

THE EXCHANGE

It was a cold and wet September morning when I met her at the station. She was wearing a red dress that hugged her statuesque figure, the black shawl pulled tightly around her shoulders. She looked cold and I apologised for being late. She replied that everyone was late in Amsterdam and I checked my watch and tapped it. The password was acknowledged with a smile and she looked past me as if checking once more for further confirmation but finding none turned back.

"You have the papers?"

Her accent was Eastern European, Russian I assumed and I nodded and looked down at my briefcase.

"I have them."

I unfolded my umbrella and she winced as if that was a signal for foreign agents to move in, but I merely nodded at the overcast sky as the first raindrops fell and she moved closer.

"My luggage is on the train," she fiddled with the purse.

"We will take the train to Zurich," I moved next to her and shifted the red umbrella to shield her from the light downpour, "the exchange will take place on the train and we will part at Zurich. We are travelling companions who became lovers on the train and then parted."

"It is good," she looked into my eyes, "I have been thinking on this matter of the lover, I am glad you are a handsome man, it will make it easier."

"Or harder if you have to betray me," I took her arm and led her along the platform as the train pulled into the station.

"Yes," she replied, "but if the papers are good then there will be no betrayal, these papers are very important to the KGB."

We stopped at a carriage and I ushered her forward, she smiled politely and mounted the steps. The porter gave us the once over as he checked our tickets.

"You are travelling together?"

My Dutch was notorious but Katerina replied in flawless Dutch, which brought a smile from the porter as he waved us inside.

"I told him you were my travelling companion," she informed me matter of factly, "it is considered polite to escort a woman, and if you are seen to kiss me it will not attract attention."

The thought of kissing this Russian beauty brought a familiar urge to my loins, but I tried to keep my face straight as we made our way to the sleeping cabins.

She turned to me as she reached her cabin and smiled again.

"I will meet you in the dining car, yes?"

"Yes," I opened the door to my cabin, "you have a preference for food?"

"Anything will be good, Soviet food is not so good."

She disappeared into her cabin after that leaving me staring after her pert buttocks and hourglass figure beneath the tight red dress. I agreed with her on the matter of the lover, it would be easy to make love to this beautiful woman.

We met in the passageway an hour out of Amsterdam and she managed a tight smile as she took my arm. She had changed into a white summer frock with embroidered flowers on the bodice; a cursory glance over my white shirt, tan suit and black tie brought a smile to her face.

"You look good," she brushed my jacket, "come, we will eat and talk of life in the West, yes?"

"Yes," I led her down to the dining car and ushered her to a nearby table, the aroma of her perfume was driving me crazy. She seemed to relish my attentions and offered me up a sly smile as she fluffed out her hair.

"You are single?"

"I am now," I examined my hand, "in my business we keep a lot of secrets and it is difficult for a woman to understand when you have two phones in the house."

"Two phones?" Katerina's eyes widened appreciably, "I should change sides, I have to use a phone box at the end of the street."

"Perhaps I should have been on the other side," I conceded, "I could always make an excuse to go

out for a packet of cigarettes, but answering a second phone always caused her to raise an eyebrow."

"She did not know of your job?"

"I told her I was in marketing," I replied, "she believed me for eighteen months."

"Eighteen months is a long time, perhaps you should have told her the truth?"

"Perhaps," I stared out the window recalling the last stormy conversation three months ago, "the fact that I was always called out late to attend to business matters didn't help. Then when I began meeting other female agents she accused me of having an affair."

"Our business is a solitary one," she smiled as the waiter brought the wine list and then departed with a smile, "we make friends infrequently and then we are forced to lie to protect ourselves and our employers."

"And for what?" I studied the wine list, "so our side is not compromised, so one can remain in the ascendant?"

"It is the nature of the game," she replied a moment later, "I think I shall have the white, what say you?" her eyes softened, "a little white will ease the pain of separation."

She looked over the rim of her glass a few minutes later and smiled sadly.

"I am sorry your wife left, perhaps she will see her mistake before long."

I felt the lump in my throat and lit a cigarette while I contemplated the memory, only coming to when she kicked me gently under the table.

"The order?"

I stared at the menu and nodded.

"You choose."

"Roast pork and apple sauce," she licked her lips.

"Sounds good," I nodded, "we will have two servings."

She raised her goblet and I clinked her glass.

"To the game, may it end soon," she murmured under her breath.

The game. It was a game I had been playing after being wounded in Korea. The transfer to Intelligence had seemed a smart career move back then. For the most of the last decade I had travelled the world seeking Soviet influence wherever it could be found and reporting to my masters. It was a brutal game of late night assassinations and kidnappings, bluff and counter bluff. These last eighteen months had seen me attached to the Denver office, my purgatory in hell at an end; to all intents and purposes I was on the way up. That was when I had met Margaret at a dance hall filled with teenyboppers, she was young and impressionable, I was a seasoned world traveller. It was a whirlwind romance and we were married within six weeks. She had no idea of the life I had led and for some reason I kept her from it. I could have been like some of my buddies and let her know I worked for the military, at least that would have explained my sudden disappearances. The wine was strong and perhaps the similarities in our jobs caused us to let things slip. We tested the waters, skirting around the edges but we both knew the other's mettle some two hours later. She knew most of the operations I had worked and I knew most of hers, we finally called a ceasefire as the train pulled into Paris.

It happened fairly quickly after that, her hand in mine as we walked back to our cabins and a moment of hesitation as we stood in the passageway. A porter gave us a second glance as he walked past, and then the door to her cabin opened and we were kissing frantically as she dragged me inside and shut the door.

Our lovemaking was frantic, pulling at each other's clothes until we were naked on the bed. For a few moments we hesitated and then we began our slow waltz as we worked each other to a crescendo. She swore fluently in Russian, German and French, and I swore in English until at last we collapsed onto each other totally spent and exhausted. She lay still for a full five minutes while I smoked a Russian cigarette, choking on the thick fumes.

"That was good," she eventually spoke, "you have the heart of a devil."

"A devil," I looked down, "perhaps you are right, I have been a devil it goes with the job description."

She smiled and stroked the patch of hair between her legs.

"In Russia to have the heart of a devil means you have passion in your heart. People should love like an angel but with the heart of a devil."

"Interesting," I passed the cigarette across.

"You are an interesting man," she eventually extinguished the cigarette, "but there is still the matter of the exchange of papers."

"One agent for one agent," I nodded, "we will go onto another assignment and two agents will be terminated."

"It is the way of the world," she replied, "maybe in times to come it will be one of us who faces the assassin's bullet."

She rolled onto her side and traced around my nipple a sad smile on her angelic features.

"I am hoping for me it is a bullet in the back of the head, one moment I will be looking in a shop window or kissing a man and then I will see a bright light and my life will be over. I would not like to know before that I am to die."

"It's a shitty game," I agreed, "I've done it both ways to people, the first was the worst but after that you get numb."

"Not so numb," she let her hand fall, "eighteen months ago I killed a Soviet agent who was trying to defect to the West, I saw the fear in his eyes when I drew my gun and if not for the fact my finger slipped on the trigger I would be dead."

"I'm glad you are not dead," I brushed a lock of hair from her face.

She chuckled and slid her hand around my waist.

"Does it ever cross your mind that this war between the United States and Russia is madness? We kill each other by day and make love to each other by night. What would it be like if our leaders could see us now?"

The thought of Kennedy and Khrushchev looking into the cabin brought a smile to my face. Her eyes lit up as she snuggled in closer.

"Hold me," she whispered, "I am scared of the dark."

I held her until she fell asleep my hand tracing little circles down her back while she murmured her pleasure in Russian. While she snored gently, I stared at her suitcase. It would be so easy to remove the papers and get off at the next station. It was what my handlers had trained me to do, seize the opportunity and gain the upper hand. But I did nothing that night, other than rolling out from under her and returning to my cabin. I spent a restless night in bed and awoke to a gentle knock.

"Come in."

She stepped into the cabin with an envelope in her hand. I pulled my eyes from the white blouse and grey pencil skirt as she sat down on the bed.

"We have an exchange to make."

"Of course," I fumbled in my briefcase and removed my envelope, "do you want to check it first?" She stared into my eyes and eventually nodded.

"It would be wise, my controller would not be so happy if I returned with a copy of Vanity Fair."

"It might bring a smile to his face," I slit the envelope and pulled out the papers while she did the same with her package.

"My controller is a woman," she murmured under her breath, "this is good, I did not know Yuri was working for your side, he will not be working for much longer."

"He is a rogue agent," I replied, "he would bring our two countries to nuclear war, as would Andrew Walker, perhaps we will go down in history as being the two who saved the world?"

"I think not, my American lover," she slid her fingers through the hairs on my chest, "there will be another Yuri and Andrew, and another and another until they are all dead. Let us hope we can find peace in our time before the button is pushed and there is no tomorrow."

She looked past me.

"There is one question I have to ask."

"What?"

"When I was asleep," she looked into my eyes, "why did you not take the papers and get off at the next station? It is what I would have done."

"I don't know," I stared at the ceiling, "perhaps I am tired of this war, perhaps I am tired of betrayal and counter betrayal. We had an exchange and all our masters want is these papers, I will make some excuse and they will believe me."

"I had not thought to trust Americans," she leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead, "I am not so sure I can trust Americans yet but I am learning."

She straightened up and pursed her lips.

"There is a hotel in Budapest, the Danubius Grand Hotel Margitsziget. I am going there when I reach Zurich. If you decide to follow me there I will lead you to a place where no one can find us, there are many places to hide in Budapest, I know most of them."

"And how long could we hide?" I reached up and undid one of her buttons and let my finger fall to the next button, the material pulled down with the weight of my arm, "if the CIA did not find us, the KGB would find us. Two bullets, two dead agents, we know it is foolishness."

Her eyes moistened as she stared down at my finger and a moment later she pulled it from the blouse and fastened the button again.

"You are right, it was foolishness, this war will make fools of us all. One day they will look at the games we played and laugh at us."

"Perhaps," I leaned back into the pillow, "but until then we are enemies."

"Even enemies can be friends," she kissed me gently on the mouth, "thank you for not betraying me last night, I will not forget you when I have you in my sights."

She left me not long after and when I alighted at Zurich, she waved goodbye and disappeared into the crowd. I made my way to a phone booth and called the embassy in Zurich, a bored receptionist answered the phone and I asked for Colonel Travis.

"Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Snow White," I replied.

"Pardon?"

"Snow White," I replied a little frostily, "he will know who I am, tell him I am at the station in Zurich with some papers."

Colonel Travis was a burly man who had worked with me on more than one occasion, but today he seemed extremely pensive as he handed me the paper.

I stared at the headlines.

Kennedy Slain.

"What the hell?"

"The goddamn Russkies," he snarled, "goddamn Reds done assassinated the president."

I scanned the article and handed it back, thinking of Lee Harvey Oswald and Katerina, was it possible?

"The package," he nudged my arm,

"Sure" I replied numbly, "the exchange went as planned."

"Where is she now?"

I stared into his cold grey eyes, knowing full well the reason for the question, revenge for the killing of our President and the remote possibility of a Soviet connection. It was with a feeling of genuine regret I gave him the address.

"Are you sure she's not pulling your pecker?"

"No," I replied with a smile as I tugged at my tie, "we umm, had quite a night, it seems my masculine charm weaseled a few secrets out of her."

"We'll see to it," he stared into the distance, "take a few days off, Paul, nothing much will happen until after the funeral, then we pull out all the stops. We're gonna hit them and hit them hard."

"Absolutely," I breathed, "about time."

"You're a good man," he squeezed my arm, "I've been reading your reports, we could use a man like you in Europe, call me next Friday and we'll do lunch."

I farewelled him and made my way back to the station, my bowels were ready to burst. War had broken out, the President was dead and the Russians were in the firing line. Katerina would be the next target. I pushed past a passenger and barged into the cubicle my head swimming as I imagined

her mutilated body on a morgue with a toe tag.

I emerged from my tomb fifteen minutes later to the banging on the door as a patron demanded I hurry up. I greeted him with a dry smile and easing past him, washed my hands and stared at the mirror. Was betrayal always like this? Did we betray each other so easily?

The lie had come easily enough and as I left the toilet and walked back to the station I scanned the timetable. The train to Budapest was leaving in five minutes, I had given Travis the name of a hotel in Vienna, but would she go along with my plan?

She was sitting in a seat staring out the window as I stepped into the carriage. She seemed to sense my arrival even though I was behind her and moved the coat onto her lap.

A tear inched its way down her cheek.

"I had not thought the end would come so soon."

I sank into the seat and closed my eyes.

"Kennedy is dead, they are blaming the Russians."

"I read the news before," she opened her eyes, "we had nothing to do with it to my knowledge, this Oswald is what is claims, a patsy."

"I know," I stared straight ahead, "they are looking for you in Vienna, I sent them there."

"Thank you," she touched my hand, "I owe you one."

"One what?" I looked across and a moment later put my hand on her thigh, "when my people find you were never there they will come for me. Where will we go then?"

"They will never find you in Budapest," she stroked my hand gently.

"And then what?"

She looked away and I scratched her leg slowly.

"I was raised in Murmansk," she spoke quietly, "in the summer the sun never sets, I have always loved a place with a sun that never sets, I should like to go to Iceland before I die. I know man in Copenhagen who does the best passports I have ever seen. He is KGB but can be trusted to keep his silence."

"Are you sure?"

"He owes me his life," she smiled crookedly.

"They will come for us," I squeezed her leg, "but before we die in each other's arms we will love like the devil, what say you?"

She let her head fall to my shoulder and pulled at my tie slowly.

"It is good that we die like this, it is better to die having loved and been loved. We will talk no more of this until we are in Budapest. For now you will hold me tight."

I slipped my arm around her and held her tight against the gathering storm.

Our war was over, their war was still raging.

Written by Alastair Rosie October 2006

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