"

"Benny wanted to make sure you knew about a Russian lady arriving on board *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection*."

"Should I be concerned?"

"She's a known assassin with twenty-six kills to her credit."

"What does Mr. Barnes recommend?"

"As long as their ship is anchored in your harbor - a guard protecting your key leaders."

"Do you know her intentions?"

"No - we don't."

"Let me refill your coffee."

Chief Bau signaled to his Secretary and she arrived with a carafe. Chief Bau thanked her and turned to Johnny, "We really appreciate our new computer system." His Secretary frowned and the Chief laughed, "Well most of us do." Chief Bau stood up, "We have an excellent list of Indian socialists and a good list of brigands in our area, but we know very little about Russian assassins. I can't believe they would send someone here to destabilize our government. Is Benny taking action?"

"She is his responsibility. He recommends you protect your leaders - just in case."

"Benny has always been prudent. What are our Russians selling that could be in conflict with our Kiwi's fossil fuel plants."

"Graphite nuclear power reactors."

"Like the ones at Chernobyl in the Ukraine?"

"Crazy isn't it. Do you think she is after your socialist power structure?"

"Maybe - how about Mr. Penny? Is he a target?"

"He was, but Benny doesn't think he is now."

"Where will Mr. Penny go when the Green ship comes in?"

"He plans on accepting your Father's invitation to visit your ancestral island."

"My Father will be honored. He will never allow anything to happen to Mr. Penny on our land. It is a matter of honor to us and Pat Penny is a hero to our people."

"How so?"

"Two kegs of beer at our Christmas Meke." The Chief laughed at his own joke, "If the Russian chooses to follow him to our homeland - my people will relish the hunt."

Chief Bau sat back down - rubbing his chin with his fingers, "My first priority is their weapons. I will let the Green ship unload and leave without interference."

Johnny wondered, "You're going to let the Captain continue his activity?" Detaining a Green ship is like eating an endangered species and throwing its skin in the face of society. It is not a good idea. I will handle this matter discreetly. He will come to an understanding if he wishes to continue sailing in the South Pacific. My Prime Minister will talk to the Kiwi government after we have all of the facts. Tell Mr. Penny I will call my Father this morning. He will expect Penny's catamaran this evening. The Green ship is on its way and might late today. It's best that Mr. Penny is only a memory on Suva's docks. I would like you to stay close. I may need your services."

Johnny set his cup down, "Do you mind? I have a question about your socialists?"

"I do not know where their six middle managers are."

"Not them. I was wondering if you believed your Indians could ever return to power?"

"Only at the ballot box. If they do achieve power and do not respect our hospitality again - we'll send them packing."

"Why are they foolish enough to plan a revolution?"

"It's easier to establish a dictatorship after a revolution than after winning an election."

Benny stuck his head in the door, "Are you about finished. I'm ready to head back to the barn. Lieutenant Matuku said to get some rest. Tomorrow night could be a busy one."

Johnny looked over at the Chief.

He nodded, "Yes - stop by the docks and send Mr. Penny on his way. He needs to set sail if he plans on reaching my island before nightfall."

Johnny stood up, "Am I to contact Lieutenant Matuku for my instructions?"

"Matuku will call when you're needed." The Chief glanced at Benny, "Do you have everything you need?"

"The only item is when *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* drops anchor. I'll be at my hotel. Pat Penny has quite a boat there - even installed air conditioning. Told me to ask you if one of your relatives is in the boat selling business?"

"Tell Mr. Penny he will receive a fair price when the time comes."

Johnny parked along a side street - close, but not to close to the docks. Benny opened their rent-a-relic passenger-side door, "Stay with the car. Two will look like a throng on Suva's docks. I'll be right back."

He walked along the dock, "Hello *Happy Hour* - mind if I come on board?"

Pat stuck his head out of the cockpit, "You again? Is there a problem?"

"How soon can you set sail?"

"As soon as you get off my boat. Where am I heading?"

"Bau - you're expected. Does your air conditioner work away from the plug?"

"Only if I run her on diesel." Pat checked his watch, "I've got a few minutes. How about sharing a beer with me?"

"Only if it isn't Primo."

"Where did you here about my Primo."

"Half the dock is still suffering from cramps and nausea."

"That's not true. I brought it in cold. I restocked with Triple X."

"Is that an Aussie beer."

"You got that right. Try it."

"I'll like it?"

"Of course."

Benny popped open his can of beer, "Why are you hanging around talking to me?"

"Waiting for my house guest gift for Chief Bau's Father."

"Which is?"

"Two kegs of beer."

Benny swallowed half his can, "Not a bad brew."

"Do you really believe our Russian lady is after me?"

"If I did - you'd be halfway to Hungry."

"Then why am I sailing out of harms way?"

"Nothing in life is certain."

Pat opened two more beers, "Where's Johnny?"

"Waiting in the car - a block away from the docks."

"Should have asked him to come along."

"He needs to learn patience."

"Why won't you let me eliminate the Russian?"

"If you do - more will follow. If she isn't after you - why stir up a hornets nest?"

"And you want to turn her. Do me a favor. When she is out of here - give me a call. I want to put this boat up for sale and return to Hungary. Did you mention my offer to Chief Bau?"

"He said you will receive a fair price."

A shout from the dock let the whole world know Pat's beer had arrived. Benny climbed up the ladder, "I'll untie your lines as soon as your beer is stowed away."

"Wait - you can help me ice it down. Nothing worse than a keg of warm beer in the tropics."

The beer iced down - Benny untied the lines and said, "Think you can handle it" before remembering Pat had sailed it alone across the Pacific.

Pat gave him one of those, "Which rock have you been under looks" as his diesel sprang to life.

Johnny was standing next to their car, "Too hot to sit inside. That took more than a few minutes."

"Had to help him get underway."

"And drink a few beers."

"What are friends for?"

"Where to now?"

"Home - Johnny - home to our hotel."

Johnny drove out of Suva in silence - until they were halfway there, "Do you really believe Pat is free of his hunters?"

"No, but they are not after him now."

"If he is no longer a threat why try to eliminate him?"

"Our Russian friends are like the Mafia. As an example for their own troops. It's a lesson you have to learn and most of our Foreign Service types out of Columbia forget."

Johnny smiled, "I'm your student. Begin the first lesson."

"If you write from right to left and talk in a foreign language - you don't think or act the same way we do. So we have to look at the world through their eyes. For a starter - look at Fiji."

"You mean the ethnic problem?"

"Absolutely - the Indians arrived to work on the British plantations. They took over Fiji's commerce and when self government came - they were the government. The Brits forgot about the Fijians, but the Fijians didn't. They decided to

take their country back."

"That's the same ethnic problem as in the Balkans. The Slavs are trying to eliminate nine-hundred years of Turkish occupation - religion and influence. They weren't able to kick the Turks out until 1913."

"That conflict is continuing. It was interrupted by two world wars and a communist takeover, but the fires didn't go out - they were only banked. It can go up in smoke anytime. All it needs is a match. Meet me at the bar for lunch. We have one more item still open."

Johnny walked into the bar smiling to himself, "With Benny there is always one more item open." He found Benny outside on the verandah - far away from the other patrons. Benny motioned for him to sit down, "Want to order - or wait?"

"I'm hungry." Johnny signaled for the waiter and they both ordered link sausage sandwiches. After their waiter left - Johnny asked, "Tell me about your open item."

"Are you going to stay committed?"

"Until early spring is all I can promise."

"Good enough for me. My instructions were to look at the lay of the land before telling you your new assignment."

"Which is?"

"Europe - Bonn Germany as an assistant to the Cultural Attaché."

"Working for?"

"Our Operations Directorate. You'll be trained and briefed after you return to McLean."

"Can I tell anyone?"

"Only your wife."

The Mock Turtle went on, "We had the best of education's - in fact we went to school every day - "

"I've been to a day-school - too" said Alice. You needn't be so proud - "

10

Koro Sea

Metal scraped on metal as the bow anchor chain clanked - clanked - clanked - rolling up on a giant spool. The scraping of metal on metal stopped when the anchor fluke came to rest in a notch on the bow. *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection's* prop was engaged seconds after the stern anchor fluke cleared the last ocean swell. Natasha looked up from her place by the rail near the wheel house, "Our Captain is very anxious to sail away from Norfolk Island this morning, but so am I. The chop in Sydney Bay rocked this ship like a cork floating in a bathtub full of small children. As good a sailor as I am - bobbing on top of this ocean - on an unstabalized rust bucket is not my idea of a good time."

The ship gained speed. Unsynchronized bobbing turned to a gentle synchronized roll. Natasha stayed at the rail long after Norfolk Island disappeared into the late morning mist, but she did not see or care. Her mind was elsewhere. She had three wet procedures to complete, "It will not be easy. I will be on unfamiliar territory in a strange tropical land. The early morning hours will be my friend. Three victims will take how many hours? Three at the most - if all goes well. The best time will be between one and four a.m. Early morning hours are my best cover. Most of my time will be spent riding a bicycle between houses. If I leave the ship at midnight I will have a cushion. I will study the maps again - visualize each procedure and memorize the roads. I must remember to ask the Captain for a topography map. And I will have to test fire my weapon with the silencer attached.

Where did he put it? Now I remember - in the hold." She looked at her watch, "It's noon. Have I been out here that long? It's time for lunch and I am famished."

Natasha could not disguise her delight as she entered the wardroom, "Wonderful - the aroma of sausage links." She peeked into the galley, "Do I smell sausage?" Cook answered, "Italian - medium hot and spicy, but not Portuguese hot - with new potatoes." He handed her a platter, "I'll have tea at your table in two minutes. Are you sitting with the Captain?" "Yes and thank you." Natasha placed her platter on the table, "You - my lovelies - remind me of Max's intestines the moment after the Tiger's first bite. What a magnificent killing machine."

She sat down to a lunch that included dark Russian bread and hot English tea. Natasha speared a sausage link with her fork - raised it to her lips - caressing the near end with her tongue. She pulled it out gently - examining every inch before inserting it between her teeth and taking a nibble. She whispered to her sausage, "This is for you my dear Max Lax - or should I say Ex Max Lax. Yours was a heroic death - one for all to envy and even I envy you."

She looked up - Captain Potz was standing at her side, "Do you mind if I join you?" Natasha wiped the grease from her chin, "Of course not - we have business to discuss." He sat down as Cook brought his plate - a carbon copy of the one he served Natasha. He nibbled on a sausage link, "I am at your command. I await your orders." "It is wonderful to be at sea again." "If you are seaworthy enough to enjoy it. We'll have rough seas for the next twelve hours. She'll smooth out when we're out of the storms wake."

Natasha did not answer - so Potz asked again, "I still await your orders."

"You may continue as planned. I will need a Zodiac - a ladies lightweight bicycle and a backpack for my equipment. What time do you plan to arrive?"

"I'm adjusting my arrival time so we'll anchor out in the bay after four in the afternoon."

"How long will it take for you to off load weapons?"

"If I use all three Zodiacs - we should be done before ten in the evening."

"Good - I need a Zodiac at exactly twelve midnight - even if your weapons transfer is not complete."

"You'll have it. How soon do you want to depart?"

"As soon as I'm back on board and Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Flank speed to Wellington. Don't inform anyone of your change in plans until we are within line-of-sight radio contact with Wellington."

"Is that all you need?"

"Do you have a topography map of the Suva area?"

"Yes."

"I need it and my weapon after lunch."

"I'll deliver them to your cabin."

Captain Potz looked down at his plate of half eaten sausage and thought of Max, "I wonder if Max knew what hit him? I can still hear his scream."

Natasha answered, "The Tiger is swift and efficient. Max died a quick - painless death. The same as a guillotine."

"Does the head still think after it leaves the body?"

"No - the blood supply is gone. It's like a lack of gasoline to an engine. An engine cannot run on fumes - it would stop. I must go to my cabin. Stop by in an hour. I will be ready then." Natasha left the table.

Potz finished dining on cold sausage and potatoes. He checked his watch, "Better check our position - get the map

and visit the hold for her weapon. Wonder why she wants it now? Won't need it till Suva."

Natasha opened her cabin door, "Come in Captain. You may place the weapon on my desk. Good - I see you brought along a box of ammunition and a topography map." Potz knew better than to ask why she needed her weapon now and the map was obvious, "We're a little over two days out of Suva. I have a two hour cushion for arrival. I'll attempt to bring her in at four in the afternoon."

Natasha began to unbutton his shirt, "Lets see how well you are muscled. Now take off your undershirt." She stepped back, "Turn around. I want to see your back." She ran her fingers lightly over his back - causing a gaggle of goose bumps to appear on his skin. When he turned around - Natasha was pulling the sweater over her head and undoing the buttons on her blouse. She laid both over the chair back and turned around, "Unsnap my bra." She removed her slacks as Captain Potz fumbled like a college freshman with the snaps. She placed the bra with her blouse and slipped into her bunk. She patted the side of her mattress, "Drop your trousers and keep me warm."

"Is that an order?"

"Are you at my command."

Potz slid in beside her and waited - not knowing what he should do. Natasha - in charge - ran her fingers along his chest - playing his skin like an accordion player moves fingers across buttons - pushing one after another until the entire score was played and the audience rose to applaud. She mounted his loins and the rhythm section joined in.

Natasha rose with the morning sun creeping across the cabin floor to the edge of her bunk. She stretched her arms over her head. Potz's acrobatics the last two days brought

needed relief - some satisfaction and a welcome diversion from her task at hand. The ringing she awoke too from a restful night's sleep was not the alarm clock she held in her hands. Pressing the plunger down did not halt the bells. She picked up the phone and the ringing stopped, "Who is it?" "First Mate - Ma'am. Captain said you wanted to be up before ten and it's almost that." "Thank you. I slept in longer than expected. We sail on smooth seas. What is your latest estimate for Fiji?" "We'll drop anchor in Suva Bay by four bells this afternoon." "Tell Cook I'll have the usual" - she looked at the clock on the wall, "in twenty minutes."

Natasha walked over to the desk and picked up her weapon, "Wouldn't want to fire you over ten meters. I better pack an extra clip. Two bullets might not be enough and if I do my job right - three should be more than sufficient."

She walked into the ward room - her hair still damp from the shower. Cook was at the table with a platter of sausage and tea as she sat down. She asked, "Where are the others?" "It's ten-twenty Ma'am. They've eaten and gone." "Tell your Captain I want to speak with him." She speared a sausage link and devoured it as she had devoured the Captain the last two afternoons. In three minutes her plate was empty of sausage. Only dark Russian bread and Australian butter remained.

Captain Potz opened the wardroom door and looked in - wishing she was gone, but resigned that she was still here. He pulled out a chair and sat down, "I hope your breakfast was satisfactory."

"I have no complaints - you have an excellent Cook and his choice of sausage is faultless."

"You are fortunate that we have five fewer passengers. You and I will have more than enough sausage. It will last until

we return to Wellington."

"Would you care for some tea?"

Natasha poured - filling his mug to the brim, "I am anxious for night to come. My planning is complete."

"Is your weapon satisfactory?"

"Only under ten meters, but it will do. I would not have chosen one of Russian manufacture. Tell me about your off-loading plans."

"I will begin as soon as we arrive. The crates are marked - farm machinery. That should be cover enough. An early evening off-load will look less suspicious."

"How many hours of fuel will I have in my Zodiac?"

"Two, but I can add tanks."

"No - you do not need too - two hours will be sufficient."

"I have to provide a departure estimate to the Harbormaster."

"Is it better to leave later than earlier?"

"Yes."

"Tell him we'll anchor out for five days."

"Do you still desire to depart before daybreak tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"I promised Ian that I would provide weapons training."

"It will not be needed."

"I have to call and inform him of your decision."

"Are you still under my command?"

"Yes."

"You will not call him. I will accept no interference with my decisions."

"Shall I file a route change - from here to Wellington?"

"No."

Potz - his face red - not used to taking orders - stood up, "If you'll excuse me. I have work to do - if we are to safely transfer Ian's weapons."

As he turned to leave - Natasha stopped him, "I test fired my weapon into several pillows and a chair back. The

bullets are lodged inside the chair cushions. I want you to dispose of the evidence before we enter Fiji's territorial waters."

"Your chair and cushions will be disposed before you return to your cabin."

Potz turned and hurried outside, "When that lady decides to take charge - she takes charge. I wonder who her next victim will be? She's tore my pecker out by the roots. If I have to satisfy her sexual appetite again - I'll be pushing a rope up a hill. Doesn't look like a killer, but I suspect she is. She can be quite pleasant, but her dark side is another matter. Cold - she looks like the devils handmaiden when her eyes narrow. Is it my imagination - or do they turn from ice blue to flaming red? Well - she's a man killer alright. Where is our Russian lady sailing too after midnight. No one in Fiji will be awake." Potz stopped in his tracks - he knew.

Natasha opened the door to her cabin. Her chair and pillows had been replaced. She checked her telltales, "It is the same - nothing has been disturbed." She glanced at her Chelsea clock on the wall, "Eleven-thirty - more than twelve hours to wait. Rajiv Desaij will be the first to go. The one Max called Minnow - he will be the second to go and Jawa Motila will be last. All of our ties to this movement will be severed. And after that - two more. I will count Max - even though his Tiger did my work. Six in one mission package! I will retain my number one status - queen of the hill. No one can come close. I need exercise - to put me to sleep. The Captain? No - it is too soon." She picked up the phone and called the bridge, "Yes - send down your First Mate. I have work for him to do." She pulled the sweater over her head and turned sideways. Natasha arched her back until her nipples were covered with goose pimples. She turned - a knock. Her breathing quickened.

Suva Bay - Fiji

Natasha opened her eyes and turned over on her side - resting on her elbow, "What is it? I know - silence. The ocean is quiet." The clank - clank - clank of the anchor fluke descending woke her up, "We are here!" She glanced at the Chelsea clock on the wall, "Four p.m. - he is good. And so was his First Mate." She glanced out the porthole. The first Zodiac was being loaded - just below - on the starboard side elevator platform. Printed on each crate, 'New Zealand Farm Machinery.' "I wonder who is going to buy this ruse. Might as well add - 'Russian Weapons.' I have time for a shower. Dinner isn't until five. And I'll need sustenance, but right now I really need a shower. That First Mate was a randy one. What did his aroma remind me of? Now I remember - goat." Natasha stepped in the shower, "I need a double order of sausage."

Captain Potz shook his head, "Second is so impatient. I hope Natasha calls for him tomorrow afternoon. That'll slow him down a step or two." He signaled for his Second Mate to come up to the rail, "I know you're anxious to get moving, but look out on the bay. What do you see?"

"A fishing boat."

"And what is he doing anchored out here instead of tied up at the dock - unloading his catch?"

"Surveillance?"

"Your learning. I won't release you until he weighs anchor and moves toward shore - or after sunset."

"Whichever comes first?"

"You're ready to move up to First. Get to the galley and grab a bite. There's movement onboard the fisher. You should be able to shove off in thirty minutes."

Natasha joined the Captain at the rail, "Why is your Zodiac loaded and still here?"

"Surveillance ship on the port side."

"That fishing boat?"

"Believe it is. If it is a fisher - she'd be unloading her catch at the dock - or be out to sea. Are you hungry?"

"Famished - I have a long night's work ahead."

"And so do I. Cook should have supper ready. Join me in the wardroom."

"Lead the way. How long did it take you to load the first Zodiac?"

"Ten minutes. Crates are heavy. Too many will sink one of them."

"How many trips?"

"Between five and six per boat."

"Pour me a cup of tea. I want to look in on the Cook."

Natasha stuck her head through the galley door opening, "I hope you have sausage for me?"

"Saving this batch just for you - Ma'am. The rest of the crew will have roast beef - tough enough to make shoe leather out of."

Natasha sat down and sipped her tea, "Do you think you will have trouble at the warehouse?"

"I hope not, but with Fiji's Indians - who can tell. They lost my last shipment to the Fiji police. My job is to get the cargo safely to shore. After that it's up to Motila and his friends."

Natasha shook her head, "Fiji's socialist revolutionaries do not always think with their brains. From what I've read - they are too emotional."

Cook brought a platter of sausage and potatoes to Natasha and a beef plate to the Captain. Potz handed his plate back to the Cook, "Give this to our other passenger and cook some sausage for me. And a steak knife for her - or she'll never cut through this shoe leather."

Cook gave his Captain a smile, "And I'll sharpen a steak knife for her. She's the best laundress we've ever had. Don't want to irritate that lady."

"You're right - pound it first."

"How about me? Where can you find a sea going Cook as good as me?"

"Not in New Zealand. There are none."

Potz looked back at Natasha - her platter was half empty and grease dripped from her chin. He looked away - thinking, "So that's what a lioness looks like - dining on fresh kill." Oblivious to all around her - Natasha speared another link and the feast resumed.

With the first Zodiac away - Potz had his First Mate standing by - Zodiac fully loaded and waiting. He called down, "Wait five minutes and keep her at six knots. We'll have three Zodiacs at six minute intervals. I'll follow you in. When you return - load up and maintain a six minute interval with our Second."

Natasha walked up to the rail, "Why do they move so slowly across the bay?"

"They're under orders to maintain a slow pace. Driving a Zodiac at high speed draws too much attention."

"What's your separation?"

"Six minutes."

"Three Zodiacs at six minutes?"

"I enjoy a bit of symbolism. Keeps us old salts sane."

Natasha pointed toward the sea, "Is that a giant dorsal fin?"

"Looks like we have company. Got to be on my way or I won't maintain pace and you won't have a Zodiac at midnight."

Rolling over on its back - Natasha's competitor - the Tiger Shark displayed row after row of teeth.

Bau Island

Chief Bau's Father stood waiting at the dock. He helped his youngest grandson tie down *Happy Hour's* lines, "You made

"You're right - pound it first."

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Bau Island

Chief Bau's Father stood waiting at the dock. He helped his youngest grandson tie down *Happy Hour's* lines, "You made

it just in time for another Meke."

Pat Penny laughed, "Good - my two kegs of Aussie beer won't go to waste. What are we celebrating?"

"The return of our warrior. Four in one night and two the next - so widely separated. We are pleased to honor a - how do our Hawaiian brothers say it - an akami alihi."

"I'm far from Polynesian nobility - Chief. And I don't feel very smart. It almost wore me out."

The Chief smiled, "Old age and treachery will always win out over youth and strength. My grandsons will carry your kegs." He touched the first keg as his grandson jumped to the dock with a keg on his shoulder, "And they are cold. We'll empty out your tubs. We have ice at our village. Come along - I have barbecued fish and pig ready to come out of the imu."

"Have you heard from your son?"

"The Green ship arrived and they are unloading."

"The Russian lady?"

"Yes - she was seen at the rail."

Suva Bay Fiji

In his dream - Johnny was adrift - wandering the hillside above the Scioto River searching for two lost sheep. An Ohio dark winter sky turned from gray to black as clouds streamed in from the northeast. As the wind kicked up - a skiff of snow blew across the grass - brown in winter. Bells began to ring. He stopped at the crest of a hill and looked down on an abandoned Oller United Brethren Church. "Bells ringing in a church - when it is boarded up?"

Johnny opened his eyes - turned his head and looked out on the Koro Sea, "It's the phone."

Matuku laughed, "You are a hard person to wake up."

"I'm living on Virginia time."

"Rainbow Warrior Resurrection has dropped anchor."

"Are they off loading weapons."

"One Zodiac is fully loaded. It looks like they're waiting for our surveillance ship to depart."

"What type of boat do you have out there?"

"A fishing boat?"

"Doesn't look like it was the right choice."

"We're moving it back to port now. Don't want to spook our weapons supplier."

Johnny asked, "Did our new warning system work?"

"Like a charm. We tracked the Green ship all the way from New Zealand. Only one glitch - they left Norfolk Island early."

"How did you resolve it?"

"We have a friend on the island. Computers can't replace eyeballs. Can you come down to the station in an hour?"

"Have they begun the transfer?"

"They will - as soon as we move our boat."

"You're dealing with professional smugglers. How about Benny?"

"He's with the Chief. They just left for a warehouse adjoining Motila's."

"If I know Benny he's going to count crates. What are your plans for me?"

"You can be our audience. We have an old saying in the South Pacific - art cannot exist in a vacuum."

"I thought Paul Gauguin lived in Tahiti?"

"We are in the South Pacific."

"And I can spell one of your men."

"As our analysts say - you broke the code."

"I'll stop on my way and pick up dinner. How many are at the station?"

"In my office - three."

Johnny hung up - stretched his arms over his head and looked at the clock, "Four-thirty p.m." He showered - still

groggy from an afternoon nap that had traveled way beyond a healthy twenty minutes. He dressed thinking, "Remind me not to take up smuggling in the South Pacific. Wonder why Benny didn't wake me before he left to help the Chief? Did he take our car? If he did it'll take me too long to rent one. The Chief and Benny are setting up surveillance on an illegal weapons transfer and I'm taking a nap in our hotel. Not a very good start for my CIA career."

Johnny combed hair - still damp from the shower - picked up his wallet and closed the door to his room. He paused at the front desk and checked for messages. There were none. He stopped at the entrance and asked the doorman, "Is the Chief's relic still near the kitchen?"

The doorman smiled, "Yes. I hope you plan to leave it in Suva. Place the cover in the grass - the same as last time." "Did Mr. Barnes drive downtown?"

"Chief Bau sent his auto. Mr. Barnes is a very important guest."

Johnny walked to his rent-a-relic - assured he wasn't.

Johnny saw the stand and couldn't resist -

The Best Fish and Chips in Fiji!

"Do you have a family pack?"

"If you have five minutes - I can prepare a party pack. Who is it for?"

"Lieutenant Matuku and several of his men at the police station."

"They stop here often - how many?" "Four - five including me."

"Have you joined Chief Bau's force?"

"No - I'm a visitor from Virginia."

"Ah - your the second one from Virginia to stop here today."

Johnny paid and waited. He was handed two large brown paper sacks, "Tell Matuku I cooked fresh Pacific Snapper."

Johnny drove to the lot back of the station - entered an almost empty headquarters building and walked to Lieutenant Matuku's desk, "Where is everybody?"

"We're on shift duty. This episode may last until tomorrow morning. I smell the aroma of fried pepper batter. What's in your two brown paper sacks."

"Stopped for fish and chips on the way."

"Excellent - did you get enough for three?"

"Five - you guys are big eaters. Owner said to tell you he cooked fresh Pacific Snapper today."

"You stopped at our favorite stand. When we finish dinner - how would you like to join me on our Patrol Boat?"

"Are you going to make an arrest?"

"No - it is our evening patrol, but tonight it is far from routine." He opened the first sack, "You have chosen well."

Benny arrived at the warehouse carrying a brown paper sack of fish and chips. He was escorted to a seventh floor waterfront room - across from and overlooking the dock of Motila's warehouse.

Chief Bau sniffed the air, "Fish and chips from my favorite stand." Benny handed him the sack - which Chief Bau opened, "Why - there is enough for a family." He cleared a desk and placed the food around, "I have grown accustomed to my good friends pepper batter and his special vinegar sauce. You have chosen well. Sit down. I'll bring you up to date as we dine." He filled a plastic plate, "Do you see anything?"

"Only a fishing boat coming in to dock."

"That's our surveillance. Our Green friends would not unload while it was at anchor. Look - out on the horizon."

Chief Bau handed Benny a pair of artillery binoculars. He focused, "A heavily loaded Zodiac - traveling no more than six knots and here comes another."

"Our Green Captain's ship arrived with three large Zodiacs on deck. Can you see the Russian lady?"

"No - the first two have men at the outboards. Here comes the third - still no lady."

Benny handed the binoculars back to the Chief - sat down and filled his plate. Chief Bau refilled his plate, "Do you want to take the first watch?"

"What am I looking for?"

"You are to make sure all the crates are unloaded at Motila's warehouse. I need an accurate count. The ammunition crates will be smaller and should arrive last. This is excellent. Did he say what type of fish he cooked today?"

"Pacific Snapper."

"It is delicious. When do you expect our Russian lady to appear?"

"Not here and not until after midnight."

"Why then?"

"Early morning and the cover of darkness are an assassins best friend."

Chief Bau looked through the binoculars, "Will you interfere?"

"Only if she bothers your people. Did you place a guard?"

"Better than that. All of our key people are attending a Meke on my ancestor's island - Bau."

"What are they celebrating?"

"A daring feat by one of the bravest of warriors."

"Is this historical?"

"For us - yes."

Chief Bau reached inside a cooler - pulled out two beers and opened both caps with a flip of his thumbs. He handed one to Benny, "We will drink to a great warrior."

Lieutenant Matuku led the way, "We're only two blocks from our Patrol Boat's dock. Where did you park the Chief's rent-a-relic."

"Behind the station. Do you want the keys?"

"Yes - you won't need it after tonight. If things go well you may return home."

"I'll have to make reservations."

"They're already made."

Johnny smiled - thinking, "This will be the end of American influence on Fiji. Partners - yes, but only when necessary. Friends - always."

The patrolman saluted Lieutenant Matuku as they boarded. Matuku asked, "Would you go below - out of sight until we are out in the channel? I want to look like our normal uniformed evening patrol."

Johnny nodded, "Yes" and went below.

Out in the channel - Matuku turned the wheel over to his patrolman and joined Johnny, "Sorry to keep you down here, but I know you understand."

"Roger that. Those Greens spook real easy. Want me to stay below until after sunset?"

"Yes - you can work with our on board computer terminal. Don't input anything. Stay in touch with Home Plate and give me a call if something goes wrong."

"Home Plate is at your office?"

"Yes. I have two cabin cruisers anchored out. They are hidden in a crowd of other ships. One near the last channel marker and the other along the way. Between my boats and our men on the dock transmitting information to Home Plate - you'll have a better idea of what's going on than I will at the helm."

Johnny asked, "Any word on how Pat Penny is doing on Bau?"

"He is safe. Quite a big Meke going on. He arrived at the same time as our leaders and is the toast of the island - very popular."

"All because of two kegs of cold beer?"

"Yes and for other reasons."

Johnny sat down at the terminal - monitoring radio calls and computer traffic to Home Plate, "Almost as exciting as watching sail boats race and grass grow. Those damn Zodiacs are traveling six knots. It'll take the Greens forever to transfer all their weapons to shore."

Matuku looked in from the deck, "Anything happening?"

"Not on my watch. Have you seen our Russian lady?"

"No - not from up here. How about Home Plate?"

"Same for them."

Johnny watched the screen as surveillance reported on the comings and goings of the *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* Zodiacs. "Chief Bau's treating this intrusion on his territory like a spider in the middle of a web - waiting for flies to come to him. Must be pretty confident if he believes he can wrap this up tonight. He is! We have airline tickets for tomorrow afternoon."

Matuku poked his head in the hatch, "You can come up to the helm. It's after sunset."

Johnny climbed out of the hatch, "When are you going to move in?"

"Not until the last weapon is safely in the warehouse and the last Zodiac has returned to the Green ship. And then it will not be tonight."

"Are your people inside the warehouse reporting to Home Plate?"

"They have instructions to report only if something is wrong at their end. Our weapons are safe - we know where they are and will take steps only if our Indian friends act in haste."

"After the transfer is complete - will you continue to keep watch on *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection?*"

"We will step up surveillance. We will know if your Russian assassin comes ashore."

"What are your plans if she does?"

"All of our leaders are safe. Our instructions are to inform Mr. Barnes and stay out of his way. I'm taking our patrol boat in - we are no longer needed out here. After midnight it could be a different story. Why don't you return to your hotel and catch up on your sleep. You have a long flight ahead of you tomorrow."

"You're telling me I'm no longer needed and that I may be in your way."

"Yes - one of my men will drive you."

The doorman at the Viti Levu opened the passenger door, "I will have to treat you with more respect. You arrived in Chief Bau's personal staff car. I hope you left your relic downtown."

"It is. I'll be leaving tomorrow." Johnny - remembering Bobbie Jean's advice on entering and exiting Five Star hotels handed him a twenty dollar bill. "I'll call when I find out my departure time."

"Colonel Ropp?"

"I'd prefer that you didn't address me by rank."

"As you wish. Mr. Barnes is waiting for you in the Verandah Bar. He wants to know if you will join him."

"I will - as soon as I change out of these work clothes."

Johnny walked to his cottage and changed into island dress - an Aloha shirt - comfortable shorts and Hawaiian slippers.

Benny stood up when he saw Johnny enter the room and waved for him to join him at the bar, "You're late - Chief Bau got rid of me an hour ago."

"After you pulled your watch?"

"Yes - how did it go?"

"Lieutenant Matuku knows his job better than I do. He doesn't need me to watch over him. Looks like the Chief put us both out to pasture. I was told that we have airline tickets out of here tomorrow."

"So was I. This trip is on the Fijians. They're sending us first class."

"I take it - you have nothing new in mind for me. How about our Russian lady."

"She's my problem. Anyone we're worried about is already out of harms way."

"Can I call my wife?"

"Not from Fiji. Not sure which way Chief Bau is sending us, but wherever we land it will be soon enough. My guess is Hawaii."

Johnny asked, "Are you buying?"

"New guys pony up for the first round. Are you hungry?"

"Fish wasn't filling. Could use an open faced sandwich."

"Bartender will take your order. He's bringing me a platter of Portuguese sausage."

"You'll be awake all night."

"I'll take that chance."

"Can you tell me why your Russian friends are sending an assassin to Fiji?"

"Fiji's Indian socialists are not playing by the rules and their Kiwi friends are getting cozy with the Chinese."

"Do the Russians care about this part of the world?"

"Pride and custom. What kind of sandwich do you want?"

"An old fashioned ham and cheese with tomato. After I finish this beer I'm going to my room. Have room service bring it to me there."

As the last Zodiac returned to the starboard elevator - Natasha checked her watch, "Not bad. Almost eleven p.m. A little over six hours." She walked to the wardroom and looked in the galley, "Cook remembered." She removed the

cover from a plate of cooked sausage - poured a cup of tea and sat down at the Captains table. She stabbed the top link with her fork and raised it to her lips - caressing it in her teeth. Natasha nibbled a piece and stopped, "Why didn't I see it. It was right in front of my eyes - in plain sight. This would have to be a country of the blind for that many Zodiac trips not to raise concern. At least by Customs. The Fijians know - they are allowing the weapons to come ashore. Who tipped them off? My people? No - that would be counterproductive. Fiji's police must have followed the New Zealanders - like a Judas goat - leading them to my Indian socialist friends. It's all beginning to make sense. I have to assume they know about me. I am beginning to feel like a bare light bulb in a privy. All eyes will be on me." She smiled, "Excellent - it will add spice to my work - to accomplish three wet procedures right under their noses." She looked down at her plate. All of the sausage was gone. Natasha wiped the grease from her chin, "Should I inform the Captain of my change in plans? No - I will let him sleep. I will need him to steer his ship in the early morning hours - when I return before dawn."

Natasha called up to the First Mate on the bridge, "Is my Zodiac loaded and ready to go?"
"It is loaded and ready - except for gas. We are filling the tank."
"Good - make sure I have enough for two hours - I'll return in a few minutes."
"Aren't you leaving early?"
"A change in plans."
"I'll inform the Captain."
"No - let him sleep. I'll need his help when I return" - she looked at her watch "around three-thirty."

Natasha hurried to her cabin - packed her back pack with black slacks - long sleeved shirt and cap. She snapped a

fresh magazine on her pistol - set the safety and placed it and two extra magazines inside the pack. Natasha smeared black grease paint on her face - washed her hands and selected two pairs of thin skin black leather gloves. She tried on a pair - took them off and placed them inside her pack. Then she removed her clothes and slipped into a two piece swimsuit.

Natasha walked to the elevator and tossed her backpack into the Zodiac. She checked the emergency medical kit and bicycle - folded at the bow. The First Mate walked up to see if all was in order and jumped back, "Sorry Ma'am - all that white skin - blonde hair and black grease paint gave me quite a start. Is everything to your satisfaction?"

"Are you sure this bicycle is fast enough?"

"It's a modified English racer Ma'am - rebuilt to your specifications in our machine shop. She should be fast and sturdy."

"Good - then I am ready. You may lower away."

The elevator slid silently down the side of the ship - it's platform continuing until it was underwater. As soon as her Zodiac was clear - Natasha shifted her weight to port then to starboard. Satisfied she knew its balance point - she pressed the electric starter button and the outboard sprang to life.

She opened the outboard motor up slowly - until she had a feel for steering and turning. She smiled, "It's like driving a surfboard. Now - where is my checkpoint? There it is - the Viti Levu resort. If my maps are right - my land-fall is a small stream three miles east - on the other side of the resort." She cruised south out of Suva Bay - away from the coast. Natasha watched as the lights of Suva grow dim. When she was certain she wasn't being followed - she turned east and opened up her outboard motor. She passed

port of the Viti Levu resort and began counting. When she reached sixty - Natasha turned to port - north toward the coast - on a direct course toward landfall.

Natasha sailed her Zodiac slowly - looking for an opening in the reef. She found it, "The stream is on a beeline - directly to the north." She took her night vision glasses from the pack and scanned the shoreline, "Got you - my lovely. Trees lining the bank gave you away." Slowing the Zodiac to three knots - she entered a shallow stream - hidden by a canopy of leaves and overhanging vines. When the stream became too shallow for the outboard - Natasha turned it off. She hopped out - grabbed the line attached to the bow and pulled the Zodiac upstream. In sight of the Coastal Highway bridge - Natasha pulled the Zodiac up through an opening onto the grassy bank and tied it to a tree. She searched her memory, "Low tide is?" She looked at her watch, "It's now - midnight the witching hour" and laughed.

Natasha touched the bottom of her two piece bathing suit, "Dry" and toweled off her legs and arms. She buttoned her blouse and pulled on slacks. Canvas sneakers completed her midnight black huntress outfit. She checked her weapon - made sure the safety was still on and slid the barrel into her waistband, "I only need one extra clip. My third victim is in Suva. I'll return to my Zodiac after the second." She pinned her hair up - tucking it inside her black cap, This Cinderella is ready to go to the ball. I have everything I need except glass slippers. And I will find them - when I return to the ship. She took her silencer out of the backpack. She tapped the extra magazine with her fingers - attached the silencer to her weapon and checked her pockets for her night vision glasses, "I might need them. She found them in her right jacket pocket, "That was a close one." She placed the pistol and silencer in her left jacket pocket and breathed a sigh of relief."

A Ride In Fiji Country

Natasha lifted her bicycle from the bow of the Zodiac - unfolded it - snapping and locked the frame into place. She carried and pushed it through trees and high grass to the highway - swearing in Russian under her breath. Looking both ways - she mounted and rode east. Adjusted the gears - she relearned the trick of balance. Slowly increasing speed until wind and sea breeze dried the perspiration from under her black grease paint.

Three miles later - and five miles east of Viti Levu - Natasha turned north on a secondary road away from the Koro Sea. She looked to the left for a coral gravel road and found it - shining alabaster white against a charcoal and green canopy of vegetation.

Natasha hopped off her bicycle and rolled it into the trees off the road in one motion. She leaned the bicycle against a Monkey Pod tree - making sure it wouldn't be seen. She walked back to the driveway - crouched down and ran along the grass - staying off the coral. She slowed to a walk when the drive-way grew too steep and climbed upward out of the forest canopy.

In a clearing - Natasha paused and crouched even lower until her knees were resting on a grassy knoll. She removed the night vision glasses from her shirt pocket and looked at the house, "My God - what a mansion! A guard on the back porch. I remember the diagram - this porch wraps around the house. And I didn't bring a knife. Slow down Natasha - your next move isn't removing this guard. Check around front - first."

Natasha crept back into the tree line and circled to the front of the house. She checked the front porch through her night vision glasses, "A guard on the front door - too and

like the one out back - asleep in a rocking chair. I'll take this one out first. Damn - I'll have to creep across a coral path. A direct approach is my only choice."

She placed her night vision glasses inside her pocket - took the weapon out - snapped the silencer on its muzzle and unlocked the safety. Then crept lightly across the coral path - not moving a single piece. She checked both sides of the front porch steps for wires and found two. They were connected to the bottom two steps. Not knowing if these wires were active or passive - so she decided to leave them alone. With her weapon in her right hand - Natasha placed her left hand on the porch rail and vaulted over - landing as silently as a cat when a canary is its quarry.

Two quick steps later - she raised her weapon - positioning the muzzle behind the left ear and squeezed the trigger - all in one fluid motion. Her weapon fired with barely an audible 'poof.' The guard slumped - into the rocking chair. Natasha checked for pulse with her left two forefingers and found none. She stood up and began to breath - again. She made sure the guard would not slide out of his rocking chair.

Natasha placed her left hand on the porch rail and vaulted over. Gliding through the humid tropical air like a jungle cat leaping from a tree - she landed gently on the lawn - bending her legs to absorb shock. Natasha stayed inside the coral path - working her way around the wraparound porch to the back of the house. As she turned the corner - the back door guard stood up out of his rocking chair and stretched. Natasha crouched lower - hugging the porch.

The guard walked down the steps - stopping before his feet touched the bottom two. He placed his hand on the rail and swung out over the last two steps - landing on the coral

path with a loud crunch. He paused and turned - facing the mansion. Not seeing lights and satisfied that he had not disturbed anyone - he walked to the top of the grassy knoll and unzipped his fly. He reached inside his trousers and began to relieve himself. With his mind on other matters - he did not hear Natasha approach. Another well placed shot behind the left ear - a muffled 'poof' and the second guard fell before his yellow stream met grass.

Natasha knelt down and checked for pulse. Finding none she turned around and looked back at the mansion. She paused, "There has to be more than just a porch alarm system. Should I shut off the electricity before I make my next move? No - there might be a passive alarm. A pressure alarm on both sets of steps is more sophisticated than I expected. First things first - I'll check the outside his bedroom." She searched her memory, "It's on the first floor - right front. He sleeps with it open."

Natasha walked upright to the back of the house and vaulted over the porch rail. Staying close to the outside wall - she edged her way around to the front. She smiled to herself, "All this security and the bedroom window is open." Natasha looked inside. Rajiv Desaij was sleeping like a British pom on a four poster bed in night clothes. She checked the window sill for alarm wires. Finding none - removed the window screen.

Without hesitation - she jumped head first through the open window - turning her head under - landing on the back of her neck and shoulder blades in a tumbler's move. Rolling forward - she sprang to her feet - firing her weapon - 'poof' - into a mouth open wide in surprise. Then - a quick coup de grace behind the left ear - a check for pulse and a pause to admire a good night's work, "A bit dramatic. Who said work can't be fun? Three and my work only a third done."

Natasha pulled the covers gently over this lifeless form and turned his head so his wound side would be on the pillow. Natasha unsnapped the silencer - locked the safety and placed the weapon inside her waistband.

She leapt back through the window feet first - landing softly on the porch. She replaced the screen - vaulted over the rail and ran toward grassy knoll in a low crouch. Over the knoll and out of sight - Natasha stopped and turned around. All of the mansion's lights remained out and outside of her heavy breathing - all was quiet.

She sat down to rest and compose herself. She looked at her watch, "One-thirty - I'm running behind. However - what great luck. Three and the night is still young." She crouched low - running downhill alongside the coral lane to her bicycle. She retrieved it from the Monkey Pod and pushed it back onto the lane.

Natasha stood next to it - catching her breath, "Slow down - Natasha. Look around and listen before you ride off. Is anyone near?" Satisfied that no one was - she mounted her bicycle and rode to the Coastal Highway - turned left and riding east. She removed the cap and let her hair down. The wind and sea breeze were cool to her face. Exhilarated - she was flushed with victory.

Natasha replaced her cap - growing cautious - as she entered a small seaside village. It was not more than six streets deep and six times six long. She looked for, but could not find visible surveillance. The night air was disturbed only by an occasional dog barking - smelling a stranger's scent in their midst.

Natasha turned left at the sixth street and began to count crosswalks. When she reached six - she turned right

and began to count houses. She slowed as she passed by the eighteenth, "Damn - he too has a guard on the front porch. And probably another one at the back door. His home is not as pretentious as Desjaiv's mansion. Krishna Minon - the leader of Fiji's socialists walks our talk." Natasha turned right at the intersection - rode south and turned west at the alley entrance - counting, "One - two - three - four - five house. There it is - his garage." She allowed her bicycle to coast to the back yard garage of the sixth house.

Natasha leaned her bicycle against the alley side garage door. She removed her weapon from her waistband and snapped on the silencer. Then replaced the half spent magazine with a fresh one. She unlocked the safety and peeked around the corner of the garage, "I wonder where his guard is?" She plastered herself to the side of the garage edging her way to the lawn between the garage and house.

She looked through her night vision glasses as she peeked around the corner, "Small back porch and not a very alert guard. He's asleep in the swing. I wonder how it is alarmed?" She crouched down and ran slowly across the back yard to the porch. She checked for wires and found none, "Anonymity must be Minon's security." She crept up the six steps - testing each board before giving it her full weight. Natasha stopped at the top, "Six paces and I'll be at his side. Three slowly and three quickly."

He died before hearing the silencer's 'poof.' She locked the safety - returned the weapon to her waistband and checked the back door, "A standard key lock. There are no visible wires - or alarms. Still - I'll cut through a window - to make sure." Using a glass cutter and a small suction cup - she removed a large circle of glass from the window in the door. She looked upward at the upper door sill, "A cowbell! How quaint - and effective."

She reached up and disconnected it. Laying it on the porch floor - she reached inside and opened the door. Natasha searched her memory for Minon's location, "His bedroom is on the second floor - back right - facing the alley. I wonder - does he have a wife? There was nothing in my instructions, but there was nothing in them about guards - either."

Natasha crept slowly up the back stairs - step by step - placing her feet carefully near the wall where the steps were less likely to squeak. At the top of the stairs - she turned left - hugging the wall. She crouched down at Minon's bedroom door - took the weapon from her waistband and unlocked the safety. She pushed on the door - opening it inch by inch. She spun around the corner - through the opening on the balls of her feet - pausing in a weapons firing crouch. Minon - like Desaij was sound asleep on top of his bed. She smiled, "Alone. If he has a wife - she is in another room. Shall I wake him up - or dispatch him in his sleep?"

She strode to his bedside. Minon's eyes came open as her weapon fired - 'poof' and he was gone. Natasha checked for pulse and found none, "The guard out front - should I. I must - he may check on the other guard." She rolled his head to the side - so the wound was on the pillow.

Natasha chose the back stairs and descended carefully - one step at a time. She walked to the kitchen sink - turned on the cold water and washed the black grease paint from her face and washed. She took off her cap - let down her hair and combed out the snags. She sat at the kitchen table to rest and gather her thoughts, "My God - why didn't I notice? The curry smell is overpowering. How can they stand to live this way? Give me Russian black bread and sausage any day." She sighed - resting her head in her hands.

She stood up, "Now how am I going to get rid of the guard out front without making a lot of noise? The best approach is to look out the front door and see where he is - then decide." Natasha crept to the front of the house and looked out the window. The guard was sitting on the top step with his back to the door - his head leaning against the post. Natasha unlocked the front door - muffling the lock's sound.

She removed her weapon from the waist band - unlocked the safety and slowly - inch by inch opened the front door - not taking her eyes off the guard. She thought, "This will have to be quick." She stepped on the porch - her eyes on the back of his head.

Three quick steps and 'poof' he joined five of his friends. She checked for pulse, "I can't leave him here and he's too heavy to carry into the house. The noise may wake up the maids and Minon's wife - if he has one." She propped the guard against the porch railing - his wound against the pillar. She looked up and down the street, "Even the dogs are quiet. All is clear." She sat on the bottom front step - gathering her thoughts as she locked the safety on her weapon and removed the silencer.

She checked the time, "Three-fifteen. Thirty minutes to the Zodiac and at least forty-five to Suva. I will not have time for a seventh wet procedure. He was of no consequence - as are most of the highly visible ones." Natasha rolled her bicycle down the alley at a walking trot - mounted at the entrance and turned south toward the Coastal Highway.

Suva Bay - Fiji

At the bridge by the stream where she had tied her Zodiac - Natasha rolled her bicycle off the bridge - into the stream. She looked at her watch, "If I had any doubt before

- I don't now. Less than an hour to return to my ship. I should have remembered - always expect the unexpected." She stripped off her black huntress outfit - rolled it up in a tight ball and placed it inside her backpack. Shoes came off next. She laid her weapon on a tree stump and began to let down her hair.

As her fingers loosened the hairpins - a hand encircled her wrist and cold steel touched the back of her neck. She turned and faced the darkness, "I won't resist. Who are you and what do you want?"

"My Dearest - I am Benny Barnes from your competitor."

"CIA! What are you doing here?"

"We have the same mission - to eliminate an ethnic problem in Fiji. However - your method is a bit more final. You have one more before you are finished here. I don't recommend it. Look to the east - you can see the beginnings of morning twilight."

She twisted away from his grasp, "I agree to a truce."

"You're word is our bond."

Natasha relaxed. This was a competitor - not a threat - not tonight anyway. She asked, "What are your plans?"

"I have none of your concern. My only concern is you. You will have to finish tonight's business in the light of day. I am here to warn you - not to continue."

"I have already decided to return to the safety of my ship."

"And the third man?"

"He is of no consequence - a barking dog who does not have appetite enough to bite."

"A wise choice. You have been successful because your work coincides with Chief Bau's wishes."

"Is Fiji's police force that good?"

"Better than good. Have you seen any visible surveillance?"

"No - have I been watched?"

"Every single minute and every single move."

Natasha's skin erupted in goose bumps. Suddenly - as with the coming dawn - she felt a cold chill, "Was I that clumsy?"

"No - not at all. The Chief's men are that good. You're playing a game on a field they know too well. Now - it's time for you to sail away." Benny handed her a card, "You'll find a set of telephone numbers on this. When you are ready - call from anywhere in the world. Ask for a mechanic. Tell the person answering - 'Hello' and after that - My Yugo needs repair."

Natasha laughed, "All Yugos need repair."

She stood up, "I must be on my way."

"Pick up your weapon - slowly by the barrel and stow it butt first into your backpack."

"I'm not going to shoot you. You're not on my list."

"Neither were the guards."

Natasha stowed her weapon - untied the Zodiac from the tree and tossed the line to Benny, "Hold tight while I load."

She placed her backpack over her shoulder and waded out - placing it at the bow. She put her left hand on the side of the Zodiac and rolled into it. She turned and looked at Benny, "If I come over will I receive the same treatment as Bulgar in your hands?"

"Of Course."

"Your safe houses come with the safety unlocked."

Benny gripped the line - tightly enough to squeeze the hemp out of it, "Are you saying Bulgar did not suffer a heart attack?"

She smiled, but did not answer

Natasha pressed the electric starter on the outboard and held her hand out for the line, "We'll meet again." The outboard sprang to life. Natasha maneuvered her craft into the middle of a small stream and tidal pool.

Navigating through the reef - Natasha continued south until she could no longer see the coastline and turned west. She opened the throttle halfway - pleasuring in a breeze cool to her bare skin. It began with a nudge and then a bump, She looked to starboard, "My God - a giant dorsal fin." The Tiger Shark's next contact raised the starboard side of her Zodiac out of the water. Natasha braced herself - opened the throttle to three quarters and turned toward shore. Caught by surprise - the shark continued on. Natasha turned southwest and began a zigzag maneuver - similar to one Navy Destroyers use when avoiding submarines. The shark turned in an attempt to pursue.

Natasha removed the weapon from her backpack and loaded a fresh magazine, "If you return my friend - you'll receive all of my hollow points." The Tiger Shark swam to a position fifty yards in front of the Zodiac - matching its speed and course. Natasha laughed, "The hollow points have changed your mind my dorsal finned friend. You know the accuracy of my weapon - you're out of range. Go home! My work on your ocean is finished. I will not eliminate the third man."

The Tiger - tired of anticipating her zigzag maneuvers swam a beeline toward the *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection*. Natasha exclaimed, "My God! He knows where I am going."

The First Mate saw the giant dorsal fin arrive before he heard the sound of Natasha's outboard motor. He waved and made a circle with his hand. Natasha waved back - nodding so he would know she understood. As he ran from port to the starboard side - she began her approach. As she drove along the port side - the Tiger moved its tail from side to side - anticipating an attack. He streaked toward the Zodiac. Natasha veered right - away from the ship to escape his first charge - then circled around the bow - hugging the starboard side of the ship traveling at flank speed.

Natasha drove her Zodiac up on the elevator platform and cut the outboard - its prop emitting a high pitched whine as it encountered little resistance when lifted out of the water. The First Mate hit the switch and the elevator moved upward. The Tiger passed underneath on its back - mouth open - teeth ready. His jaws closed on air - then water. A swirl of water was the only evidence of his failed attack.

Natasha looked for his dorsal fin. She wanted to shout taunts, but knew better. All evidence of this shark and his attack were gone.

Captain Potz met her at the rail, "Close call." He clapped his First Mate on the back, "Good job - sailor." He turned to Natasha, "Were you able to complete your mission - or do you want us to stay on?"

"Weigh anchor and leave immediately! My work here is complete."

"Your wish is my command. Are you hungry? Cook is in the galley preparing breakfast."

"I'll be in the wardroom as soon as I shower and change clothes."

"We should be outside Fiji's territorial waters before noon. I estimate three days to Wellington."

"Running from the Tiger has made me very tired. As soon as I finish breakfast I'm going to rest. If the Fiji authorities attempt to board your ship - wake me before they come on board." Natasha stayed at the rail and watched as the crew tied her Zodiac to the deck. She retrieved her backpack and returned to her cabin.

She undressed to the clank - clank - clank of two anchor chains winding up their spools. Natasha heard the prop engage and the ship begin to move. She entered the shower - allowing cold water to cover her skin until warm water streamed down - wetly caressing her breasts - allowing the

water to wash away the salt spray before soaping down her body. Natasha stepped out of the shower and toweled off the excess water from her skin, "There - that's better. I must resign myself. The logistics were as Americans say, 'To hard.' The delay - eliminating four guards made killing the third man an impossible dream."

She smiled as she combed her hair, "Six in one evening. They will be singing my praises at The Central Committee. And if I count Max - seven. I have two more on my schedule. But before I can execute them - three bonus ones - the First Mate - Second Mate and the Green lady. That will make six on shore and six at sea and in Wellington. What is that saying? I know - be truthful and multiply. I might be overreaching. Twelve - out of country on one mission? But I must. The First and Second Mates slept with me and the Green lady must know. It is Bolshevik pragmatism. Revolutionary idealists first and enterprising peasants as an example." Natasha dressed and carried her black outfit to the laundry. She handed her soiled clothes to the Green lady and smiled.

They very soon came upon a Gryphon - lying fast asleep in the sun. "Up - lazy thing! said the Queen and take this young lady to see the Mock Turtle and to hear his history. I must go back and see after some executions I have ordered" and she walked off leaving Alice alone with the Gryphon.

11

One Flew East

Johnny stumbled out of bed and picked up the envelope he found slipped under his door. He opened it. Inside - he found a First Class airline ticket to Hawaii. He checked the timetable, "I leave at four this afternoon. With a two day layover in Sydney? Chief Bau's folks must not have been able to make connections - or he's in a hurry to get me out of here." He looked at his clock, "Ten o'clock. I'm late. Have to pack - shower - shave. Get a move on. I'm supposed to meet Benny at eleven for a late breakfast."

Johnny found Benny on the Verandah, "Sorry I'm late. Had to pack. You look like you've been rode hard and put away wet."

Benny nodded, "We had a busy night. Didn't get to sleep until four-thirty. I ordered for you."

"SOS and eggs with black coffee."

"How did you guess?"

"I'm learning from you. Old OSS habits die hard. Why were you out so late?"

"Trailed after our Russian lady. She had a busy night."

"How many?"

"Top two Indian socialist leaders. We have company."

Chief Bau and four bodyguards approached, "Do you mind if I join you for lunch." His men sat down at the next table. A waiter appeared and the Chief ordered, "I'll have the same as my friend Mr. Barnes."

Benny interrupted, "I'm not sure you'll care for my selection

- a platter of the Chef's Portuguese sausage."

"You're right. I'll have my usual." Chief Bau announced,

"The Russian lady is no longer a problem. Her ship sailed at daybreak this morning. *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* was one hundred miles out when she gave my Harbormaster a departure call." He looked over at Benny, "Did you talk to her?"

"Yes - I told her to leave."

"She missed one. What held her up?"

"She had to eliminate two guards at each of her first two stops."

"Six in one evening - spread so far apart. She is a Russian wonder horse."

The waiter brought Chief Bau a half a-dozen poached eggs resting on a bed of ham and toast - covered with a special Fijian pepper sauce. Two more waiters followed with Johnny and Benny's orders. The Chief rested briefly halfway through his meal, "The Kiwi weapons are safely in my hands. The third man is being detained in my jail. I radioed my Father. Mr. Penny is on his way. He will dock sometime after twelve noon. Is your luggage packed?"

They both nodded - "Yes."

"It will be sent on ahead to the airport. Benny - you and Colonel Ropp have a two day layover in Sydney. Hotel and transportation are arranged for. Mr. Penny will continue on to Vienna. I want to thank you and my government thanks you for your assistance. If and when you decide to return - your accommodations will be on us. But for now - I believe it is best for you to leave - before someone in our press connects the dots and blames you - your government and mine."

Benny wiped the grease from his chin, "Appreciate your thanks - Chief, but Johnny and me didn't get our hands dirty on this one."

"You remember your Gilbert and Sullivan?"

"'As someday it may happen that a victim must be found'"

"You know your operettas - Benjamin. Johnny - your computer system is a priceless gift."

Benny sat back in his chair, "We were your insurance policy."

"As always - Benny - you have - as you say - hit the nail on the head. Words are not sufficient to express our gratitude. Our Tabuas do. Wear them with pride. With your country's assistance - we now control our ancestors' land and we will hold on to it."

Benny asked, "Is our luggage on the way to the airport?"

Chief Bau stood up and smiled, "It left your rooms" he looked at his watch, "Ten minutes ago and I must - too. Even I must answer reporter's questions. If you will excuse me?" Johnny and Benny stood as the Chief and his escort left the restaurant.

Benny returned to his platter of sausage while Johnny toyed with his SOS. Benny looked up, "Don't knock it. Two days rest in Sydney - a layover in Hawaii - it doesn't get any better than that."

"That isn't it. I was wondering about Natasha. You let her go unscathed."

"Professional courtesy. She wasn't going against us and you forget."

"I do? About what?"

"The Cold War is over. The Russians are our friends."

"YGTBSM."

"Very funny. What are your plans for Sydney?"

"See the sights. Haven't been to the new Opera House."

"The one with the bad acoustics?"

"True, but it looks good on the harbor."

Benny looked at his watch, "Time to pay our hotel bill and catch a ride to the docks. We have three hours to kill and Pat's catamaran is as good a place as any to do it."

Johnny picked up a newspaper on his way out of the lobby. The headline was two inches -

Two Indian Socialist Leaders Assassinated

As they entered the back-seat of Chief Bau's sedan - Benny asked, "What did they say about the third man?"

"Chief Bau has a suspect in custody - a wealthy store owner named - Jawa Motila." Benny laughed, "Round up the usual suspects."

"Are they going to hang it on him?"

"I don't think so, but they have enough for a weapons smuggling charge. That should be all the Chief needs."

"How about the Kiwi connection?"

"It won't matter. The organization here has been gutted."

"Who is it?"

"A man by the name of Ian Fleming."

"That's the one Kalani warned me about."

"He was interested in moving a lot of cement and asphalt here. Looks like he'll have to earn an honest dollar - or find a new country to exploit."

Pat Penny threw the bow line to Benny and the stern line to Johnny, "Gently - she doesn't belong to me." Benny asked, "Who did you sell her - too?"

"Don't know. The Chief's brother is my broker. All I know is it's paid for. Profit covers my trip here and stay."

Johnny asked, "Does it pay for your wife and daughter?"

"No one can afford those two - not even me. What are you two up too?"

Benny answered, "We're being kicked off the island. You are - too. We leave for Sydney at four. You have a connecting flight to Vienna. Your tickets are at the Quanta's counter. Johnny and I are killing time until the flight."

"I have beer in the ice chest. Help yourself while I bring up my luggage. Is that your car?"

"Chief Bau sent it. His driver is waiting for your gear. He'll take it to the airport and come back for us at two-thirty."

"Only take me a minute. I wondered why the Chief's Father insisted on cleaning all my clothes. All I have to do is change - I'm all packed and ready. Johnny - our friend Kalani will be one happy Kanaka. His Tiger Shark is heading home - his dorsal fin was last seen making a wake east."

One Sailed South

The First Mate stopped Captain Potz outside the wardroom after breakfast, "Mind if I ask you a question - Captain?"

"No - go right ahead."

"Our Russian lady passenger asked to see me and our Second after we dock. Do you know what she wants?"

"Probably both of your bodies. Don't either one of you stay too long. I need you both to stay alert and on top of the ship while I'm ashore. Have you seen our Green passenger?"

"I looked in the Laundry this morning and no one was there."

"Probably slept in. She's been working twelve hour days."

"Hate to see her go. First laundry lady we've had that didn't mix white socks with navy blue denims and then add bleach."

"She held up real well - considering she lost all of her friends."

His First said, "I'll check in on her."

Natasha walked past the Captain and First Mate on her way to breakfast without saying a word. She peeked into the galley. Cook handed her a platter of sausage and new potatoes. She stopped at the side board - made a pot of tea and carried her breakfast to a solitary table at the back of the room. She sat alone - with no desire for company - nibbling on a link of sausage. She speared a new potato with

her fork and smiled, "That was fun last night, but the dream came again. And Bulgar was at the front of his merry red band turning the spit."

"Too bad my Tiger Shark wasn't around to enjoy the Green lady's remains. She didn't make a sound - not one squeal. Strange - it was as if she caressed my ice pick when I plunged it into her heart. That makes eight - if I count Max and I will. The next two will be tricky. I must think this one out. They are both too young for a heart attack." Natasha laughed out loud, "I know - my Captain will become a nautical serial killer. I need the silencer and a full magazine." Natasha speared another potato and devoured it - her full attention on breakfast. She finished the last potato and attacked the sausage - link by link.

Fleming was irate, "Where have you been? I've been waiting patiently for your call."

"I was under orders not to call until I was within line of sight of Wellington."

"Do you know what happened on Fiji?"

"We delivered our cargo and sailed away."

"You didn't provide training?"

"Our last passenger requested an early departure."

Ian paused - catching his breath, "Can I talk to Max?"

"Only if you travel to the great beyond. We lost him and all, but one of our Greens in an accident on Sydney Bay."

"What happened? Was it the lady?"

"No - Max was taking them to shore in one of our Zodiacs when it flipped over. Biggest shark feeding frenzy I've ever seen. Nothing was left - not even a pair of shoes."

"Did you get a chance to talk with Jaws?"

"No - I delivered the goods and sailed away."

"Why didn't you call when you lost Max?"

"Our passenger wouldn't allow it."

Ian was resigned, "It's just as well you didn't. I would have asked you to return to South Island. Have you considered Christchurch?"

"I did, but our passenger insisted on Wellington. I imagine she wants a face to face with you."

"Are you certain there isn't enough left of Max for proper burial? I owe him that. He was a loyal employee and friend. I'll miss the bastard."

"I'm sorry - we looked. Do you know Sydney Bay?"

"Never been there."

"It's a breeding ground for sharks. The water is boiling with them. We should make port sometime after five this evening."

Potz requested, "Can I tie up at your construction dock?"

"It's in the middle of nowhere."

"It'll match this voyage - from nowhere to nowhere."

"How soon can you make it to my office?"

"Have to check in with the port authorities. No sooner than six. Can you give me a ride?"

"I'll pick you up after six-thirty - no sooner. I'll be out to dinner with a client."

Natasha packed her gear and called for a crewmember to take it to the deck. She donned a khaki colored raincoat and walked out into the evening mist. She had decided, "The Second shall be first and the First second. I shouldn't feel this way, but it is very difficult to conceal the pleasure of anticipation - to see the look on their faces. I wish I had a film crew."

She knocked on the Second Mate's door. He opened it and she almost laughed out loud. He was naked - ready for his sexual exercise. Natasha asked, "Will you help me out of my coat" and turned - removing her weapon with her back toward

him. She turned around and fired - 'poof' - into a surprised open mouth and again - 'poof' - to the heart. She picked up her trench coat, "I was right. The expression on your face was exquisite - well worth recording on film."

Natasha donned her trench coat and pocketed her weapon, "Oh - it is still warm from firing." She selected his door key from a pile of keys on the desk - opened the cabin door and locked it from outside. She pocketed the key, "You're brother will join you in a few minutes." She ran into a crewmember on her way to the First Mate's cabin, "Can you call a taxi for me?" "

Yes Ma'am. You just missed a ride with the Captain. A friend picked him up not more than two minutes ago. And you almost missed me. I'm on my way out. Besides our First and Second - you and our Third Engineer are the only ones left on board. Have you heard anything about our laundry lady?"

"No. Has she done something improper?"

"No one can find her - must have fallen overboard."

"You won't forget to call a taxi on your rush to leave the ship?"

"No Ma'am - I won't."

Natasha knocked on the First Mate's door. He opened it and stood aside as Natasha entered the cabin. As he closed the door - she asked, "Will you help me take my coat off" and turned.

He answered, "Why don't you - while I undress."

She turned with her weapon in hand - firing in one motion - into his crotch as he was unzipping his fly. As he doubled over - Natasha blew off the top of his head, "I don't often get mad. If I wasn't in a hurry - your death would have been monumental. I hope you learn to assist a lady in the next world." Natasha shuffled through the papers on top of his desk until she found the room key.

She stepped outside into the corridor - locked the door - walked to the top of the gangplank and looked down. A taxi was waiting. As Natasha stepped on the gangplank - she retrieved the two sets of keys from her coat pocket and dropped them over the side. The taxi driver opened the back left door, "Do you have luggage?"
"At the top of the gangplank."

Earlier - Ian Fleming had driven slowly along the dock looking for *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection*. He soon found it - rising out of the evening mist. Captain Potz emerged out of the fog, "Thanks for picking me up."
"Get in. Is your lady passenger still on board?"
"In her room - entertaining my First and Second Mates."
"At the same time?"
"No - one at a time. If I know her - she'll be busy until well after midnight."
"When will she depart?"
"She didn't say."
"I have a meeting scheduled with her in my office tomorrow."
"My God! She'll kill my Mates."
"You sound like you're speaking from experience."
"I am - she is a real tigress in bed. Great the first time and the second, but after that she'll tear your pecker out by the roots."

After a few moments of silence - Ian asked, "How was your voyage?"
"Not a very happy one. Did our Indian friends lose their weapons again?"
"Not only their weapons. I can't account for eight key people. I have only one contact left and he's in jail. It looks like my Fiji effort has gone tits up."
"Anything I can do?"
"No - my last item is your final payment. I have it in my office."

Ian pulled his car into the underground garage and connected the fuel tank to natural gas line, "Won't go very far on a fill. I'll call a taxi for you when we're finished. I've got Max's files to clean out." As an after thought, "And those of my Indian associates." They rode the elevator to the seventh floor in silence - until Ian asked, "Did you say you didn't have a chance to speak to Jawa Motila?" "Not a very brave man. He wasn't around when we delivered your weapons. Is he the one in jail?" "Yes." "He'll sing like a canary when the sun rises."

The elevator door opened and Ian said, "Well - if it looks like a wake - feels like a wake and smells like a wake - we're having a wake. I've got a full bar. What will you have?"

"Scotch - do you have Pinch?"

"A bar wouldn't be a bar without it. I'll have the same. Water or soda?"

"Neat. What charges are they holding him on?"

"Murdering four guards and two leaders of his party."

"Did he?"

"Might have. He had the weapons. It would be a perfect time to take control. Freshen your drink? It'll take two or three more for a proper wake."

Four refills later - Ian and Captain Potz were standing in front of his window - looking out over the ocean as late twilight turned the sea into a misty orange glow. Potz was impressed, "Great view you have up here from the seventh floor. Away from the mob."

"Most of the time our view is obscured - clouds and mist. All we can hope for is a little sunlight over Cook Strait. Our Maoris knew. They named their islands the land of one long cloud. We're still able to stand on our feet. Can't dishonor Max with an improper wake."

Ian dimmed the room lights so they could see better through the window and returned to the bar to mix two more drinks.

Captain Potz asked, "How many have we had?"

"This makes six."

Natasha exited the elevator at the sixth floor and climbed the fire stairs to the seventh. She deactivated the door alarm with a quick snip of an all purpose tool - which included wire cutters. She opened the door, "Good - I still remember - it opens to a hallway on the opposite side of the building. She removed the weapon from her coat pocket and dropped her coat on the floor. She passed the office elevator, "Just as I thought - Ian has a private elevator that opens only into his office and garage."

She walked through the Secretary's office - standing to one side of the door before peeking in. She almost laughed out loud, "They're having a wake! How appropriate." Neither one heard Natasha approach. She was on top of them before they could see her reflection in the window. Ian went first with a 'poof' - as a bullet entered behind his left ear - leaving powder burns on the side of his head. Captain Potz - his Scotch whiskey reflexes lagging - turned in slow motion. Natasha fired - 'poof' - a bullet entered his crotch. Like his First Mate he doubled over. Natasha didn't fire a second shot - not yet. She waited until he forced his body into an upright position and fired - 'poof' - another bullet entered his abdomen. He rolled onto his back on the floor - looking up with his mouth open. 'Poof' - she dispatched him with a coup de grace into a mouth open in exquisite pain. "That's the proper way to eliminate a one time lover." She placed the weapon in Fleming's right hand - wrapping his index finger around the trigger, "It won't stand, but it will buy me time." She arranged their bodies so it would look like a murder suicide.

Natasha paused at the door and admired her handiwork, "What did the American lady say in the last Hollywood movie I saw. Now I remember - 'Way to go - girl!' Twelve - counting Max. No one can approach my total. She clasped her hands over her head and shouted, "I am number one!" Natasha cringed, "I'm going overboard." She turned out the lights and walked quickly through the Secretary's office to the fire stairs. Natasha exited on the sixth floor - as she came in and rode the elevator down to street level singing the words to an old Russian proverb -

"Live with wolves - howl like a wolf"

Natasha walked and walked - block after block until she arrived at a taxi stand in the middle of Wellington. She sat in the back seat - her collar pulled up - thinking, "Within twenty-four hours I have eliminated five more - on unfamiliar territory. I am at the top of my profession. There is no one better. Yes - for once I can truly say I am fulfilled." The taxi driver turned his head, "You did say airport - didn't you Ma'am?"

"Yes - I sent my luggage on ahead."

"So you're the one. My Mate said he gave a ride to the prettiest woman he's ever seen at the docks."

Natasha smiled, but didn't respond. She cracked the window and breathed in the cool night air, "I can smell the flowers. I wonder why I didn't notice them before." She leaned back in her seat and opened the compartment in her mind. The one that contained memories of her children - and home.

Honolulu - Hawaii

A gentle trade wind breeze blowing across the jagged peaks of the Koolaus carried the scent of tropical flowers on a pineapple mist to Johnny. He caught up with Benny, "Smell those flowers - only place in the world I'd rather walk than

ride in from the arrival gate to the main terminal."

"And it isn't far. I've walked longer distances in San Francisco inside United's Terminal. Tell you what - flying First Class has spoiled me for anything else."

"Even the Director's bird?"

"He has a good cook, but nothing like the meals and service we received on Singapore."

Johnny asked, "Are you staying over with me - or flying out tonight?"

"I can use a rest and my office doesn't know I'm on the way home. We'll meet tomorrow night. This is your turf."

"How about the Warriors Lounge in the Hale Koa Hotel. Company buys."

"In a pigs eye. You're one of us. Where is it?"

"Fort DeRussy - downtown Waikiki - next to the Hilton Hawaiian Village."

"Better rent a car." Benny handed Johnny a credit card and a thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills, "Keep receipts. We're freer up front than your uniformed guys, but our money guys know how to squeeze a nickel. When you turn in your voucher - give an honest accounting."

Johnny almost called the Hickam VOQ, but stopped, "I won't need too. Don't work for those folks anymore. I made reservations at the Hawaiian Village. Only place I can find with close in parking. Then I better call Bobbie Jean and let her know I'll be home in two days. She won't be a happy camper. How long has it been? At least four days since I phoned."

Benny called to Johnny as he retrieved his luggage from the carousel, "Not gonna' miss your jabbering." He gave Johnny a wave and disappeared.

Johnny walked across the street to the parking garage and picked up his rental. He drove out on the airport

roundabout to the new Freeway - then to H1 and turned right at Punahoe. He looked at his watch, "It's eight p.m. - no wonder I'm hungry. Better check into my hotel first and then a meal." He drove over the speed bumps - past the geodesic dome to the main entrance of the Hawaiian Village. Trade winds gentle at the airport were stronger here. They blew a mist of rain into an open lobby.

The desk clerk apologized, "We look on rain as a blessing, but this is a stronger trade."

"I'm visiting in your rainy season. It's to be expected. Do you have my reservation?"

"Have you stayed here before?"

"Last time at the Rainbow Tower."

"And your name?"

"Johnny Ropp."

"Wait one minute." The clerk checked his computer and smiled, "Your wife is Bobbie Jean Langtry! I have a suite for you in the penthouse of our new Tapa Tower. How long will you be staying with us?"

"Tonight and tomorrow night."

The desk clerk rang for a bellhop, "We'll park your car."

Johnny followed the bellhop to a suite of rooms with a slightly lived in look, "Is someone else staying here?"

The bellhop shrugged his shoulders and sat the suitcases down. Johnny handed him a twenty dollar bill, "I'll take it from here." He carried his luggage into the bedroom and stopped. Bobbie Jean looked up from the writing desk, "I've been waiting for you - Soldier." She handed him a glass of red wine, "We have dinner reservations at nine."

Johnny lifted her up and held her in his arms, "You are wonderful."

"And you have the smell of a bear."

He let her down with a kiss, "How did you track me down?"

"Chief Bau telephoned the day you left Fiji."

Johnny shook his head, "So that's why we had a two day layover in Sydney. So you could make arrangements for Nanny to take care of our sons and fly here. Was that why I was told not to call you?"

"I plead guilty. I asked Chief Bau to let me know when you were leaving. I wanted to be here when you flew in - to surprise you."

"That you did. When did you get in?"

"A few hours before you. I had the use of a private jet."

"Your Vegas connections?"

"It was flying here to pick up a high roller. Don't worry - I'm in the seat next to you on your flight back."

"Did Benny know about your charade?"

"That's why you both went separate ways at the airport."

Johnny looked at his watch, "Thirty minutes to shower and change clothes. Will you help me unpack?"

"Undress and take a shower - I'll take care of your clothes."

"Join me?"

"We'll be late for dinner?"

"Life is short - eat desert first."

"I'll call and change the time."

Kalani was waiting at the counter of the Ilikai coffee shop when Johnny and Bobbie Jean walked in at eight o'clock in the morning. Johnny chided, "Hey Kalani - why you no bring da kine Ching-Chang with you?"

"Remember when you phoned from Fiji and asked where he was?"

"You said he was at an off site at the Kuilima Resort on the North Shore with his Secretary."

"His wife caught him." Kalani blushed, "Is this the lovely Bobbie Jean I've heard so much about?"

Bobbie Jean took his hand, "You might be Hawaiian, but you do have Southern ways. I'm flattered to meet you Mr. Kalani. May I call you Aku."

Kalani smiled, "Yes."

"Did you reserve a table?"

"Look around - no need too. Do you mind if I join you two for breakfast?"

"Not at all."

Kalani led the way and as Johnny asked, "Did your Shark God return?"

"The fishing is unbelievable. What did you feed him in the South Pacific?"

"Six Fiji Indians - four Green whale watchers and one Kiwi."

"Who was the Kiwi?"

"Max Lax."

"I know of him. He belonged to one Ian Fleming."

"Pat Penny's Russian huntress was a busy lady."

"You haven't heard. Before she flew away - Ian Fleming - the last Green on board the *Rainbow Warrior Resurrection* - its First Mate - Second Mate and Captain."

"If we give her credit for Max - that makes twelve."

"Max belongs to one Shark God. Who did in the six socialist middle managers?"

"I can only guess."

"Pat Penny?"

"That's my guess."

Bobbie Jean looked up from her menu, "Are you two going to order - or talk business while I starve."

Johnny looked over at Kalani, "Order now - talk later."

Kalani waited until after the waiter left their table, "Bring me up to date on the South Pacific."

"Fiji belongs to the Fijians. Between Pat and the Russian lady - the Indian socialist movement is no longer a threat. Chief Bau had all the bases covered. You won't see a revolution down there in our lifetime."

"How about New Zealand?"

"I didn't have a chance to visit."

"Just as well. They're a bunch of insular bastards."

Conversation stopped while their waiter poured coffee. Kalani asked, "What do Matuku's analysts think?" The Kiawi's are hard over to live off the dole." "They're still sucking at the nipples of insular cradle to the grave socialism?" "Yes - but Fleming's export business has been chopped off at the head." "Damn - we're going to have a power vacuum down under until the Kiwis learn to pull their own weight. Ought to change their national bird from to the ostrich. How was Australia?" "Independent as ever - not afraid to stand up and be counted and still in tune with the real world." "Well - the Kiwis are a thousand miles away from Australia and a light-year away from a country with balls."

The waiter brought their breakfast. Kalani looked up between bites, "Almost forgot - I have a meet with Benny Barnes this afternoon." "Any topic I should know about?" "No. Just another South Pacific update." "You're allowing Benny to interfere with your fishing?" Kalani laughed, "No way - if he wants to talk with me - Benny will find me on a rock near the Blow Hole on the other side of Koko Crater."

Bobbie Jean filled her plate with vegetables from the Warriors Lounge Happy Hour Buffet and waited as Johnny filled his plate with barbecued chicken legs and wontons. As he poured soy sauce over the wontons - she grimaced, "How can you eat that?"

"Soy sauce over wontons - it's as good as it gets."

"How soon will Mr. Barnes be here?"

"Should be here by now. Did you make reservations for dinner?"

"You didn't tell me if you wanted to drive to the Swiss Inn in Niu Valley - Roy Yamaguchi's in Hawaii Kai - or the

Golden Dragon at the Hilton."

"I can't make up my mind. They're all favorites."

"Then I'll decide. Good Chinese food is hard to find back home. We'll go to the Golden Dragon. I'll call and make reservations while you fill your stomach with fried grease."

"If I'm going to die and we all will - I'll die with a stomach full of fried wontons dipped in soy sauce."

Bobbie Jean laughed, "You look like a fried wonton dipped in soy sauce."

"Touché."

Benny walked into the lounge as Bobbie Jean walked out, "Hope I didn't scare your wife away."

"My greasy fried food was the culprit. She's making dinner reservations at a Chinese restaurant - the Golden Dragon. Want to join us?"

"No - can't - have several old friends I'm meeting. Retired out here from the Company. Kalini said he talked story with you over breakfast. We plowed the same ground."

"Did he tell you about the mess our girl made in Wellington?"

"She is something - isn't she?"

"What do the authorities say in New Zealand?"

"They're confused. Same weapon killed all four men. However - one was a suicide and he wasn't on the ship where the First and Second Mates were shot. Captain and the First Mate were shot in the groin - first. So - right now they're calling it a murder suicide - with Ian Fleming getting the credit."

"She is good."

Bobbie Jean returned to the table, "Reservations in an hour." Benny stood up and helped Bobbie Jean with her chair, "I won't stay long. Meeting some old friends in an hour and flying back tonight." He looked at Johnny, "Call my office the day after you arrive. Now where were we."

"New Zealand. What happened to Jawa Motila?"

"You won't believe this. Chief Bau has him up on ten counts

of murder."

"He can't make that stick. There is no evidence."

"And he has him on possession of illegal weapons and plotting to overthrow the government. Add on the murder charges and the process will drag on and on. By the time the courts resolve it - the whole affair will be ancient history. The most that will happen to Jawa will be a one way ticket back to India after it's resolved. Don't think the Chief can make treason or a murder charge stick and I don't think he cares."

"Jawa is the only one left who can tie the weapons to the Kiwis."

"Doesn't matter. All the other major players are dead. The Chief eliminated his insurrectionists - defanged the Indian socialists and closed down an illegal smuggling operation."

"Any turmoil in New Zealand."

"A Kiwi can't see with its arse in the air and its head in the sand."

Benny pointed at Johnny's plate, "If you're not going to eat those chicken legs - do you mind?"

"They're yours. I'm tired of paying for drinks. This round is on you."

Bobbie Jean persisted, "Are you sure you won't dine with us? The Chef at the Golden Dragon serves an unbelievable lobster dish served in a curry sauce with haupia."

"No - I don't have time, but you tickled my interest. What is a haupia?"

"One of three coconut condiments. It can be either coconut milk - a sauce - or shredded coconut."

"If it's mixed with curry - my money is on the sauce."

Benny paid for the drinks and lifted his Scotch and water, "A toast to our Russian hunter - 'Za Vacha Zdorovye!' She is one marvelous killing machine." He downed the rest of his drink, "Have to be on my way. Don't forget to call when you arrive back in McLean."

Johnny smiled, "We might never leave here."

McLean - Virginia

On a dark - moonless night - Johnny Ropp wandered out the arrival doors of Dulles terminal - trying to remember where Bobbie Jean said she parked their car. He was greeted by ten degree temperatures - twenty knot northwest winds - gusting to thirty and blowing snow. He pulled up his coat collar - turned around with his back to the wind and walked sideways across the street into the short term parking lot. He didn't ask or wonder why Bobbie Jean's Bentley was parked in the first row of the congressional parking area. He checked the window, "Good - she didn't get a ticket. Hope this heap starts" and scraped off the ice. On the first quarter turn of the starter - the Bentley's engine sprang to life. Johnny let the engine warm up and began the process of extracting it from a snow bank.

Bobbie Jean followed the sky cap out of the terminal, "What took you so long?" "Snow bank piled up behind your car. Running good. British may not know air-conditioning, but they sure know how to make a car start in cold weather. The only problem I had was navigating out of a snow bank." "That's not the only problem you have." "Where would you be if Ralph was alive.?" "If Ralph was alive? And I knew what I know today? I would be one unhappy camper on my way to a divorce." "I would have guessed that you'd be managing the Broadwater Beach Hotel in Biloxi - Mississippi." "The way my deceased husband gambled - we wouldn't have much of a hotel left for me to manage and you know me - I wouldn't bother to invest my inheritance in a loser. And I wouldn't have twin sons and a husband I love to needle."

Johnny had to know, "Where did you get a congressional parking pass?" "Our business partner and your dear friend."

"I should have known - Bidup Bidwell's finger prints are all over this one."

Bobbie Jean placed her hand on Johnny's right arm, "Don't drive away - I forgot to tip the sky cap."

As Johnny turned onto the Dulles access road - on the way to their farmhouse in McLean - Bobbie Jean asked, "Kalani and you were talking about assassinations - weren't you?"

"Yes, but not ours."

"How many?"

"Twelve in Fiji - five in New Zealand and one by a shark."

"And Pat Penny and his daughter are the assassins?"

"Don't know about Penelope, but he could have done six in Fiji. I'm talking out of school. It's only a wild guess - there is no hard evidence."

"And Natasha?"

"Six in Fiji and five in New Zealand."

"Does this happen all the time?"

"No - or at least not that I know of."

"Is CIA involved?"

"Not directly. If you're wondering - I wasn't in any danger."

"That's not it. I've dealt with a few unsavory characters in my businesses. However - as long as I play by the rules and stay on my own turf it's a fairly benign world. The St. Valentine's Day Massacre looks insignificant compared to sixteen and you treat it as just another day at the office."

"You said as long as you play by the rules and stay on your own turf - yours is a benign world. So is mine. These people broke the rules and attempted a takeover of another country's turf."

"You're saying that the practice of diplomacy and foreign relations is gangster politics?"

"I haven't looked at it that way, but yes."

"And CIA is the enforcer?"

"No - we use military force for that. Look at CIA as the

Untouchables. Investigators and analysts with the capability to do Special Ops."

"And your assignment is in?"

"Operations."

"I rest my case."

"Not so fast - it's against the law for us to assassinate anyone."

"But - you stand by and watch others do your dirty work."

"Not our work and we're not in a position to interfere - unless we must protect our national interest."

"Which is?"

"I see your point."

The winter sun was breaking the horizon when Johnny awoke and brushed his hand against Bobbie Jean's hair. He smiled, but she didn't wake. She was rolled up into a tight little ball. He tucked the covers around her and slipped out of bed. It wasn't cold, but it felt cold to him, "Seventy-two degrees should be warm enough. Must be dry air." He washed his face - brushed his teeth and dressed. Nanny greeted him as he entered the kitchen, "Coffee is in the pot. You'll have to fix your own breakfast. My boys are off to school and I have a taxi waiting outside to take me to National Airport."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Always business - my restaurant manager passed away in Jackson."

"Do you have anyone in mind?"

"Are you interested?"

"Not right now, but if Bobbie Jean has her way - I'll be looking for work."

"You wouldn't like Jackson. Yankees never will understand Southern ways and you're not the right color to manage my restaurants here or there. But - if I expand into Northern Virginia - I'll keep you in mind. Now help me carry my luggage to the taxi."

Bobbie Jean flew out the front door in her robe and slippers. She hugged Nanny, "You're leaving before I have a chance to say good-by."

"Ask your husband" and she winked at Johnny - hopped into her taxi and drove away.

Bobbie Jean looked at Johnny, "Did you say something harmful to my Nanny?"

Johnny laughed, "Lets go back inside before I have an icicle instead of a wife."

He closed the door, "Her manager in Jackson passed away - so she had to hurry home. Guess what? She offered me the job." "You'll have to learn Southern ways before you'll ever manage a restaurant in Jackson."

"Nanny said exactly the same thing. Boys are off to school and coffee is in the pot. Had to make their own breakfast."

"They always do. Nanny doesn't cook at home. Like bringing her business to the kitchen. She is taught our sons to cook - so they'll be self sufficient." The phone rang.

A familiar voice from the past said, "Lieutenant Colonel Ropp?"

"Roger that - what can I do for you?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"Voice sounds familiar."

"It's Paddy Black."

"Nick Nack - how the hell are you. Last time I heard of you - you were recovering your memory in a hospital bed at Willford Hall in San Antonio."

"They tried to kick me out of the service, but I beat the rap. I'm in your old job."

"At the Paddock or in the General's office?"

"At your old desk in the General's office."

"Not the broom closet?"

"It's a broom closet - again. Who did you piss off?"

"Just about all the powers that be inside the Pentagon. What do you want?"

"I know you're out of here, but can you stop by and bring me up to date. When I asked what I'm supposed to do - all I get is, 'Do the right thing.'"

Johnny hung up. Bobbie Jean asked, "Who was that?"
"Nick Nack."

"Paddy Black. What did he want?"

"He has my old job. Wants me to stop by and brief him."

"That's a long drive to town for a ten minute lecture."

"Whoa - it was a much tougher job than that. If you don't have anything for me to do - I'll stop in and see him this afternoon."

"Still a fire horse - responding to the alarm bell. The work I have for you will have to wait until the snow melts. Nanny left a message for you. Bidwell wants you to call."

"That figures. No way he can putt a golf ball on Burning Tree greens with this much snow on the ground."

Bidwell picked up on the second ring, "Welcome back to the world - Johnny. How was Fiji?"

"Great place to visit - mostly unspoiled. Knowing you - you never call unless you have some kind of nefarious plan in the works."

"This one is clean as a whistle. Do you think Bobbie Jean is ready to go into the real estate business?"

"She already is. What do you have in mind?"

"I'm holding a couple of markers."

"What is a marker. Some kind of pen?"

"Could be, but in this case - gambling debt notes. If you are willing - we can subdivide your property in half acre lots - all with a minimum of zoning fuss."

"Bobbie Jean would jump at an opportunity, but we have two boys in school and she won't move."

"Understand the problem. How many acres do you need for your farmhouse and stable?"

"I haven't given it much thought."

"Talk to Bobbie Jean about it. You put up the land and I'll put up the houses. Do you remember that old guy selling real estate in Roswell?"

"The one who finished his selling pitch with, 'There'll always be more people, but there'll never be more land.'"

"Roger that."

"Your day has arrived in McLean. It has a lot more people than land."

"We'll talk it over. What about my sheep?"

"It's time to get rid of them. That ram of yours brings new meaning to worthless. I made arrangements to get him and his ladies into a petting zoo near Reston."

"That's agreeable, but I'll miss the lazy rascal."

"Then it's a deal?"

"Not so fast. This decision is above my pay grade. Before I forget - where did you get that congressional parking pass Bobbie Jean had on the dash of her Bentley?"

"Don't ask."

"Don't tell."

Bobbie Jean laughed, "Bidwell wouldn't tell you where he got the pass - would he. What devious plan has our business partner come up with this time?"

"He wants to subdivide our farm into half acre lots."

"He wants to do what?"

"Build houses on our land. We furnish the land - he builds the houses. Bidwell has several gambling markers we can trade in for land use and building permits."

"I'm not selling my home!"

"We won't have too. Decide what we want to keep and we can develop the rest." "I already have. I drew up a plan before we bought the farm. Hate to say it - Bidwell is right. Land value will probably go up and development costs will too. And if he can grease our way through the permit process. Remember how long it took to get approvals for our Omaha restaurant? What about your sheep?"

"Bidwell is thorough. He made arrangements for them to go to a petting zoo."

"The courtyard inside the Pentagon?"

"The one near Reston."

The phone rang, "The whole world must know we're back." It was Tucker - calling from his office deep inside the dark dungeons of the Washington Post, "Wherever you visit - you can sure stir up a mess of trouble."

"Fiji? It's an unspoiled paradise."

"Let's see - four Greens and a Kiwi fell out of a Zodiac and were devoured by sharks. Six mid-level socialists disappear from Fiji. Then two high level Fiji socialists and four guards are assassinated. A Green lady goes overboard and the First and Second Mate are shot to death. A leading Kiwi industrialist and the Green Captain are the last to go in a murder suicide. You return home and the South Pacific turns quiet."

"You sure like to connect unlike dots."

"Is there a story there?"

"Could be, but I doubt if anyone cares except the Brits and the London Economist. Fiji now belongs to the Fijians."

"Did you have something to do with it."

"My job was to help them acquire a new computer system and to provide training."

"The internet is everywhere. I'm the last of the computer illiterates. Mind if I give Benny a call?"

"I'm not my Benny's keeper."

"I'm feeding you straight lines."

"Sam's tomorrow night at seven?"

"Roger that."

Pentagon

Johnny groaned, "Wall to wall cars," as he turned off Boundary Drive into Pentagon North Parking. "I'll have to park way out in the north forty. At least the wind will be

quartering on my walk in. Walking out? I hope the northwest wind turns more to the west." The right side of his face felt like an icicle as he opened the entrance door and showed his badge. Johnny went from too cold to too warm in an instant, "We can place a cruise missile through a window at five hundred miles and we can't adjust a building thermostat to control an even temperature." He attached the badge to the zipper on his leather flying jacket, "I'll have to turn this in. Whoops - almost forgot - I'll need a new ID. I'm no longer on active duty. Benny said Active Reserves when we were on Fiji. Wonder what that means?"

Johnny just had to look in - to make sure. He opened the door to his old office and found mops - brooms and buckets, "Isn't the first time I had an office disappear. The last time it was office and people - too. At least this time I won't have to hold court in a cafeteria for two weeks."

Johnny stepped through the door to the General's office. Paddy Black got up from behind his old desk, "Am I glad to see you. We've had quite a turnover here. Tupelo retired and followed Barnes up river to CIA. We have a new General." "Who's the new boss?" "Rockly T. Fellow." "Do you have guidance?" "Do the right thing. I'm lost - will you to lead me down the path to righteousness?" "How good is your Top Sergeant?" "One of the best. Tupelo hand-picked him." "Work with him as an equal and you'll do just fine." "And if I insist on a strictly military rank basis?" "Bend down - place your ears between your legs and kiss your ass good-by." "Can you tell me where you're going?" "I'm out of the Air Force. Do you have anything for me?"

"Sealed orders - quid pro quo - first you brief me on what I'm supposed to do."

"I need a cup of coffee first."

Johnny returned from the coffee mess, "We'll start at the beginning. Who signs your report?"

"The Exec."

"Do what he says. He's the boss. If you don't have guidance - here's what I did." Johnny spent the next hour showing Paddy the ropes that would help him on his climb. Footholds and direction of climb were Paddy's responsibility.

Paddy shook his head, "That's more than I care to know. Your letter and personal items are in the vault."

"I'm on my way." Johnny knocked on the vault door. Tupelo looked out through the opening with a grin, "I've been waiting for you."

"What are you doing here?"

"Cleaning up and briefing the new guy. Your situation is trickier than Personnel is used to handling. I was sent over to straighten it out."

"You're still in uniform."

"Won't be after today. I turned in all of your classified. Your accounts are clear. Packed all of your personal stuff in one box. You do travel light."

"Been out the door and down this road before."

Tupelo handed Johnny a sealed envelope, "Open this when you're at home alone. Have your wife place the contents in a safety deposit box. This is your protection. Sergeant in Officer's Assignments is waiting for you on the fifth floor."

"Where am I going."

"After you check in and sign out upstairs - stop back in and pick up your box."

"Will I get an answer then?"

"Yes and no."

"They haven't moved Personnel - have they?"

"Same place - with Air Force blue footprints painted on the floor so the pilots can find it."

Johnny looked for footprints, but found none and smiled, "He had me looking." Johnny reported to the Sergeant manning the front desk, "Lieutenant Colonel Ropp. I'm checking out." "I've been waiting on you." He handed Johnny an envelope, "Read and sign what's inside and get your picture taken for a new ID."

Johnny sat in a hard wooden students chair - the type with a desk top on one armrest and read the cover letter. He signed at the signature block and sighed, "Benny led me astray - I'm not out of the Air Force. It's strange - though - don't think I've ever seen an Air Force Reserve assignment to a Post Office Box in McLean."

"He looked at the next piece of paper - an agreement to remain in the Reserve for two more years. Johnny signed at the signature block. The next letter was brief -

Report for training at the Lonesome Pine Farm - in the Blue Ridge Mountains - follow Route #50 - see enclosed map.

Johnny opened the map. At the top he read -

Commit to memory and shred after reading.

Johnny handed the map to the desk sergeant and waited as he shredded it. Afterwards - he posed for a new ID in a borrowed jacket - shirt - tie and returned the rest of the items in the envelope. He waited, "Is that all?"

"You're finished - Colonel."

"How about my wife? She'll need a new dependent ID."

"That wasn't covered in my instructions."

The clerk picked up the phone and punched in seven numbers, "What about his wife? She'll need a new ID card. Okay - will do." He pulled out the appropriate forms - typed in the information and handed them to Johnny, "Make sure she goes to Fort Myer next week."

Johnny wandered back to General Fellow's office suite. Tupelo met him at the door, "General Fellow wants to see you before you check out." Johnny followed him. General Fellow looked up and smiled, "Good luck at the Agency - Johnny. Hard to tell if you've been screwed or given a leg up. We'll keep track of you" and he smiled, "I know where you are. Benny will keep me informed of your progress. You're on the CIA payroll - so do us proud." "Will I return to the Air Force?" "You've never left it - so how can you return?" "Do you know where I'm assigned?" "CIA Operations." "Geography?" "Tupelo will let you know." "Don't ask?" "Don't tell."

Tupelo took Johnny into the vault and closed the door, "Your first assignment is temporary - in Germany. Your old outfit in Munich is closing down. All, but one of Paddock's detachments are closing. CIA is picking up the mission." "Is that why Benny Shanghaied me?" "General Fellow offered you up and Benny requested you." "Better the devil you know?" "You might say that, but if we didn't want you - you would still be in uniform. When you report to the farm - dress casual - sweaters - that kind of thing. Leave your leather flying jacket at home. No military apparel. You will need clothing for a week." "Outdoor activities?"

"Not for you - except for small arms training. Strictly self defense. Report to your check point Monday morning at 10:00 a.m. on the dot."

Northern Virginia

Johnny walked into the kitchen through the mud room, "It took longer than I thought. I had to process out of the Pentagon and get a new ID."

"Are you out of the Air Force?" "Sort of - I was transferred to the Reserves and I've been assigned to a Post Office Box in McLean."

"To a Post Office Box? First a broom closet and then a Post Office Box. You are moving up!"

"You'll have to get a new ID. They want you to stop in at Fort Myer next week."

"Go back to where you said you were transferred to the Reserves. Why? What does it mean?"

"Damned if I know - unless it's for my new job."

"Benny and Tupelo were Sergeants."

"They were under cover. Benny is a Colonel in the Reserves and I don't know about Tupelo."

"And your new job?"

"Damned if I know. I'm supposed to call Benny's office tomorrow morning. Should find out soon. I have training scheduled Monday at the Farm. Tupelo said it would last a week."

Bobbie Jean stopped her work at the kitchen counter, "Will you be home at night?"

"I'm supposed to bring along enough clothes for a week - so I don't think so."

"Is there anything else?"

"I'm being assigned temporarily to Bonn Germany."

"And your family - will we go to Germany?"

"I don't know."

"I need time to think and you have to change clothes. We're

meeting Tucker - Bidwell and their wives at Sam's."

"How about the boys?"

"They're old enough to be alone." Johnny opened the sealed envelope and handed it to Bobbie Jean.

Johnny noticed the sign as he drove into the underground parking, "Since when has the building been renamed - Sam's? I thought the owner didn't want to sell. Did we pay for the advertising space?"

Bobbie Jean opened her car door. He followed her to their private elevator. She pressed the button, "Our partner had an unusual run of luck with the dice."

"Did he win the building?"

"No - we paid market price and the old owner is carrying our note at six percent simple interest."

"What about his marker?"

"Bidwell is holding it until the building is free and clear. Then he'll forgive it."

As Johnny and Bobbie Jean stepped out of the elevator into Sam's private dining room on the top floor - Tucker waved for Johnny to come over to the bar, "Bidwell's down stairs - checking on business."

"Did you get a hold of Benny?"

"He wasn't anxious to talk. Tried to get him to stop in tonight - so we could talk in private. Didn't work, but he gave me enough insight for a background piece."

"Not much interest in this town about Fiji?"

"There isn't, but that's what newspapers are good at - drumming up interest."

"Did Benny talk to you about me?"

"No."

"You've lost a confidential source at the Pentagon."

"You were a dry hole anyway. Where are you going?"

"I'm working full time for Benny."

"About time you went to work at a real job."

Bidwell exited the elevator, "Johnny! How soon can you get those damn sheep off our property."

"Your idea - your problem and I'm leaving it up to you to explain why they're going to a petting zoo to my boys."

"We can't move the heavy equipment in until after the ground dries out and that will be late spring. Survey work begins as soon as the snow melts."

"Are you going to build on spec or to order?"

"First six on spec - after that we'll see."

"Price range." "Five-hundred - up. Won't be cheap."

"How many?"

"Sixty-six."

"What are you going to name it?"

"Langtree Estates."

Bobbie Jean put her arm through Johnny's, "Don't worry - we live there. I'll be on top of each and every decision. And we're forming a new corporation called GSM."

"What does GSM stand for?"

"G is for Bidwell - Gambler. S is for you - spy and M is for Tucker." Tucker smiled his best what me worry smile, "M - don't you mean N for newspaper?" Bobbie Jean had reeled him in, "No - M for muckraker."

On their way home - Bobbie Jean finally opened up, "You signed up for two more years without asking me. You had to sign an agreement - didn't you?"

"I promised - I'd stay on until late spring and then we'd talk. Don't worry - I can resign anytime."

"Can I tell Mother. She never thought you'd amount to," Bobbie Jean blushed and added, "Important. She thinks any job in Europe is the top of the ladder."

"You can, but tell her to keep it out of the newspapers."

"Don't you dare do anything rash without telling me. Two more years. It will take me that long to finish the

subdivision. I don't want to go to Germany and I don't want you away all of the time. There are no easy answers."

"At least our boys will be able to enhance their education with a few trips to Europe."

"We can visit!"

"We're not in Kansas anymore - Dorothy."

Johnny phoned CIA Ops - a little after eight the next morning. Benny's Secretary answered, "Hello."

"Johnny Ropp checking in."

"Come in tomorrow. Stop at the front desk. I'll have your paperwork waiting for you. Did you receive instructions?"

"For training?"

"Yes."

"I'll fill you in on what's required."

"That was a narrow escape!" said Alice - a good deal frightened at the sudden change, but very glad to find herself still in existence. "And now for the garden." And she ran with all speed back to the little door, but alas! the little door was shut again and the golden key was lying on the glass table as before [Alice said] "and things are worse than ever."

CIA Operations

Johnny turned off the exit ramp of George Washington Parkway at the Fairbanks Highway Research Station Sign and pointed his car toward the geodesic dome. He parked in a visitor spot and walked a few short steps to the front door of CIA Headquarters. Inside - on the left - he stopped at the visitor desk and presented his military ID and drivers license. The civilian guard - dressed in a blue blazer sport coat and tan pants looked both over, "Colonel Ropp - we were expecting you. Come with me. First you'll need a photo ID and of course - there is paperwork for you to read and sign. And then an interview."

"How long will it take?"

"If things go right - you should be finished no later than noon. I'll make a photo ID first and you can fill out your paperwork while we laminate your pass."

Benny was waiting for Johnny as he came out of the interrogation room, "You passed. Now you can come into the office."

"Why the sealed envelope and lock box?"

"In case something happens to me - my boss - your General and most of all - in case something happens to you. It's for your wife's protection."

"And for mine. Your idea?"

"Yes - I've seen too many guys wiped out who didn't watch their six." Benny opened the door to a room full of desks stacked a foot deep in paper. Johnny looked around, "The empty one is mine?"

"For as long as you work for us."

"Where is everyone?"

"On assignment or compensatory time off. Put your ass on the line here - when the job is done - vacation starts. Coffee or tea."

"Coffee."

Johnny sat down at a small conference table at the far end of the room - thinking, "This could be a govy office anywhere. Furniture is new - though. Stacked space saving stuff." Benny sat down with a carafe of coffee and poured, "So your going out to the Farm Monday."

"Your Secretary said she'd leave instructions."

"I'm it. You'll need money for the nightly poker games. When you were told casual - they meant casual. Jacket - sweaters - khakis - jeans - no ties - suits - or coats."

"What about Germany?"

"Our Embassy in Bonn. Don't take your family - it's too temporary."

"Who do I report too?"

"We'll cover that when you get back from the Farm."

"Does anyone work for me?"

"Are you kidding? You're the new guy."

Johnny smiled at that news, "Fill me in on where I can go and what I can do."

"You worked inside for the USIB Sigint Committee. Our rules haven't changed."

"Committee name has changed - from United States Intelligence Board to the National Foreign Intelligence Board. You guys are no longer automatically in charge of each committee with an automatic two votes."

"And the committees meet downtown near the White House - so you know who's in charge."

"And why our Intelligence is all screwed up."

"Yeah - it used to be an interagency squabble on who can do

the best job and now it's a mud fight to see who can get on the street with an answer the quickest that fits the latest political spin. I'll take you on a tour."

Benny guided Johnny to the cafeteria, "Look the same?"

"No - we're in a different building."

"We added on."

"The Peter Principle?"

"That and computer technology. Used to have several analysts that knew everything about their area. Now we have a dozen or more - all backed up by computers and we can't come up with answers."

"Same problem we have at the Pentagon. A lot of money for hardware and software and no money left over for thinkers."

"All the doors here are still closed. Stay out unless you have business to conduct. You park out here - in back. Our trees provide screening."

"And the walk in is just as far away from the building as North Parking at the Pentagon."

"Hey this is the government. At least we don't charge you to park here. Pick up your car pass at the visitors desk on the way out."

"I'm finished?"

"Johnny - we've been working together for quite a spell. It is pretty much the same - maybe a little quieter. We won't have Pat Penny and Natasha to liven up our lives."

Northern Virginia

Neither Johnny or Bobbie Jean slept well Thursday night. Johnny's mind was on his change of status and Bobbie Jean's thoughts were of adjusting the boundaries of their home and stables under her subdivision plan. After the boys were off to school - Bobbie Jean went back to bed and Johnny went outside to check the surveyors flags and water his sheep. He looked at the flags near their drive, "Won't do - we'll lose too much of our privacy." He looked at the map Bobbie Jean

had prepared, "No wonder - they lopped off two extra acres." The sheep were huddled under their lean-to at the back of the stables, "Hope you folks like a petting zoo. Ought to be a lot easier than having two boys and a Border collie chase you around." He patted his collie - Ralph, "Don't worry you can still herd us." When he returned to the farmhouse - Bobbie Jean was fast asleep.

The aroma of bacon cooking in the microwave - toast in the toaster - eggs frying and coffee percolating did their usual trick. Bobbie Jean appeared - like magic - in the kitchen - rubbing her eyes, "You certainly know how to wake a lady up."

"There is a connection between our three senses and love."

"Especially so if someone else is doing the cooking. Did you check the flags?"

"Yes - I found the error. We lost two acres in front of the house and stables."

"That won't do - can it be fixed?"

"They'll have to resurvey. They petting farm is coming for our sheep this morning."

"Sad?"

"Very."

"Did you tell our boys?"

"Didn't have the heart. I'm going to take them to the Smithsonian tomorrow. We'll see the National Air and Space Museum - Hirshhorn - National Gallery - Industry and History. They want to see the mummies."

"I'm not letting my men go out alone. Too many single women in this town. When does it open?"

"At ten."

"We'll park at Sam's and take the subway into town."

As Johnny served - Bobbie Jean opened the Post, "Did you read Tucker's article about Fiji in the international section?"

"No - didn't get past the headlines - sports section and comics. What does he say?"

"It's all about the rise and fall of socialism on Fiji. One of their leaders - Jawa Motila has pleaded guilty to importing guns and plotting to overthrow the government. Motila's - isn't that the General Store we were in?"

"The same and he was the owner. What happened to him?"

"He was allowed to return to India with a suspended life sentence. Tucker implies that he was behind the murder of two other Indian political leaders and four bodyguards. Can you tell me?"

"I think it was Natasha, but that's not proven."

"Does Benny know?"

"Yes and he's not talking."

"Well he must have talked to Tucker."

"That - as we say in the government is above my pay grade."

"And a way to pass out disinformation."

Smithsonian

Johnny laughed, "It's a miracle - we made it all the way to Arlington without RL and JR fighting in the back seat."

Robert Livingston Langtry spoke up, "That's because you finally got it right."

And Johnny Jr. added, "We're going to see the mummies and eat at Sam's. Do we have to go to the art museums?"

Bobbie Jean answered, "I insist. We'll go to the American History Museum first - Natural History next and the three art museums last."

Both RL and JR moaned when Bobbie Jean mentioned three art museums. But - they were two steps ahead on the way to Arlington Metro Station.

Johnny squeezed Bobbie Jean's hand, "Don't look behind - we have someone following us."

"Are you that important?"

"Silly isn't it? I don't believe we have anyone on our side who believes we're important enough to follow."

"Could the agency send someone along for protection?"

"A junior agent in training?"

She began to giggle and sing, "Into the air junior birdman - into the air upside down."

"Very funny. He could be on a training exercise."

The Rosslyn Metro station was so empty it echoed. Johnny kept an eye on the tagalong until the Orange Line subway train rolled to a stop. They waited and boarded the last car. The train stopped five times before a computer generated voice over a loudspeaker announced, "Smithsonian." The tagalong exited the car in front of them - following at least sixty paces behind on the way to the Jefferson Street exit. Johnny caught up with the boys, "Don't look around, but we have a tagalong following us."

RL asked, "What's a tagalong?"

"One of the bad guys. Pretend you don't see him. I don't think we're in any danger, but you can never tell. Better stay within hollering distance."

He slowed down and rejoined Bobbie Jean, "It's a two block walk to the museums. I hope our friend brought along walking shoes."

Bobbie Jean smiled, "He must be foreign - he's wearing leather soled shoes. You didn't scare our boys - did you?"

"I gave them something to think about other than how much they hate visiting art museums. I asked them to stay close."

"Is that why they're walking faster?"

"Those rascals - it's all a game to them."

The American History Museum should be called the Museum of Science and Industry. It was loaded with every item either invented or built in America since the Industrial Age began. The big hit for the boys was the giant steam

locomotive in the basement. Johnny looked for, but could not find the button that turned on the stereo engine sound.

JR asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Used to be a button to push here - whole room would fill with the sound of this locomotive starting up and moving out at full speed."

RL pointed to his headset, "It's still here."

"Can't be the same as having the whole room fill with sound. Ready to see the elephant?"

JR asked, "Where is it?"

"In the entrance rotunda next door."

"Before we get to the mummies?"

"They're on the second floor. Don't walk so fast this time. Our tagalong is having a hard time keeping up."

The elephant didn't hold the boys' attention for more than a moment. The whales and dinosaurs did. The biggest disappointment was the mummies - or lack of. Dug out of a latrine in Philadelphia - they had been on display on the second floor for years. They were relegated to storage - like most of the artifacts held by the Smithsonian. The faux art of Museum Science held sway. Instead of being a neat place to rummage around on a rainy day - the displays now reminded Johnny of Epcot at Disney World.

He led his disappointed sons to the National Gallery. It alone - of all the Smithsonian buildings reminded him of a museum. Until they entered the new wing - where blank walls and a curator enamored of architecture broke the magic spell of the wonderful clutter of the National.

The Hirshhorn? Like the old National Gallery - hadn't changed. The best art was in the basement - produced by early American artists who had learned to paint - not roll tires over canvas. Their tagalong didn't enter the building with them. He sat down on a bench outside with the other

statues. Bobbie Jean laughed, "Your friend doesn't care for Modern Art."

"Or sore feet. We'll follow the ramp up and ride the elevator down to the basement."

"Who selects these paintings?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Don't we have artists trained in the classics?"

"We have art schools."

"Why is their work not on display? All I see are huge empty canvases - all white - or with one dot - or finger paintings reminiscent of kindergarten."

"Art is defined by politics and dealers."

"Ours lack taste."

Bobbie Jean looked up at the emptiness of the Air and Space Museum, "This building reminds me of an empty hanger. Don't they have anything to display?"

"There is ten times more of everything on display at the Air Force Museum on Wright Field in Dayton" Johnny answered.

"There used to be more out - when it was displayed in a Quonset hut next to the castle. At least they still display Lucky Lindy's airplane - the Spirit of Saint Louis."

"It's a very impressive empty building. Where are all of the airplanes and rockets?"

"In a hanger - stored out of sight somewhere beyond the beltway. Think they're at Dulles - but Maryland comes to mind - too."

RL and JR stopped at the other end and waited. JR said, "We've seen everything except the movies. Can we eat?"

Johnny answered, "Lead us back to a Metro Station. Not too fast. Our tagalong is having a hard time keeping up."

Bobbie Jean squeezed Johnny's arm, "I know he's Russian."

"How can you tell?"

"He's limping. His shoes don't fit and his feet are killing him. How did you like our brief Museum tour?"

"We have a new field called Museum Science that teaches its students how not to display artifacts."

"And from what I've seen - teaching Modern Art means training students to drive a tractor over canvas."

"I didn't think we could make it through all the museums and see everything in less than three days. We did it in less than five hours."

"I used to be able to spend three days in one building. I'm disappointed. I wish our boys could have been here before the window dressers took over. The Smithsonian was at one time a marvelous king sized attic. You could pick and choose what you wanted to see - not be spoon fed by idiots."

"If it wasn't for the game our boys are playing with the tagalong they would be disappointed too. No more mummies meant no more Smithsonian to them."

"Isn't it a shame - an entire generation is being robbed of the past by trained window dressers."

"I'm hungry - are we going to treat our tagalong to lunch at Sam's?"

"Yes - he'll need it."

JR and RL led them northwest on Pennsylvania Avenue - turned north on 11th Street and took the escalator down to the Metro Center Station. They walked directly into a car on the Orange Line train going to Rosslyn. Their tagalong - more than a football field behind - was left stranded on the platform. Bobbie Jean nudged Johnny, "Don't you think he looked relieved?"

"He was in pain."

"Will someone else follow us in Arlington?"

"Not if he calls and tells his control about his experience."

The lengthy escalator ride up - out of Rosslyn Station was longer than a ski lift in Vermont. Outside the Station Johnny looked around to see if there was another tagalong, but there was none.

Lonesome Pine Farm

Johnny drove west on Leesburg Pike into the Virginia countryside on a cold and windy winter morning. The Lonesome Pine Farm was hidden deep in the interior of a national forest where only a wilderness guide - or a lost flock of Bluebirds could find it. On a deeply rutted road over streams - almost too deep to ford - Johnny wound over hill and dale through a forest - so dense - it's canopy covered the road from the sun - even without leaves. As he bounced along - Johnny muttered out loud, "Should have rented an off road vehicle to get here. Damn that Benny. He must be laughing himself silly. He should have warned me. Thank God - a fence."

Johnny looked out at a weathered sign - posted on the fence -

Lonesome Pine Farm
Posted - No Hunting
Trespassers Will Be
Shot On Sight!

"Thank God - I'm here."

As instructed - he honked six times in short bursts. Out of nowhere - two guards dressed in Army forest fatigues appeared - weapons drawn, "Step out - face your car - place your hands on the roof and spread your legs. Where is your wallet?"

"On the front seat."

The guard reached in and opened it up, "Colonel Ropp - we have been expecting you. You can relax."

"Why all the security when you can recognize who I am?"

"Never can tell when a bad guy might try to penetrate our facility and it gives us training - too."

"You guys are almost as thorough as my neighborhood grocery

when I'm trying to cash a check on Sunday."

"More - we need three IDs and a fingerprint scan - which you'll do right now." Johnny placed both hands on the screen of a laptop computer and waited.

The biggest - ugliest of the two guards telephoned for transportation and an escort. The other one returned Johnny's wallet and made a request, "Give me your car keys - Colonel - you won't need them where you're going. Why didn't you drive an off road vehicle - or come on our bus with the others?"

"All I got was a map and instructions on how to get here."

"Who is your boss?"

"Benny."

The guard doubled over in laughter, "Ever been on a snipe hunt?"

"No - is this one?"

"No, but if we had one - Benny would be the instigator."

Johnny was escorted inside the fence along a path through more dense forest to another road. When he turned around to thank his escort - they had vanished. He said - to himself, "Not another I love a mystery week! All I have to do now is wait for Jack - Doc and Reggie to show up." From the bowels of a forest primeval came the familiar roar of a HUMV - one without a usable muffler. It braked to a stop at his feet and two guards hopped out, "Wallet Colonel and place your hands on the computer screen for a fingerprint scan." Seconds later he said, "Pick up your gear and hop in back. They lurched ahead as soon as his rear end touched the seat. The guard riding shotgun shouted, "Hang on - we've bounced more than a few out the back."

Johnny grabbed the overhead sissy bar with both hands and hung on for dear life. The HUMV bounced and bounced and bounced again over ruts on this much used Virginia mud road through the forest. As he pulled himself off the ceiling,

Johnny shouted over the engine noise, "Didn't anyone tell you guys the Cold War is over?"

The shotgun guard replied, "No - who would believe anyone spouting that kind of nonsense."

Their ride smoothed out when the HUMV turned upstream and followed a shale stream bed.

Two miles later - the HUMV climbed up out of the stream and entered a dense - old growth forest. Johnny asked, "How do you guys get around when we have spring rains?"

The shotgun guard turned around, "The same as we do during the summer when we have a gully washer thunder storm. We fly in by helicopter."

The HUMV became airborne - flying out of the forest canopy - landing on a narrow crushed stone Colonial road. Johnny let go of the overhead bar, "Looks as solid and as narrow as the Appian Way."

The shotgun guard nodded, "Close. These were carved out by George Washington when he was a surveyor for the British Army. It was built to last. We added crushed stone. Always a little damp in this forest - so we get very little dust. And the stream bed is solid rock underneath the shale. Our roads are mostly passable year round except for that mud stretch and it is too - unless we have a flooding rain. And even then we're not isolated. We have a landing strip for small aircraft - a lake for an amphibious plane and a helo pad. Pretty private out here. We're in the middle of a national forest. The trees are second growth. The original forest was logged out to build Washington in the early nineteenth century. Hang on!"

The road turned sharply uphill on a circular path - following another stream bed upstream. Although the ride was smooth - the turns weren't. They came out on top of a rounded hill in a meadow. The driver stopped, "You can see

our farm." He pointed, "Over there - in the valley."

"It looks just like a farm."

"It was. Our compound is halfway up the hillside - behind the barns hidden under trees. We use the barns to store equipment. Looks close doesn't it? But we're still a good thirty minutes away. Hang on - it gets dicey going downhill."

Johnny was wobbly legged when he exited the HUMV inside the compound. The shotgun guard tossed down his flight bag with a grin, "Can I give you a piece of advice?"

"As long as it's free."

"Next time - fly in with the rest of your class."

"Tell that to Benny."

Johnny walked into the reception area and set his bag down - looking directly into the eyes of a gruff old former OSS agent, "I'm Johnny Ropp."

"And I'm smart enough to be out of this business, but not smart enough to distance myself from it." He tossed Johnny a room key, "Up the stairs and to the left. Lunch is in thirty minutes. Unpack and stow away your gear - then meet the rest of your class in the mess hall."

"Do I need a badge?"

"Not at this farm, but don't stray away from the compound without an escort."

"You don't recommend solo walks in the forest?"

"Only if you want to commit suicide."

Johnny hauled his flight bag to the top of the stairs. His room was at the end of the hall. He opened the door and looked inside, "Bunk bed - chair - desk and lamp - bureau for clothes - no closet and one overhead ceiling light. Even have to make my bed. Sheets and blankets are stacked at the end. Latrines are on both sides of the stairs. Hell - I'm back in boy scout camp. What does this place remind me of?

Now I remember - a CCC - Civilian Conservation Corps camp. So that's how they got all these buildings - roads and runway. It was already here."

When it was a CCC camp - the mess hall used to have cooks. Food was available, but Johnny had to prepare his own. He met and introduced himself to the other students - all as inept as he was at making deli sandwiches. He discovered that his classmates came from a variety of backgrounds - with one thing in common. None of them were professional agents and with the limited amount of time available for training - in no in danger of becoming one. One attitude that he did not share with them was their enthusiasm.

After lunch - Johnny's group settled in the mess hall for a series of movies about CIA. Fairly standard stuff. Its origins - from the OSS to today's multifaceted tasks. An hour later - after a coffee break - their instructor entered the room dressed in cowboy boots - hat - jeans and a western shirt. He sat down at the end of the table - placed his feet on it and leaned back, "I'm your wrangler - in fact you can call me Pecos Pete. That's your first lesson. We don't use our real names when we're under cover. If you see me or any other covered employee at the bank or grocery store - don't bother to talk to us - recognize us or use the names you know us by. If we want to talk to you - we'll let you know.

He lit a Cuban cigar, "Notice my dress? Not the same as Hollywood would like you to believe. We don't wear black suits unless we're trying to blend in. That's your second lesson - we can look like anyone you'd expect and neither do the bad guys. The more we blend into the background - the more effective we'll be. You're third lessso is - a bad or good guy can be anyone - anywhere - anyplace. But - most likely - not at all."

Pecos stood up, "My assistant is going to pass out a series of questionnaires for you to fill out. We are doing a psychological profile on each one of you. Two pronged - for us and you. We're probing for weakness'. Need to know your vulnerabilities. These will tell us where and when you can work for us. Last thing we need is for you to be compromised - that doesn't do either of us any good. What will our questionnaires do for you? For one thing - our profile will tell you where you're strong and where you're weak. And that's a handy thing to know when the unexpected occurs. And it will. Always does - know matter how well we plan. If you know how you'll respond to any given situstion - you can control or at least modify your response. And most important - it will help you to stay away from a situation where you can demonstrate your weakness."

He flicked the ashes off his cigar, "Now - I don't mean to frighten you. Ninrty-nine percent of what you'll do is as exciting as watching grass grow. We're preparing you for that one percent. Don't try to outguess the questions. It won't help you and it sure as hell won't help us. Respond with the first thing that pops in your mind. And to help you be truthful - my assistant will attach a few wires to record your emotional response. I see three hands up. Put them down. I won't take questions. When you're done here - it will be time for you to prepare your own dinner. Best way to do that is to organize who'll do what. Steaks and greens are in the icebox - along with potatoes and vegetables. Big charcoal grill out on the patio. Use it - don't mess up the range - or you'll have to clean it. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast. Seven o'clock in this room."

The assistant attached wires - bundled inside a wrist band to Johnny's writing arm, "Press the button once for one and twice for two etceteras. Answer the questionnaires in sequence. Read and respond - don't dawdle." Johnny finished

the last question at exactly six p.m. He looked around. He was the first one done. He removed the wrist band and handed in his forms. He didn't say anything to the assistant and she didn't say anything to him. He walked out on the patio. Charcoal - matches and a lighter were on a table beside the grill, "Pretty fancy grill. Built out of river rock - must have been built in the thirties during CCC days. Better take a look at the steaks before I start a fire."

Johnny walked to the kitchen and opened the icebox, "Exact number of steaks as there are students." He picked one up, "Has to be at least twenty ounces without a bone and it's an inch and a half thick. Wonder where the instructors eat?" He looked around - found a pan and entered the pantry looking for soy sauce. Then he took a fork and tined the steaks before rubbing salt and pepper on both sides.

A second student joined him in the kitchen, "What are you doing?" "Marinating the steaks. Soak them in soy sauce - pepper - salt and a little Worcestershire sauce. Why don't you wash the potatoes - roll them in butter - salt and pepper them and wrap the whole lot in foil." "Peel them first?" "No - wash them with cold water and put as many as you can into the foil. They aren't very big. Say at least three - or four per person."

Johnny went outside to start the fire. When he returned - the rest of his class was in the kitchen. He organized a table setting - salad making and bread cutting brigade. He looked around, "Any wine? Someone check the bar in the dining room. If it's locked - break the damn thing. I'll pay for it."

The potato man asked, "Where did you learn to organize a large cookout?"

"My wife owns a piece of Sam's in Arlington."

The wine guy returned with half a case of red and half a case of white, "It was open. I'll put the white in the freezer and we'll open the red. There's German beer on ice in the bar and hard stuff for those who care for it."

Johnny poured a glass of red and tasted it, "Not bad and a cork too. The kind we pour at weddings and funerals."

After dinner - Johnny went looking for a phone and found none, "Just as I suspected - no outside phone calls from the Loneseome Pine Farm. Bobbie Jean will understand - I hope." He wandered back into the mess hall, "OOPS - forgot to set up a dish washing crew. And I better have someone build a fire in the fireplace. I don't see a TV - radio or record player for entertainment - just six game tables - poker chips and sealed decks of cards."

Finding volunteers for cleanup was not as easy as for cooking. The same crew that fixed dinner wound up with the cleaning detail. Johnny wiped his hands after the last dish was put away and spoke with the six slackers. Not to admonish them for not pulling their own weight, but to find out who they worked for. All six were associated with the State Department. He sat down in front of the fire with one of the three novels he brought with him. Later - he watched several of the poker games, but did not join in. Bobbie Jean's admonition was still ringing in his ears, "Never bet with or on anything that talks." And Bidwell's card dealing lessons when they served together in the Air Force.

All six State Department affiliates were spread out one to a table - winning with poker hands that defied the law of probability. The games were over almost before they began. A fight didn't break out, but if this had been the old west - six cheaters would have been hung. Johnny read until his eyes told him it was time. When he climbed the stairs at ten - he was the last to turn in.

The next morning at breakfast - their class had six fewer students. Before anyone could ask - Pecos Pete walked into the mess hall, "We're short six this morning. Can't abide with greenhorns from State lying on their psychological profiles. That's a clean sweep. Haven't had one of them make it past the first day since we began this course. Would have tossed them out for cheating at poker - anyway."

He reached into his pocket - pulled out a wad of bills and set them on the table. Hope you remember how much you lost. If you don't - my assistant will tell you. That's your third lesson - never trust anyone associated with or working for our State Department. Use them, but don't confide in them or let them use you. Your CIA contacts will be identified to you before you go overseas. You all passed your first test. If you hadn't - you wouldn't be here today. I gave you the don'ts. After you finish breakfast we'll cover the do's."

Johnny almost moaned as another projector was set up by Pete's assistant, but he knew better. Pecos waited for them all to be seated, "This movie is a keeper. Watch and learn the secrets of our trade - observation techniques. Not as simple as you may think. What you see may be false - or it may be true. This will help you sort it out. The next one is on how you can see without being seen. Then we'll talk about it and I'll give you my insights. Johnny Ropp - step outside with me."

Johnny followed Pecos out on the patio, "What do you want? Am I out of here?"

"Benny really stuck it to you. Had you drive out here and attend a course you really don't need. You've been in the field - haven't you?"

"If you can call Fiji a field."

"And in Germany. I just found out you were captured and

transported to Hungry. You've seen some of our best agents at work - up close."

"I can still use the training. Besides - my fellow students need a Chef."

"Okay - you can continue, but keep your mouth shut. The school solution doesn't always match up with what you saw in the field. Any questions?"

"What's for dinner?"

"Italian sausage and lots of it - with fresh peppers and pasta for the faint hearted. I watched you cook last night. I'm dining with you."

Wednesday's movies were filled with the rest of the don'ts. Don't compromise your friends - your mission - your country - or the CIA.

Thursday was spent at the firing range. Johnny was introduced to a variety of weapons - ours - theirs and others. He was taught how to use them all including silent weapons - or whatever came to hand. Hand to hand combat was demonstrated, but discouraged. If attacked he was to run away as his first defense - kill if need be - or surrender if outnumbered - out gunned - or overwhelmed.

Friday's lessons were on how the bad guys operate. This extended late into the evening. Bad guys now came in all sizes and shapes - from friend and foe alike. The heavy handed thugs of the Cold War had been replaced by faceless - nameless hordes. A very complicated set of circumstances. The school solution - look for the telltale signs of agent activity and avoid them.

The rules of engagement were drummed into their thick skulls early Saturday morning. Afterwards - two old OSS hands regaled them with tales of the good old days - all about real life scrapes from a pair who had been there and

done that. Lunch was a festive affair. A repeat of their first dinner - steak and potatoes. After that - they packed and left - all by airplane except - Johnny.

Johnny decided to pay closer attention on the drive out of Lonesome Pine Farm. He couldn't. He was flown away in a black helicopter with curtains drawn over the windows and deposited in a meadow - outside the fence line of the National Forest. He was given the keys to his car and directions, "Take the lane to the southeast - where it intersects with a gravel road. Go east and you'll see road signs leading to Leesburg Pike."

Johnny opened the door to his car and checked the odometer, "Reads the same as when I handed over the keys." He drove away - wiser, but still undecided as to his future - humming a Dylan tune -

*"The order is
Rapidly fadin'.
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changing."*

Thirty minutes later - Johnny intersected Leesburg Pike and turned east toward McLean. Two hours later - when he turned into his driveway - snowflakes were marching in on a noreast wind - two by two.

Northern Virginia

Bobbie Jean met Johnny at the door, "You didn't call - not once."

He gave her a hug, "No outside lines."

"Real secret squirrel stuff. Benny called this morning and

left a message."

"What did he have to say?"

"You are to report to the cafeteria in the second building Monday morning at eight. Have a cup of coffee at the first table and wait."

"For him?"

"No - he did say something about instructions for your next assignment."

"Are you going over with me?"

"I haven't made up my mind, but if you get anywhere near Budapest - I'll fly over and be at your side. Have to protect my investment."

"Dinner in - or out?"

"Falls Landing - I'm hungry for crab cakes."

Bobbie Jean called for reservations as Johnny showered away the dust from Lonesome Pine Farm. As he stepped out of the shower - Bobbie Jean met him - holding his clothes at arms length between the forefinger and thumbs in both hands, "Where in the world were you? Your clothes smell like they were dropped into a muddy creek and hung over an open fire." "We were in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia on the trail of the lonesome pine."

"Right - you and Arthur Godfrey. Can you tell me?"

"I just did. What time is our reservation?"

"Six - we have an early one."

"What - no professional courtesy?"

"That is professional courtesy. They are booked solid. Coat and tie tonight - my farm boy."

Bobbie Jean ordered the wine while Johnny looked over the menu, "I know what you want - crab cakes."

"And you want the pepper steak."

"No - I'll try the rock lobster tails this time. I had steak for lunch."

"Did you learn anything about your assignment in Germany?"

"No - I imagine that was what Benny's phone call was all about. I wouldn't be surprised if it was make work. Sure you won't change your mind and go with me?"

"Did you forget? We're subdividing our farm and Bidwell is in charge. I have to hang around and make sure Bidwell doesn't build the access road through our house. You saw where he placed the survey flags."

"Later - then?"

"We'll see. I thought you said it was a short duration assignment?"

"It is, but so was my trip to Fiji."

"I see your point."

They bundled up and walked to the car. Snow flakes were coming in clumps - no longer coming down in pairs. Johnny opened the passenger door of Bobbie Jean's Bentley, "We're in for another weekend storm."

"The boys have a basketball game at the high school tomorrow morning."

"That's why you bought a four wheel drive instead of the sports car I wanted. To navigate Virginia's roads when the weather turns bad."

"I'm glad we ate early. Georgetown Pike from Great Falls to McLean will be a mess in another hour."

"All hills - curves and no shoulders."

Bobbie Jean huddled close, "I'm going to miss the isolation we had - screened by our farm."

"Can we change our minds?"

"You know those six houses Bidwell is building on spec?"

"Yeah - he wanted to price them at five-hundred."

"They sold out for six-hundred."

"It's too late for them. Can't we can cancel the others?"

"Won't do any good."

"The first six are next to our house and stables?"

"Bidwell outfoxed me. He knew we might back out."

Johnny woke up to a bright - sunny winter morning. He looked outside and shaded his eyes from sun reflecting off snow covered trees. Last night's storm had passed. The wind switched from the northeast to the northwest - water droplets freezing in mid fall. He dressed - put on a pot of coffee - threw on a coat and walked down the lane - looking for the Sunday Post. As usual it was in the ditch, but this time on top the frozen snow - not soaked through with muddy water as it usually was. He walked up the lane - making a detour to the stables. Last night's fire in the pot bellied stove was almost out. He stoked it with firewood made out of the lean-to that one time covered his sheep, "Sure miss those rascals - even that worthless old ram. That's what we can do today - go to the petting farm and check on our sheep." Johnny made sure the wood was burning before he set the lid back inside its hole on top the stove.

Bobbie Jean poured coffee, "Don't forget our boys have a basketball game at one this afternoon. What were you doing out there?"

"Adding wood to the fire in the pot bellied stove in the stable. To keep the pipes from freezing. Paper isn't soaked through for a change. I was thinking about taking the family on a visit to the petting farm."

"After the game. Should be over by two-thirty. The boys will want to visit their pets - too. You miss them don't you?"

"We had them for quite a spell, but we can't afford to keep this many acres in McLean. Taxes will eat our lunch. Cold out there. What's the forecast?"

"More of the same."

And so was the rest of the day. Virginia's hilly roads and streets - covered with compacted snow and ice - as usual - were a driver's worst nightmare. Not the world's greatest drivers - the denizens of McLean played bumper cars on top of

the snow. Johnny stopped six times to extract cars from the ditches beside Virginia's shoulderless roads. And the petting farm was closed due to weather.

By early Monday morning - the roads were clear - enough so Johnny was able to make it on time to his assigned table in the second building's cafeteria. When he returned to the table with a large container of coffee - an envelope with his name on it was on the chair. He opened the envelope and read

"Stay in the cafeteria until eight-fifteen. Go to room 212 on the second floor of this building. Enter at exactly eight-twenty. You'll receive further instructions there."

Johnny looked around the cafeteria to see if there was anyone he knew. There wasn't. CIA's cafeteria was reminiscent of one you would find at an Ivy League institution. A gaggle of left leaning intellectuals in tweeds and sweaters - sipping tea and black coffee. Not an old soldier OSS home he would have pictured it to be and not the ultra right militaristic scene Hollywood painted. From experience - Johnny knew CIA was dominated by mild mannered moderates - hard to slot. If one must - CIA employees fit a category of left of center. CIA estimates were almost always more conservative than the military's and those of State Department. Johnny didn't know if policy makers at State were left or right, but he was certain they were totalitarian. He looked at his watch - it was eight-sixteen, "I'm late."

Johnny arrived at the door to room 212 at eight twenty-one - one minute late. He pushed the buzzer button, "Someone had this timed out to the second." The door opened - and a smiling young lady greeted him in a reception room, "ID please and place your left forefinger on the digital scan."

Johnny handed her his military ID. She took it and kept it, "You won't need this anymore."

"And my wife?"

"She might need hers to shop. Follow me Colonel Ropp."

She opened the third from the left of six interior doors. He followed her inside a room that contained a desk - chair and four framed sailing prints on the walls. She held the chair for him, "You'll find several packages in the top middle drawer. When you complete the forms and understand the contents of the packages - buzz me with the button on top of your desk. Three short buzzes - please."

She backed out of the room, "I'll be in the next room" and closed the door.

Johnny opened the middle drawer slowly - half expecting a jack-in-the-box surprise to jump out at him. Instead he found a manila envelope - looked it over and opened it with the letter opener he found in the desk tray. He read the cover letter, "I'm being assigned as an assistant economics diplomat in the Commerce section at our embassy in Bonn. Hmm - doesn't say anything about temporary. Better not mention that to Bobbie Jean." He looked at the accompanying map. His office building was circled in red, "Not in the embassy compound." He returned to the letter, "I'm assigned to the Operations Directorate and my immediate boss is Tom Tupelo. If he's not available - I'm to contact Benny Barnes." He memorized the two telephone numbers, "Strange - I'm not to return to CIA headquarters unless I receive instructions from one of them to do so."

Johnny opened a business letter sized envelope. Inside was a airline ticket from Dulles to Germany in Business Class. He looked at the date, "I leave in three days. So much for time off with my family. And I'll stick out like a sore thumb in Germany with this tan I picked up in Fiji." He moved on to the second page, "I'm to leave any ID that shows

military affiliation at home and if Bobbie Jean or our boys travel overseas on a visit - they are to leave anything that will identify my military association at home. Must be because of terrorist activity." Johnny was impressed, "They are thorough. I'm to replace my luggage ID with the new name tags enclosed in the little envelope." He opened the bank envelope, "Six-thousand dollars in fifty dollar bills and a special credit card." He returned to the second page and dialed the telephone number listed there.

The voice at the other end was Benny's, "You got through to the second page - so we have to assume you can read." Benny began to laugh at his own joke. He quit as soon as he began, "Take all of your credit cards - driver's license and organization cards out of your wallet and place them in the envelope you find in the drawer on your left. You'll find a second envelope with your new identity cards and driver's license. From now on all of your financial transactions will be controlled through our office. The instructions are laminated on one of the new bank cards we have provided. Read it - see if you understand. I'll wait."

Johnny sifted through the cards, "Got it. How about Bobbie Jean and the boys?"
"If they're coming over for a visit - we'll provide proper cards and identification. Make sure you let me know."
"You realize my wife is independent and has her own business to care for. She won't take kindly to CIA managing her affairs."
"We won't, but when she's overseas with you - she'll use our cards and identification."
"Benny - when do I get a chance to volunteer?"
"You don't - that's why we like hiring you military guys."
"And you don't have to pay retirement."
"Or medical after you retire."
"Any instructions?"

"When you arrive."

Benny hung up and Johnny listened to see if he could detect a recording device - which he knew was there. He couldn't.

Johnny made a quick check of the other desk drawers. They were empty. He stood up and pushed the desk chair back into its hole. He was about to push the buzzer - three times as instructed when the door opened. A smiling receptionist peered in, "You look surprised. Your desk chair is pressure sensitive. Have you followed our instructions?"

"I hope so. Is that all there is? Can I leave now?"

"Yes - you're free until you report to your assignment. Return to this room when you return to the building. Don't return to your office unless instructed to do so."

"I thought Benny or Tom would meet me."

"They would have - if you turned down the assignment."

Outside - Johnny turned up his collar for protection against the northwest wind, "Brr - wind feels much colder than it was when I went in."

Just at this moment Alice felt a very curious sensation - which puzzled her a great deal until she made out what it was - she was beginning to grow larger again and she thought at first she would get up and leave the court, but on second thought she decided to remain where she was as long as there was room for her.

13

Germany

Johnny walked down the arrival ramp - his eyes riveted on the door leading to the terminal. Standing behind a row of theater chairs - leaning against the wall was someone he wasn't looking for - Tom Tupelo. Tupelo moved toward the center aisle as Johnny entered the terminal, "Welcome to Bonn - Johnny."

"I'm glad to find someone here I know."

"With that tan - you probably thought you'd stick out like a sore thumb in this land of mist and fog. But don't worry - over five percent of the Deutsche population is returning from vacation in sunny Florida."

"Are you my sponsor?"

"After a year of taking care of you at the Pentagon - who else would they pick?"

Johnny stopped for a drink at the water fountain, "Did you arrange quarters?"

"You have a hotel suite near the embassy."

"Very expensive treatment for a low level assistant Foreign Service type."

"You'll learn. State treats their employees like visiting royalty. Especially in a country we defeated. Don't you remember counterpart funds?"

"Roger that. We took payment in their currency after the war and can only spend it in their country."

"We're no longer conquering heroes - we're targets. Your hotel has security, but watch your six. Clear customs - I'll meet you out front."

"Customs? I thought I had diplomatic immunity?"

"You do but you don't want to draw attention to yourself."

"What car should I look for?"

"A black Mercedes - over ten years old. It doesn't pay to stick out here."

As Tupelo walked away - Johnny wondered, "Why all the concern? No one is watching. At least no one I can spot." He looked for his luggage tags, "Dummy - they're attached to my ticket." He followed the signs to Customs.

Tupelo hopped out of his Mercedes and opened the trunk.. Speaking flawless German - he ordered the sky cap to place Johnny's suitcases inside. Johnny tipped him and opened the passenger side door. As they moved away from the terminal - Johnny said, "I have several questions for you."

"Not here - we'll speak at your hotel."

"About all the German I know is how to order a meal and ask where the bathroom is."

"I thought you were fluent."

"No one asked - so I didn't think it was a criteria."

"Do you know enough to drive a car and read signs so you won't step in front of a tour bus?"

"I do, but that doesn't make me fluent."

Tupelo shrugged his shoulders, "It'll have to do. I'll wait as you check in at the hotel. Meet me in the bar after you unpack."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Johnny thought, "Spy business makes for long quiet spells." He looked out at the mist, "And moments of sheer terror."

Johnny tipped the bellboy and waited for him to leave before checking giving his suite the once over, "Not bad. Has a refrigerator - a hot plate skillet and a coffee pot. I'll have to buy my own supplies. Can't use the military

stores. Wonder if the embassy has a commissary? I'll ask Tupelo." From experience - Johnny unpacked his hang up clothes first and hung them in the wardrobe. "Have to get used to rooms without closets again."

He carried his toilet case into the bathroom and rinsed his face, "Wonder if the water is good? Now that's a silly question. I'm in Germany - they take hygiene seriously here." He laughed, "and the beer is pure." Johnny closed the door to his suite and walked to the elevator, "Wonder where the security is? Haven't seen one guard." He rode the elevator down to the lobby - without stopping.

Tupelo had a half liter of the local lager waiting, "You sure took your time."

"Learned my lesson. Hang my clothes as soon as the bellboy leaves. Where is all the security you talked about?"

"Miniature TV cameras cover all the entrances and exits. You can't get in here without coming through the front door. And we have a flying squad ready to swarm where trouble happens. I won't take much of your time. I'm the Cultural Attaché at the embassy - so we won't run into each other at work. I'll figure a way to get messages to you. What do you know about economics?"

"Took a year in college and dropped it because I was bored silly."

"Perfect - frigging perfect - you don't know a thing about economics and you don't speak German. You'll fit right in with our Foreign Service crowd. Here's one of your business cards. At least you look the part."

Johnny stopped Tupelo before he got up to leave, "I have a few housekeeping questions."

"Fire away."

"Is there an embassy shop where I can buy food - beer and supplies?"

"We have a small canteen for toilet articles - coffee and that kind of stuff. The rest you'll have to purchase on the economy. How are you doing on currency?"

"Have enough to get by until I find a bank."

"Lesson number one. Use embassy counterpart funds. Banks ask too many questions. When you report for work in the morning I'll have someone show you the ropes. Dine at the hotel until you know where you're going. Won't be easy if you don't speak German."

"I know how to find a local Gast House."

"You know more than you're letting on. Don't call me at work. If I need you - I'll call you."

"What about an emergency situation?"

"You won't have one. But if you do - call our Operation's watch officer."

"In the States?"

"The miracle of modern communications."

"Do you have orders for me?"

Tupelo stood up, "In time - we'll see." He walked out of the bar.

Johnny took a sip of beer and set the stein down - smiling, "He stuck me with the bill!"

Bobbie Jean was curious, "Did you find out what you're supposed to do?"

"Still working at the same job."

"You're not going to tell me."

"I don't know, but I'm getting tired of living out of a suitcase. Embassy put me up in a hotel suite."

"Five star?"

"More like two and a-half."

"How's the weather - sunny?"

Do you remember our normal winter weather in Northern Virginia?"

"Somewhere in Virginia in the rain?"

"That's Bonn squared - with the addition of fog."

"Bet they have good home fries."

"Very funny! The potatoes here are excellent. Can't get a bad meal."

"Do you know when you'll return?"

"If I'm over here more than thirty days will you visit?"

"I have a better offer. I'll fly over in three weeks."

"I accept and as usual your timing is absolutely perfect."

"How so?"

"It will take me at least three weeks to find the local four star restaurants."

The Economics Officer was as perplexed as Johnny, "I would like to welcome you on board, but I can't. You don't work for me. I don't even know why you're assigned to me. You should be in Belgrade."

"Yugoslavia? Where they build the Yugo?"

The Economics Officer laughed, "You and I think alike. Your assignment is to review social - political - religious and economic data on Yugoslavia."

"What is the product?"

"Damned if I know unless it's a forecast."

"Where do I begin?"

"At the beginning. Try our library first and the University after that. You do speak German - don't you."

"Not very well. I'm not fluent, but I can read. Do you want to review my product."

"No."

Johnny wasn't at his desk more than ten minutes when the phone rang. It was Tupelo, "Your area of expertise is going to be the Balkans."

"That's what my Economic boss said. I know very little about the area - except for Pat Penny's reports ."

"Good - you know where to begin. I retrieved their files. I'll have them on your desk."

"Is that why I have a vault for an office?"

"The building you're in used to be a bank."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Become an expert and write an estimate. With Russia weakening the Balkans will explode again. Don't think of the Balkans as a collection of countries. Think of it as Africa with tribal groups."

"You said will explode not may."

"Study the history of Bosnia - Serbia and Croatia. See what you think."

Johnny spent the next week reviewing information from The Farm in Munich. Then he reviewed all the data he could find on the Balkans in the embassy library. When his initial review was complete - he sat down and wrote a preliminary finding -

A Balkan Primer

(Or how I learned to love ethnocentric conflict)

There are four elemental sources fundamental to the continuing conflict in the Balkans. And it is the mixture of all four that makes the Balkans a tinder box. The elemental sources of conflict is a synthesis of Tribalism - Economic - Religion and Nationalism. To begin at the beginning - the genesis of modern Balkan conflicts began when Constantine moved the Capitol of the Roman Empire east to what is now Turkey in 300 AD. In 395 the Roman Empire split into two parts with both Rome and Constantinople as capitols. In 1054 the Catholic Church split in two parts - Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. During the same time ^Rfame Islam was on the rise. Mohammed flees from Mecca to Medina in 622 and the Muslim calendar begins. The Arabs conquer lands from China to Europe. Islam is firmly entrenched until 1492 when the Moors are finally conquered

by Spain. In 1055 another ethnic group moves west from Asia - the Asian Seljuk Turks conquer Baghdad - in 1064 Armenia - in 1075 Palestine - in 1453 Constantinople - and in 1517 the Turks capture Egypt and control all of Arabia.

It wasn't until 1572 at the peace of Constantinople that Turkish expansion into Europe and the Balkans was temporarily halted. It took six years for the European powers to finally stop the Turks at Vienna - 1683 to 1689. This was the high watermark of the Turkish advance into the Balkans. In 1822 Greece declared its independence from Turkey. Turkey invades Greece and Russia declares war on Turkey. This war ends in 1829 when the Turks finally recognize Greek independence. Then in 1853 - the Crimean War begins when Turkey declares war on Russia. A year later - 1854 - Britain and France join Turkey as allies. This war ends in 1856. The decline of the Ottoman Empire becomes self evident when Italy defeats Turkey in 1911 and annexes Tripoli and Libya.

Bulgaria - Greece - Serbia and Montenegro take on Turkey in 1912 - in the Balkan Wars and defeat Turkey in 1913. European Turkey is split between the victors. The Balkan Wars flare up again in 1913 when Bulgaria attacks Serbia and Greece. Romania intervenes and Bulgaria is defeated. Turkish domination of the Balkans ends - however ethnic Turks and Islam remain.

World War I is ignited in 1914 when a Serbian terrorist assassinates Archduke Ferdinand in Bosnia. Turkey - Bulgaria - Austria - Hungary and Germany join in a war against Russia - England - France - Italy and

Japan. The treaty of Versailles draws new Balkan boundaries in 1919. World War II begins in 1939. Germany invades the Balkans. After the war is over - new Balkan boundaries are drawn again. In 1991 the Yugoslavian war erupts. Slovenia - Macedonia and Croatia declare their independence from Yugoslavia. Germany recognizes Slovenia and Croatia. In 1992 the United Nations recognizes the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serbia (Yugoslavia) continues to battle the secessionists.

What we have today is a tinderbox of ethnocentric conflicts between tribal groups. Taking Yugoslavia as a whole (Slovenia - Serbia - Croatia - Macedonia - Kosovo and Montenegro) - the ethnic groups are - Serbians (36%) - Croats (20%) - Bosnians (10%) - Slovenes (8%) - Albanians (8%) - Macedonians (6%) - Montenegrins (3%) and others (9%). And the tinderbox of religious groups in conflict - Serbian Orthodox (41%) - Roman Catholic (32%) - Muslim (10%) and other Christian (11%). And a national geography of mountains and valleys that leads to isolation and a mentality of us against them not unlike our own Appalachia. And an economic conflict between emerging capitalism and a dictatorship of the proletariat. And who knows how many are Turks have remained behind in Kosovo - Albania - Macedonia and Montenegro.

Short of building a fence around Yugoslavia - dropping weapons in by air and waiting for the tribes to have at each other - there is no solution for a millennium of unresolved territorial and religious disputes. Alexander the Great and his armies came out of this region in 329 BC and conquered the known world - so these folks come from a long line of warriors. Another problem is determining who owns what and when did they own it. Think

of Israel and Palestine and the territorial battles there. These disputes go back over a thousand years. Those countries closest to the area - Italy - Germany - Greece - Turkey - Romania - Bulgaria - etc. are reluctant to get involved. Those furthest away - Russia - Great Britain - France and the United States are not and may wind up stationing peace keepers (military troops) there to keep the various factions from killing each other - not unlike the legions of Rome - 2000 years ago. Forecast - if we get involved think of Brer Rabbit - tar baby and a potential for another World War.

Tupelo looked up - after reading the estimate Johnny handed him, "Do you know what information we need?"
"Well - there's not much we can do to keep them from fighting. It must be essential for us to know when one of these tribes is going to have at it with another one."
"And who best can do that?"
"Pat Penny and his Balkan network."

Moscow

Natasha shivered - her apartment felt colder than a Siberian Husky caught outside in a winter snowstorm. At first she thought she felt cold because of her long stay in the South Pacific.
Her Mother insisted otherwise, "I can't remember it being this cold in Moscow. Wait - now I remember. It was colder the year the Germans were at our gates. Was it 1941 - or 1942. Does it seem that long ago?"
"You're memory is always right - Mother. The Germans invaded in 1941. It is only twenty below today, but the wind makes it feel colder. It will get better for us. The Central Committee has promised me a new apartment with my promotion to Colonel."
Mother smiled, "A promotion to Colonel and you are so young, but a new apartment. When generals are not receiving pay."

"It is different when one works directly for the head of state."

When Natasha returned from the South Pacific - The Chairman of The Central Committee called for her to come in to the Kremlin - so he could personally congratulate her. He pinned on three button Colonel shoulder boards to her uniform and kissed her on both cheeks. She received a substantial money bonus from The Central Committee Secretary in his office shortly afterwards. And she was now allowed to shop in The Central Committee private store. Her Mother - who refused to go to KGB stores - would no longer have to que up for food and clothes. And now she was allowed to stay home for her first vacation in years. However - even her new exalted status could not overcome the chilling cold of one of Moscow's severest winters. And in the back of her doubting Russian peasant mind was a nagging thought, "When everything is right - misfortune is waiting - around the corner."

Six weeks later - when the call came for Natasha to return to work - she was rested and ready - even if it meant more training - which she hated. A covered military vehicle came to her apartment in the dark of early morning. She was driven outside of Moscow to a compound surrounded by thick pines - a KGB training facility for special agents. Natasha knew what to expect - she had been through this drill many times. First a complete medical examination and then the strength and flexibility tests. As usual - she passed these with the highest marks. Then - she received an update on the latest silent killing techniques followed by intense study on current terrorists - other country's agents and world activity. She was surprised, "They didn't cover my latest effort in the South Pacific." But she kept this thought to herself. Still - an alarm bell began to ring in the back of her mind. Weapons training was the last item - before she could return to Moscow.

By the end of the week Natasha had requalified as a top weapons expert. She was pleased, but she knew shooting at paper targets meant little. She knew, "To shoot to kill at a live target - that takes will not just skill."

Natasha returned to her apartment in the dead of night - as she had left it - in a covered military vehicle. Her Mother was waiting, "Do you want me to stay - or may I return home."

"You may go home. When I am called - my belongings will be transferred to my new apartment."

"Where is it?"

"With the ministers - near the Kremlin. Have you shopped at the new store?"

"No - I looked in, but it did not feel right. I was not dressed well enough."

"Come back tomorrow. I will take you out to buy clothes - so you will feel comfortable."

"I only need a few things."

"You will look like a Western woman when we are finished."

"How do Western women dress?"

"In comfortable clothes. Casual elegance."

"Our clothes are comfortable."

"They are not elegant."

"I will wait for your call."

Natasha allowed the phone to ring six times. She picked up and said, "Hello."

It was not a call from The Central Committee. It was a pleasant lady from the Central Housing Authority, "Your apartment is available. I'm having it cleaned and painted. You may move in next week."

"May I move my dishes and clothing in earlier?"

"Will tomorrow be soon enough?"

"We will stay out of the painters way."

"Your move is our top priority."

Natasha asked, "Will you send workers to help pack my dishes?"

We can move them for you tomorrow. If you agree - I'll have your dishes packed today."

Natasha was speechless, "Of course. Your people - are they reliable? Mother and I will be shopping this afternoon."

"I give you my personal guarantee - there will be no problems. This is a ministerial move."

Natasha hung up and dialed her Mother, "I will be moving into my apartment next week. While they are packing this afternoon - you and I will shop for your clothing. We can stop in and preview my new home."

"You have not seen it?"

"No - the minister still lived there."

"What happened to him?"

"He was transferred to the east."

"Siberia?"

"No - Kamchatka."

"Will I be allowed to stay in your apartment while you're away?"

"Of course - you are my Mother."

Her move was fast - clean - efficient - smoother than Natasha expected in Moscow. Not one piece of furniture scratched - or dish broken. And her apartment! It was like one of the hotel suites in Hollywood movies. Six spacious rooms - two bathrooms - a kitchen - a garage for her auto and warm - it even had a thermostat. Her Mother was in shock, "So this is how our government ministers live. Not even our Tsar had rooms this large. How much space do you have?"

"I am told over three-thousand square meters."

"Six families could live in here and not bump into each other. When will your children see it?"

"Not until spring. Do you think they will like it?"

"I'm not sure. It will take getting used too."

This time when the telephone rang six times - Natasha knew it was a call from The Central Committee. And it was The Secretary, "How do you like your new home?"

"I am very pleased. It is so large - and warm. Is it appropriate to thank you and The Central Committee?"

"I am happy to have been of service."

"Is this a business call?"

"Yes - a car will arrive in an hour."

"Should I pack?"

"No - you will have plenty of time for that."

Natasha's mental alarm was ringing out of control.

Natasha - dressed in a Colonel's uniform - her hair still damp from a quick bath - braved the northwest wind in the center courtyard. Not only did her new building have the very finest of military guards - entrance could only be gained through the courtyard. A black limousine stood waiting. She entered the back seat wondering, "When did we switch to Mercedes?" And as an afterthought, "How many more rides will I take before my assassin comes?"

Her limo moved silently over the snow of the courtyard - out onto Moscow's streets. She watched snowflake after snowflake stick and melt on her window, "When will I become a liability? Is it now? I could easily have become an albatross around the neck of my government. It is time to make plans for my family and me - if we are to survive. I wonder why Bulgar did not? Hubris! It had to be blind pride. That would not happen to a Russian woman. We trust no one."

Natasha followed her two man military escort to The Secretary's office. She waited in the outer room - watching his military aid shuffle through a stack of papers and correspondence. Her military escort stayed on - standing at attention on both sides of her chair. Her mental alarm bell

rang louder, "I have never been kept waiting before. And meetings were always held in the inner conference room. The one between The Chairman and Secretary's offices." The Secretary's military aid stood up, "Colonel Natasha - The Secretary is ready." Natasha's escort led the way. One opened the door while the other stood at attention.

She entered to The Secretary's greeting, "Welcome Colonel" and the door closed after her. He pointed to a chair, "Please sit down. Will you join me in a cup of tea?" Natasha felt like a cow walking the ramp to a slaughterhouse - at that moment in time when it smelled the death inside. She nodded, "Yes" demurely and sat down in an overstuffed chair. The Secretary poured tea into two golden cups. Her military escort carried the tea to her end of the table and set it on a small tea table. The Secretary sat down in a solid wood chair at the far end of the table - looking down on her. Neither spoke for what seemed like two minutes to Natasha.

She finally broke the silence, "How may I be of assistance to Mother Russia?" The Secretary reached inside his coat pocket and removed a white envelope. He slid it across the table. Natasha picked it up before it fell on the floor. He motioned with his hand for her not to open it, "You may" he nodded toward the door to the inner conference room, "open it in there." When he stood up - she did - too. His eyes were vacant as he spoke, "Leave the envelope and its contents on the table when you leave." He kissed her on both cheeks, "Good hunting - Tovarishch!"

Natasha walked to the inner conference room door - her eyes straight ahead. Her military escort appeared from the shadows and opened the door as she approached. She sat down at the conference table - composed herself and asked her

escort for another cup of tea. When he returned - she took a sip and nodded, "You may go now." When the door closed behind him - she opened the envelope -

Your targets are Pat Penny - his wife Patricia Penny and his Stepdaughter Penelope Penny. Their current location is Villa Penny outside of Budapest - Hungary. You are authorized to pursue at will. You may depart for Budapest in six days - no sooner. Until then - your time is your own.

Natasha folded her orders - placed them in the envelope - laid it on the table and stood up. She smoothed out her uniform skirt. Her military escort opened the door to the hall and she followed - briskly to the hall outside. All of the Kremlin doors opened as she approached. She was being rushed from one to another and out of the building. Outside - her limo door opened as she approached and closed as she entered. Inside she allowed herself to think, "Pat Penny? He is fish food in Hawaii. Are the orders real or a sham? If he is alive - he and his family will be impossible to approach at his Villa. And his wife and daughter - too. Why?" At that moment her mental alarm bell drowned out all other thoughts.

As the limo turned onto Moscow's streets - she slowly gathered her thoughts, "Very unusual - I was not given a time limit. And even more unusual - I was not given my usual support. I was not even given a name to contact at our Hungarian Embassy. Natasha - I believe it is time to begin planning a family escape. The bells of hell are going ring-a-ling for you." Her limo sped through the streets of Moscow to a very familiar haunt - the KGB special armory. The one reserved for agents - licensed to commit wet procedures.

Natasha was pleased, "This is the armory where I met my husband and sharpened my sense of smell on the aroma of black powder." The limousine entered an empty underground parking garage - slowly approaching the far wall - blinking its headlights six times - then six times more and six times more. The cement wall moved upwards. The limo moved forward into an immense underground man made cavern and stopped at the far end. Her driver opened the door, "I will wait until you return - Colonel."

"Go to the canteen and have tea. I will be awhile."

Natasha strode through empty corridors to her personal supply of weapons, "This silence is unnerving. I remember when this armory was alive with activity. I suspect I am the last of my kind - a dying breed - no longer needed by my Country." She unlocked her personal gun cabinet and selected a high powered rifle - two pistols and a silencer for each. She looked at the other cabinets. All were empty. An orderly appeared. She handed him her weapons, "Take these to the firing range. Where are the others?"

"There are no others - Colonel."

"Is the canteen open?"

"Yes - they are waiting with your special order."

Natasha looked inside the canteen and said to the cook, "You remembered!" She carried away a platter filled high with Russian country sausage to a table behind a partition reserved for special agents. She sat down to strong - dark tea - buttered black Russian bread and a mound of greasy sausage links. She nibbled on sausage and looked around, "The condemned Colonel eats a hearty meal and for a change no one is around to watch."

Natasha gorged herself. Droplets of grease dripped from her chin to the plate as she devoured sausage link - after sausage link - after sausage link. The glaze finally lifted

from her eyes as she buttered a thick slice of black Russian bread. Alert again - she wiped the grease away from her fingers and from around her mouth. She sipped the last drop of tea from her teacup - pushed the chair away from the table and brushed the crumbs away from her uniform.

Except for the single orderly - Natasha was alone at the range. She selected her ammunition - carefully weighing each bullet - discarding those that were more than a half a gram off her specified weight. She called for the orderly to come over, "I had to throw out half of these bullets. What is the problem?"

"We lack personnel. When you leave today and your weapons are shipped - the armory will close down."

"How many are left?"

"Me - the cook and a caretaker."

"When I am finished - make sure my weapons and the bullets I select are sent to our embassy in Hungary. My life may depend on it"

He nodded, "Yes" and backed away - returning to his spotter's station.

Natasha loaded two rounds and fired and repeated this process until she had tested one weapon after another. There was only one hole in the center of her hand gun target and only one in the high powered rifle target. After cleaning each weapon she handed all three to the orderly and waited. He sealed each weapon in plastic and placed them carefully in a sturdy wooden box. After the boxes were sealed - Natasha thanked him, "Remember - to our embassy in Budapest" She stopped at the Director's office to say goodbye.

The door was open. She looked inside - it was empty. She walked to her office to check for messages. It was empty - her desk and all of her personal belongings were gone. She walked across the hall and looked into Bulgar's old office.

It was exactly as he had left it. Even the wall decorations were still up, "He has his memorial - will I have one? No - who would see it?" She walked quickly to the entrance and stepped outside into the parking garage. She breathed a sigh of relief, "At least my limousine is still here. Calm down Natasha - you are too nervous. Soon you will be jumping at from shadows."

Her driver held the door open, "To your apartment - Colonel?"

"Drive around the outskirts of Moscow. I need time to think. To view a fresh snowfall is the best tonic." Natasha leaned back and closed her eyes, "I am the last of the new breed of assassins. We were trained to kill without remorse and without joy. Our training was complete. I feel no remorse and my only joy is in flawless execution of my work. Therein lies the error my superiors made when they trained us. I will execute a flawless escape - not only for me, but for my family - too. But - I am late. My timetable was for next winter - when our borders should be more porous. Slow down Natasha - haste is an error waiting to happen."

She opened her eyes and looked out on a countryside covered with new white snow and closed them again. "I must not alert anyone above - or those below. I must ignore the obvious - that the world around me has changed and give an appearance that all is normal. I have six days before I must leave. More than enough time for a warm vacation at a Black Sea dacha. Will that raise a red flag? No - each year we vacation on the Black Sea. This is earlier than normal, but not out of the ordinary. My family can escape from there. I have a friend who will do anything for my affection. And he does pleasure me. But to where? To escape is not enough. I must have a plan - a destination. Slow down Natasha - you will find a place and a way. Take your time and think this problem through."

She opened her eyes again and signaled for the driver to return to Moscow. She looked out the window - counting snow flakes, "What did Bulgar do when he knew his time was coming? Nothing - if he knew he did nothing. He didn't know it was his time until he discovered I was the one. He should have known immediately - when I was assigned to work with him. He always worked alone. And when he discovered it was me - all he did was replace the poison I carried in my purse with water. Was it pride - love of country - or stupidity that made him stay when it was time to go? No - it was none of those. It was loyalty that killed him. He was from the old school. I am not. Should I follow his example - remain loyal and die? I am from peasant stock. He was from the aristocracy. I am a peasant. I will survive."

She sat on the edge of her seat as the limousine entered the center courtyard of her apartment building. The driver opened the door, "Will you need me - later?"
"Not today - I will remain here. Tomorrow - yes."

As Natasha opened the door to her apartment - an escape plan unfolded in her mind. She closed the door and removed her coat, "I will call today. My children will leave school tomorrow and return home. If I am going to save them - I must act now. She picked up the phone and dialed MWR - the KGB Morale - Welfare and Recreation office. A fat - lazy sounding - pig of a bureaucrat answered, "It is late - call back tomorrow."

"This is Colonel Natasha Noscent. If I call on you tomorrow it will be to kill you. Do you understand?" She could sense the hair rise on this pig's back. Within the KGB her fame had spread far and wide.

Fear was in his voice. It broke - as he responded in a fawning tone, "Your wish is my command - Colonel. Where do you want to go."

"Do you have my file?"

The line was silent as he opened the VIP file drawer.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I have your file."

"I will need a dacha on the Black Sea - the one I used last year - for six days. And arrange transportation for me - my two children and my Mother for tomorrow afternoon."

"You are eligible for one much larger - with servants."

"My children love this dacha. Maybe I will convince them of a minister's dacha the next time. Can we look at one while we are there?"

"I will arrange it. Is there anything else?" "Have it ready - including food."

Natasha hung up - smiling to herself, "So far - so good. My pattern will look normal. A Black Sea vacation with my family before going away on a mission fits my pattern. The Central Committee will not be concerned. I will be watched from now on. If so - I will use this surveillance to my advantage. I will use my watchers as they use me. It will be a fun game and the stakes will be high - my life and there death."

Natasha telephoned her children's academies and cleared the way for their return home. At first - the academies refused to cooperate. No one was allowed out in mid term except for a death in the family. Natasha gave them The Central Committee's priority number and all resistance ceased. Natasha then telephoned her Mother. A trip south after Father Frost had long overstayed his welcome was an eagerly awaited tonic. Natasha hung up and began to undress, "All that remains is for me to arrange the date and place of refuge for my family's departure to the west."

Natasha pulled the drapes. Her new apartment was not close enough to the street to display her body for all to see. She made tea and prepared a hot bath, "It is wonderful to have an apartment so warm. I can walk around without

clothes. I feel free at last. I am not hungry, but what is it I want? Now I remember - the drink Colonel Ropp made for me. Vodka and ginger beer - a Moscow Mule. I do not have ginger geer. I do have vodka - tomato juice and hot pepper. I will make a Bloody Mary. It is time to get used to western ways. You will do fine - Natasha. You are schooled in their language and customs. And we no longer train assassins. I will be a hard one to eliminate. They must send an untrained one after me."

She mixed her drink - pouring in two fingers of vodka. The hot pepper made her cough and then smile. Natasha peeked out through the curtains for one last look at the night snows of Moscow. She stared at the headlights on the street - shining like stars through a light snowfall, "I will miss your quiet nights - Mother of all the Russias. I will miss you even more if I am no longer alive. It is better to be a live expatriate than a dead loyalist. When the government changes again - I may yet return.

Natasha walked to her Roman style bathroom and slipped slowly from the back of the sunken tub into a very hot bath - her thoughts on her family and where they should go ashore after an escape across the Black Sea.

Natasha awoke early - to an aroma of spicy Russian sausage. Her children were being picked up at eight-thirty. She frowned, "They will never live in our new apartment. Maybe it is better that they don't. Her Mother who had arrived early in the evening - yesterday had breakfast ready and waiting. Last night - Natasha was the one that insisted they pack light. Her Mother agreed but raised her eyebrows when she saw Natasha pack their precious family mementos. As usual - she worried, "They may break on our flight." "Mother - until I'm certain about the security here - we must take them with us. We have our own private flight."

Inside the limousine - on their way to Moscow's airport - Anna and Peter - Natasha's children couldn't contain their excitement. A trip to the Black Sea in the middle of a cold Russian winter was a treat in itself. To vacation at their favorite dacha - was butter on the bread. They weren't even upset with Mother when she made them carry their lessons. She did not let on that the lessons were a subterfuge. That would come later at a family meeting. Anna - her daughter bubbled over, "Will we get to see the great Black Sea Fleet?" Natasha had been waiting for this opening, "Yes and if Oleg Mastrovsky's ship is in port - I will arrange a visit. Calm down you two. You're like inmates celebrating early release from one of our Siberian gulags." Natasha smiled - even she was caught up in their holiday mood.

Her driver entered through the private gate at Moscow's airport and drove straight to their plane. Anna hopped out and looked it over. She called back excitedly, "It's an Ilyushin Il-18 turboprop. We must be traveling with a very important person. Who is it?"

Her Grandmother beamed, "It is your Mother. She has been promoted and given courtesy reserved only for government ministers."

A steward walked down the entry ramp, "Colonel Noscent?"

"Yes."

"Where do you want your luggage?"

"Is there anyone else traveling with us?"

"No."

"On board with us in the passenger compartment. My children have studies to complete."

There limousine driver drove a safe distance away from the Il-18 and telephoned his control, "They are boarding their flight."

"Anything unusual?"

"No - just enough luggage for only a short visit. They have

the appearance of a happy family on their way to a Black Sea vacation. Colonel Noscent mentioned a Black Sea Fleet Captain - Oleg Mastrovsky. Her children want to see the Black Sea Fleet. The Colonel said she would arrange a visit if the Captain's ship if he is in port."

"Was the Colonel's Mother with her?"

"Yes."

"And you saw or heard nothing unusual?"

"No - Colonel Noscent is as usual - not very talkative."

Sevastopol - Black Sea

Natasha telephoned The Central Committee Secretary's office from a secure military phone at the airport as soon as they landed in Sevastopol, "We are vacationing at a Black Sea dacha. I will leave from here on a direct flight to Hungary in five days. Can you make arrangements?"

His military aid came on the line and asked, "For yourself or for you and your family?"

"Only for me. My family will stay on for a week and return to Moscow. If things go right - I may be back at the same time as they are. Are there any changes to my instructions?"

"No - continue on as you were directed."

When she walked out on the tarmac - her limousine stood ready - packed and doors open. The driver asked, "To your dacha - Colonel."

"Yes - my children are anxious to begin their vacation. Has your weather been warm?"

"For Moscow - yes. For our Black Sea resort - no. We have had too many days below freezing, but a warm front is due tomorrow."

"Then your weather will be better tomorrow. I order it to be so."

And her children laughed.

Natasha was pleased with the limousine. It was a Mercedes,

"We are in the midst of change."

After they arrived at the dacha - only Natasha noticed the watcher. He had his fishing line in the water - several hundred meters down the beach.

Natasha - her arms folded in front of her - clinging to an open cardigan sweater - stared out toward a sea matching its name. A cold forbidding water - painted black from the shade of low - thick - dark clouds. The dark skies and wind carried a cold afternoon mist. But this rain did not deter her children. As soon as the luggage was inside their dacha - they changed into swimsuits and dashed across the pebble strewn sand toward the sea. Natasha shivered from a mental chill as she watched her children swim in Black Sea winter waters. She turned away, "I wonder - would I have gone in water that cold when I was that young? Silly woman - don't you remember chopping through the ice on Moscow's river? You were the first to jump in and the last to climb out."

She picked up the phone and dialed the Black Sea Fleet headquarters and inquired, "Is Captain Oleg Mastrovsky's ship in port?"

The duty officer replied, "I am not allowed to provide ship information."

"I am Colonel Natasha Noscent. My Central Committee number is ..."

There was only a slight delay before an answer came in a trembling voice, "Captain Mastrovsky's ship is the Grisha Corvette - *Orca*. His ship is first in line at our main dock. May I advise him of your inquiry?"

Natasha looked at her watch, "Yes and send a car for me. I will visit his ship this afternoon." Natasha hung up, "A Grisha Corvette! My dear friend Oleg has moved up in his naval world."

Natasha was piped aboard Captain Mastrovsky's ship with the courtesy and flourish of a Russian Fleet Admiral. Oleg

greeted her at the top of the gangplank - kissing her on both cheeks, "Welcome aboard - Colonel. I see we have reached the same rank, but you - you have the status of a minister. May I inquire why you are honoring my ship with a visit? Have you decided to accept my offer of marriage?"

Natasha kissed Oleg on both cheeks, "It is the best offer I have received. Aren't you going to offer a lady the courtesy of tea?"

"Of course." He dismissed his ceremonial sailors and took Natasha's arm in his - leading her to his cabin.

He opened the door, "Would you care for a drink stronger than tea?"

Natasha smiled and held his hand, "Vodka and orange juice. I am on vacation here - with my family. This is not an official visit."

Oleg poured two glasses - mixed to Natasha's specifications and sat down beside her. He raised his glass, "Za Vacha Zdorovye - my sweet one."

"What does your ship's name - *Orca* stand for. It is not one of our Russian heroes."

"*Orca* is Latin for killer whale. A very appropriate name for an antisubmarine warfare ship don't you think?"

Natasha sipped the warm mixture of vodka and sweet orange liquid from her glass and placed her hand on Oleg's inner thigh - resting it there - gathering warmth.

Oleg - visibly bothered and sexually aroused - stood up and refilled his glass to the brim with vodka. He drank half - locked his cabin door and removed his uniform coat. He drank the rest of the glass - refilled it with vodka - removed his tie - and unbuttoned his shirt. When he turned around - Natasha was resting on his bunk - her sweater and skirt on the floor - without clothes. Oleg drained his glass and removed the rest of his uniform. When he turned around -

Natasha was under his sheets smiling - beckoning for him to approach with her forefinger. Oleg stumbled over his shorts as he attempted to remove them and hurried to Natasha's side - his shorts still hanging from one ankle. He collapsed in her arms.

Afterwards - Oleg rested his head on one hand - admiring Natasha's smooth skin - sleek lines and the perfect arch of her breasts, "If I had known we would be this good together - I would have continued my pursuit of you in spite of your objections. Have you decided to accept my proposal?"

"Yes - we will be married - soon. But first we must talk." She nodded with her head toward the speaker on the wall. Oleg nodded, "Yes." He sat up, "It is time for you to see my ship."

As she dressed Natasha added, "And Russian sausage and tea in your wardroom?"

"I will arrange it. When will we be married. I wish to make an announcement of our intentions to my superiors."

"Not now, but soon my love - soon."

Natasha knew this conversation would be recorded. It was her wish that it be transmitted to Moscow. Only then would The Central Committee know of her passionate love affair. It would give purpose to her vacation and cover for her family's escape.

Outside - on their tour of his ship - Oleg stopped below the navigation radar. He held her hand, "Now we can talk. I can't stop the rotation of this damn radar and it can't be repaired. We have no spare parts. The noise of its rotation will cover our conversation."

Natasha spoke with directness - in full command of herself and Oleg, "Marriage was but one of the reasons I sought you out - I have come to collect a debt of honor."

"I have not forgotten. I am indebted to your late husband."

He saved my life. He pulled me down - out of the line of fire when we were in special KGB weapons training class." Natasha did not mention that it was she who was aiming the weapon at Oleg.

She took his hand in hers, "It is time for you to save his family."

"I will. What task do you have for me?"

"I need transportation to a safe harbor for my Mother and children. Can your ship accommodate them?"

"Are you defecting?"

Natasha studied his face - looking for deceit.

He continued, "If we are to be married - I will not wither away in our homeland. I will go with you."

"And my family?"

"I will carry them like precious cargo to wherever you wish."

"Where do you recommend?"

"The Bulgarian Coast - near Sabia on the border of Romania. My ship is scheduled to sail in twelve days."

"Will you come along?"

"Of course. Where will you be?"

Natasha paused and rushed ahead - confident of his trust, "I have a mission in Hungary for The Central Committee. I will meet you on the coast. Can you give me a precise location and time."

"We will make landfall on the beach six miles north of Sabia at six in the morning sixteen days from now. Can you have a car ready and safe passage arranged for our escape?"

"Yes - come to my dacha for dinner tonight. I will introduce you to my family. Can you stay for the night?"

"Of course. Is it safe to talk there?"

"I have at least one watcher and of course the dacha has microphones. We can speak as we walk along the beach - like two lovers should. And we'll have a full moon."

"We can make our final arrangements as we walk."

Natasha squeezed his hand, "Are you hungry? I am - for your sausage and tea."

After the meal, Natasha turned - smiled and waved to Oleg from the bottom of the gangplank - then turned away and walked along the docks to her waiting limousine. As her driver opened the door - she entered thinking, "I will never marry Captain Oleg Mastrovsky. The thought of going through life with such a brute makes me shudder. Oleg is a pig among pigs - a lout among louts. But - he is very athletic in bed - eager to perform his duty. What endurance! What stamina! It could have been the vodka. Natasha smiled to herself as her limousine left the naval yard, "The Central Committee will believe I am in love. But - they fail to remember - a Black Widow never loves a prey afterwards. Devour - yes."

Captain Oleg Mastrovsky arrived at the dacha promptly at six. He brought along a sailor's uniform and two Sea Cadet uniforms in a Russian Navy duffel bag. He kissed Natasha on both cheeks, "These are for your children to wear when they visit my ship." He pointed to the sailors uniform, "A gift for your Mother. She will need something to wear in the cold sea air."

Natasha took the gifts and handed them to her daughter, "Why don't you and Peter run upstairs and try on these uniforms while Captain Mastrovsky and I take a walk on the beach."

"Yes - Mother. What if they don't fit?"

"Your Grandmother is an excellent seamstress."

As they crunched pebbles - walking on the beach - Natasha spoke, "The clouds have covered a full moon. Our watcher will have a hard time tracking us. Have you made arrangements for your ship to be at the Bulgarian Coast on the prescribed time? Will you be able to carry my children?"

"I have made arrangements. What about your Mother?"

"She refuses to go. Mother will not leave her friends in Moscow for an uncertain future in a strange new world."

"Isn't your Mother worried about what will happen if you defect?"

"No we have a brave new world order. The Central Committee will come after you and me, but never an old woman. She will bring our children to your ship when the time comes and stay behind - covering their departure. She will not return to Moscow until you and our children are safely ashore."

They continued walking along the beach - carrying their shoes when they reached a sandy strip - in silence. As they turned to walk back to the dacha - Natasha held Oleg's arm with her hand. She squeezed it, "How will I guide your boat to shore?"

"We will use a simple code. You will have to buy a lantern. At exactly ten minutes to six in the morning - as I approach - I will blink my lantern six times. You will blink yours six in response - wait sixty seconds and blink six times more. Then leave your lantern on steady - to guide my boat to shore."

Will your ship remain in port until you sail?"

"Yes - our Black Sea Fleet is short of funds. Our time at sea is severely restricted. I am under orders not to depart any sooner than twelve days from now."

"The sea air has done wonders for my appetite. Mother has prepared beef and sausage for dinner and I have brought along French wine from The Central Committee store. You and I will celebrate our engagement in style - tonight." As they crossed the sand to her dacha - Natasha looked around for a watcher and saw none. She was about to mention how strange this was to Oleg, but decided not too. Instead - she laughed and ran on ahead - wet sand flying from the soles of her feet. She turned and mocked a much slower Oleg. As she sat next to him on the porch steps - wiping sand from her feet -

Natasha looked out on the Black Sea. It was still - as calm and dark as its name. In the quiet of evening it came to her - like lightning in a bottle. She knew the future and hoped that Oleg did not.

When Oleg left Natasha's bed and returned to his ship in the dark of early morning - Natasha did not return to bed. She entered the kitchen and began to prepare a breakfast of sausage and black Russian bread for her family. When all was ready - she climbed the stairs and whispered to her sleeping children, "Wash your faces and come downstairs for breakfast. I have an important matter to discuss with you. Be quiet. Do not wake your Grandmother."

Anna whispered back, "Are you going to marry Captain Mastrovsky?"

Natasha smiled, "Do you want me too?"

"No - he smells and he is such a dolt. I do not want him for my father."

"Can you keep a secret my little one?"

"With my life."

"I told Oleg I will marry him, but I will not. I need his assistance. Please - my darling - hold this secret as you would protect your life - it will depend on it."

Natasha decided to wait for Anna and Peter to finish their breakfast before beginning her family discussion. Peter stood up - ready to run out to the beach. Natasha stopped him by touching his arm, "Sit down. We must discuss your future - whether we will be together or apart. When I am finished - I will give you two choices. You must choose between leaving our country or staying with your Grandmother. I have been promoted and given the privileges of a minister. But - dear ones - this is but a ruse. If I stay in Russia - I will be eliminated. If I am to remain alive - I must flee our homeland. If you choose to stay - you will be thrown out of your academies. You will lose all of your privileges.

You will live in Grandmother's one room apartment - or return with her to your ancestor's village. If you decide to go with me - we will make a new life in the west where we will have privliges that are beyond your wildest dreams. Your choice is this - to remain here in poverty or go with me to a land of opportunity. It is up to each of you to decide. I will respect your decision. I am going to sit out on the front porch and drink tea while you make up your minds."

Anna opened the front door, "Mother - we have decided. Come in and freshen up your tea."
Natasha poured a fresh cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table with her children, "What is your decision?"
Anna spoke, "If we go with you - how are we to leave and where will we go?"
"You will depart on Captain Oleg Mastrovsky's Grisha Corvette - *Orka* in eleven days. He will carry you to shore in a long boat four days later. That is why he brought Sea Cadet uniforms. I have business in Hungary. I leave in four days. I will be waiting for you on the Bulgarian Coast and will drive you to Hungary. After that - I do not know. England or America - wherever I receive the best offer."
Anna spoke for both of them, "We will go with you Mother."
Natasha held them in her arms, "You have made me very happy. Now my little ones - do not tell anyone about our plans. Our lives depend on your silence. Obey Captain Mastrovsky, but if you think he is placing you in danger - save yourselves first and damn the consequences."

"Let the jury consider their verdict," the King said for the twentieth time ...

"No - no!" said the Queen. "Sentence first - verdict afterwards."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Alice ... "The idea of having the sentence first!"

14

Budapest Hungary

Natasha breezed through airport security. And her bags sailed through unchecked - as befitted her new ministerial status. As she waited for her flight - Natasha looked for, but could not find her expected tagalong. She was relieved and worried at the same time, "There has always been one." She slapped her left fist against the right palm, "Natasha - calm down. You're letting emotions control your brain. Your driver reports to his control and his control reports to his superior and he does the same. The Central Committee knows your every move. Stay alert - if security is lax on this end death will certainly be waiting on the other."

Natasha's flight was not a pleasant one. Flying on a regional carrier meant her First Class seat was the same as Coach. The tea was as cold as the sausages. And it didn't get any better when she arrived at Budapest Airport. She was greeted by the lowest ranking member of the Cultural Attachés staff. He introduced himself with a tenor whine, "My name is David. You are to follow me."

"I am Colonel Natasha Noscent and you will show my rank and ministerial status respect or you will be reassigned to an embassy in hell."

David's dress was as scruffy as his demeanor. A mousy middle aged man - thin - with thick glasses and a permanently bent over gait - he refused to handle her luggage through customs. Natasha made a mental note, "If I must eliminate an assassin from among our embassy personnel - this David will join him in hell."

As she entered the waiting embassy car - she slammed the door in David's face and rolled down the window, "You are the lowest level of pond scum. You are ordered to return to the embassy on foot. Now - enjoy your walk home!" Natasha ordered the embassy driver - a Hungarian, "Drive on - we are leaving that impostor here. He cannot be Russian. He must be a Kosovar."

She leaned back - her head against the headrest - and closed her eyes, "Is this a premeditated effort to put me off guard? They must have known that wimp would irritate and distract me." Natasha focused her mind on nothingness and slowly her inner calm returned. She opened her eyes, "I must pay attention to the passing scenery. I may be on my own in this Budapest - much sooner than I expect. If my intuition is correct - they will believe I have already fallen into their trap. I thought they would send only one assassin. I am honored - The Central Committee may have sent an entire squad of assassins.

Natasha watched the passing scenery with admiration, "What an unusual town - with Buda on one side of the Danube and Pest on the other. It is much more alive than I expected - like the movies I saw of Paris when I was in Washington DC. Restaurants and Cafes dot the streets. They have repaired the damage our tanks did during the uprising. When was it? Think Natasha - remember your history lesson - it was 1956. Has it been that long? The Hungarian people certainly seem happy and free." Her limo passed by a restaurant that caught her eye, "Strange - a German restaurant? In Budapest."

Her driver answered, "*Rhine Jager?* it is owned by the Penny family. It is our finest - they only cook food grown at their Villa in the country outside of town. Would you like a reservation for dinner tonight?"

Natasha covered a broadening smile with her hand, "I'm not certain - I'll think on it."

She closed her eyes, "I can't believe my good fortune. I have found Three Penny's Achilles' heel on my drive in from the airport." She asked, "How far away is the restaurant from our embassy?"

Her driver responded, "Less than two miles. Have you changed your mind about the restaurant reservation?"

"Yes - for seven."

"Will you dine alone?"

"Yes."

Inside the courtyard of the embassy - the Cultural Attaché opened the door for Natasha, "Didn't my assistant greet you at the airport?"

"Is that who he was? He decided to walk home. Can I get my clothes pressed by someone on the embassy staff? I just came from a vacation on the Black Sea and dampness has ruined the creases in my skirts."

The attaché frowned, "David is one of my best men. We have valet service - Colonel. How long do you plan to stay?"

"Until my mission is finished."

"Can I or my staff be of assistance?"

"Thank you. If I need you or your staff - I will give you ample notice. Did my box arrive from Moscow?"

"It is in your room. You will need claw hammer and clippers to remove the metal straps and nails."

"Have them sent up with the valet. Is the embassy kitchen still open?"

"It will be."

"Have the cook prepare sausages and black Russian bread and send it up to my room."

"May I ask where my assistant is now?"

"Between here and the airport."

Natasha followed the maid upstairs to her rooms - the VIP quarters reserved for one of her exalted ministerial rank - a bath - sitting room and bedroom. Natasha shooed the maid

out of the room, "I do not need your assistance to unpack my things. Have the cook hurry with my order of sausages." She checked the sitting room. A wooden crate was in the center - on the floor. She returned to the bedroom and laid out the clothes she wanted pressed on the bed. The rest she placed in drawers - or hung up in the closet. Natasha turned on the hot water faucet and began to fill the tub. She frowned as brown water cascaded from rusty pipes. She removed the stopper and let the water run until it turned clear. The tub was halfway full when she heard a knock on the door. She turned the faucet off and shouted, "I'm coming."

Natasha called out, "Who is it?"
A man answered, "The valet. I've come to pick up your clothes."
Natasha placed her ear close to the door and listened - to determine if there was more than one. Satisfied - she turned the dead bolt - stepped to one side and threw open the door. A metallic object caught her eye - the silencer on the end of a pistol.

Her defensive response was quicker than a lightning bolt strike on the Steppes. She grabbed the valet's elbow and hand with a vice like grip - turning the pistol inward - toward his stomach. The rapid fire pistol made muffled percussion sounds as its magazine emptied into the valet's abdomen. He collapsed on the floor with a groan. Natasha removed the pistol from his hand, "An excellent choice of weapon." The last words he heard were, "The damp air of Sevastopol really has wrinkled my woollens. They really do need a good pressing."

Natasha laid the pistol on the end table - grabbed the valet by his feet and drug his lifeless body into the sitting room. She placed it behind the couch - out of sight of the door. Then she checked his pockets and found a spare

magazine for the pistol. She removed the empty magazine and replaced it with a new one - bolted the door - braced it with a chair and returned to the bathroom. Natasha turned on the faucet and filled the tub the rest of the way. She undressed - pinned her hair up so it wouldn't get wet and slid slowly into the tub - until she was fully immersed. She sat up and soaped her body, "If I was concerned for my safety - I would have stormed out of her and taken a room at a Budapest hotel. A contract has been activated and here is where it has begun. I can control the beginning, but after that? Of course I can, but if there had been three at the door. I am not certain. So it begins. What will I do now? I will have to leave the embassy soon. Will they make another attempt here - and soon?" Natasha leaned back - staring at the ceiling until the answer came - as it always did.

Natasha toweled off - but did not unpin her hair. She arranged it with meticulous care until she looked more like a peasant than a princess. She was almost fully dressed when she heard another knock on the door, "Who is it?" "Your food from the kitchen." She picked up the weapon from the end table and hid it behind her back before opening the door. A kitchen helper pushed the cart in and began to uncover one of the plates. She brought her weapon forward and fired once into his forehead and rushed forward - making sure he did not fall onto her dinner. His hand carried the cover with it to the floor. On the platter - another pistol - a copy of the one she had just used.

Natasha lifted the cover over the other plate and breathed a sigh of relief. Her sausage and bread were underneath. She picked up a link and put it right back down, "It looks clean, but I can't be too careful. The next effort might be poison." Natasha found the spare magazine in the kitchen helper's pocket, "Now I have three magazines." She opened the crate and removed her weapons. She used the claw

hammer to damage all of the firing mechanisms so they would no longer function without major repair and kept the first weapon for her own use. She picked up a phone and called Security, "There has been two accidents. I will need a cleanup crew."

Natasha phoned the Cultural attaché, "Have a car for my use in the courtyard in ten minutes."

"Do you wish a driver?"

"No - I have an international license."

Natasha packed one bag with essentials, "I hate to leave the rest of my things, but I must travel light."

Although she no longer felt safe - Natasha was certain this would be the last attempt at the embassy - today. She also knew, "It is time to leave and find a hotel room."

Natasha placed the unneeded and no longer working weapons inside the crate and resealed it. She placed the pistol and extra magazines inside her purse and waited. For the third time in the last hour there was a knock on her door. She asked, "Who is it?"

"Security cleanup crew."

"Come in with your weapons holstered."

Natasha held her weapon in firing position and slowly opened the door. Four large Security thugs entered - staying a discreet distance away - nodding in her direction. As they entered she picked up her suitcase - shouldered her purse and kept the door between her and them. She locked the door with her key and left by the back stairs. When she walked through the kitchen - empty of life.

Her auto was waiting inside the courtyard - door open - keys inside. Natasha gave it a quick check. She found explosives inside the engine compartment - on a timer - set to go off fifteen minutes after she started the motor. She hopped inside and turned the key.

Ten minutes later and many blocks away from the embassy Natasha pulled off the road next to David - the assistant Cultural attaché - still walking back to the embassy. She opened the driver's door and hopped out - extracting her purse and suitcase. She smiled, "I have been thrown out of the embassy and ordered to find you. You are to return with the car."

David - out of breath and dog tired from a ten mile walk hopped in without a word and did a U turn - driving away at break neck speed. Natasha flagged down the next trolley and climbed onboard.

Three minutes later she heard a muffled explosion and looked back. A column of black smoke rose from the direction of the Russian Embassy. She smiled, "He made it inside the interior courtyard. That makes three down and with a little luck - a few more in the courtyard. What rank amateurs. The Central Committee is scraping the bottom of the barrel." Natasha patted her purse - her fingers tracing the outline of the weapon inside - and felt secure.

The trolley rolled to a scheduled stop and the lady sitting next to Natasha walked out - leaving her newspaper behind. Natasha picked it up, "I must find a place to stay until I pick up my children. A hotel or anything short term will send up a red flag. That is the third place they will look after the train station and airport. Indecision is not in my makeup - yet it is clouding my thoughts. I have enough money to live well for a year in my Swiss bank account. But - I have declared my freedom - too soon. Will my children escape from Sevastopol? And Three Penny - is he really alive or is it all a ruse? It matters not. Alive or dead - I cannot and will not complete this mission. But - I must find work and save my funds for a rainy day." She read the newspaper - searching for advertisements requesting workers and found none.

Natasha glanced out the window as her trolley stopped in downtown Budapest. It was there before her eyes - *Ruhe Jager* - Three Penny's restaurant. She stood up and climbed down out of the trolley thinking, "What a delicious thought." On a spur of the moment - she had made up her mind to seek employment at Three Penny's restaurant. Natasha stopped in front of a store window - piled her hair up higher into a bun - removed a pair of large glasses from her purse and donned them. She patted her hair, "Natasha - you could fool your children. You do speak an aristocratic form of Hungarian."

She walked to the side door of *Ruhe Jager* and rang the bell. The Maitre d' opened the door and asked in French, "Are you inquiring about the receptionist position we have open?"

Natasha could not believe her luck, "Yes" she replied in French, "I am running away from an abusive husband. I have just arrived in town from Pecs and heard of your opening." The Maitre d' looked her over and thought, "What luck - she speaks French - wears expensive clothes and her purse and suitcase are Italian leather. She is perfect." He asked in German, "How many languages do you speak?"

She replied in Hungarian, "I am fluent in English - Russian - French - German - Hungarian and Spanish."

"You are hired - follow me. Have you a place to stay and have you had dinner?"

"No I do not and I am quite hungry."

He took her to the storage room, "Leave your coat and luggage here and I will show you where you will work."

The Maitre d' spoke with the Chef, "I have found a receptionist who is too good to be true. Even you will like this one. She is beautiful - fluent in six languages and well dressed. I hired her on the spot."

"Who does she look like?"

"Her hair is up in a bun - like a school teacher, but even that cannot hide her beauty. She looks like an American actress - Grace Kelly."

"Is she hungry?"

"Yes - will you have one of your cooks prepare a Wienerwurst plate with dark bread and butter?"

"I already like her. How did she take to our receptionist desk?"

"Like a swan to water. She is taking dinner reservations."

"I must see your catch. I will take the meal to her myself. Does she have a name?"

"Gretchen Gaborsky."

"Is she Polish?"

"She looks Sweedish and acts Austrian."

The Chef carried a dinner plate to the receptionist desk. The Maitre d' joined him, "What do you think?"

"She is gorgeous and your room - it is the best ever. She has dressed it like none other."

"And Gretchen has memorized our seating - which guest goes where and when they will arrive."

"She is too good to be true. Does she have a place to stay?"

"I have given her a suite of rooms above the restaurant until she can find something more permanent."

Natasha walked up and curtsied to the Chef. He kissed her hand, "Welcome to *Rhue Jager* - Gretchen."

She asked, "Do you mind if I taste your sausage? It has such a marvelous aroma." She took a bite off of the end of a link, "It is wonderful. I am truly in heaven."

The Chef blushed and returned to his kitchen. The Maitre d' asked, "Do you need any help?"

"I might. Will you let me make a few mistakes?"

He laughed, "For you - Gretchen - I will. So far you have been perfect."

"And so is your restaurant."

As the time for her seven o'clock dinner reservation drew closer - Natasha kept a close watch on the entrance - her machine pistol - at hand under the desk top. The phone rang. A deep base voice female asked, "Has Natasha Noscent arrived for dinner?"

"No - we have a table open. I can hold it for half an hour - if you will order now from our set menu."

"I was looking for the lady. She has an emergency at home. Did she leave a telephone number?"

"No she didn't. Wait a minute - it is not often someone cancels a reservation. I made a note. Here it is - she was called out of town on an emergency. She telephoned from her airplane. It was so unusual - I wrote it down for the Maitre d'. If one misses their reservation he wants to know why. If he does not approve - I am not allowed to provide another reservation when asked."

"Did she say where she was flying too?"

"No and I did not ask. The Maitre d' has asked that she be crossed off future reservations."

Later - an obvious KGB agent dropped in for a drink at the bar. He did not stay.

Natasha climbed the stairs to the small apartment above the restaurant carrying her suitcase. She was tired but wide awake. Pleased that she had found work - so soon and when she needed it. She unlocked the door and turned on the light, "Spartan, but it will suit my needs." She closed the drapes and looked outside through a tiny opening, "What rank amateurs - no tagalong. The streets are empty. They are sucking up the dredges from the bottom of the barrel. Now that I have escaped their clutches - how will they come after me? I will be cautious - like a wolf." Natasha turned her bed down and turned on the radio at her bedside - listening to classical music as she undressed. She was worried, "Tsar Nicholas's children were not spared. Natasha breathed a sigh, "Mother is Russian - she will be ready."

Black Sea

Natasha's Mother was prepared for surveillance, but she did not expect it to arrive this early. A tagalong appeared across the street the day after Natasha departed for Hungary. She was deeply concerned - overly so, "A watcher! This has never happened before when my Daughter was away. Natasha warned me that she was in trouble. Grandmother opened the curtain a sliver - so she could look out the street side window without being seen, "He is still there. If she was not alive - he would not be. What should I do?" Unable to think - she walked to the kitchen - wiped the crumbs from the table - cleaned the stove and swept the floor. As she put away the dinner dishes the answer came to her. She called the children, "Peter - Anna - it is time to leave. Pack your suitcases and put on your Sea Cadet uniforms. Anna - tuck your hair under your cap."

As Anna and Peter arrived downstairs in their Sea Cadet Uniforms - Anna did a twirl, "How do I look - Grandmother?" "You look exactly like one of our brave sailors - who came forward to save our revolution in Saint Petersburg. Your hair - did you tuck it under your cap?" "I cut it off. It will grow back." "Peter - are you ready to go?" "Yes - Grandmother, but I thought we were going to stay three more days on the beach." "I did too - little one."

Grandmother peeked through the curtain again. The watcher was still there - huddled under a bush - staying out of the wind - trying to keep warm. Grandmother waited for a near full moon to go under the clouds before shooing her children out the door of the dacha on the beach side. Anna whispered, "Won't the watcher see?"

Grandmother smiled - "Anna is so like her Mother." "He is staying out of the wind across the street. He will not

expect us to leave on the beach. Take off your shoes. We will walk the beach for a mile or two - before we return to the road to the Naval Yard."

Anna took Peter by the arm, "Stay down or the watcher will see us."

They walked along the beach until Grandmother could no longer walk on pebbles and soft sand. Two hours later they arrived at the docks.

Captain Oleg Mastrovsky smiled. He did not display one bit of surprise at their early arrival. He greeted Peter and Anna with a salute, "My - what brave Sea Cadets. You two are solid Russian sailors - helping your Grandmother climb aboard our ship."

Grandmother kissed Captain Mastrovsky on both cheeks, "My precious ones are in your hands. I must return to the dacha. We have a watcher. I will stay there until you have safely carried my little ones to another shore."

She turned and spoke to Anna and Peter, "Obey Captain Mastrovsky." With tears in streaming down her cheeks - she kissed them and said, "Good-by" - knowing she may never see them again.

Peter and Anna ran to the rail and waved - as Grandmother walked quickly away.

Anna was happy, but tears flowed from Peter's eyes. It was only a little over a month ago - Grandmother had prepared her annual Grandfather Frost party. There were aunts - uncles - cousins - the whole family. The table was full of oranges - nuts - cakes and tea with sugar. Grandmother gave Peter the love his mother could not. The weight of knowing this life was over - pressed down on his shoulders. He turned away from the rail and took Anna's hand. She pulled away, "Peter - we are Sea Cadets and Sea Cadets do not hold hands. Wipe the tears from your eyes."

She turned away so he could not see her's.

Oleg led them to their cabin, "You will stay together in one of my First Officer's cabins. You are my honored guests. Sea Cadets normally sleep in Crew's Quarters. I will return in an hour to check on you. Do not leave your cabin."

Peter followed Anna into the cabin - sobbing, "We have lost our home - Grandmother - everything."

Anna scolded him, "You are twelve years old. When I was your age I went on trips by myself. Look at me - wash your face. It is tear stained."

Peter washed the tears from his face. Anna helped him dry, "I am thirteen - the oldest - so I am in charge. You must obey me. We must conceal your feelings. And remember - no one is to know I am a girl. That's why we we're in a cabin by ourselves. Remember what Mother told us - trust no one - not even our host - Captain Mastrovsky. That's better. Control your emotions and stay alert. Now put away your clothes in the locker under your bunk."

Peter inspected the shower, "Where is the tub. What is this called?"

"It is a shower. You turn one of those round things. They are called faucets and the water streams down on your head. You turn it off - soap down your body and then you turn it on again to rinse off."

"Where does the water go?"

"Down the drain - holes in the floor."

Captain Mastrovsky knocked on the cabin door and then opened it, "Hello Peter - Anna. How do you like your cabin?" Anna answered, "It is like a gulag. This room is very small. We have to share a toilet and there is only one wash stand." "You are on board a Russian Navy ship. You will not have the conveniences of home."

Anna asked - how long will we remain in port?"

"Three more days. I have informed my officers that you are

children of one of our ministers. This will be your first experience at sea. Since you are special guests - you will dine with me and my officers in our Ward Room. Show my Officers and Crew every courtesy. Do not converse with them. When asked a question - smile and answer only yes or no."

Anna asked, "Can we see your Crew at work?"

"Yes, but not until we are ready to go to sea. Most of my Crew is on shore leave. We will have the ship to ourselves before we sail. You may explore, but do not touch anything except the hand rails. You must stay on board."

Anna asked, "Are there water restrictions?"

"Not for you two."

"Are there dining protocols?"

"Yes - similar to the ones you follow at your Academies. Watch me and follow my lead. Now - off to bed with you."

Oleg turned off the light and closed the cabin door. He stopped at the rail, "They are beautiful children." His thoughts turned to Natasha and their meeting on the beaches of Bulgaria, "We too could make a family, but destiny has interfered." He returned to his cabin - thoughts of sex with Natasha clouding his mind. Oleg turned on the light over his desk and lit his pipe - then opened the envelope and reread his orders. His mission was clear.

Budapest Hungary

For Natasha - her days at *Ruhe Jager* were the best of times. But - nights away from her children were the worst of times. This was the first time she was unable to lock her thoughts of them away. Her greatest surprise came at the beginning of the second week - when she learned that one of her targets - Three Penny was still alive. Natasha could not believe she had failed - so she didn't, "He must have made a pact with the giant Tiger Shark - the one in Sydney Bay at

Norfolk Island in the South Pacific. Three Penny lives and now? He is my boss. I wonder if he knows I am working for his family? What he doesn't know - I am no longer a threat. Only I know - my mission is a ruse.

Three assassination attempts on me - on my day of my arrival! It was not meant for me to complete these wet procedures. What is the cruel game American children play on each other? A Snipe hunt! I have been sent on a mission to catch a fictitious animal. Well - my Snipe hunt ends in Budapest. I will not run from here. They will soon know I know. But - I will not be hunted here - not in the den of my prey."

Natasha was surprised - the Maitre d' understood, "Of course you may have two days off. If you need more time to fetch your children - take it. If your husband is typical of most Hungarian men - it may take you longer than you think. If it does - I will understand. Your job will be waiting for you when you return. And be careful. If your husband abused you when you were together - now that you have your freedom he may turn violent. Do you need a car?"

"No - I rented a closed van from one of the airport rental agencies - for privacy. I do not want my husband to see my children when I drive away."

"Be careful - Hungarian husbands are not known for kindness to wives - or children who decide to leave. Most abusers I know only want their families when they're deprived of them."

"I will be careful. If I am not back in five days - will you notify the authorities? I may be held captive."

"Of course. Has he done it before?"

"Yes - more than once."

Natasha used a fake passport and driver's license to rent the van at the airport. She chose her disguise with care. Her hair was up in a bun and wire framed glasses - she

wore the disguise of an eccentric English school teacher on vacation - studying antiquities on the Black Sea shores of Rumania and Bulgaria. Inside her van was a picnic basket and a cooler. Food and wine packed for her and the children personally by the Chef - enough for three days. She wasn't hungry and never overindulged when she walked into danger. But - she knew, "I may have to bribe a border guard and our Chef's food will convert the devil." And the cooler was an excellent place to hide her weapon. Natasha had wrapped her machine pistol and magazines in plastic and stored the pouch under the wine.

Natasha drove south out of Budapest and crossed over the border to Rumania at Nadlac. At the border - her disguise worked like a charm. An eccentric befuddled English teacher was more than any border guard could wish to challenge. And her papers appeared to be in order. She crossed over the Bulgarian border at Ruse. With only a cursory check of her papers - she was waved through. Natasha arrived in Varana at midnight - south of her meeting place on the Black Sea. She drove north to Sabia - arriving at her designated rendezvous at two a.m. Hiding her van behind a sand dune - she checked the shoreline and beach as thoroughly as frogmen checked a beach before an invasion. Satisfied that a trap had not been laid - she returned to her van.

Natasha removed a six foot wood silhouette from under the cover of the van floor and carried it to the beach. She found a suitable location and propped it upright - twenty meters from the tide line. She walked to the surf and turned around, "It will do. In case it is too obvious - I will place my lantern in front of it. If Oleg is a foe instead of friend he will be instructed to shoot first and look second. My silhouette will be diversion enough." She returned to her van and poured coffee from the gallon thermos, "At least the caffeine in this American drink is good for something - to

keep me awake." She sliced a thick piece of white Hungarian cheese - cut a chunk of thick dark bread and sat down on the bumper to dine - her first food in twelve hours.

Natasha removed her weapon packet from under the wine bottles in the cooler. She wiped the moisture off with a towel - loaded the magazine - thought for a minute and decided to attach the silencer, "If he attacks - Oleg must be dead before he hears the sound of my weapon." She checked her watch, "I have three hours until it is time." She tucked the weapon in her waist band and followed the path down the dune to where she propped her silhouette.

She sat down on a blanket - her back to the silhouette and uncased binoculars - focusing on the horizon, "Just enough moon to see well and still - I can barely make out Oleg's corvette. The sky is black - the sea is black - my God what a forsaken place this land is. A perfect place to land unseen. Captain Mastrovsky - you have chosen well - even God has deserted this land." She scanned the horizon - pausing for a few seconds when she saw Oleg's ship. Her stomach was churning with worries for her children. Natasha cased her binoculars - set the alarm on her watch and closed her eyes.

The sound of Oleg's motor launch approaching shore woke Natasha. She turned on the lantern and blinked it six times. Her signal was not returned. She blinked it six more times with the same result. She looked out over the waves with her binoculars, "Their are three persons in the motor launch and it is heading my way. Why doesn't he return my signal?" She looked at her watch, "Oleg is twenty minutes early" and knew the answer, "Oleg will be the one to make a fourth attempt on my life." Natasha covered the lantern so it provided a small amount of light and set it down in front of the silhouette. She moved away as far as she could and still pull the cover

off. Then she walked thirty paces south - turned and walked to the surf line. Facing north she crouched down - almost touching the sand and took the pistol from her waistband. She inserted a magazine and took the safety off.

Captain Oleg Mastrovsky guided his motor launch from the stern - the bow moving up and down through the waves. He saw Natasha signal, but did not respond. In the black of night - the only object he could make out was a lantern and the outline of Natasha standing behind it. He warned Peter and Anna, "Stay down - children. When we land on the beach - I must scout the area and make sure all is safe." He uncased an automatic rifle - inserted a magazine and unlocked the safety. He drove his launch onto the beach - cut the engine - jumped out and ran toward the silhouette - raised his weapon and shouted, "Natasha my love - is that you?"

Still running - Mastrovsky fired his weapon - raking the silhouette with a stream of bullets bellybutton high. He did not hear the sound of Natasha's weapon being fired. A single bullet entered Oleg's temple as he ran toward the silhouette in front of the dune - his body unaware that his mind was now dead. Oleg fell face forward. Natasha walked up slowly - her weapon ready and stood over him, "It was a very short romance - Comrade." She checked for pulse, "A single shot kill. You have not lost your touch - Natasha."

Natasha placed the safety on and stowed the weapon inside her waistband. She turned and walked to the launch, "Peter - Anna - you can get out now." Peter - his eyes wide asked, "Did you shoot Captain Mastrovsky?" "I had too - he fired his weapon at me." Natasha did not say that she was going to kill him - regardless. She hugged her children - close and long, "I missed you so much. Do not mourn for Captain Mastrovsky. He attempted to assassinate your Mother and you would have been his next victims."

Natasha released her children, "Help me drag his body to the launch. For most of his life Oleg was a dear friend. He died following orders. It is fitting we return his lifeless body to the sea - a proper burial for a valiant sailor." Natasha turned Oleg's lifeless body over. She grasped both feet and motioned for Peter and Anna to take his hands. Together they drug his body to the launch. It took all three to lift his lifeless form over the side of the motor launch. Natasha directed Peter, "Find Rocks" and Anna "Smooth the sand where we have walked."

Natasha unbuttoned Oleg's sea jacket - pulled it open and made sure it was tight around the waist band. Peter ran up with an arm full of rocks. She inserted them inside Oleg's jacket, "I will need two more armloads." Anna used the silhouette to smooth the sand after Peter carried the last of the rocks. Natasha buttoned Oleg's coat to the neck, "Hop in the launch children - we are going to give Captain Mastrovsky a fitting burial at sea."

Natasha started the motor in neutral and placed the prop in reverse. When the launch broke free of the sand - she turned it out to sea and opened the throttle. Peter asked, "How far out will we go?" Natasha responded, "Far enough - so he won't wash up on shore."

Six miles out - Natasha removed the anchor and most of its chain. Anna helped her tie it around Oleg's feet. It took all three to push him over the side. As the anchor followed - Peter asked, "Are you going to say a few words - Mother?" Natasha nodded, "May red devils turn you on a spit and burn your flesh before you are devoured." Natasha threw Oleg's weapon overboard, "You may need this to ward off the fish." She turned the launch toward shore and opened up the throttle. They rode in silence for several minutes. Natasha laughed, "Cheer up children - the wicked one is dead."

Natasha stopped short of running the launch up on the beach, "Hop out children - we're going to get our feet wet. I want to turn the launch around and send it out to sea. When the authorities find an empty launch - they will know Captain Mastrovsky was lost at sea." Natasha opened up the throttle. The motor launch sailed true - out into the Black Sea. Natasha soaked to her waist in the surf - laughed like a school girl who had been doused with a bucket of water in a water fight.

Anna linked her arm with her Mother's as they climbed the dune from the beach. She was proud to be a part of Mother's adventure, "You must be very important - to have an assassination attempt by one of Captain Mastrovsky's rank. Where are we going now." "Eventually - Budapest, but first we must build a fire to dry out our clothes. Then we will dine. The Chef at my restaurant prepared a feast for us.

Natasha and Anna built a fire with the wooden silhouette while Peter - impatient as ever - dined. He stepped outside the van, "Come - have dinner with me. This Hungarian food is wonderful."

Natasha had been awake too long, but she knew they must leave. Although all had gone exactly as planned - she knew too well that things could still go awry. As she drove away from the sand dunes - Anna asked, "What is our route." "We will cross borders at different places. We can not use the ones I used yesterday. When I traveled here I was a single English school teacher on vacation. We will return as an American family on a visit to relatives in Bulgaria. So - we travel north to Constanta - Rumania and east to Polesti. Peter - are you awake?" He was not. Anna asked, "Do you work at the restaurant?" "Yes - I am the receptionist."

Natasha could continue no further. The adrenaline rush of the hunt and finality of the kill had drained her system. Awake and still under the ultimate stress a mother could bear - she needed to close her eyes and go to sleep. Natasha slowed her van to fifteen miles an hour - driving through Busteni - deep in the Transylvanian Alps.

Anna woke up, "Where are we?"

"We're in a town called Busteni in Romania. I can no longer drive. I have been up for thirty-three hours with only three hours sleep. I am hunting for a hotel."

"On the right - over there. The one with the gingerbread. It looks like a nice hotel."

"It looks like it was built for Vlad the impaler, but I am so tired we will stop here."

Anna wondered, "Can we roam around town while you catch up on your sleep?"

"I know you are more than able for your age, but you do not speak Romanian. And your papers say you are American, but you're not fluent in English."

"I understand - If Peter and I roam - we will stay within sight of our hotel."

Natasha fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

She should not have to worried. Her children stayed within the hotel grounds. This hotel was designed in early Victorian Dracula. There were plenty of hiding places and hidden corridors to occupy them - until they too fell asleep early in the evening.

Natasha woke at midnight with sleep in her eyes. She tiptoed around her two sleeping children and immersed her body in a tub of hot - slightly rusty water. Natasha washed away the salt and sand of the Black Sea - still thinking of Oleg, "I knew I would soon have to eliminate him. Or would I? He was so active in bed. No - Mastrovsky had to go. To

keep him as a pet and eliminate him later would be too complicated. It is a waste of time to think of hypothetical situations. Oleg was dead as soon as he fired his automatic rifle."

Natasha dressed and woke her children, "Peter - Anna get up. We must be on our way. I want to cross over the border into Hungary at sunrise." She had to push Peter to wash and dress and then had to prod him all the way to the van - he was so sleepy. Peter fell asleep as soon as Natasha started the motor. Anna was up - washed and dressed in five minutes. She sat at her Mother's side, "I will help keep you awake. I am anxious to see our new home."

Natasha drove carefully on the unfamiliar Transylvanian mountain roads - nervously tapping her fingers on the gear shift column. Anna wondered, "Why are you nervous - Mother?" "I will not be comfortable until we cross the border into Hungary. If I was on my own - this would not be a problem. I am not accustomed to the responsibility of such valuable cargo - my own children. I know we won't have trouble. I have eliminated all margin of error. If things go wrong - I can handle a squad of border guards. But - I am not on my own. That's why I want to arrive at the border crossing a little after sunrise when the sun will be in the guards eyes. It will give me an additional edge. You have the map. How are we doing?"

"Don't worry - Mother. According to my calculations we will arrive at the border an hour early."

"I have to go to the bathroom. Find a suitable spot where we can stop - rest and have breakfast."

Natasha stretched her legs while Anna and Peter gathered wood for a fire. She sliced white Hungarian cheese to melt over slices of black bread in a skillet while Anna boiled water for tea.

Peter asked, "Will we go to an Academy in Budapest?"

Natasha had been so busy trying to survive - she had not given any thought to their schooling.

"I am not certain. If you do - it won't be for several weeks. You must perfect your English and learn Hungarian. So - for the time being - you will study language in our apartment."

Anna was pleased, "We can use tapes. My water is ready for tea. You can place your skillet over the fire. Will you share sausage with us this morning?"

"Remember - it is hot and spicy." She opened the cooler, "There is enough for all and the border guards."

Natasha approached the border crossing into Hungary with a sun low on the horizon - in the guards' eyes. This crossing was not as lucky as the last three. A guard waved her van over to the side of the road, "Just a short random inspection to see if you are carrying any illegal contraband into Hungary."

She opened the rear doors so he could climb inside. The guard opened the lids to the cooler and picnic basket, "Where did you get the food and wine?"

She answered, "*Rhine Jager* in Budapest. I have taken a position there as a receptionist."

"But your passports are American?"

"We have returned to Hungary. I had an abusive American husband. I have wine from Villa Penny that you may like. I have gotten out of the habit."

The guard climbed out of the van and Natasha retrieved two bottles of white wine from the cooler. "I am returning to work today. Our Chef prepared enough food for a week. Would you like to try some? He is one of the very best in Budapest."

Natasha gave the guard enough food to feed his family for several days. To him she was not only a benefactor, but a

contact to a world he could only dream about. Natasha succeeded in halting his search before he dumped the cooler and discovered her weapon. She drove into Hungary - self satisfied that she had not lost her edge - able to cross four borders in forty-eight hours with a weapon untouched.

Natasha's van arrived at the airport before noon. She turned it in and hailed a cab for her family. They arrived at *Rhine Jager* early in the afternoon. While Natasha settled her children into their temporary home - she was unaware of a new visitor - a lady who occupied the suite across the hall. Penelope had driven into Budapest from Villa Penny to discuss the spring menu and to see how the renovations were holding up. In New York - her two story apartment would be a town home or maybe a penthouse. She had access to her apartment by private elevator from her parking space in the basement under the restaurant. Pat had insisted on a key operated lift for security.

The Maitre d' was excited about his new receptionist, "She is a jewel. Hard working - beautiful and efficient. And she knows how to dress our restaurant without guidance. She reminds me of an American actress - Grace Kelly."

"Does she have a name?"

"Gretchen Gaborisky."

Penelope smiled, "Is she Polish?"

"No, but her husband might be. She is picking up her children in Pecs today. If Gretchen doesn't run into trouble she will return tomorrow."

Penelope nodded in agreement and walked to the Kitchen.

She quizzed the Chef, "Our Maitre d' told me the new receptionist looks like Grace Kelly. Is this true?"

"Yes - exactly. She is quite beautiful."

Penelope excused herself and ran to the phone.

She dialed the Villa's private number."

Her Stepfather asked, "Are you sure he said she looked like Grace Kelly?"

"I just heard her description from our Maitre d' and the Chef confirmed it. Are you thinking what I am."

"Yes - it may be my Russian Hunter. Very clever of her to seek work as our employee. She has learned her lessons well - get as close as you can to your quarry and earn his trust. What else do you know about her?"

"She has a thirteen year old daughter and a twelve year old son arriving today. The Maitre d' has put her up in the apartment across from ours until she can find one. Her story is - she is running away from an abusive husband and arrived with only a suitcase and purse."

"If it is the same hunter and she has her children along - she may not be after me. Do you think she would bring her children on a hunt?"

"No, but can you afford to take a chance?"

"If we can keep her under control - she might be an asset. Don't do anything. Do we have a photo of her?"

"We always do - one for our routine security check - one for for our wall and another for our files."

"This is not routine. I want see it before she returns."

"I will bring it with me. I am finished here - for now. By the way - our restaurant has been operating at full capacity since Gretchen arrived. Profits have improved. and our gross has jumped six percent."

Patricia Penny took the photo from her husband Pat and scanned it, "A very good disguise - piling her blonde hair up. Gretchen is your Russian Hunter. What is her real name?"

Pat Penny took the photo back, "Natasha. What shall we do?"

Penelope stepped in, "I will eliminate her for you."

Pat frowned, "She is one of us - we owe her our professional courtesy."

His wife touched Pat's arm, "But she tried to assassinate you

on the Potomac."

"Natasha was only the weapon - her government wanted me dead. If she is no longer their employee - she might decide to work for us. Natasha is a good. She is Russia's number one assassin. She will fit right in. And we have an insurance policy - her children."

He turned to his daughter, "Penelope - bring Natasha and her children here - alive."

"She will not come willingly. How many notches do you think she has?"

"At least thirty. Be careful. Always put a Black Widow spider to sleep first before placing a glass jar over it."

The day after she returned - Natasha reported to her station at her scheduled time - three in the afternoon. One of the day waiters carried in a glass of ice water and placed the glass on the shelf behind her podium. The Chef arrived with an appetizer plate of thin sliced sausage topped with sharp melted cheese, "It is a new item. Try a few pieces and tell me what you think."

"Must I say your sausage is good if it isn't?"

"Of course not. If you don't care for it - our customers won't either. It is better to catch our mistakes before our customers do."

Natasha took a bite and held it in her mouth. She swallowed, "This is wonderful. The spices in your sausage are just right. You are a master."

She ate three more pieces, "I love the residual salt taste it leaves in my mouth. This will be my dinner tonight."

Natasha finished the rest of the appetizers and handed the plate back to the Chef. She searched for the water glass behind the podium - found it and drank about half. As the Chef walked away - Natasha slumped to the floor.

Penelope stepped out of the shadows."

Penelope knocked on the apartment door. Anna opened it a crack, "What do you want?"

"I'm the owner of your Mother's restaurant. She has taken ill. I am driving her to my Villa in the country. Your Mother collapsed from overwork. She must rest until her health returns. The country air will be good for her. If you wish to go with her - pack your bags."

"Is there room?"

"I have an empty bedroom and a small house she can use."

"How about Mother's things?"

"Of course - pack her bag too. I'll have one of our waiters pick the bags up in fifteen minutes. He will escort you to my van."

Penelope turned away and entered her suite on the other side of the hall.

Anna asked Peter, "Did you hear what the lady said to me about Mother?"

"Yes, but I don't understand Hungarian."

"She said Mother is ill. She is taking her to a Villa in the country so Mother can regain her strength. We are to pack our bags if we want to go along. If not - we will stay here. Do you want to go?"

"If Mother is going - I don't want to stay here without her."

"Then we will go with Mother. Help me pack her things and then we will pack ours."

Natasha opened her eyes slowly, "Have I been poisoned? She looked around, "What a strange room. Decorated in red with dark woods and a mirror in the ceiling."

Anna came over and held her hand, "Good - you are awake. You collapsed at work. Miss Penelope said it must be from the strain of leaving your husband. I think they drugged you."

"Is Peter all right?"

"He is upstairs riding Mr. Penny's train in the attic. You should see this house - hidden passages - false walls - a

wonderful place to explore. Mr. Penny asked that I bring you downstairs when you wake."

"I will bathe first. Where are we?"

"At Villa Penny in the country. He told me to tell you that you have found sanctuary and that they will not detain you against your own free will. He said it was something called professional courtesy."

Natasha sat up slowly, "If I was drugged - it was not one of ours. I am not dizzy - my head feels fine - like I had a good night's sleep."

"You did - Mother it is nine in the morning."

"Go - tell my hosts that I am awake. Is there a cook?"

"Yes - the food is better than at the restaurant."

"I will be down after I freshen up. I would like sausage and black bread with butter."

"That is the same meal Mr. Penny and his daughter Penelope had last night for dinner and this morning at breakfast."

Natasha called out to Anna before she closed the door, "What do you think of our hosts? Should we trust them?"

"They have treated me like a princess and Peter like a child of the Tsar. If they were going to eliminate us - you would not have come out of your sleep."

"Then why did they drug me?"

"We would not have come voluntarily."

Natasha walked into the breakfast room and stopped. Pat and his family were at the table - drinking coffee. Pat stood up and held a chair for Natasha, "Would you like a cup of coffee or do you prefer tea?"

"Coffee. If I am going to live in the west - I must learn western ways."

She lifted the cover on her plate and gasped. It was piled high with link sausage. She nibbled on a link - controlling an urge to dive in and devour all in one breath.

Pat began, "You must be hungry. Go ahead - we had breakfast

earlier. You can answer most of my questions yes or no. I'm not certain how you conduct yourself when you have a mission to complete, but I doubt if you would infiltrate your target's business with your children along. Why are they with you?"

She finished chewing on the last bit of sausage - before indicating she was ready to speak, "This sausage is the best I've ever had. My children are with me because It was time for me to flee. I saw the signs and followed them. A friend of mine carried them to a Black Sea shore where I met them. Unfortunately - he too was an assassin and I his intended victim. He is no longer with us. When I arrived in Budapest - there were three attempts on my life before the afternoon sun grew warm. You probably read about the last one - a car exploded in the embassy courtyard. I was sent here on a ruse - you three were to be my victims. Of course you were never intended to die. I was the one. I have not defected - I have left my country and my employer." Natasha resumed dining.

Pat began again, "If you work for us - will you be loyal to my family?"

Natasha nodded, "Yes." Good - then it is done - we will be loyal to your family. Your children will attend private school and you will work at our Villa. What was your formal training at the University?"

"I was trained in chemistry."

Penelope clapped her hands, "I will train you to be our Vintner. And we have opened a new brewery. You will be perfect."

Natasha smiled, "I do not understand. I was sent here - to Washington DC and to Hawaii to eliminate you. Why are you so kind to me and my family?"

Pat answered, "We now have a common enemy and we have a common profession."

Penelope added, "And you have proven to be a good worker at our restaurant. You know what you are doing - you are a self starter - you need refuge and we can use your talents. And in your short time with us - you have increased our profits."

Natasha wiped sausage grease from her chin and set her napkin down, "You will use all of my talents?"

"If needed - yes."

"You must know my former employer will continue his search for me."

Pat answered, "He will not find you at our Villa. In a year or two you will be old business."

"What if they continue to come after you and find me?"

"Has anyone succeeded yet?"

"You're right. Bulgar and I were the best - both number one and we did not succeed. No one else is in training - our facility has been closed down. They scrapped the bottom of the barrel in their selection of assassins to come after me."

Pat sipped at his coffee, "You will be debriefed."

"By the British or Americans."

"CIA. I can arrange for it to be here."

"Who is your contact."

"Benny Barnes."

"He is honest - I accept."

Penelope stood up, "Come with me. I'll show you to your new home."

Natasha pushed her chair out, "Before I go - I need to know if I will keep my new identity?"

Pat responded, "Gretchen is a fine name - but we should change it and your last name. Gretchen Gaborsky raises too many questions about your nationality and that of your abusive husband in Pecs. You look more Scandinavian than Hungarian. Borge is more suitable. You can drop the abusive husband cover. It is no longer needed. You will be a widow

as I assume you are in real life."

"I am - my husband was murdered in Afghanistan. What is my first name?"

"Ingrid - Ingrid Borge. Very close to Hungarian, but most likely Danish."

"Ingrid - I like it - most Russians have a little Swedish in them."

Penelope opened the door, "Your children are waiting."

On their way to Ingrid's cottage - Penelope placed her arm around Ingrid's waist, "I may need your assistance in the near future."

"Is it a wet procedure."

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"An American - Johnny Ropp and his wife."

"Am I the one who will pull the trigger?"

"No - that will be my pleasure. I seek only your expertise on how best to accomplish this exercise."

"Where is he and who does he work for?"

"He is in Bonn Germany working for Benny Barnes."

"Have you done this type of work before?"

"Many times."

"How many targets have you eliminated?"

"My last four were in Fiji."

"So it was you who restructured their socialist middle managers."

"Yes. You too did wonderful work in Fiji and New Zealand."

Ingrid squeezed Penelope's hand and brushed against her thigh with hers, "I have found a kindred spirit."

They paused - embraced and kissed - one that quickly turned to passion - a fire out of control.

Moscow

The Secretary knocked on The Central Committee Chairman's door. He opened it to, "Come in Tvarish."

"May I sit with you and drink a glass of Vodka."

"Of course - pour me one too. What is our problem."

"My news is good and not so good. Our Black Widow is better than any of those we have trained for our most difficult missions. The bad news is - we have lost her replacement - Captain Oleg Mastrovsky."

"Him too?"

"And all those poor souls at our embassy in Budapest. Our Black Widow has quite a sting. Is there another hunter qualified to join the chase?"

"No - we closed our facility down. Oleg was the last one."

"Comrade Chairman - I am without a plan."

"Do we know where she is?"

"No - our fox has gone to ground."

"With her children?"

"Yes."

"Her mother - can she assist?"

"She knows nothing and if she did - would die with her lips sealed."

"Our only problem is - will she defect?"

"We might use CIA's Counter Intelligence Chief."

"We might not have too. We are fortunate - their most senior debriefer belongs to us."

"In that direction," the [Cheshire] Cat said - waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter and in that direction" - waving the other paw, "lives a March Hare. Visit either you like - they're both mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh - you can't help that," said the Cat, "we're all mad here."