

Shafi Doldi

by
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CHAPTER 1

Stanislav Zenoviev turned away from the window and glowered ferociously with sky blue eyes at the brown-skinned man sitting at the table.

“You’re a big disappointment, Shafi,” Stanislav bellowed in Russian. “Your President Mengistu handpicked you to come here to Leipzig to continue your studies. From here you were bound for Moscow and bigger things within the Party. So many people had high hopes for you. But you let us all down.”

Shafi licked his lips while hatred surged like an oven flame in his breast. He glanced over at Tanyana Zenoviev, tall, pale and rail thin, dressed all in black, standing in the doorway leading to the kitchen, her spine slightly curved with scoliosis, shoulders humped. A cloud of smoke enveloped her peanut shaped head as she puffed on a cigarette with lips like pencil lines.

Stanislav picked up a file folder from the table and flipped it open. His mouth curled down at the corners as he scanned the contents. He was a square-jawed man who was accustomed to wielding power over other people and making important decisions about their lives.

“Your performance has been very lackluster, Shafi. You spend most of your time drinking vodka and beer in the company of sluts.” Stanislav tossed the folder back onto the table. “You’re nothing but a fraud. Your appetites are for the decadent excesses of the West. You care nothing about the organization of the Ethiopian peasants. And to top it all off, you’re a petty thief. Everyone knows it was you who stole your comrade’s wristwatch.”

Shafi squirmed in his chair and glanced again at Tanyana, standing with arms folded across her flat chest. “I know the principles of

Marxist philosophy as well as you and your ugly wife,” he snapped back in fluent Russian.

Tantiana eased over and crushed her cigarette in the ashtray on the table in front of Shafi. He noticed a tear in the arm of her black sweater where a sliver of pale skin showed through. He snuffed his nose when he caught a whiff of underarm funk.

“We have no choice but to send you back to Addis Ababa,” Stanislav began again. “Mengistu and the Derg have been told all about how you’ve been carrying on here in Leipzig. But I understand why you probably feel and behave as you do. You were educated at a British university and you’ve been to America. Your mind has been warped by the images of glitter and gold you saw in their cities. Still, it’s such a shame. You have intelligence and you speak several languages. It’s amazing how you had so many of us fooled with your Marxist rhetoric. You had a bright future with us.”

Shafi grimaced as a bead of sweat seeped down from his armpit and soaked into his shirt. He felt naked and exposed; cornered like a marauding jackal in a hen house while the drab little room seemed to be closing in on him. Other than the table and chair where he sat, the only piece of furniture was a sagging couch. The hardwood floor looked scratched and scuffed from many shoe marks.

“Some say Marxism can never work in Africa,” Tantiana interjected in her raspy, intellectual sounding tone. “If that’s true, then it’s because of insincere men like you, Doldi. The craftsmen and technicians in countries such as your Ethiopia have to be put to work attending to more than just the exploitative tasks outlined by the West. You were being prepared to lead this very important segment of people. You were being groomed for the role of a black KGB operative in the West. But you turned out to be nothing but a charlatan.”

“I smell betrayal,” Shafi growled, slamming his hand down on the table and rising from his seat. “My good name and character are being dragged through so much mud.”

Stanislav moved toward Shafi who settled back down in his chair. The Russian stood with authority over the African while their eyes met, burning with mutually intense hatred.

“Mengistu might have mercy on you,” Stanislav said. “Maybe he’ll send you to America where you can drive a taxi cab.”

“And you’ll have your pick of the white sluts there,” Tantyana added with a chuckle.

Shafi glared at the woman. He loathed her even more than he loathed her husband. She had always presented herself as being the consummate Marxist, proposing the ideal Marxist solution for every problem, and offering up the perfect Marxist interpretation for every situation.

“It didn’t take long to find out what kind of man you really are,” Stanislav explained. “You think we’re all fools, always laughing at us on the inside. I know your sneer. You figure you’re so smart and we’re all so stupid. You charmed your way in with Mengistu, then you charmed your way in with us. Mengistu has assured us that he can recommend a better man for our program than what you turned out to be.”

Shafi stared ahead at the off white wall. The Russian was reading him just right. Pretending to embrace Marxism, Communism, socialism or whatever kind of “isms” his accusers preferred to speak of meant nothing more to him than an opportunity to use his wits and get over in the world, to get over with his own people, and finally get out of Ethiopia. Yes! Stanislav was most correct about him. Shafi aspired to be a privileged person, a businessman and a rich man. “*A big shot*,” as he had heard them say in the West. He didn’t care anything about the peasants in Ethiopia, or anywhere else, and none of them cared the least about him. Every man stood alone in the world and was responsible for shaping his own destiny.

“Your plane leaves Leipzig tomorrow afternoon,” Stanislav went on, perching his hands authoritatively on his hips. “Your belongings will

be brought to the airport. You'll remain here with us for the night. An escort will arrive in time tomorrow to take you where you need to go."

"So this is how you intend to destroy me and shame me before Mengistu and my government." Shafi's tone still sounded defiant, although he was feeling panicky. His throat felt dry and his heart was beating fast.

Stanislav leveled a long, penetrating stare at him, but Shafi kept his eyes away. The Russian was a very smart man, dedicated and cunning, a leader and an organizer, a hero to many. Party people respected him as being a true Bolshevik who had fought his way up through the ranks during the Khrushchev administration, and was known to be intolerant of even the slightest hint of bourgeois corruption in his comrades.

At last, Stanislav turned away, saying, "You destroyed yourself, Shafi. Tatyana and I were only here to help you."

The African hung his head. Stanislav's tone had reeked of grim finality. Shafi knew that his being returned to Addis Ababa in disgrace, accused of petty theft, whoring and drunkenness, could very well lead to his own imprisonment or execution. Madness had been running rampant in his country for many years, even before the deposal of the Emperor. Some referred to what was going on as the *Red Terror*. Shafi had seen the best of men offhandedly shot because they had been suspected of committing improprieties. Many others had been tortured and imprisoned. Mengistu would probably look upon his terrible showing with the Soviets as being a personal betrayal of trust.

Shafi watched the Russian walk over to the window and take a cigarette from his shirt pocket. Stanislav wasn't a particularly big man, but he still carried himself with great confidence; shoulders back, stomach flat, a brisk stepper wherever he went. He looked like he came from old Russian stock, nose somewhat blunt, eyebrows heavy and black, a subtle Asian cast to his features. He held his head a certain way that made him look like an aristocrat as he fired up the

cigarette and flicked the match stem at the ashtray in front of Shafi. His aim was off. The stem hit the African on the hand.

Chuckling, Tantyana turned and headed away into the kitchen.

Shafi's jaw quivered while he took a deep breath and rolled his eyes. A knot tightened in his belly as he scanned the Russian from head to toe. He had never seen Stanislav Zenoviev defend himself in a fight, and although the man looked physically fit, he didn't appear to be any kind of a powerhouse. On the other hand, Shafi had always kept himself active and in good shape, and he had seen fierce action in the Ethiopian army during the war with Eritrea. He felt strong and limber, and he was also twenty years younger than the Russian. So, now was the time for him to make a move that would prevent his being returned to his homeland.

Shafi arose slowly, shoulders slumped dejectedly, giving no indication that he intended to attack. Stanislav puffed on his cigarette, and was about to say something when the African suddenly lunged at him.

"You fool," Stanislav roared, throwing up his arms in reactive defense.

But Shafi managed to pummell through and land a couple of blows to the man's forehead, knocking the cigarette from his mouth. Stunned, Stanislav groaned and fell back against the windowsill. Shafi hit him again, hard and squarely on the jaw. This time the Russian dropped to his knees, mouth hanging open and filling with blood.

Just then, something with a sharp point hit Shafi in the back, between his shoulder blades. Whirling around, he caught the charging Tantyana with a roundhouse punch against the side of her head, knocking her off balance and sending her stumbling away from him.

He glanced down at the kitchen fork she had thrown and hit him with, then he turned back to Stanislav, who was trying to stand, and kicked him in the side of his neck.

Tantiana came at Shafi again, and this time he floored her with a tremendous fist, driving like a piston rod into her soft belly and making her gag.

He grabbed up the wooden chair he had been sitting in and brought it down with all his might across Stanislav's skull. The Russian collapsed, hitting his mouth hard against the floor, breaking his front teeth.

Shafi moved like a whirlwind. There was no stopping him now. He had launched a surprise attack and quickly gained the upper hand. Again and again he brought the chair down across Stanislav's head until the wood splintered and broke into pieces.

Turning once more to the woman, he drove his foot into her chest as she was trying to stand, then he pounded across the top of her skull with the section of chair that was left in his hand, making a muffled "thock" sound with each blow. She tried to cover herself, but he easily devastated her defenses, beating her down to the floor then bashing and stomping her savagely about the head and face.

Again he turned to Stanislav, kicking him with potent force between his legs while he lay on his back, blood oozing from the wounds in his head. The Russian let out an agonizing howl of pain, and Shafi dropped down on him, taking his white neck in his brown hands and squeezing with all his strength. Shafi didn't let go until the man had turned almost blue and stopped moving.

"I'm not going anywhere you tell me to go," Shafi growled, rising up over the fresh corpse while breathing hard with blood on his hands. Then he drew back with his foot and kicked Stanislav in the face several more times, shattering bones and breaking more teeth.

Returning to Tantiana, he grabbed her up by her hair, twisting the strands between his fingers, and lifted her up enough so that he could work with knee lifts under her chin. Bones cracked and blood gushed from her mouth, a muffled whimper escaped her lips. Finally, he flung her aside and dropped down on her with his knees, pinning her arms

to the floor behind her head and throttling her soft throat until he was sure her life was gone.

An uncanny silence filled the room when the violence had ended. Shafi stood majestically over his slain mentors, puffing and blowing like a machine, eyes on fire, the blood and adrenaline still pumping through his vessels with strenuous force. He wanted them to get up so that he could kill them some more. But Stanislav and Tanyana would never move again.

He went to the window and peered out at the falling snow. Not a soul was in sight on the narrow, shadowy street. Stanislav's blue sedan parked in front of the house was almost covered with a white blanket.

Shafi felt a familiar coldness inside his body as he looked again at his victims lying broken on the floor with blood oozing from their wounds and trickling into the cracks in the wood. All the animation had been taken out of them, leaving Shafi feeling greatly relieved. He had killed two of the Big Reds.

Tanyana had pissed, and there was a puddle forming on the floor beneath her. Her finger twitched, but Shafi paid the movement no mind. He felt more than sure that she was dead. He laughed. He had killed before. Men, women and children in Eritrea. He had shot them and sometimes hacked off their limbs and heads, and he later received many commendations from his superior army officers for his killing efficiency. But now he had made his biggest kill ever, in Leipzig, East Germany, and this time he was going to be applauded only by himself.

His plan to flee his African communist life was still going almost according to schedule, even though he hadn't planned on executing the Zenovievs. His flight to the West was going to take place just a few hours sooner than originally anticipated, and he would have to leave his luggage behind. He wondered whether Stanislav had been wise to his plan to jump ship. The scheme had been seriously in the works for the past two months. It was one hell of a coincidence that the Russian picked this particular evening to come down on him and have him

expelled from the country and sent back to Ethiopia. And if Stanislav had been wise to him, who else knew of his plan to steal away to the West?

He reached down into Stanislav's jacket pocket and pulled out the watch he had been accused of stealing. He held it up and smiled. A piece of bourgeois excess. He had taken it from a Bulgarian classmate he didn't like. It was a fine piece, Swiss made and very old, probably handed down from father to son, initials engraved on the back.

It was almost midnight. He still had ample time to prepare for his departure before the prearranged escort arrived, probably sometime in the morning, to take him to the "debriefing," whatever that was.

He went and stood over the bodies again, just for a moment, to make sure there were no more signs of life. His hatred was still smoldering as he drew back his foot and gave Tanyana one more vicious kick in the face, bursting her nose and banging her head into the wall.

Now it was time to set his grand plan into motion. The murders weren't going to stop a thing in his program. He went to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror over the sink. The smooth skin on his face remained unscathed, but his knuckles were cut and bleeding, and there was blood on his pants, shoes and jacket.

For a moment he felt unsettled. He couldn't board a plane with bloodstains on his clothes. Then he remembered the German man named Kiel, who usually stayed in the house, was about his same height and build. After taking a shower, he searched through the closets and found appropriate pieces to change into: dark-colored pants, a pullover sweater and a corduroy sport coat fit perfectly. He used a wet towel to wipe the blood off his shoes.

Now he was ready to execute the trickiest part of his plan: making up the official looking documents he would show to the always suspicious guards at the airport checkpoints so that he could breeze his way through into the West. He kept everything he needed to make his

plan work inside a box he had stashed earlier behind a bureau in one of the bedrooms.

He sat down to work at the table in the kitchen where there was a typewriter and the best overhead light. He thought about poor Effi, the German woman with the thick white calves, his helper and lover, a high level bureaucratic functionary who had stolen the blank identification cards, official seals and stationary he needed from a government office in Leipzig. She had also made the necessary phone calls to the most important officials to back up the counterfeit papers because all details that were checked, got double checked. So now, if he implemented his plan correctly, he would be able to slip right through the Soviets' fingers.

Working slowly and carefully, he put together his bogus travel papers and passport which would allow him to fly to Berlin, then Frankfurt where he would pick up the flight bound for New York. He smiled at the wallet size photograph of himself, looking so stern and official, wearing his red star so proudly in the lapel of his coat. He could also see the scheming glint in his eyes. And Stanislav had recognized it too.

He smiled when he thought again about Effi. She wasn't at all pretty, but he had lied and told her she was. She was really a morbidly drab little woman with a smell like shit that sometimes seeped from her pores. She had been bored and unhappy for so long, and he had brought joy into her dull life for the first time. She had fallen in love with him, and they carried on with a clandestine and lustful romance in the dreary city of Leipzig. They sneaked around, fucking and sucking in public places, in little nooks and crannies here and there. Effi had never known such satyric passion. Chances were the secret police would quickly find out about how she had aided him in his escape, and she would break down very quickly under KGB pressure.

But there had been a time, not too long ago, when Shafi considered himself a loyal communist. But only for a short span when it appeared

that he could profit from being such. He had watched the Russians who came to his country. They had been called the “Red bourgeois.” He had admired them and wanted to be like them, walking tall above the crowds of peasants, favored and protected. Now he chuckled aloud. Just before his death, Stanislav had spoken nothing but the truth about him. The African had longed for the luxuries and frivolities of the West, even before his college days in England and the subsequent trip to America where he lived for a month in New York City. He had harbored secret thoughts about greed and sensual delights. He languished in daydreams and fantasies wherein he lived the life of a rich, Western man, and he came to despise his dusty, African existence.

He could’ve never revealed himself to his stern father, a farmer and devout Muslim, a fatalist, who had accepted his own downtrodden lot in life without question, and expected that his son would follow along the same well trampled path. But Shafi still smiled whenever he thought of the grand old man, dead now for the last five years, killed by random gunfire in the night somewhere on the outskirts of the city of Harar. And sometimes, when his father’s spirit came into his presence, Shafi felt a twinge of guilt because he had turned his back on the traditions and stopped praying to Allah. But he could no longer abide by the old ways. He belonged to a new world. He wanted to tear his roots away from the African soil.

Shafi worked diligently into the wee hours, preparing one set of documents after another, scrutinizing his handiwork with the most critical pair of eyes; finding faults and starting over again and again until he was finally satisfied with the results.

He checked his stolen watch at 4AM. A nap was out of the question. He was still too keyed up. He fixed himself another sandwich and a pot of coffee, and killed the next couple of hours sitting at the window in the front room, watching for Party people who might drop in unexpectedly. Occasionally he got up and looked at the dead Russians lying on the floor, and wondered what he might do if, by

chance, someone happened to come to the house. He considered hiding the bodies in one of the closets, but he still didn't want to be bothered with having to wipe up all the blood. So he left them where they were, and in one instance he stood over them and stared down into Tanyana's dead blue eyes, and as he turned away he kicked her again in the face.

The plane he intended to catch was scheduled to take off from Leipzig at 7:30. The snow had stopped falling so there wasn't any apparent reason for the flight to be delayed. The papers he was going to show at the terminal would guarantee him a seat, even at the last minute.

He burned the paperwork he didn't use and flushed the ashes down the toilet. He spent a few minutes in front of the mirror marveling at his fine looks; his "*prettiness*," as Svette, one of his whores, had said about him during their tender moments. His smile could charm the most dogmatic of skeptics. His shiny black hair was curly and cut close. And now he saw that he, too, projected an aristocratic air, just as Stanislav had.

His final act, before leaving the house, was to rifle through the Zenovievs' pockets and take the keys to the car and the German money he found on Stanislav. He also took the Russian's cigarette lighter and a writing pen. Just before he left the house he picked up the man's attache case so that he would have some props to carry. Growling angrily, he gave Tanyana one last powerful kick in the face, knocking her shattered top jawbone out through her cheek.

Light snow was falling when he stepped outside at a quarter to six. The German sky was still overcast. He brushed the accumulation of snowflakes from the car windows with his hands. Not another soul walked the street, and the rest of the neighborhood houses were still asleep.

For a moment he felt afraid. One mistake and he was finished. Not only would he be declared a disgrace to his own government, but the

Russians and Germans would most certainly execute him for murder and treason if he was captured. He was playing a high stakes game with an all omnipotent opponent that held the power of life and death over his head.

He got in the car and gunned the motor and listened to it sputter, but it didn't die. He let the engine warm up a bit, then slipped the clutch into gear and eased away from the curb. There was no turning back now, no matter what.

He kept up a constant watch in his rear view mirror as he made the drive to the airport. Whenever another car got in behind him, he would turn off and take an evasive route along alleys and side streets which seemed very foreboding. He wished he had some vodka to help settle his nerves, but resorted to deep breathing exercises instead.

The first glimmer of daylight was showing through the clouds as he finally pulled into the parking area adjacent to the airline terminal. An East German policeman, standing at the gate entrance with a rifle slung across his shoulder, gave him a glance and a nod to keep going. Shafi looked at the official sticker in the bottom corner of the windshield and smiled. A first minor hurdle had been cleared.

He parked the car and got out and walked briskly toward the terminal. The wind was blowing the snow flurries into his face, and he muttered a curse under his breath. Two men stepped past him, speaking rapidly to each other in German.

The inside of the terminal was dimly lit and fairly deserted, except for a few people sitting in the straight back chairs, and the policemen standing at the doors looking rather bored with their routines. Shafi stepped right up to the counter where two uniformed men sat. One fellow looked to be thirty or so, with dark hair and hardly any chin. His older companion looked spaghetti thin, wearing thick-lens eyeglasses which sat crookedly on his pointed, red nose.

“Good morning,” Shafi intoned, very confidently, in Russian.

The men looked at each other, then looked at him. Their naturally suspicious natures showed in their expressions.

Shafi reached inside his coat and came up with the papers he had worked so diligently to make look authentic. He laid them on the counter and held his breath, keeping his hands down and out of sight so that the officials wouldn't notice the cuts on his knuckles.

The older man picked up the documents and started scanning them while the younger official never took his eyes off Shafi. The African started sweating under his clothes. Suddenly, his mouth felt very dry and he wanted to urinate.

The older man looked up from the papers and stared at Shafi with a pair of the coldest gray eyes in the world. He passed the documents to his partner, then his thin lips twisted into a faint smile. "Your papers look to be in order, comrade Doldi. We've been expecting you. Your flight leaves on time."

Shafi finally exhaled slowly. The younger man glanced up at him and reached for a rubber stamper which he banged down on two of the papers.

"Your plane is boarding now at gate five," the older man went on. "Any luggage?"

Shafi shook his head and nodded down at Stanislav's attache case. "I can carry this on with me."

"Of course," replied the official.

Then for a moment Shafi was gripped by the worst feeling of terror. He imagined that both men were merely leading him on, and he expected them to suddenly pull out the guns he was sure they were carrying and arrest him. Had either of them noticed his hands shaking when he took the papers back from the younger man? Had they seen the nicks and scars on his knuckles? He stuffed the papers back inside the breast pocket of his coat.

"Have a pleasant flight, comrade," said the older man.

Shafi nodded and walked away toward gate five where his papers were checked again by two more uniformed men who never said a word to him while their eyes radiated menace and malevolence. They were ready to make an arrest for the slightest infraction. Shafi peeped these men as being low level KGB, making sure every dot was in place and every T was crossed.

Again Shafi let out a sigh of relief when they motioned for him to go on through and get on the plane. He smiled while thinking about how official and commanding Effi must've sounded on the phone when she made the very important preliminary calls to key people on his behalf, setting up the dynamics of the moment where he was right then, about to make his smooth escape to the West.

The small plane was loaded, carrying only a dozen passengers. Shafi took a window seat where he could watch the terminal before they took off. The blowing snow had stopped. He half expected to see the guards running toward the plane with their guns drawn, coming to arrest him. But such wasn't the case.

As the plane started moving a short time later, he leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes with look of contentment on his face. So far, so good. Getting out of Berlin later on was going to be the final hurdle for him to cross. At first the Germans and Russians would probably figure he was hiding somewhere in Leipzig after they discovered the Zenovievs' bodies, but they would quickly find out about the forged documents and phony phone calls, and pick up his trail to the West.

But he felt glad about retaining and traveling under his true name, and actually it had been easier for him to make his exit as Shafi Doldi, rather than trying to slip past the border sentinels using an alias. But on the flight from Frankfurt to America, he would travel under an assumed name, chilling his trail. But once he was safely established in the West, he would reveal himself. Eventually, he wanted his old communist chums to know what a big man he had become.

CHAPTER 2

Brenda Page sat in the chair beneath the dim lamplight, pulling her panties up on her honey-colored legs. She smiled at the young, dark-skinned man lying on his belly across the bed watching her with an impish grin on his face.

“It’s been nice, Raphael. You can stay in here until the one o’clock check-out. My plane leaves for Frankfurt at nine.”

“Hate to see you go, Brenda. We had such a wonderful time together. Don’t you like it here in Berlin?”

“Yes, Raphael. Such wonderful times. But I’m a widow now, and I have a fashion business to run and money to make. I’ll be back in the fall and I promise to look you up.”

The man reached for the full cocktail glass on the night stand and took a sip. He licked his lips and smiled.

Brenda got up and walked over to the bed, her ample breasts spilling out of her unfastened bra. Taking the glass from him, she held it up in front of her pretty face. A sparkle of yellow lamplight danced inside the diamonds she was wearing on her finger.

“Don’t go back to Chicago,” said Raphael, shifting around on the bed and reaching up to stroke her crotch. He kissed her thigh and sniffed her fishy sexual aroma. She opened her legs a little more so that he could slip his fingers inside her panties. Turning up the glass, she drained the last of the champagne.

“Stay one more day,” he pleaded. “It’ll be good for you.”

She winced in pleasure and eased away when his fingertips stroked her most sensitive place. “I’d like to, but I can’t, dear heart.”

She set the glass back down on the night stand and strode over to the closet and opened the folding doors. She reached in and took her skirt and blouse off the hangers.

Raphael swung around to sit on the side of the bed. He was slender and very cute, in a charming, boyish sort of way, skin smooth with hardly a blemish, eyebrows thick, almost like brushes, straight black hair cut low and combed back. He reached into the ashtray on the night stand and picked out a stick of reefer they had put aside earlier. He struck a match and lit it up. The first puff made him cough and sputter.

Brenda chuckled at him while slipping into her clothes. “Don’t blow a gasket. That’s some high grade Columbian.”

He coughed again, holding the smoldering joint out for her. “It’s an aphrodisiac, that’s for sure. I had you hollering and screaming in here a little while ago. I was afraid the hotel security people might come.”

“Hush your mouth, Jamaica boy,” she replied, grinning and taking the reefer from him.

Raphael flopped back on the pillow and squeezed his stiffening dick. Brenda stepped into the bathroom to put on her make up and finish getting dressed. She was very pleased with what she saw in the mirrors. Her recent fortieth birthday hadn’t diminished her ravenous good looks in the least. No gray hair. No wrinkles. Her finely wrought features gave her a look of nobility. The few extra pounds she had put on from eating rich foods in posh restaurants had settled in her hips where it did her some good.

“Now I’ve got to get out of here or I’ll miss my flight,” she said, emerging from the bathroom a few minutes later.

Raphael nodded approvingly. Her skirt fitted just right, not too tight, a low-cut blouse showed off her cleavage. An Afro hairdo topped off her oval shaped face to perfection.

She went again to the closet and pulled out her suitcase and top coat. She checked her watch. Now she was in a hurry.

“I’ll miss you, Brenda,” Raphael said as she grabbed up her purse from the table by the window and slung the strap over her shoulder.

“Sure you will,” she replied, cynically, starting for the door, but pausing and turning to stare at him.

He stretched his lithe body on the bed, yawning and opening his arms for her to come to him.

“Yes, Raphael.” She reached in her purse and extracted a piece of paper currency. “A special tip for such good service.” She put the money in his hand, but didn’t allow him to touch her again.

He looked at the bill and his eyes lit up with glee. “Old Ben Franklin. My favorite dead American. I love to collect these. And it’s new, from this year, Nineteen-seventy-nine.”

Chuckling, she opened the door and stepped out into the brightly lit corridor. A uniformed young Berber man pushing a food cart nodded when he passed her. She recognized him and smiled. She had tipped him quite well the day before after he located the sack of marijuana for her and Raphael.

The elevator was only a couple of doors away. She pressed the call button and waited. Checking her watch, she decided that she would make her flight without having to rush. She reached in her purse and found her dark glasses which she put on just as the elevator arrived and the doors opened. Stepping aboard, she rode down alone to the ground floor.

The hotel lobby was fairly busy. A group of loud talking American men wearing business suits milled around the front desk while the clerks wrote up room assignments and handed out keys. Brenda stepped lively toward the exit doors, her purse swinging by the shoulder strap across her shoulder. A couple of men sitting in the lobby turned their heads to take wolfish looks at her.

She spotted a business acquaintance named Gordon Walker entering the hotel, heading straight toward her. He was a pot-bellied, gray-haired gentleman wearing a brightly-colored dashiki. He looked to be on the high side of fifty, gold and silver on his fingers, gold ankh on a

gold chain around his neck. He started smiling when he saw her. They stopped together near the doors.

“Brenda Page, you can’t be leaving Berlin so soon?” He pointed to her suitcase and shrugged. “You’ll miss Trelain’s private showing on Friday. I hear the evening gowns he’s showing are stunning.”

“I don’t care about him,” she replied, snootily “I’m handling a line of Calini gowns. Trelain and I aren’t getting along too well these days. Bad blood between us because of a deal we were both involved in last spring. Trelain ended up beating me out of a nice bundle of cash.”

Gordon snickered. “Sure he did. After he found out you were trying to beat him.”

Brenda scowled and pushed her dark glasses up on her nose. She had never really cared much for Gordon. He wasn’t exactly a competitor because he dealt exclusively in leather goods. But he was always trying to get her in bed, and he definitely wasn’t her type.

“Fashion marketing is a very competitive business, Gordon. You should know that after all these years.”

“You’ve got what it takes to make it in this business,” he came back with a chuckle. “All the important men aren’t gay.”

“I’m on my way back to Chicago to regroup and come back at this market from a whole different angle. Sorry I can’t chat with you any longer, Gordon. Got a plane to catch.”

“Be sweet,” he said, smiling and blowing her a kiss while watching her twisting rear end as she stepped away. “I’ll call you in a week or so when I get back to New York.”

She threw up her hand and waved, but didn’t look back.

The doorman with the spit-polished brass buttons on his green uniform beckoned for the first taxi in line as soon as she stepped out on the street. The driver was a Turk wearing a cap pulled down almost covering his ears. He nodded when she told him “Airport,” then tripped the meter and sped away.

The city was still coming alive for the morning. The streets were clogged with cars, trucks, buses, and people on foot and riding bicycles. Berlin wasn't one of her favorite cities. This was her second time being there and she had made up her mind she would avoid visiting again, if she could. In fact, none of the large European cities impressed her the way she had once imagined they would. They were all too Americanized. The popular music was American. The clothing styles were American. The post World War Two architecture was American. The rules and regulations were American. She had really gotten disgusted on her first European trip five years before when she saw McDonald's golden arches standing in the heart of Downtown Paris.

The Germans seemed polite enough and always accepted her money for goods and services, but she could still detect the resentment and disdain for her in their manner. People of color didn't set too well with them. She had noted a few particularly unpleasant exchanges between the Germans and the Turks. But all dark-skinned foreigners were perceived as threats. And she also didn't like the infamous wall which separated the sectors of the city into East and West. Armed guards patrolled along both sides of the concrete partition, heightening the presence of danger in the air.

But the trip to Berlin had been a profitable one for her. And that was the only thing that mattered. She had sold over nine-thousand dollars worth of trendy jackets and unisex tops to a wholesaler named Krantz, who would probably reorder in a few months. The Germans seemed to enjoy an insatiable appetite for American styles and fads.

She arrived at the airport in plenty of time to catch her flight. By the time she passed through all the check-points, the announcement came over the loudspeaker that her plane was boarding.

She stopped in the ladies room and checked on her make up one last time before heading for the appropriate gate. A blonde-haired woman emerged from one of the toilet stalls and gave her a spiteful look. Brenda watched her in the mirror while touching up her lipstick.

The blonde washed her hands slowly and patted them dry on a paper towel.

“Come on with it, bitch,” Brenda muttered to herself. “I’ll kick your motherfucking ass.”

Leaving the ladies room, Brenda headed for the boarding gate. There was a short line of people still filing on, and she hooked onto the tail end.

She got one of the aisle seats, next to a bearded fellow who looked like a college professor, with horn-rim glasses and a head full of curly hair that was in a disarray. He smiled at her, but seemed more interested in the book he was preparing to read.

She looked over the rest of the passengers. She was the only black person on the plane. A dark-skinned Hindu couple was sitting up ahead. Brenda adjusted her seat and took a stick of gum from her purse. She turned and looked at who was behind her. A well-dressed fellow in his late forties, white hair, white moustache, maybe Australian, smiled and nodded at her. She figured he had probably been watching her all the time and was thrilled when she finally looked his way. Returning the smile, she nodded genially.

The flight to Frankfurt hardly allowed her any time to settle in. Her eyes were feeling heavy because she hadn’t got a bit of sleep the night before with Raphael in her hotel room bed. As the jet soared across the cloudy German skies, she let her thoughts drift back to the exciting hours she had enjoyed with her Jamaican gigolo. And yes, she had hollered and screamed because of the way he had stroked inside of her with his beautifully circumcised piece of manhood, making her have some of the sweetest climaxes ever while she held on tightly to him, gritting her teeth and hissing in his ear. Then he had kissed her and held her close to him. And he had sucked the nipples on her breasts, and licked the nipple between her legs that made her dissolve into a hysterical mass of orgasmic, bone-popping convulsions.

She relived the whole night of romance while cruising through the clouds in a state of twilight bliss. She heard none of the background chatter of the other passengers, and the flight attendants left her alone. A couple of times she emitted a soft, pleasurable moan and shifted in her seat. She could feel the wetness coming down between her thighs.

CHAPTER 3

Leonid Valony, KGB Commander in Leipzig, East Germany, hadn't been able to shake the head cold which had been lingering for almost three weeks. He was just ten days away from his sixty-fourth birthday and feeling very concerned about his health. In the past three months he had bid final farewells to four of his old comrades. Heart attacks, cancers, and liver failures had killed them. Now, every little ache and pain made him wonder about his own mortality. He had just started brewing himself a fresh pot of herbal tea and was planning to spend the day at home in bed, catching up on his reading, when the call from Yuri Ghenalov had come through for him. And now, here he stood in the living room of the Kiel house, still wearing his heavy overcoat and thick scarf, staring down at the bodies of Stanislav and Tantyana Zenoviev.

"Very ugly business," intoned Ghenalov, reentering the room, carrying a spiral-bound notebook. He was a slightly built fellow, pushing fifty, with ruddy skin and a balding crown. Dark, baggy circles hung like little seed pods under his eyes. He stood very straight, like he might've had a steel rod stuck up his spine, small chest heaved out, shoulders back, holding his head at a certain angle which made him look very officious. Flipping open the notebook, he cleared his throat and spoke on. "But I'm afraid the African has eluded us entirely, sir. He passed through the Berlin checkpoint early this morning with no trouble at all. He has most certainly sought refuge in the West."

Leonid felt a sneeze coming on and pulled out his soggy handkerchief and put it up to his big, red nose. But nothing happened. He stared at Ghenalov and dabbed a bit of moisture away from his top lip.

"This is most unfortunate," Leonid intoned, ominously. "Heads will roll behind this incident, you can be sure. How was Doldi able to

secure the papers necessary to get him past the checkpoints? How did he receive the advance clearance notices? He definitely had accomplices in high places.”

Gheneralov looked down at the bodies and shook his head. Leonid was right. There were going to be serious reprimands, demotions, punishments and more punishments for a number of people. But thankfully, he wasn't involved.

“Stanislav was a good friend of mine,” Leonid said. “We worked together so many times on Party business. He and Tanyana were fine people, just people. Good communists. They didn't deserve this. To be beaten and murdered.”

Gheneralov said nothing. He could tell that his superior's words were being spoken from the heart. And although Gheneralov hadn't known the Zenovievs directly, he had heard of their reputations for being first-class Party people. They had recently been very instrumental in quelling internal conflicts within the Communist Party in Iran, and Tanyana had just completed a highly successful mission organizing Party business in Mexico.

Finally, Leonid let out the violent sneeze that had been tickling his sinuses. His hulking frame shook as though from an explosion, and he reached out to steady himself with his hand against the wall. Again he took out the handkerchief and wiped away the mucous and spit. Gheneralov wondered if some of the wetness was tears.

“Cover our comrades,” Leonid commanded, gesturing toward the dead couple. “I don't want to look at them any more.”

Gheneralov went into the bedroom and snatched the covers off the bed. Returning to the bodies, he draped the blanket over Stanislav and the sheet over Tanyana, avoiding looking at their faces again.

“So, we're sure the African killed them,” Leonid began, taking a seat at the round table.

“Killing like this comes easily for him,” Gheneralov replied. “He served in the Ethiopian army in Eritrea. And he was performing very

special tasks directly for Mengistu before he came here to us. He was scheduled to be sent back to Addis in disgrace this morning. What should we tell the local police of this incident?”

Leonid twisted his mouth around and made a sucking sound through his teeth. “We’ll tell them nothing. This is our business. Shafi Doldi is our responsibility.”

Gheneralov nodded. He could tell from his superior’s tone that he had very definite plans in mind.

“Make arrangements for the bodies to be removed from here,” Leonid commanded. “Quietly. And I mean very quietly. Tantyana’s mother is living in Moscow. I dread seeing her and hearing her cry. But I know she’ll call me.” The big Russian buried his face in his hands and took a long breath. Then he looked up again, his eyes glassy. “This man Doldi received his higher education in Britain.”

“Yes,” Gheneralov added. “He has insatiable tastes for everything sensual and superfluous. Yet, he speaks so eloquently on the virtues of scientific socialism. Much like the Ghanaian, Nkrumah. A sop for the west.”

“A charlatan of the highest order,” came back the KGB commander, reaching for the manila folder still lying on the table. He flipped it open and extracted a glossy, black and white photograph of Shafi Doldi. “This man showed great promise. His brown skin and cunning intelligence made him valuable to us. He was eventually going to be sent to America.”

“Black KGB?” asked Gheneralov, showing surprise. “A unique concept. But what happened with this man, if I’m permitted to ask, sir?”

Leonid tossed the photograph onto the table and leaned back in the chair. “I’m familiar with Shafi Doldi’s set of circumstances. Stanislav discussed him with me just a week ago, and the Party people know of him. Doldi turned out to be a sociopath. Drug use, drunkenness, petty theft, cavorting with the most unsavory prostitutes. His true motives

quickly became clear to us. He was making a mockery of his Marxist indoctrination. You see, our African friends can become very complicated for us. They can show a vindictive side because they've been conditioned to resent and distrust all white men. It's the racism that comes at them from the Western European colonialists and the American slavers. Our man Doldi has no doubt faced both these entities, and he's learned to hate them both. He probably hates and distrusts all whites."

"Addis will acknowledge that Shafi Doldi is wanted here for murder," Ghenalov said. "They'll turn him over to us."

Leonid threw his hands up in defeat. "They'll never get the chance to send him back to us. He'll never go back to Ethiopia. He's probably headed for the bright lights of Hollywood and the hustle-bustle of Wall Street. That's where he truly wants to be. He figures he can emerge victorious in their rat race because he thinks he's so much smarter than everyone else. And thanks probably to someone else here, he has fled to the West."

"He might approach American intelligence," suggested Ghenalov.

"Not likely." Leonid grimaced as he got up and moved over to the window, his expression suddenly becoming more dour. Light snow was coming down. His breath fogged up the glass. "Doldi has as much contempt for the West as he has for us. He'll seek out the loose women, the alcohol and the drugs. He'll try to '*make it*,' as they say in America, in their dog-eat-dog, every-man-for-himself style system. And he'll probably succeed. He has no problem with killing in order to get what he wants. And he'll be with his own kind there, in that respect."

"So, in a manner of speaking, we've unleashed a monster on the West, sir," posed Ghenalov. "And if that's the case, I question whether we should even pursue the matter at all. He's bound to be destroyed, or destroy himself, sooner rather than later."

Leonid turned from the window, his face clouding over and simmering with wrath.

Gheneralov cringed. He regretted having suggested that they forego any attempt to bring the African to justice.

Leonid moved back to the table and picked up the photograph again. His chin quivered as he started to speak, then he glared at Gheneralov and gritted his teeth. "Stanislav and Tantyana believed in our mission in Ethiopia. And all of Africa. They believed in what the Party is doing and trying to do for the working classes. So, I don't care what the official line might turn out to be regarding Shafi Doldi. I want this man found and . . ." His eyes opened wide and his chin started quivering again as he stared at the picture.

"Found and what, sir?"

"He should receive exactly what he gave my two beloved comrades lying here. And more. Much more."

"I understand perfectly, sir."

Leonid relaxed and cleared his throat as the fire subsided in his eyes. He slipped the photograph back inside the folder. He regretted that he had made such an emotional display in front of a subordinate, but he couldn't help it. Stanislav and Tantyana had been like family to him.

Gheneralov made a notation about the time of day in his notebook and looked toward the kitchen. "I'll make the call now and have the bodies removed."

Leonid heaved a sigh and made a snuffing sound through his nostrils. "Yuri," he said before his assistant could leave the room.

Gheneralov paused and looked inquiringly at the KGB chief. The man hardly ever called him by his first name.

"I want you to handle this matter personally. I want you to see to it that Shafi Doldi is found. And I want the traitor or traitors who helped him here in Leipzig found also."

"Yes, sir."

Leonid's eyes started blazing again, chin twitching. "I want you to go to America, or wherever you have to go, and find this African."

Don't delegate this task to anyone else. Handle it yourself. Is that understood?"

Gheneralov nodded and swallowed hard. He had never been to America. The idea of going there sparked a tingle of excitement inside him.

"Use whatever resources of ours you need to get this job done," Leonid went on. "Do whatever you have to do." Returning to the window, he stared out at the snow flurries blowing in the wind. His heart felt heavy.

"I'll find him, sir," said Gheneralov before he disappeared into the kitchen.

CHAPTER 4

Brenda Page disembarked from the plane at the Frankfurt airport and headed immediately for the ladies room so that she could clean herself up after her flight-long wet dream. She had an hour-and-a-half to kill before the connecting jet took off for New York. The white-haired guy who had given her the eye on the flight from Berlin made an attempt to engage her in conversation as they entered the terminal. He turned out to be an Australian, as she had suspected; a developer of computer software for a firm based in Sydney. He was hardly what she considered charming. He was one of those types of men who figured his money could ensure his passage anywhere and with any woman that struck his fancy. She let him walk with her for a little ways, and he invited her to join him for a cocktail. But she declined graciously and disappeared into the ladies room.

The crotch of her panties was soaked with her cream. She got a fresh pair out of her suitcase and slipped them on while using the toilet stall, wrapping the soiled ones in a paper towel and putting them away. When this business was done, she checked her face again in the mirror over the sink and chuckled when she thought about how Raphael would've kidded her about the wet underwear.

She felt relieved when she emerged from the ladies room a few minutes later and found the Australian to be nowhere in sight. She had suspected him of possibly being one of the overly persistent types who might've waited around for her and made a nuisance of himself. On another occasion, earlier in the year while visiting on business in Toronto, a white American fellow had attempted to force himself upon her at a networking party, and even went so far as to grab her wrists. To get him off of her, she had pulled the twenty-two caliber derringer she often carried in her purse and stuck it in his ear.

The busy Frankfurt terminal looked like any of the American ones she had traveled through, except that the signs giving directions were in German, English and French. Other than that, she felt as though she was already back in the States. The crowd tended to be more internationally flavored.

She spotted a concession stand and decided to satisfy her occasional sweet tooth with a candy bar. All the popular American brands were available, but she picked a French product instead; a delightful piece of chocolate gorged full of raisins and nuts. She noticed an English language newspaper showing a front page picture of American President Jimmy Carter looking very worried. The accompanying story told something about the escalating American conflict with Iran, involving their deposed Shah, Pavlovi. A contingent of Iranian nationalists had taken over the United States Embassy in Tehran and had been holding hostages. Brenda remembered how she had once dealt with a couple of Iranians over a transaction of fine cloth. They had seemed like very professional businessmen who never spoke once of politics.

She paid the runtish German clerk for his candy and he gave her a polite, snaggletooth smile in return. She turned to walk away and bumped into someone. The side of her face brushed against a man's shoulder. As she reached out to brace herself, the weight of the suitcase she was carrying threw her off balance. Then the combination of the two peoples' awkward movements together caused Brenda to somehow lose her dark glasses. They dropped with a light clatter in the midst of four clumsily moving feet, and were promptly stepped on by a pair of black oxfords. The frame crunched and cracked; one of the lenses shattered into several little pieces.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the man, reaching out to steady Brenda.

She looked up into a handsome, cocoa colored face. She let her gaze linger on him while he held her by her arms for a second longer than was necessary. He was a beautiful man showing an intelligent

sparkle in his brown eyes. His features could've been carved personally by one of the ancient African Gods of beauty. Brenda felt almost in awe of him.

"My fault," the man said.

"No, I should've been watching where I was going."

"Let me pay for your glasses." His voice sounded resonant; his tribal accents on the English words were very articulately placed.

"Those glasses didn't cost anything," she replied. "They were just a designer's sample."

Smiling, he stooped down and picked up the broken shades. He couldn't help but ogle at her nice legs.

"Well, let me treat you to a cocktail," he said, sweetly. "It was really my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going."

She pondered for a moment. She was interested in this man. He definitely looked like he was worth talking to.

"Okay," she replied. "My flight to New York isn't for an hour."

"What a coincidence. I'm on that flight, too."

He gave her the broken glasses and she tossed them into a nearby refuse basket. They walked together through the crowd to the cocktail lounge. He moved with confidence and reserve, carrying her suitcase. And he was tall, but not too tall. She didn't care for men who stood at basketball player heights.

The cocktail lounge was nothing fancy. A little cut-away section off from one of the corridors with a counter and a couple of beer spigots, and a flabby-jawed bartender wearing a red cap. A half-dozen small tables with a couple of stools sitting at each took up the rest of the space. No soft lights, no atmosphere. The place was empty except for a squatty built man wearing a bright orange ski jacket standing at the bar nursing a beer.

They sat down at one of the tables.

"I'm sure the selection is limited in a place like this," the man said.

"I'll take a rum and cola with a twist of lime," Brenda replied.

While getting up to go to the bar, he stared for an instant at the diamond on her finger.

“I’m widowed,” she confessed.

Then he turned and headed away to get their cocktails.

Shafi Doldi turned on all the charm for Brenda Page while they sat together, sipping their drinks in the air terminal’s cocktail lounge. She was very beautiful and also intelligent. The kind of woman he really wanted. Just sitting there in her company gave him a thrill. She wasn’t plain and haggish looking like Effi, the German. And she didn’t seem bawdy and coarse like the Russian sluts Stanislav had accused him of wasting his time with. He would have to put on his best performance for this fine, Western woman. He could tell she was attracted to him.

Their conversation started again about the dark glasses. He offered more apologies, and she excused him. Then they quickly moved on to other things.

“So, as fate would have it,” he said. “We’re both on our way to New York. My name is Shafi Doldi.”

She extended her hand to him and he squeezed it, gently. “I’m Brenda Page. You’re African?”

“Ethiopian. Is New York your home?”

“No way. I’m from Chicago.”

Shafi touched his temple with his fingertips and rolled his eyes bewilderedly at the ceiling. “This is quite a coincidence, Mrs. Page. I’m also on my way to Chicago.”

She reached in her purse for a cigarette. He promptly offered the lighter he had taken off Stanislav’s body. She spied the cuts on his knuckles and frowned.

“An unfortunate fall on the ice,” he explained. “I’m glad I didn’t break my head.” Then he asked, “You’re in Germany on vacation?”

“I haven’t taken a vacation in years.” She took a drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke away from the table. She crossed her legs

and made sure her knees were showing. “I was in Berlin for a few days on business. Fashion marketing is my line. How about yourself?”

He smiled. “Another close coincidence, Mrs. Page. I’m a dealer in African arts and artifacts. Wood and bone carvings, fine woven cloth, art works and such.” He looked again at the glittering diamonds set in gold on her finger as she raised her glass and took a sip of rum and coke. “Was your husband also in the fashion marketing business?”

“Not at all. Harry, that’s my husband, was into real estate. Mostly commercial properties. Some residential. He was killed eight months ago. One of those little street punks tried to rob him one night when he was getting into his car. Harry was shot, but he also managed to put a bullet in the little piece of trash that shot him. So, there’s just me and my stepdaughter, Felice, now. I’m running the fashion business alone. But it was always my affair to handle on my own. Harry believed a woman should keep a certain amount of independence.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about your husband’s death.”

She gave Shafi a severe stare. “Are you really?”

“You’re a very beautiful woman, Mrs. Page.”

They stared quietly into each other’s eyes while sipping on their drinks. His vodka and tonic tasted strong. He wanted Brenda Page and he knew he could have her. His life was already taking a turn in the direction he wanted it to go, and he hadn’t even gotten out of Germany yet.

“What’re your plans once you hit Chicago?” she asked, finally breaking the silence which had settled between them. “I’m assuming you’re going there on business. This is hardly the time of year to visit Chicago for any other reason. I hear we’ve got snow on the ground knee-high back home.”

“Of course on business. I’ve lucrative outlets for my artifacts already established in the eastern United States. It’s time for my company to branch out. Chicago is the heart of the Midwest. Then I want to get things started on the West Coast.”

“You’re a very ambitious man, Mr. Doldi. A man with a plan.”

“I have a passion for money,” he confessed, showing his perfect, white teeth through a smile that made Brenda feel the familiar tingle in her loins. “I grew up very poor in Ethiopia. My father worked so hard all the time, but never made anything more than the minimum we required for living. Just like most of my people. But my father made sure I paid attention to my studies. And I was lucky. I get the breaks, as they say. I was able to attend university in London. In the West, in America, one can make however much money he has the will to make. One can be an owner and an entrepreneur. But I’m afraid the sorry lot of the workers is the same all over the world. To be depressed and exploited.”

A raven-haired woman came and sat down with a plump man at one of the other tables. They were talking in a language that could’ve been Dutch. Shafi glanced over at them. He felt glad he didn’t have to be bothered with women like that any more. European women could be so crude and lacking in feeling while thinking at the same time that they were superior to anyone with dark-colored skin. He noted Brenda Page’s sweet red lips and the twinkle in her eyes. Not only was she beautiful and intelligent, she owned a business and was probably enjoying inheritance money from her late husband.

“So, tell me about some of these artifacts you’re handling,” Brenda said. “I’ve got a few African masks and some wood carvings at home. Bought them at local art fairs.”

Shafi welcomed the opportunity to further show off his charm. He had a good spiel prepared for her. He had done plenty of background research into the history and current trends in black African arts. Chances were, she knew nothing of the inner workings of the business he claimed to be involved in. He could tell her all sorts of lies and exaggerations, just so long as he told them convincingly and with expression. She was ready to pick up whatever he was putting down. And so he went on to describe how he sold and shipped art pieces

from several African countries, in addition to his native Ethiopia. He named some of the specific tribes whose works he supposedly handled. Brenda recognized the Yorubu and the Masai, but she hadn't heard of any of the others he mentioned. He described his business as being very fast-paced and glamorous. Never a dull moment. And of course, he stayed very much on top of the game. He was the epitome of class. Rich American entertainers sought out his pieces to put in their homes. His statues from Malawi had once been used as set decoration pieces in an academy award winning movie. And while he talked, his leg swung happily back and forth beneath the table. The sound of his own voice, spouting fantastic lies while painting such a glamorous picture of them as being real, pleased him to no end. And Brenda Page was believing everything he was telling her.

They boarded the New York-bound plane together after Shafi went to the main ticket office and showed another set of documents he had prepared back in Leipzig, giving himself another name just for that flight. A manager saw to it that he was issued a ticket which was good on the flight out of Frankfurt, and the connecting trip from New York to Chicago. Shafi wasn't sure why he was afforded such a courtesy by the airline because of the papers. All he knew was that somehow the Russians had made it possible for their special people to get special favors from certain officials in the West. For a price, of course.

There was a problem when they first got on the plane because their reserved seats weren't next to each other. Using his wonderful charm, Shafi prevailed upon Brenda's seat partner, a middle-aged American man wearing a crew cut and speaking with a heavy, Louisiana drawl, to trade places with him.

"That sure was nice of the old redneck," Brenda quipped as they fastened their seat belts.

"You called him a redneck?" Shafi questioned.

Brenda chuckled. “That’s what they call white southerners back home. But it’s funny though, how some of the worst racists from the old Jim Crow days turned out to be some of the nicest people you’d ever want to meet.”

“Sounds very strange.”

“America is strange,” she went on. “I never knew how strange it was until I left it and looked at it from the outside. The people are in a constant turmoil, at war with each other because of what color they are, what church they go to, what they like to do with each other in the bed, how they wear their hair, how much money they have or don’t have.”

“Lots of countries are like that, Mrs. Page. Not just America.”

Brenda nodded and adjusted herself in her seat, heaving her bosom out and turning so that her breast slightly brushed Shafi’s arm.

The flight attendant, a smiling blonde-haired girl with dimples, walked by in the aisle. Shafi took a quick glance at her shapely behind and settled back, feeling tired and rest broken. He really hadn’t slept for two days. And the vodka was rushing through his veins, acting like a sedative. There had been so much to do, so much to prepare for at the last minute prior to his desertion from the Communist Party. Stanislav had caught him by surprise with the deportation orders. And the murders had really complicated matters.

He wanted to talk some more to Brenda Page and tell her about himself, and he wanted to hear her story, too. But now he didn’t want to open his eyes again, at least for a couple of hours.

“I can stand to get a little sleep if you can,” Brenda said to him, as though she had been reading his mind. “Don’t worry. I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

CHAPTER 5

Effi Kruger sat on her living room couch and sipped tea from her cup. Anemic, winter sunbeams shone through the window, making a box-shaped patch of light on the floor. She was feeling hungover and sick from drinking a half bottle of vodka by herself the night before; eyes still bloodshot, lips chapped, her complexion the color of a freshly peeled onion. She was wearing only her slip; her breasts underneath were small, like tennis balls. Her hair was in a jumble on top of her head. The backs of her stumpy legs were beginning to show the blue lines of varicose veins.

She hadn't gone to her job at the Party office that morning, and she hadn't even bothered to call in. The full seriousness of what she had done struck her the second after she made the phone call to the airport the night before last. Now the course of her life was about to drastically change forever because she had betrayed the trust of her positions within the Party and the government. She had helped a young Ethiopian man to get out of the country and flee to the West.

She looked around at the plain, little room. It appeared to be a bit more spiffy than some of the other Party peoples' lodgings. Most of the furniture was new. There was the couch she was sitting on, a recliner chair, television set, thin blue carpet, a few pieces of bric-a-brac sitting around. Yes, the Party had been good to her over the years. She could acquire products and services for cheaper prices than what ordinary citizens had to pay, and she could get them sometimes when others couldn't get them at all. Her Party office carried influence. She could make good things happen for people she liked, or for other Party members who could somehow return the favors.

But now all those good times were about to come to an end. She had thrown them all away for a brief fling with pleasure and self-

indulgence. Shafi Doldi had told her he was a “spirit being” who had a grand mission to carry out in the world, and she had experienced a feeling with him like she had never felt before. He had hugged her close to him in her bed, and his kisses had breathed new life into her withering body. He had handled her so masterfully, opening her legs wide and getting way down deep inside of her with his male strength. And she had made sounds like a wild animal while bucking furiously beneath him.

Now her lover was gone and her fate was in the hands of the Party. The same Party she had betrayed.

She sipped the dregs of the tea and let it trickle slowly down her gullet. The queasy feeling in her stomach made an upsurge, and she held her breath and fought to keep the warm liquid down.

Just then, a knock came at the door. Not a forceful knock. It sounded more like the rapping of doom and undoing. Slow and persistent. She looked toward the kitchen where there was a back door. But where could she run? Where could she hide in Leipzig? Officers were probably waiting down below in the alley anyhow.

The knock came again, a little stronger this time. She heard a sneeze and muttering voices outside in the hall.

She got up from the couch and staggered over to the door. The dizziness almost made her drop as she slid back the latch and turned the knob. She let out a soft groan at the sight of the two grim-faced men standing there. One of them was her direct superior, Schildkraut, a young, fairly good-looking fellow wearing wire-frame eyeglasses. She had never seen the older man who was standing with him, but she could tell by his severe demeanor that he was someone very important. And someone to be feared.

Effi stood aside and let the men enter. They came in looking around curiously at the little apartment. She closed the door behind them.

“This is Commander Leonid Valony,” Schildkraut announced, nodding respectfully toward the bigger, older man. “He’s very interested in this little matter concerning Shafi Doldi.”

A chill coursed through her body. No doubt about it. They knew everything about what she had done to help the African get out of the country.

Leonid’s icy stare seemed to penetrate through her body. He took a step closer to her and said, “Why did you do this, Effi? Did he give you money?”

She couldn’t speak. Her mouth started quivering and suddenly she had to urinate.

“I’m afraid you’re in very serious trouble, Effi,” Schildkraut told her. “I’ve never known anyone in our section to be in as serious trouble as you are today. You gave the African access to very valuable government documents. And you gained access to and used classified codes on his behalf. You forged signatures of government higher ups and put on fake voices on the phone.”

Leonid reached out and took her chin in his hands, squeezing and wrenching her mouth into different twisted positions. She started sputtering and wheezing while the tears swelled in her eyes.

“I’m afraid the African has not only left Leipzig for the West,” Leonid explained, solemnly, while crushing the insides of her cheeks against her teeth and gums. “He has committed murder. He has killed Stanislav and Tanyana Zenoviev.”

Effi couldn’t hold her urine any longer. The water came splattering down from between her thighs, wetting the hem of her slip and splashing on her ankles.

Leonid let go of her chin, and the men looked at her in disgust.

“You’re a pathetic excuse for a woman,” Leonid intoned.

“I didn’t think he would kill,” she whimpered.

“Why did you do it, Effi?” Leonid asked. “Did he give you money? How much?”

“He didn’t give me any money.”

The men looked at each other for a moment, nodded, then returned their terrible gazes to her.

“You slut,” Schildkraut growled.

“I’ve never had a man like him. I’m so sorry.”

Schildkraut reached into his coat pocket and took out his black leather gloves. He put them on, flexing the fingers several times, making sure they were fitting comfortably. His mouth wrenched into a cruel sneer. Suddenly, he lunged downward toward Effi, then came up with his leather-bound fist and jammed it into her belly.

Leonid held her up when her knees buckled and she let out a shrill cry of pain. He turned his head while she gagged and almost threw up.

“You have to come with us now, Effi,” Schildkraut said.

She took a deep breath and gritted her teeth while the pain cut into the entire lower part of her body and finally worked its way out through her toes.

“Please, don’t hit me again,” she sniffed.

Schildkraut glared at her and flexed his gloved fingers.

“Go get yourself dressed,” Leonid ordered, holding her a little ways away from him by the top of her slip. She wanted to drop, but he wouldn’t let her go.

“May I hit her again, sir?” asked Schildkraut, his blue eyes lit up with expectation.

Leonid shook his head and started pushing Effi toward the bathroom. His shoes made a squishy sound as he stepped into the urine soaked spot on the rug. “We’re going to let you freshen yourself up a bit, Effi, before we take you in. A number of people who will be there will want to ask you questions. And I’m sure you’re going to tell us everything. Isn’t that right?”

He slung her around behind him and nearly made her fall, tightening his grip on her slip and holding her up while he checked the bathroom

for another means of escape. The window was much too small for her to squeeze through and there was no other door.

“Get in there,” he snarled, jerking her back around and pushing her into the bathroom. “Make it fast.”

Leonid snorted some phlegm down from his sinuses and spit it out on the floor. He reached and pulled the door shut when she started gagging and retching.

“She’ll probably be executed,” Schildkraut said, bitterly. “And well she should be. Nothing like this has ever happened in our section.”

Leonid walked away from the door. Effi was vomiting uncontrollably, and he hated the sound of sickness.

“Effi never gave any indication that she felt disloyalty toward the Party,” Schildkraut said, removing his gloves. “She’s always been one of the most dedicated. Never been any problems.”

Leonid sighed and looked around the apartment. “Has she ever been married? Or had lovers?”

“I know she’s never been married,” Schildkraut replied.

Leonid looked around at the dreary apartment. He understood why she had forsaken her Party. The poor woman had been stifled by dullness and dogma all her life. He also understood a few minutes later when the sound of a gunshot rang out behind the bathroom door, followed by a thud and a clank.

Schildkraut’s eyes opened wide in alarm. Leonid shook his head. Neither of them made a move toward the bathroom.

“How do you suppose she got the gun?” the Russian asked, dryly.

Schildkraut swallowed hard and looked toward the closed door. “No idea at the present, sir. But there will be a full investigation.”

“Yes. I’m sure there will be. Well, I’m just glad she didn’t decide to rush out here and use the gun on us.”

“I’m glad too, sir.”

Leonid walked over to the window and looked out at the morning. His cold seemed to be getting a little better. The sore throat was gone.

“Well, go ahead in there and see if she’s dead. I’ve looked at enough death these past couple of days.”

Schildkraut stepped over to the bathroom and pushed open the door. He looked cautiously inside. “Head’s in the toilet,” he reported. “I’m afraid it’s a real mess.”

“Doldi has to pay for all of this,” Leonid growled, wringing his fists angrily in front of his own face.

CHAPTER 6

Shafi slept for a good four hours on the plane before he finally awakened with a bit of a start. At first, he thought a loud noise had gone off, like a siren or an alarm, but as he listened closely, he could only discern the background chattering of the other passengers over the very faint droning of the engines. The bad taste from the alcohol was fermenting in his mouth. Brenda was still snoozing beside him, her head lying on the pillow tilted just a bit in his direction. He took advantage of the opportunity to study his sleeping beauty. The woman of his dreams. An American, black bourgeois.

She wasn't at all like the women from his own country. Brenda Page seemed self contained, and at the same time very knowledgeable about the world. She flaunted a particular style of arrogance that fascinated him. Her brand of militant feminism belonged to an elite group of Western women who were used to having their own money and making decisions independent of a man.

He studied the angles and lines in her face, the pleasant, tan skin tones highlighted just a bit by the lipstick. She gave off a slightly sweet aroma, not like store bought perfume, but more like a natural, herbal fragrance. He longed to kiss and caress her.

He looked away for a moment when a dowdy little woman sitting across the aisle started laughing at something she was reading in a magazine. When he returned his gaze to Brenda Page, he found her staring at him dreamy eyed.

They passed the time sipping cocktails and chatting, mostly about each other's business. Shafi found telling lies to be easy and fun. He could make up all sorts of stories right off the top of his head about this deal and that deal, and how he was such a smart businessman. He also talked about Ethiopian history, going back to the ancient times

before the reign of the great leader Menelek and the invasions by the Europeans. He knew all about the Falasha Jews and the Coptic Christians.

Brenda listened to Shafi with rapt attention as he came on more like a university professor than a businessman. His smooth speech and exotic accent fascinated her, and they would laugh together and sometimes casually hold hands.

The drinks put Shafi and Brenda to sleep again for a short time before the plane finally landed in New York and they got off together. Shafi felt exhilarated. His plan had worked perfectly, and now he was in the West where he had always wanted to be. He felt like the man of the hour walking on New York ground. He could sense the hustle and bustle and the cold indifference of the crowd. People seemed to be walking all over each other, scrambling to get where they were going. Policemen were on patrol. In some places the air appeared hazy from the cigarette smoke. Shafi wanted to dive right into the maelstrom, like a swimmer on a hot day at the beach. He needed to become completely immersed in the Western way.

“We’ve got almost two hours to kill before our flight to Chicago goes out,” Brenda said as they strolled through the terminal. “You got anything planned?”

Shrugging, Shafi glanced around at a short, Spanish man wearing tight-fitting overalls and a blue cap, walking very fast, pushing a four-wheel cart loaded with cardboard boxes. The fellow seemed to be very skillful at maneuvering his vehicle through the shifting crowd. Shafi thought that his quick-stepping strides looked very funny, like those of a character he had once seen in an old silent movie while attending the university in England.

“I don’t have anything special to do here,” Shafi answered finally. “What would you like to do?”

“For a couple of hours?” Brenda mused. “Let’s see.”

The crowd seemed to grow thicker, and Shafi felt as though he might be swept away. Someone bumped into his shoulder and kept going without saying a word.

Finally, Brenda spoke again, touching his hand. “There’s a hotel nearby. You want to check into a room?”

Their gleaming eyes met and they both smiled.

“What would we do there?” Shafi asked, innocently.

“What would you like to do?”

He grinned, taking her hand in his. Just then he felt a chill and his smile wilted when he noticed a tall man wearing a blue topcoat standing nearby, staring hatefully at him. Shafi was sure the man was Russian. His face was long with a drooping moustache and several red places from shaving nicks marring his cheeks. Panic took hold of the African as he started walking through the terminal with his prized beauty hanging on his arm and the stranger’s gaze still following them.

“What’s the matter?” Brenda asked in an almost taunting voice, sensing her escort’s sudden tension.

Shafi glanced around. The stranger was still staring at them. But what could this man do to him in New York? Russians had no power in the great capitalist city of the West. There were rules to the game of politics the two systems played with each other. But rules were meant to be broken.

He thought about the Zenovievs and how easy it had been to kill them and get them out of his way. Renewed anger swelled inside him when he realized that the people in the Party he had broken away from might still try and make claims on him, even in the West. He looked back again at the stranger, but now the man had turned his attention elsewhere.

Shafi and Brenda stopped at the money exchange station where Shafi turned in the currency he had taken off Stanislav’s body in Leipzig and received thirty-five American dollars.

The hotel was a two-minute taxi ride from the terminal, through a maze of frantically moving traffic. It was cold and the wind was blowing. Shafi kept looking around to see if they were being followed, but he couldn't detect anyone or anything on their tail. He felt angry because he didn't want his new life in the West clouded with fear and apprehension. He yearned to be in the clear so that he could live his dream.

He used six of his thirty-five dollars to pay for the taxi fare and tip the shabbily dressed black driver, who told him "Thanks, brother," with a gap-tooth smile.

Shafi and Brenda strolled leisurely into the hotel and headed for the front desk.

"Good evening," said the prissy looking clerk wearing a red vest and bow tie. Thin lips also red. Hair red. Fingers long, almost like tentacles.

"A single, please," Shafi said.

"Certainly. All I need is a major credit card and some identification."

"I'm afraid I don't have credit cards," Shafi replied, shrugging.

Brenda reached into her purse and came up with an American Express card and tossed it on the desk.

The clerk got busy right away getting them registered.

"Everything is turning into plastic these days," Brenda said, nudging Shafi. "It's getting so you have to have a credit card in order to do more and more things. Even the little ordinary things like renting a hotel room or a car."

Shafi smiled inwardly to himself. He was going to make it his business to have his own credit cards as soon as possible. They symbolized Western affluence and distinction.

When registration was completed, they rode the elevator up to their ninth-floor room. The plush carpeting on the floors along the corridors felt like cushions beneath his footsteps. The walls were

smooth. No lumps and cracks in the plaster. Ornate light fixtures polished and shiny. He had never been in a hotel as elegant as this one before. Shafi felt elated. He was never going back to where he came from. Not ever.

“Now, let’s get down to some real business,” Brenda said once they were inside the room.

“Good business?” he mused.

“Very good business.”

She took off her coat and laid it across the back of one of the chairs while he sat down on the side of the bed.

“You’re very beautiful, Mrs. Page.”

Standing directly in front of him, she smiled and opened her blouse, heaving her bra-covered breasts and turning her head just a bit to the side. Then she unfastened her skirt and let it drop into a heap around her ankles. Shafi stood up. She opened her arms for him. He embraced her and they kissed, tentatively at first, on the lips; then they were pressing together almost with bruising force. His hands slid down her back and slipped inside her yellow panties. She let out a soft “hiss” and eased closer to him.

“You’re beautiful, too,” she said, taking a gasping breath.

He squeezed both cheeks of her rump. Her silk underpants felt smooth against the backs of his hands as he pushed them down on her thighs.

“You’re going to handle me real good, aren’t you?” she said close to his ear.

Then he pushed her back onto the bed with her panties down to her knees. His eyes opened wide at the sight of the hairy place between her thighs.

“Get you some pussy, baby,” she told him. “Get it good.”

CHAPTER 7

Felice Page stepped briskly along the upstairs hallway in the great mansion, her blue, terrycloth robe tied loosely around her waist. She was slender and shapely with long legs and a twisting, twitching walk. Her eyes were brown, lips cherry red, complexion like alfalfa honey, auburn-colored hair tied in a ponytail. “Priscilla,” she called out, starting down the stairs. “That was Brenda on the phone. She’s taking a taxi from the airport right now and should be home within the hour.”

The housemaid leaned over and emptied the scraps of paper from the wastebasket in the foyer into her plastic garbage bag. She was a heavy-set woman in her late-fifties, with umber-colored skin and short hair slicked back with pomade. Her hands were large, fingers short and stubby. She groaned and held the lower part of her back as she straightened up again and looked at the clock on the desk. It was almost eight.

“Make some more coffee,” Felice said. “And have hot water ready for tea. You may as well put out some fruit and bread and have the bacon and eggs on standby, just in case she’s really hungry. And she’s bringing a guest with her. A business associate. Some African fellow. Be sure to straighten up first in the front room.”

Priscilla nodded and returned the wastebasket to its place in the corner. “I thought Mrs. Page would’ve been home already when I got here this morning.”

“She said her flight out of New York was delayed,” Felice explained. “Had to land unexpectedly and layover for several hours in Cleveland. Bad snowstorm.”

“There’s plenty snow right here in Chicago, too,” Priscilla grumbled. “I sure did start to stay home this morning. It’s so slippery out there.”

Ice is hid under the snow where you can't see it. And I'll tell you the truth, child. These old bones of mine sure can't take no falls. Sometimes I wonder why I ever Biloxi to come up here in the first place."

"I thought you liked Chicago," Felice taunted.

"I like it fine. But without the ice and snow. You're just twenty years old. You can slip and fall and get right up. If I fall, I might have to be picked up and carried off on a stretcher. My neighbor, Mrs. Avery, fell on the ice last winter and broke her hip. She ain't been right since. Had to stay in the hospital for nearly a month. Doctors had to put a pin in the bone. Lord, Lord, how that poor woman suffered."

Felice headed away to the living room where Priscilla had already opened the drapes, letting in the washed-out morning light. It was a comfortable room, furnished more in a style reminiscent of the 1950s. There were a couple of bulky sofas and throne-like chairs with wooden arms carved like cats' paws sitting in a semi-circle. A wide mirror with a fancy border hung over the fireplace. The lamps were mostly hand made creations, fashioned out of wrought iron, teak wood and fine glass. Afghan carpeting lay on top of a wall-to-wall, burgundy-colored shag. The hi-fi set was an older console model with a maple cabinet that opened from the top. Several record albums sat beside it in a rack.

Felice flopped down in one of the chairs and kicked her feet up on the ottoman. A twinge of sadness came over her as she looked up at the portrait of her father hanging on the wall. An artist friend of the family named Kuhfu had painted it, at her late mother's request, some ten years before. Felice had always thought the painting captured her father's spirit. His eyes seemed to be full of life, watching her, radiating the love and devotion he had always felt for his family.

"Who is this African Mrs. Page is bringing home with her?" Priscilla asked, stopping to stick her head in the room while on her way to the kitchen.

"I don't know," Felice replied. "She said he was nice."

“We’ll see. I ain’t never liked no old Africans.”

Felice chuckled. “We’re all Africans, Priscilla.”

“Well, if I’m an African, I don’t know nothing about it. And I don’t want to know nothing about it.”

“Just take a peek at yourself in the mirror sometimes.”

At first, the housemaid gave the girl an annoyed look. Then her expression softened. “Thinking about Mr. Page? You miss your daddy, don’t you?”

Felice nodded. “I miss him so much. Sometimes I feel like I’m going to walk into this room and he’ll be sitting here in one of these chairs, reading his paper and smoking that pipe of his.”

“Yes, yes,” Priscilla said. “He was a fine man and a good man. I miss him too.”

Felice got up and shook off the encroaching cloud of grief that was threatening to make her start crying. She needed to get dressed if her stepmother was bringing a guest, especially a man, into the home. She was about to start up the stairs when the telephone on the table in the foyer rang.

“I’ll get it, Priscilla,” she called out.

Lifting the receiver, she spoke a cheerful “Hello?”

“Good morning, Miss Page,” replied the slightly nasal sounding male voice she recognized as being that of Mort Weinstein, her father’s attorney.

“Hello, Mr. Weinstein. How are you?” She didn’t particularly care for the old lawyer, although her father had always placed a great deal of trust in him. And he was still managing the affairs of the estate.

“Can’t complain,” he replied. “I was calling to speak with Mrs. Page.”

“I’m afraid she’s not in, Mr. Weinstein. But if you call back a little later she should be here. Anything I can help you with?”

“No, Felice. Our business is all set. You just have to hit that twenty-first birthday. And that’s just a couple of months from now.

I needed to speak with Mrs. Page today pertaining to some other matters.”

“Should I have her call you?”

“No. I’ll be in court most of the morning. I’ll call again tomorrow.” There was a pause. The lawyer cleared his throat. “You know, you’ll be coming into very a hefty sum of money and property your father left you, Felice. You’re going to need expert advice and guidance on how to handle it.”

“Brenda has a very good head for business,” Felice said.

There was another pause. “Yes, well I’m sure Mrs. Page has a very sharp head on her shoulders. But I think you and I should sit down sometime soon and talk about a few things. I handled your father’s legal affairs for over twenty years. I consider him as having been a friend, not just a client. And I think I owe it to him to do more than just my obligatory functions for his only daughter.”

Felice heaved a sigh. “I appreciate your kind words about my father, Mr. Weinstein.”

She was starting to feel uneasy. The lawyer could sense it through the phone and decided not to push further with the conversation.

“Okay, Felice. I’ve got to get going now. Tell Mrs. Page I called and I’ll get back to her later. Goodbye now.”

“Goodbye.” She hung up the phone. Something in the man’s tone had depressed her. He wanted to say something that she was sure she didn’t want to hear. Or was afraid to hear. Something about her father. Or maybe Brenda. Or maybe herself. Whatever it was, she had the feeling that it wasn’t good.

She turned and hurried up the stairs to her bedroom so that she could get dressed.

CHAPTER 8

“You’ll have to call and inquire about your luggage again,” Brenda said to Shafi as they were walking away from the taxi toward the front door of the great mansion, their breath billowing from their nostrils like the white smoke from the tailpipe of the car. “The airline lost my bags last summer when I flew to Reno.”

“Yes, I’ll call them right away,” Shafi replied. He was carrying her suitcase, and thinking maybe he shouldn’t have discarded Stanislav’s briefcase. The bitter Chicago cold was slicing into him like a blade right through the coat he had worn from Leipzig.

Brenda scanned the expansive, snow-covered grounds surrounding the two-story, red-brick mansion where the bare branches of the bushes and trees shook in the wind. It was a magnificent structure, with a coach house in the rear. A historical Hyde Park palace, built sometime during the early 1900s, and owned by a wealthy Jewish family until the late 50s when well-to-do Negro, Harry Page, bought it and moved in. New shutters painted royal blue framed the windows while small gargoyles guarded the downspouts. A marble and stone birdbath, now full of frozen snow, sat in the middle of the front yard.

The front door to the mansion swung open just as Brenda and Shafi started up the short bank of steps. A smiling Priscilla was standing in the doorway waiting for them.

“It’s good to have you home, Mrs. Page.”

“It’s good to be home, Priscilla.”

The housemaid closed the door behind them and gave Shafi only a fleeting glance. He set the suitcase down and started looking around the foyer.

Felice came running down the stairs. She was wearing dark slacks and a red sweater. “Brenda, I’m so glad you’re home.”

They embraced.

Then Felice turned her attention to Shafi, her eyes opening wide as she scanned the handsome man quickly from head to toe. Brenda could tell that the girl liked what she saw.

“This is Mr. Shafi Doldi,” Brenda said, gesturing politely to her guest. “He’s a dealer in African art and artifacts.”

Felice extended her hand.

“And this is my stepdaughter, Felice Page.”

Shafi took the girl’s hand in his, and Felice turned on all of her allure for him, showing her teeth and fluttering her lashes. An awkward silence prevailed while a dark gleam sparked in Brenda’s eyes.

“I’ll take your bag upstairs, Mrs. Page,” said Priscilla, breaking the brief icy spell.

“And, yes,” Brenda said, snappily, as an afterthought. “This is Priscilla.”

The housemaid nodded curtly in Shafi’s direction and picked up the suitcase and started up the stairs.

Shafi felt as though he had stepped into a world of opulence and splendor as he was shown into the living room and seated on the couch. Priscilla reappeared, carrying a tray loaded with hot pots, cups, cream and sugar. She deliberately kept her eyes away from Shafi. Brenda turned her nose up at the coffee and tea and told her to bring vodka and beer. Felice put on one of her father’s Gene Ammons albums. The deep, sweetened sound of the tenor saxophone swinging through a melody, with the droning organ and drums sizzling underneath sent Shafi almost into a swoon. This was another one of the Western pleasures he yearned to know. Jazz music. The highbrow and the ethereal. He started patting his foot and nodding his head in time to the rhythms.

Felice immediately tried to thrust herself into the center of his attentions, fanning around in front of him, bending over to straighten things here and there and showing her shapely hips through her tight-

fitting slacks. She sat down in the chair facing him, crossing her legs and jiggling her foot.

Brenda gave her guest a glowing introduction, explaining that he was from Ethiopia and involved in the importing and exporting of African art.

Felice showed great enthusiasm for their visitor. "I love Yoruba art," she said. "There was an exhibit at the museum last summer. Fabulous."

Shafi smiled affably. "Yes. The Yoruba are fine artisans. I've marketed quite a number of their pieces. I get many calls for West African works."

"Ethiopia is in the East," Brenda interjected. "Next to Kenya."

"I know my geography," Felice answered with a chuckle.

"So, Felice, you're not in the fashion marketing business," Shafi said, his eyes lighting up as Priscilla returned with a bottle of Russian vodka, orange juice, and several cans of beer.

"Felice is an artist," Brenda answered. "Or should I say an art student who misses more classes than she attends. I'm afraid she refuses to take the world of commerce very seriously." Then turning to Priscilla, she said, "That'll be all for now."

The housemaid deposited the alcohol tray on the table with the coffee and tea, and left the room, deliberately keeping her eyes away from Shafi.

Felice moved quickly to serve their guest. He preferred his vodka straight, with a beer on the side.

"Your country is supposed to be communist now," Felice said, returning to her seat opposite him. "I saw an article in the newspaper."

Shafi sipped his drink and smiled. "I'm afraid I take no interest in politics. I'm strictly a businessman. But Western news agencies would probably make a big issue out of such a thing, whether or not such a thing is so. They have their long standing cold war going on with the Russians and any other government which calls itself communist or

socialist. Otherwise, I would guess you hear very little, or nothing at all, about my country.”

Brenda smiled. She couldn't hear enough of the man's voice. He sounded so eloquent and intellectual. And she could tell that Felice felt the same way about him.

“Where are you staying while you're in town?” Felice asked.

“I have to find a good hotel.”

“Yes,” Brenda chimed in. “But in the meantime I've offered one of our guest rooms to Mr. Doldi. His luggage has been lost by the airline.”

“You're too kind, Mrs. Page,” said Shafi.

Just then, the telephone rang. Brenda looked at it and said, “They know when I'm home.”

After the second ring, the phone went silent. Momentarily, Priscilla appeared in the doorway. “There's a call for you, Mrs. Page.”

Brenda started to lift the receiver in the living room, but got up and went instead to the phone in the foyer where Priscilla had already picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Monique,” replied the slurry, raspy male voice in her ear.

She felt a chill and a twinge in the pit of her belly as she glanced nervously around to see if anyone was within earshot. “Who is this?”

“Time out for playing games,” replied the caller. “You know who this is. Your old pal Sonny. I was just sitting here sipping on a little Ricky and decided to give you a call. Where've you been? Out of town or something?”

“Sonny?! How did you get this number? You shouldn't be calling here.”

“I had to call you, Monique. Or should I go ahead and call you Brenda? That's your real name. Your little masquerade is over. But we've still got some seriously unfinished business to take care of. I guess you thought you could just skip out without paying me the rest

of my money when you found out your old man got that shot off and killed the kid.”

“Knock it off, man.” She kept her voice low, but sharp. “Don’t talk about that on this phone. You sound like you’re drunk.”

“Where do you want to talk about it, baby? I want the three grand you owe me.”

“We’ll have to meet somewhere, Sonny.”

“Most definitely, baby. And I was thinking you might need a little servicing in the bed, what with your husband being dead and all.”

A surge, like shorting-out electrical current, cut through Brenda, making her hands shake and the receiver knock against her ear. “Look here, nigger. There’s nothing going on between us in the bed. I’ll pay you every penny I owe you for that special job you did for me.”

“I know damned well you’re going to pay me.”

“Okay. Just give me a day to get the money together.”

The caller snickered. Brenda frowned when she heard the gurgling sound of the wine in his mouth.

“Okay, Sonny. How about this evening? Drive over to the Sixty-fourth Street beach. Say, around eight? I’ll meet you there and I’ll have your money.”

“Sounds fine to me, baby. I know exactly where that beach is. We’ll have it all to ourselves tonight. Nobody but us and the snow and the ice. And we can discuss our new terms.”

“What do you mean by new terms? I’m going to pay you what I owe you and we’re never going to see each other again.”

“It’s not that easy, Monique. Or should I say Brenda.”

Brenda felt something cold creeping up her spine. She slammed the receiver down in its cradle and snatched her hand away from it, as though it was contaminated. She glared at the phone thinking it might ring again. But it didn’t.

Priscilla walked by, on her way from the kitchen, carrying a bottle of bleach. Brenda reached out and grabbed her by the elbow, stopping her in her tracks.

“Yes, Mrs. Page?” The housemaid was a little startled.

A strange glow lit up Brenda’s eyes. “Did that man who was just on the phone call here while I was out of town?”

“A couple of times, I think. I wrote it down on your message pad.”

“What did he say?”

“He just requested that I tell you he had called. I think he told me his name is Sonny.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“That was all.”

Brenda glared toward the living room when Felice let out a giggle.

“Did he ever talk to Felice?”

“I can’t say. You know she answers the phone herself sometimes when I’m here. And I’m not here everyday.” The housemaid was feeling uneasy as Brenda’s grip tightened around her arm. Her mistress’ intense gaze seemed fixed on some calamitous scene in her own mind’s-eye-view, almost like she was in a trance. Then Brenda seemed to snap back and release her hold on the woman.

Priscilla continued on her way, and Brenda returned to the living room where Shafi and Felice were carrying on a delightful conversation about the Hyde Park neighborhood.

“The University of Chicago campus here is a sight to see in itself,” Felice was saying. “The Oriental Institute has a number of great Egyptian exhibits. And there’s Rockefeller Chapel.”

“I know of this University,” Shafi replied.

“We can give Mr. Doldi a tour of the city,” Felice suggested to Brenda. “And we can start right here in Hyde Park.”

“Mr. Doldi is here in Chicago on business,” Brenda said, trying to smile. But the phone call had upset her and caused her stomach to

become tied in knots. “He might not have time to go sight-seeing and wandering around the tourist traps.”

“Oh, Brenda,” the girl replied, exasperatedly. “You’re such a killjoy. Always working. Work, work, work.”

“They always say youth is wasted on the young,” Brenda said. “But for now Mr. Doldi and I are exhausted. We’ve just traveled half-way round the globe. It’s called jet lag, young lady. I’ll have Priscilla make sure the guest room is ready and we’ll talk some more after Mr. Doldi and I have gotten our rest.”

Felice seemed let down, and continued sitting in the living room listening to the music after Brenda and Shafi had left.

Priscilla gave her assurances that the guest room was in good order and Brenda escorted Shafi to its location on the second floor near the end of the hall.

“You have a very fine house and a very fine daughter,” he said, stepping into the spacious room where there was a full bed, dresser, chairs and a television set.

“Thank you. Any toiletries you might need should be in the bathroom.” She pointed to a closed door opposite the closet. “I’ll see about a change of clothes for you, if your luggage hasn’t been found. When you call the airline, you can give them this address so they can deliver your bags.”

They stood in the center of the room for a moment, staring at each other. The music could still be heard playing faintly in the downstairs living room.

She heaved a sigh as he put his arm around her and kissed her softly on the neck. She wanted the man to make love to her, but she couldn’t relax anymore for him. Suddenly, her nerves felt raw and she didn’t feel tired anymore. The phone call had upset her totally. How did Sonny find out her real name and phone number? She pulled away from Shafi when footsteps approached in the hall.

“Is everything satisfactory for your guest, Mrs. Page?” Priscilla asked in a sour tone while standing in the doorway with a dust mop in her hand.

“I believe so, Priscilla. But Mr. Doldi will let you know if he needs anything.”

The expression on the housemaid’s face twisted into a grim display of disgust, nose turning up as though she sniffed an odd aroma. “I’ll be available,” she remarked, finally. Then she stepped away.

“Priscilla is really a very nice person,” Brenda said.

“I’m sure she is,” Shafi replied, sarcastically.

“She probably resents you because you’re the first man who has slept in this house since my husband died. The two of them got on well together. She knew Harry’s first wife. Felice’s mother.” But Brenda was feeling embarrassed and angry at the housemaid. Why all the hostility toward the man?

Shafi kissed Brenda again, on the cheek.

“Go on and freshen yourself up and get some rest,” she said. “We’ll talk more later.”

He gave her one last nip on the forehead, and she left him, heading away to her little office on the first floor. A comfortable space with a desk, book shelves, file cabinets, a typewriter and some odds and ends. For now, she had very urgent matters to look into. After eight months of clear sailing, with Harry Page dead and buried and no one feeling the least bit suspicious of her, one untidy loose end was now threatening to further unravel her well-laid plan. The situation had already turned into a mess for her because Harry had suddenly changed his will just a week before his death, leaving everything in a trust for his only daughter Felice.

Brenda sat for a long time at her desk, staring at the walls. She felt like she needed to be doing something, but she didn’t know what. Sonny wanted his three grand, and all she had to do was go to the bank and make a withdrawal from her account. But that wasn’t going to be

the end of her business with him. He had already let her know he had another program in mind, and it sounded like blackmail.

CHAPTER 9

Shafi slept for the rest of the day. It was around seven in the evening when he finally opened his eyes and felt like he didn't need to close them again. He got up and went to the bedroom door. The mansion sounded quiet. Dim night lights were burning in the hall.

He flicked on the television set and got back into bed. An old black and white movie was playing. Something about pirates and ships at sea. He watched the images on the lit-up screen, but his interest in them waned quickly. He writhed about on the soft sheets, stretching his limbs and gloating inside because he was laying up in the lap of luxury on his first day of freedom in the West. Stanislav and Tanyana had been all wrong about him. He wasn't going to drive a taxi and chase white sluts in America. He was going to be a businessman, and make love to wealthy, beautiful, black women. And now he almost wished he hadn't killed the Zenovievs, so that they could see him riding high in his new place in life, and he could laugh in their ugly faces and thumb his nose at them and their horrible little Communist Party. But his smile wilted a bit when he thought about his father and the people in his own government who had seen to it that he got to travel to the Soviet Union and East Germany. Truly, he had forsaken them, and he no longer wanted any parts of the lives they led. He cared nothing about Muslims or Christians. Mengistu and the Derg no longer gave any directions in his life. Damn the deposed Emperor. Shafi wanted to forget everything those people stood for. He had turned his back forever on all the hunger and fighting, the poverty, and most of all the dust that blew across the Ethiopian landscape during the droughts, like a curse from Hell.

He was feeling hungry. He got up again and put on his pants and shirt and ventured out of the room, taking the stairs down to the first floor where he heard soft music coming from the kitchen.

Brenda was just closing the refrigerator when Shafi walked in. She smiled at him and pointed to a bottle of orange juice sitting on the table.

“I bet you’re starved,” she said, leaning against the utility counter and sipping something from a cup. “You’ll have to help yourself right now. Priscilla’s long gone and I have an appointment to get to.”

Shafi looked around. He had never seen so many modern appliances in one kitchen before. Mixers, toasters, coffee pots, can openers. All the luxuries one needed to take the drudgery out of housework. He thought about his mother and the other women back home in Ethiopia. Their lives had been very hard.

He looked closely at Brenda. She was wearing brown corduroy pants which fit her perfectly, showing off all of her curves and her shapely behind. Her bulky sweater came up into a big collar which covered her throat.

Shafi eased over to her and slipped his arm around her waist. A smooth sounding love song came on the radio.

“Be careful,” Brenda said, moving away from him while still allowing him to hold her hand. “I don’t want Felice to see us doing anything. She’s still grieving.”

Shafi squeezed Brenda’s hand and whispered, “I want you right now.”

Again she pulled away. He could sense there was something wrong. “Have I done something you disapprove of?” he asked.

“Not at all. I’m just a little ticked off about some business matters. I’ll have everything straightened out in a couple of hours.”

“You work fast.”

“Did you call the airline about your luggage?”

He shrugged and shook his head. "I'm afraid my bags are gone forever. They're still trying to trace them."

"I'm not surprised. Thieves are working everywhere. Who can you really trust these days?"

Shafi nodded. He wanted to put the matter of the luggage to rest.

"Well, I've got to be out of here," she said, moving suddenly as though she were in a great hurry. "Help yourself to whatever you want to eat. I shouldn't be gone very long. Felice had an evening class at school. She should be coming in within the hour."

"Thank you, Mrs. Page." Shafi stared at her twisting hips as she stepped out of the kitchen.

He poured himself a tall glass of orange juice and found some slices of corned beef in the refrigerator which he put between a couple of slices of rye bread spread with mustard. He also helped himself to potato salad and coleslaw. These were the kind of delicacies most Westerners took for granted, he mused while sitting at the dining table, enjoying his meal. Even the red bourgeois didn't dine as well. They didn't have the multitude of choices that were available in the West.

When he was finished eating, he decided to roam around the mansion. At first he called out for Brenda, then Felice, and finally for Priscilla. But there was no reply. Assuming he was alone in the house, he started on his grand tour.

The building appeared to be in splendid condition. The original woodwork and floors showed signs of recent sanding and varnishing. The carpeting wasn't new, but because it was top quality it still looked good. He sneered when he came upon the African wood carvings sitting on a table on the sun porch. One piece depicted a man with an elongated head holding a spear; its companion was a woman with a protruding belly, carrying a basket on top of her head. He picked up the carvings and looked at their bottoms. He doubted whether they really came from Africa at all.

He opened all doors that weren't locked, and investigated what was behind them. Closets, pantries, bathrooms, linen storage. Everything looked neat and orderly.

On the second floor, he found the first couple of doors he tried to be locked. The third one was slightly ajar. He entered cautiously. This room was cluttered. Bed unmade. Books and women's clothes were strewn everywhere. A sweet, feminine fragrance hung in the air. He picked up a sketch pad and flipped through the pages. The pencil and charcoal drawings looked tentative and lacking definition. A note at the bottom of one of the sheets said: MEET COCO BEAUTY SHOP AT SIX. He smiled. This was a young lady's room. Felice's room.

He picked up a crumpled pair of underpants off the bed and sniffed at the crotch. The linen material felt smooth against his cheek.

Returning to the first-floor sitting room, he picked out one of the jazz records and put it on the phonograph. Something lightly swinging, with a raspy-voiced woman singing about love. The bottle of vodka was still sitting on the table. He went to the kitchen and got more orange juice. As he settled back in the recliner with drink in hand, he looked up at the portrait of Harry Page hanging on the wall. "This is going to be my house," he said, offering his glass up in a toast.

CHAPTER 10

Brenda killed the headlights on her Volvo as she turned off Lake Shore Drive at the Sixty-fourth Street beach. The expansive parking lot was empty except for a dark-colored sedan sitting at the furthest end, near the rocks which held back the lake. During the summer the concourse would be teeming with people at leisure. Picnickers spread their blankets on the grass beneath the great trees while cyclists cruised by along the bike path. Smoldering barbecue grills kept the aroma of cooking meat strong in the air while vendors sold ice cream and hot dogs from make-shift carts and converted wagons. Groups of men would congregate around the benches, sipping wine and smoking weed, beating out frantic rhythms on their conga drums while yachts and sailboats drifted in and out of the harbor. But now the grounds were frozen and deserted, and the lake was a solid sheet of ice for as far as the eye could see. Icicles hung like crystallized lace from the barren branches of the trees. The beach house was locked and shuttered for the winter.

Brenda pulled her Volvo up beside the sedan. A shadowy figure was sitting behind the steering wheel. She checked the pistol she was carrying in her coat pocket and made sure the safety was off before getting out of the car. Sonny wasn't to be trusted, especially since he had found out that he couldn't trust her. The three thousand dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills were in her shoulder bag.

A gust of wind blew in off the lake and almost turned her around as she stepped up to the window on the driver's side of the sedan. Sonny rolled the glass down about an inch and smiled up at her. She could detect the aroma from the cigar he was smoking.

"Get in here, Monique. We got lots of good stuff to talk about."

Brenda walked around the back of the car and climbed into the front seat. Soft music was playing on the radio. Sonny crushed his cigar in the ashtray and cupped his hand over his mouth when he coughed. He was a burly man in his mid-forties with close-cut hair and a pair of ears that seemed too small for the size of his head. His dark face was covered with a stubbly beard. She had always thought of him as being a prize fighter because he seemed so brutish.

“You got the cash?” Sonny asked.

She tapped the shoulder bag with her fingers.

“You’re something else, Monique. But let me stop calling you that and call you by your rightful name: Brenda Page. You know you had me fooled for a while there, girl. I just knew you were for real when we first met up in that tavern on Roosevelt Road. You looked and acted the part of one of them low-life dames from around there.”

“Let me give you the money I owe you, Sonny. I’ve got to be going.”

“Not so fast, Brenda. Murder for hire is worth a whole lot more than what you’re so eager to pay me, especially since you tried to duck out on me and I had to take up time and energy, and some expense to find your ass. What do you take me for? I’m not just some West Side street nigger.”

She sat up straight and stared directly at him. “This is the price we agreed on.”

“Things change,” he said, nodding. “Especially when the deal turns sour like ours did. When Pooky popped your hubby, then your hubby popped Pooky, I guess you figured there was no need to pay me the rest of the money. Both of them were dead and I sure wasn’t going to the cops. Right? I knew you only as Monique, the jilted woman, who wanted to get revenge against a two-timing, lying old buzzard named Harry Page. I had no idea you were really the old guy’s wife who stood to inherit a bundle of cash and some real estate. You played me for a fool, baby. Disguising yourself as Monique. Quite a make up job. I

sent Pooky to take care of the killing, but your husband turned out to be a whole lot tougher than I expected.”

“How’d you find out about me?” Brenda asked.

Sonny shrugged. “When you didn’t show up with the rest of my cash I started looking for you Monique, all up and down Roosevelt Road and all over the West Side. But Monique didn’t seem to exist. Nobody knew her. Then I started snooping in your old man’s affairs. Asking questions here and there. Lots of people knew him. Then I saw a picture you took with him at some testimonial dinner. That disguise you put on as Monique, the rich man’s whorish plaything, was good, but it wasn’t *that* good, baby. I looked real close at that picture of you with your hubby. Mrs. Harry Page, they called you. You know you’re fine, girl.”

He reached and put his hand on her leg. She drew away. He grinned and reached beneath her coat to squeeze between her thighs. Her back was against the door.

“I want to fuck you to death,” he said, groping her with his heavy hands.

Brenda couldn’t move any further. The man’s foul breath smelled like a combination of sour wine and stale tobacco, wet on her face as he tried to kiss her.

“This is all a part of our new deal,” he growled, leering. “We’ll get to the money part in a few minutes.”

She relaxed and let him squeeze some more between her thighs while she slid her hand down inside her coat pocket.

“That’s it,” he said. “You’re getting hot. I can smell it on you, baby. Fishy and pissy.”

She got a grip on the gun and pulled it out of her pocket just as his mushy lips pressed against hers. He felt something and started to pull away just as she squeezed the trigger and the explosion went off, the pistol kicking against her palm.

Sonny's eyes opened wide in a combination of surprise and terror as she pumped another round into him. He reached down between them and grabbed the muzzle of the gun just as the third blast went off.

Brenda managed to pull the door handle as Sonny slumped over into her lap, groaning and gurgling. Again she pulled the trigger, and the popping sound was muffled by the man's body.

The door clicked open and she slid backwards out of the car, breaking her fall with her hands against the cold ground. She got up, looking around nervously. The lot remained deserted while cars continued whizzing by in the distance along Lake Shore Drive. The wind made a frying sound, like meat cooking in a skillet, blowing through the trees. Holding the pistol ready to fire again, she looked in at Sonny slumped face down across the seat with four slugs in his gut. She wanted to pull the trigger on him again, right into his head this time, but she didn't want to see the mess it would make.

Working quickly with her coat sleeve, she rubbed her fingerprints off the door, then kicked it shut and hurried back to her own car. She used a tissue to wipe her face while checking her reflection in the rear view mirror. Sonny's sour smell seemed to be soaked into her flesh.

She started up the car and pulled away, leaving the headlights out until she was about to slip into Lake Shore Drive traffic. She touched the bag containing the cash and smiled. Now she was totally in the clear. All links between her and Harry's death were gone.

CHAPTER 11

Shafi cupped his hand over Brenda's mouth, muffling her scream while he lay between her open thighs, pumping in the deep, hooking strokes. The bedsprings creaked ever so softly beneath them as she worked her behind and rolled her belly, bucking and kicking, then finally wrapping her legs around his rump and squeezing his manhood tightly inside of her. He tried to hold back his climax, but Brenda got too hot for him. She looked up into his face and grinned when he let go with a teeth-clenching growl, and she grinded on him as hard as she could so that she could receive all of his love juice into her deepest places.

"I might be pregnant behind that one," Brenda moaned, kissing him on the neck while he lay in her arms, breathing heavy with his eyes closed. "But now you better get out of here before Priscilla shows up for work and Felice gets up. I don't want either one of them to know what we're doing."

Shafi started to pull out of her, but he still felt some hardness in his organ. He slipped his hands under her buns and she made a "hssst" sound as their ankles locked together. This time Brenda gritted her teeth and held on tight until she started melting inside.

When the action was finally over, they got in their last kisses at the door before Shafi slipped out of Brenda's room and tipped quietly along the hall in his barefeet. He heard Priscilla open the front door and come in the house just before he eased into his own quarters.

Brenda and Felice were sitting at the dining table sipping coffee and scanning the news pages when Shafi made his entrance an hour and a half later. He had taken a long bath and scrubbed his hair with a very pleasant smelling shampoo he found in the cabinet. He felt amazingly refreshed.

“Did you sleep well?” Felice asked, her eyes glistening with wholesomeness as he stepped into the room.

“Very well, thank you.” He cast a quick glance at Brenda, but she didn’t look up from her reading.

Felice was all smiles as she motioned toward the seat at the table opposite her own. She was still wearing her nightgown and a robe. Hair tied in a bun on top of her head. “You’re just in time for breakfast. Priscilla is making blueberry pancakes and sausage this morning.”

Brenda looked at him for the first time, keeping her smirk disguised.

“Do you have plans?” Felice inquired. “If you don’t, I’ve got time to show you some of the city this afternoon.”

“Felice,” Brenda interrupted. “I told you Mr. Doldi is here on business.”

“Yes,” he answered. “I’ve appointments this morning and in the afternoon. But I thank you for your most generous offer, Felice. Some other time for sure.”

The girl appeared visibly crestfallen. Her mouth twisted into a frown and her shoulders slumped.

The housemaid entered the room carrying a pitcher of orange juice on a tray. She rolled her eyes at Shafi while setting the load on the table.

“Did you call again about your luggage?” Felice asked.

“I’m afraid the people at the airlines had no good news for me this morning,” Shafi replied.

“That’s terrible,” Felice whined. “Here you are all the way on the other side of the world without your luggage.”

The threesome indulged in more chit chat over the big breakfast that Priscilla served, and Shafi didn’t hesitate to accept second and third helpings of pancakes and link sausage. Priscilla watched him eat with a scornful expression on her face, and gritted her teeth while she poured his fourth glass of orange juice.

Shafi felt thoroughly stuffed when the meal was over. He pushed himself back from the table and let out a resounding burp.

Priscilla didn't look at the African as she proceeded to clear away the dishes, but she still couldn't conceal the resentment she felt toward him that showed in her tightly clenched jaws and snatching movements.

"I have a ten o'clock class this morning," Felice said, rising from the table and smiling at Shafi. "Will you be having dinner with us this evening?"

Shafi looked toward Brenda. Priscilla opened her mouth as though she was about to say something, but stalked on out of the room, carrying her load of dirty dishes.

"Mr. Doldi will be our guest until he gets himself situated," Brenda declared.

Felice smiled and nodded as she turned and stepped out of the dining room, twisting her buns rhythmically beneath her gown and robe. Shafi wanted to watch her, but shifted his attention to Brenda instead.

"So, you've got a busy schedule today?" she said.

"I'm afraid so," he lied. "But with my bags still missing I'm afraid I'll be at a disadvantage. Especially when it comes to money. I had travelers' checks."

Brenda brushed her foot under the table against his leg and licked her lips. "You just be sure to bring yourself back here to me tonight, Mr. Doldi."

Reaching down, he grabbed her ankle and tickled the bottom of her foot. She giggled and snatched it away just as Priscilla returned.

"Will you be going out this morning, Mrs. Page?"

"No, Priscilla. I'll be working at home for most of the day. I might go out this evening."

Priscilla gathered up the last of the dirty dishes and left.

"I'd better be going now." Shafi stood up and turned to leave.

“Just a minute,” Brenda said, getting up and heading over to the table where she opened the top drawer with a key she had in her pocket. “Here’s a little something to tide you over.” She handed him a paper dollar.

“This is a hundred,” he said, holding it up.

“I know what it is. Pay me back when you get straight. And you should know better than to pack travelers’ checks in your checked luggage.”

He stuffed the money into his pants pocket. “A stupid mistake, I admit. And you’re more than generous, Brenda.”

She looked down at his crotch.

Shafi returned to his quarters and got ready to leave. Felice and Brenda were in the living room when he came down to the front door. He got the impression they were arguing, but he couldn’t make out their words.

“Have a good day,” Felice said, hurrying to the door to see him off. “Which way are you headed?”

“I think Downtown,” he replied.

“I can call you a cab, if you like. But if you wait a bit I can drop you off. I’m going to class down that way.”

“I prefer to walk around some. Get a feel for the neighborhood and the city.”

“That’s cool.” She sounded disappointed.

Brenda joined them.

Shafi nodded and fastened his coat collar as he opened the door and stepped out into the winter.

“He’s a very nice man,” Felice said when he had gone.

“There’s no need for you to act like such a love sick school girl over him,” Brenda replied.

“I *am* a school girl, remember?”

Felice ran up the stairs while Brenda returned to the living room. The phone rang twice before someone answered it. Brenda went to

the window and stared out at the still frozen grounds. The light was weak and snow flurries swirled in the air. A large blackbird was perched on the rim of the birdbath, twisting its neck and pecking at one of its wings. Brenda turned and stuck her tongue out with mocking sassiness at the portrait of Harry Page. "Everything is going my way now, you old punk," she muttered under her breath. "I'm going to have this house and all your money and property, despite your funky old will. I was always smarter than you, Harry. You know that. This little spoiled brat daughter of yours is no match for me." She stepped up closer to the portrait and looked around to make sure no one was watching before she spit right in the man's oil painting face.

"I don't like the looks of that old African nigger," Priscilla grumbled, walking up just as Brenda was leaving the living room.

"What's the matter, Priscilla? He's a gentleman and a businessman."

The housemaid pursed her lips and looked down at the floor. "I can't put my finger on it, but that man ain't right. All that talk about his luggage being lost. He don't seem to be that upset about it to me. I'd be raising boatloads of hell with that airline if they'd lost my bags."

Brenda chuckled. "You're just prejudiced, Priscilla. Lots of colored Americans have hostile feelings toward Africans and West Indian people."

"Well, I don't know about all that. Being prejudiced and all. I just know I don't like that old Doldi."

Brenda said no more as the housemaid walked away, favoring her right foot with a slight dip in her step.

Felice left for her class a little while later, rushing out of the door all in a tizzy because she had fiddled around until the last minute. Then the mansion became silent. The housemaid was doing laundry in the basement while Brenda sat at her desk in her office, scanning catalogs and price lists, and allowing her thoughts to wander back to the night before. She hadn't seen anything in the papers about Sonny's body being found at the beach parking lot. And maybe she would never see

any mention of it. Sonny hadn't been anybody important; just a small time hood from the Westside who dabbled and dabbled in everything from drug dealing to murder. The police would probably celebrate his death. And she knew all about criminal minded black men like him. Her father had been that sort of man, in and out of jail, always hustling, providing very little for his family. Brenda had grown up in a world of black ghetto poverty, her mother uneducated and having no skills, except being able to cook and clean. But Brenda had escaped from that rut of a world, because she was fine and she had some smarts and ambition. And one night she ran into Harry Page.

Then Brenda started thinking about what Priscilla had said about Shafi, low-rating him because he was African. She had heard similarly negative sentiments from American blacks about foreign blacks many times. Her own mother had referred to Jamaicans as "Those funny talking niggers."

Nevertheless, Brenda picked up the phone and asked directory assistance for the number to the airline, then called them. A polite sounding young woman identified herself as "Customer Service," and told Brenda that there was no record of a lost baggage claim from a Mr. Shafi Doldi. Brenda asked the clerk to double check, but the answer came out to be the same.

At first, Brenda felt panicky. If the man had told her a lie about his luggage, what other lies had he told? Who was he and what was his game? She got up and went and stood at the window. A gathering of noisy sparrows played in the bare branches of one of the trees. Now she felt unsure of herself again. Maybe getting rid of Sonny wasn't all she needed to do to make her life safe.

CHAPTER 12

Shafi walked north with the wind along deserted sidewalks, past more mansions and newer townhouses, until he came to Forty-seventh Street. Then the neighborhood changed. The buildings and the people seemed more rundown and the light dim. Forty-seventh Street appeared to be the dividing line between the integrated affluence to the south and the ghettoized, black working-class morass to the north. Discarded cans, bottles, paper and other rubbish littered the ice-caked curbs and sidewalks. Many of the storefronts were boarded-up with sheets of plywood.

He walked west until he came to a wide thoroughfare called Cottage Grove. There was a liquor store on one corner. A supermarket on another. A stone building with great Grecian columns, which had once been a bank, was now a huge thrift shop. Bundled-up people huddled in doorways waiting for the busses. He crossed the street and headed for the liquor store.

“Vodka,” he told a scrawny, pop-eyed man working behind the counter.

“A fifth? What kind?” the clerk asked.

“A small one. The best you have.”

The clerk reached down behind himself and snatched a half-pint of Smirnoff from the shelf. Shafi tossed the hundred-dollar bill onto the counter and put the bottle in his coat pocket.

The clerk held the paper money up to the light and gave it a scrutinizing look before ringing up the sale and counting out Shafi’s change.

Back on the street, Shafi stood for a moment looking and pondering which direction he should go. The ghetto fascinated him. Even in the midst of racist induced poverty black people realized more wealth and

enjoyed more freedom of choice than most of their brethren on the continent of Africa. He noticed a well-dressed young woman climbing out of a new car. An old man who looked like a derelict, wearing a long, tattered coat, hobbled past her holding his head down.

“Hey, baby,” called a voice behind Shafi.

He turned around to see a woman walking toward him. She was dressed in black pants with cuffs tucked down inside her boots, and a gray coat which came down just below her waist. She wasn’t an ugly woman, but there was a look of hardness about her. Nicks and scars in her face. No lipstick. Sprigs of nappy hair sprouting from beneath a wool cap. She had a broad, flat nose and muggy, brown eyes.

“You got two dollars to get in the cut?” she asked in a rough voice.

He answered her with a puzzled look on his face.

“Want a date?”

“A date?”

“Man, do you want to get sucked off?”

He felt slightly embarrassed because he hadn’t picked up on her drift right away. He looked the woman up and down. She had tobacco brown skin, hefty hips and large breasts. He imagined that she would look decent if she were cleaned up and wearing clothes like what Brenda Page wore.

“That’s not all I might want to buy,” he answered.

“What you got in mind, honey?”

“Marijuana. Can you get me some marijuana?”

“Some of that stink weed? Hell yeah I can get you some.”

“Good. And I want to have that date, too.”

“You got a car?”

He shook his head.

“That don’t stop nothing, honey. Let’s step around here in the alley.” She hawked and spit on the icy sidewalk. “You want me to get you off first, or do you want the weed first? Ten for the blow job and ten for the weed.”

“Do me first.”

“Okay. Come on. Let’s go.”

Shafi followed the woman into an alley, a few steps west of the liquor store. Walking became very perilous on the ice as they made their way past garbage cans which were spilling over with trash. Shafi noticed something that was like pink mush splattered on the ground.

She led the African to the rear of a dilapidated six-flat apartment building where the back porches looked rotten enough to fall down all at once. A couple of abandoned cars sat in what should’ve been the backyard.

“We can go right down in there.” The woman pointed to an open door leading into the basement of the building. “Come on.”

Shafi followed her down a short bank of ice-crusting steps into the gloom. The basement floor was covered with frozen muck, and littered with empty bottles and cans. The brick walls were crumbling and powdery. The air smelled of burning oil from the boiler that kept up a low churning sound.

“Back there,” the woman said, nodding toward a little nook that had once been the coal bin, separated from the rest of the room by a section of wooden fence.

Shafi followed her into the bin. There was a beat-up mattress on the floor. A pair of smutty panties hung from a nail in the fence. Shafi pulled out the bottle of vodka and wrenched off the cap. He turned it up and took a long swig.

“Can I sip with you, baby?” asked the woman.

He handed her the bottle and she wiped off the top with her coat sleeve before turning it up to her lips.

“Lord, have mercy,” she said, making a gruesome face when she had gulped down a healthy amount of the clear alcohol. “That’s some fire water.”

“What’s your name?” Shafi asked, taking the bottle back from her.

“Sugar.” Hawking again, she snorted phlegm down from her sinuses and spit it out through the slats in the fence. She opened her coat and adjusted her loose-fitting pants. “You talk like you’re from the islands somewhere.”

“I’m Ethiopian,” he replied, capping the bottle and putting it back in his pocket.

“Okay, Mr. Ethiopia,” Sugar said. “Let’s see some green.”

Shafi pulled out the clump of paper money left from the broken hundred-dollar bill. Sugar’s eyes opened wide when he handed her a couple of tens.

“Let’s see what you can do,” he said, putting the rest of the cash away again.

“Okay. And maybe I’ll get a tip cause I’m going to do it to you real good. Go ahead and whup it on out for me.”

Shafi hiked his coat back and unzipped his pants. Sugar smiled when he pulled out his organ. She took it in her hand and began squeezing it.

“Look at this big fella,” she said, smiling and slowly dropping down into a squat on the mattress. “Nice and hard.”

Shafi let out a groan when she took him into her mouth. And Sugar proceeded to put on a grand performance, calling on all the techniques and tricks of the trade she knew about how to give a man pleasure. At one point, Shafi made her stop and pull her pants down before she continued to blow him off. And when the big finale came, he gritted his teeth and let out a gurgling cry while she held onto his trembling thighs and choked on him.

When the sexual episode was over, Shafi waited in the basement while Sugar went to get the marijuana. She stayed gone for less than five minutes, returning with a little manila-colored coin envelope containing the weed.

“That’s some of that Columbian,” Sugar said when Shafi opened the bag and sniffed at its contents. “I got some papers if you want to check it out.”

“In my country we chew khat,” Shafi said. “But I like smoking this marijuana here better.”

Sugar came up with a pad of rolling papers and handed them to Shafi. He quickly twisted a joint, and she was standing ready with a lighter. He took the first puffs, then passed the smoldering weed to Sugar. She puckered her lips and made loud sucking sounds as she drew in the smoke from the reefer. Shafi watched her with a slight smile on his face. She was one of the hungry masses. Hungry for anything and everything she could get.

“How about a tip, baby?” she purred while passing the joint back to the African.

He reached in his pocket again and peeled off a five-dollar bill and handed it to her.

She stuffed the money into her coat. “Do you think you could let me walk with one of them joints?”

“Not this time,” he told her, realizing that the more he gave her, the more she would ask for.

They left the basement together and walked back to where the alley met Forty-seventh Street. The combination of the alcohol and the reefer had him feeling high. He turned to Sugar just as she caught sight of someone familiar on the other side of the avenue and started waving and running toward them. She wasn’t interested in Shafi anymore. He had served his purpose.

Snow flurries were blowing again as the African strolled back to the corner and looked both ways along Cottage Grove. A feeling of accomplishment swelled in his breast. Stanislav Zenoviev had accused him of being a glutton for the decadence of the West. Now he could really live down the old Russian’s words and enjoy his fill of it.

CHAPTER 13

Over the next couple of weeks, Shafi behaved like a child, lost and giddy, in a toy store at Christmas time, as he explored the seamy delights of the American city. More snow came and the temperatures fell into the deep freeze. But bad weather couldn't stop his fun. His body ran on a potent mixture of Russian vodka and German beer surging through his veins, alternately dulling and stimulating his brain, and he smoked strong marijuana whenever he could score a bag. Brenda Page extended her hospitality to him, keeping him up in spending money while never mentioning the matter of his missing luggage again. She bought him some clothes to wear, a pair of shoes, and a pair of boots, and he promised to pay her back within the month. He stayed out drinking and partying most nights until the bars closed, then he would call Brenda and let her know he was on his way so that she could open the door at the mansion for him. She would let him in the house and take him into her bedroom for lovemaking until dawn. He spent his afternoons and evenings roaming the streets in search of the thrills he had always dreamed of. Sometimes he prowled through the black ghettos, drinking with men on the streets or shooting games of eightball in rough pool halls, but most often he hit the ritzy Downtown and North Side scenes where he sat with his legs crossed, sipping vodka screwdrivers and putting on his bourgeois airs, striking up conversations with strangers in swank hotel lounges and introducing himself as an importer of fine African arts and artifacts. Always the gentleman, he dined in expensive restaurants as well as fast food huts, and fell in love with gyros sandwiches served with sour cream and french fries on the side. He always kept his eye out for young, impressionable black men and women who appeared to be about business. He could make them look up to him in awe because of his

deeply intellectual conversations and foreign accent, his hip businessman's lingo and polished manners. On several occasions he picked up prostitutes and went with them to cheap, funky smelling hotel rooms or into abandoned buildings or dark gangways. He couldn't seem to get enough of the sensual delights that were available to him.

Shafi continued to be treated as somewhat of a celebrity at the Page mansion by Brenda and Felice. But Priscilla couldn't help but act cool toward him while she still afforded him the benefits of her services because it was her job. Felice seized every opportunity to spend time in Shafi's presence. She made sure her hair was always combed just so and she was dressed just right. Sometimes she would change clothes two or three times in an evening for him. Brenda found the girl's behavior to be most irritating, but she didn't let it be known how she felt, and Shafi treated Felice as though she were a teenager carrying a puppy love crush for him. One night Felice managed to organize a dinner party to celebrate Brenda's opening of a new account with a local Downtown department store. The three of them went out to a neighborhood Chinese restaurant and had a wonderful time. Shafi opened a fortune cookie and chuckled to himself when he read the message on the sliver of paper he found inside: "*A change for the better is coming in your life.*"

Shafi and Brenda managed to keep their hot sex a secret from Felice. Or at least that's what they thought. They never touched in her presence, and they were careful not to stare too hard at each other. Priscilla, however, couldn't be fooled. She picked up the little unconscious signals Brenda sent out, and she recognized the tell-tale evidence on the rumpled bed sheets. But since she was only the hired help, she realized it wasn't her place to say anything about her employer's affairs. Nevertheless, she continued to harbor loathing in her heart for the African man and wished that he would be gone out of the Page home forever.

Brenda wasn't exactly sure how to fit Shafi into her plans, beyond her bedroom. Her most important goal was the acquisition of Harry Page's fortune through his daughter Felice. Thus far, Brenda still commanded the young woman's trust and respect, and because Harry had no other living relatives, there was minimal interference to have to deal with. Having Shafi in her life put the icing on the cake, so to speak. He was that perfect fit between her legs she was always looking for. She figured that the drinking and late hours he kept were all a part of his business style. Being the handsome man that he was, she expected him to have his share of female admirers, but she was more than confident that she could eventually contain him all for herself.

Shafi realized where he stood with Brenda Page, and he didn't mind playing the role she had cast him in as her lover. But his goals were clear to himself. He wanted Brenda because of all the wealth he assumed went along with her. He also wanted her because she was a whole woman who was also black. Too many of the African women he knew had been ritually mutilated as children. Circumcised. Pearl tongues cut out. Scarred for life. And he was tired of the white women's narrow slits. He wanted a woman like Brenda who could enjoy all the sexual feelings a female was supposed to feel. And he was sure he knew how to play his cards right so that everything would go his way.

CHAPTER 14

Yuri Ghenalov didn't like coming to the United States, especially to New York City. He felt small and insignificant walking the crowded streets of Manhattan where the people seemed as cold and ruthless as the wind and snow which cut into his face, making him keep his head down and hold onto his hat. He had been given a Greenwich Village address on Jane Street by KGB operatives just before leaving Frankfurt. For some reason he and the Pakistani cab driver who picked him up at La Guardia airport got the street numbers mixed up in the dark, and Yuri got out in the wrong block and had to walk back, carrying his small suitcase.

"Can you spare some change for a white brother?" whined a strangling voice coming from the shadows next to an apartment building.

Yuri turned to see the long, thin shape of a man huddling close to the wall. The reddish glow of a burning cigarette quivered in the phantom's hands. Yuri didn't stop. He caught a glimpse of a pale, grizzled face, fretfully on the verge of puking, eyes sunken and yellowed with disease.

The address he was looking for was a two-story gray stone with a wrought iron fence and security gate protecting the front. An empty beer can sat on the ground next to the fence. Lights burned in the windows above.

Yuri rang the bottom doorbell as he had been instructed to do by his contacts in Frankfurt, and waited. He looked back along Jane Street. The long man had emerged from the shadows and was walking slowly toward him. Just then, the buzzer sounded and Yuri pushed open the gate. The long man stepped up his pace. Yuri ducked inside

the front door and heaved a sigh of relief when the lock clicked behind him.

He paused for a moment in the lobby. The carpeting running up the stairs was a deep burgundy color; the wallpaper a maroon, flowered pattern.

“Come on up,” called out a man’s voice from above.

Yuri climbed the stairs to the first floor where a smiling, cherub-faced man stood waiting for him with an outstretched, welcoming hand.

“And how was the sky?” the man asked in Russian.

“High and blue,” Yuri answered, on cue, as he had been instructed.

“Yes,” the man said, pumping his hand vigorously. “Comrade Ggeneralov. I’m Nuradin. Welcome to New York City. Come in and rest yourself.”

Yuri was shown into an apartment that was one huge room, sunken in the center, with a kitchen, bath and closet space on the upper level. An expansive picture window, now concealed by heavy draperies, took up almost all of the wall opposite the entrance. The furnishings looked new and expensive. A great chandelier with dangling, glittering baubles hung over the center of the room.

“Rest your bag, Ggeneralov,” Nuradin said, still smiling.

Yuri set his suitcase down and took off his coat and hat and let his host hang them in the closet.

“I’ve just prepared dinner,” Nuradin went on. “Lamb chops and rice. A few more minutes and we can eat. Have a seat.”

Yuri nodded and descended the two stairs to the living room area and sat down on the wrap-around sofa.

“Would you care for a refreshment?” Nuradin asked from above.

“Just water for now,” Yuri replied.

Nuradin brought his drink in a red glass and sat down in the arm chair across from him. Yuri could tell that his host was used to living in the West, and maybe enjoyed it. He looked to be in his early forties

with dark hair that showed no signs of gray; pinched nose and a thin moustache. The fat in his mid-section sagged a bit over his belt line as he reared back in the chair. He wore a pair of brown suede moccasins, blue jeans and pullover shirt with three buttons open at the collar.

“How do you like America?” Nuradin asked. “I can tell you don’t travel to the West very often.”

“It’s a very strange place. I’ve been to D.C. before, but I didn’t like it.”

Nuradin chuckled. “It definitely has a down side. D.C. especially. I would think the Americans should be embarrassed to have their Capital city so full of their depressed blacks, and looking the way it does. And so much crime. This city might be just as bad. But there’s money to be made off poverty and racism, as you know. People pay dearly here for the buzzers and security gates, like the ones you passed through to get in here.”

Yuri frowned when he thought about the old man he had seen in the shadows.

“But enough talk about America’s social ills,” Nuradin went on. “You’re here on a special mission for Leonid Valony.”

“A *very* special mission. Few know about it, even within the KGB.”

Nuradin leaned over and pulled out a spiral-bound notebook from under his chair. He flipped it open and read silently for a moment. Then he spoke again. “Shafi Doldi. An Ethiopian. He’s the purpose for your visit.”

“I hope you can tell me something more about his whereabouts.” Yuri drained his glass and cleared his throat before going on to tell about the African’s failed Marxist training and the subsequent events leading up to the murders of the Zenovievs in Leipzig.

Nuradin’s smile had faded by the time Yuri finished laying out the facts. He put the notebook aside and spoke. “I knew Stanislav and his wife well. They were dedicated people who would’ve definitely weeded

out a bad apple like this Doldi. But they evidently didn't know just how rotten he really was."

"Doldi wants to make a fool of the Party."

"He arrived here in New York three days ago, in the company of a woman. An American black woman. But he's no longer here. We have reason to believe he went on to Detroit, perhaps Cleveland or Chicago. He's got papers under another identity. But our sources say Detroit. Knowing what we know about him, we're sure he'll stick to the big cities. How he might get along without money we can't say just yet. He's probably living in the black world, and we don't have as many resources in that area as in some others."

"From what I can tell about this man, he'll have few problems surviving here," Yuri said. "He knows how to use women quite well. That's how he was able to get out of East Germany so easily."

"I see." Nuradin tapped his finger against his lips. "And I also get the impression that this mission is more of a personal matter that Leonid wants settled. I know he and Stanislav were very close."

"I'm not supposed to return home until the African has been destroyed," Yuri said.

"This Doldi is obviously a very dangerous man," said Nuradin. "He's already murdered two of our people, that we know of. He won't hesitate to kill again."

"You're supposed to supply me with what I need to get along," said Yuri. "Do you know who the woman is our African friend has picked up?"

Nuradin arose from his chair and went over to a little cabinet next to the television set. Opening the doors, he reached inside and came up with a gun. An automatic. Black steel. Small enough to fit in a coat pocket, but big enough to be devastatingly lethal. He handed it, butt first, to Yuri.

"It's also been arranged for you to have a subordinate," Nuradin explained. "He should be arriving any minute now. One of our people

named Kouhar. He knows his way around most of the big American cities. A very capable fellow. He was very effective recently in an operation in Nicaragua. He's not squeamish about killing. And he's not particularly fond of blacks. African or otherwise. Hardly a shining example for the party. We haven't been able to find out anything about the woman we suspect Doldi is traveling with. Not yet. But we will."

Yuri checked the weapon. It was loaded. He slipped it down into the pocket of his sport coat. The weight of it didn't bother him. "I'm supposed to contact you again when I've done what has to be done."

Nuradin nodded and reached down again into the cabinet and came up with a large envelope. "In here you'll find all your necessary identification. A New York driver's license in the name Smith. Library card. Gas card. These Americans love their cards. And you've got keys to a new Chevrolet Impala. Red, of course. Parked outside. There's a couple thousand dollars in cash in the envelope too. Contact me if you need more. You can stay here for the night and head out for Detroit in the morning."

Just then, the door buzzer sounded.

"That should be Kouhar," Nuradin said, stepping away to answer the door.

Yuri leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He thought about home back in Russia, the town called Kalinin, a couple of hundred miles west of Moscow. His beloved Vajzylka was there waiting for him. He already missed her so much. Her long, brown hair and soft skin. The heart-felt poetry she composed while sitting at her little writing desk. The loving smile she could turn on especially for him. But she was also a hardened woman carrying childhood memories of famine and utter despair in wartime Stalingrad. They both knew and understood the obligations that went along with Yuri's work and position within the KGB. The position he had worked so very hard to attain. And this time he would be returning to her with blood on his

hands. But she wouldn't be able to see the blood, even though she would guess it was there.

The sound of the door clicking shut snapped him back. He glanced up and saw a robust-looking man wearing a hooded coat and dark glasses entering the room with Nuradin.

Yuri stood up as the big man descended the steps.

"Yuri Ghenalov, meet Kouhar."

The big Slav didn't crack a smile when they shook hands. Yuri tried not to wince as the bones in his fingers felt like they were being crushed in an iron vise.

Kouhar took off his glasses and unfastened his coat.

"You're just in time for a meal," Nuradin said.

Yuri studied the Slav's face. He seemed like he could be a very brutal man. There was no kindness in his gray eyes. The straw-colored hair under the hood was cut short, and there was a black mole in the crease next to his nose.

"So, we're out to assassinate a black," Kouhar said, sneering, his deep voice heavily accented. He made an exaggerated chewing motion with his mouth.

"Have you been briefed on the details?" Yuri asked, inflecting his rank and authority in his voice.

"The only other details he knows so far is that he's to follow your orders," Nuradin interjected.

"Fine." Yuri scanned the Slav again and made up his mind that he didn't like him. But he was the kind of brute that was needed for the mission at hand.

"Well, let's have our meal and talk more," Nuradin said.

Yuri watched the muscles rippling beneath the big Slav's shirt as they stepped up to the kitchen level where there was a small, wooden eating table surrounded by four chairs. Now Yuri had a clearer picture of how the mission would proceed. It might not be necessary for him to do any killing himself. He could delegate the task to the Slav.

CHAPTER 15

Shafi woke up early one Sunday morning with one of the worst hangovers of his life. He had been out drinking vodka and American beer until two AM. Hammers seemed to be pounding inside and outside his brain, and no matter how he sat, lay or turned, the bilious feeling in his belly rose like a wave in his breast. He couldn't walk. The best he could do was crawl from his bed to the toilet to puke his guts out and moan in agony.

He looked at the clock around noon, and resigned himself to having to spend the rest of the day in bed. He tried walking to the bathroom, but sank down again into a heap beside the bed instead, lying there naked, panting and sweating.

The door to his room opened. "Shafi, are you here?" Brenda called out.

He couldn't answer. He didn't want to even try and talk. If she thought he had gone out, then he might be able to get the prolonged rest he needed.

When she was gone he crawled back into bed and wrapped himself in the covers. He had indulged in a wild night of drinking and reefer smoking with a group of office workers he met in a Downtown lounge and followed to a party at a guy's house on the West Side of town. He couldn't remember a lot of what went on. He knew he had raised a woman's skirt in a bathroom somewhere and slipped his finger inside her vagina, and he had gotten into an argument with a cab driver over a fare. But he couldn't remember much else after he got drunk, and he had no idea how he finally got back to the Page mansion.

The sick feeling came on strong again. He took deep breaths and grunted while keeping down the bilious contents of his stomach. Sweat started pouring out of him, and he cut loose with a loud fart that

burned his rectum. Then he couldn't hold back from vomiting any longer, and the retching started again. But this time there was nothing left in his belly to come up. He just lay there with his head hanging off the side of the bed, gagging and dry heaving.

The sun became bright in the room, then it started fading. He couldn't sleep, even though his eyes were closed. He was just waiting for the sick feeling to ebb.

It was sometime during the late afternoon when he finally worked up the strength to stagger again into the bathroom. He rinsed the sour taste from his mouth and brushed his teeth. He tried to drink a little water, but it came right back up. Holding a cold towel across his face gave him some relief.

He went to the window and peered out at the winter scape. He commanded a view of the next house and yard to the north. The snow and ice had turned to so much slush because of the recent rise in temperature.

He thought he heard the doorbell ring, but he couldn't be sure, and he really didn't care. No one would be coming to see him. Closing his eyes, he let his forehead rest against the cold glass. Then he was sure he heard Brenda's voice, snapping and sounding angry.

He stumbled out of the bathroom and went to the door of his room and opened it.

"Felice didn't tell me she had made an appointment with you," Brenda said on the first floor below.

"Maybe the young lady doesn't feel like she has to consult with you on all matters concerning her father's estate," replied a man's voice.

"I can't stand you, Weinstein," Brenda said. "I've never liked you."

"I know that, Brenda. And I really don't care whether you like me or not. But I'm glad you finally came out and said it. Is it alright if I come in and wait for Felice? She told me to stop by so that we could talk. I'm sure she's on her way right now."

Shafi eased out into the hall, his bare feet hardly making a sound across the thick carpeting. He got down on his knees next to the banister and waited to hear more from below.

“You’re always so interested in sticking your big nose into our business,” Brenda said.

“That’s what Harry Page paid me to do.”

“Harry is dead.

“Yes, he is. And it’s a shame, too. He was a good man. I was his attorney, and I was also his friend.”

“Well, he won’t know what you’re doing now. So why don’t you just leave us alone, Weinstein? Just sit on your fee and go on about your business. We can get another lawyer, if we need one.”

“You’re no good, Brenda. I know it and Harry realized it, too, before he died. That’s why he wrote you totally out of his will the way he did the week before he got killed, and put everything in trust for his daughter.”

Shafi’s ears perked up as he leaned closer to the banister.

“Yeah. Harry knew what you were all about,” the lawyer went on. “You’re nothing but a high class whore. He found out about those men you were sleeping with behind his back. You even brought a man in this house and took him to bed while Harry was in Milwaukee on business. Harry paid to have you watched after he got really suspicious. Thankfully, he never legally married you. He let you call yourself Mrs. Page and he treated you like his wife, but he probably suspected there was something wrong with you from the beginning. But you were slick. You got away with your little dirt for a long time before he found you out.”

“Hush your foul mouth,” Brenda roared. Then there was the resounding sound of a hand slapping against flesh.

Silence reigned for a long moment while Shafi held his breath. He wanted to peek over the banister, but he didn’t want them to know he

was there. Brenda evidently figured she was alone in the house. Priscilla had the day off.

“Slapping my face doesn’t change anything, Brenda. I’m still going to advise Felice about how to invest her money.”

“If you tell that girl any of that filth about me I’ll kill you, Weinstein. And I mean that.”

The lawyer laughed. “I’m sure you do mean it. And I still believe you had something to do with Harry’s death. I just can’t prove it. The little rat punk that shot him is dead and the trail ended there. But you had something to do with it, Brenda. I’d bet my life on it. And I’m not scared of you. The only reason I don’t tell Felice about you is because Harry made me promise that I wouldn’t. He knew you were a slut, but it’s too bad he didn’t know you were something even worse than that. I think Harry was still in love with you, in his own foolish way. He was always a sucker for a pretty woman.”

“Well, one thing’s for sure, mister big time attorney. Felice still looks up to me and I’m still going to get a part or all of that silly man’s money. And there’s nothing you can do about it. And there’s nothing you better do about it.”

“I’ll just have a seat in the room with my old friend’s portrait, if you don’t mind, and wait for Felice.”

There was another pause. Then Brenda growled, “Heil, Hitler!”

Shafi listened for a few moments longer, but nothing else was said. His ears were ringing from the revelations he had overheard. He eased back into his room and closed the door ever so quietly. He never wanted Brenda to know that he had been in the house and overheard any of the terrible talk she had with the lawyer. This meant that all his plans were going to have to change. Felice was the woman he had to have if he was going to lay his hands on the Page fortune. Brenda was really just the old man’s common law widow nobody, looking for an opening the same way he was. He sat on the side of the bed and smiled when he thought of Felice’s lithe young body, and how he was going

to lay into her with some of his long, hooking strokes and make her cry out.

Shafi dressed quietly and listened and waited for an opportunity to slip out of the house by way of the back door. He was still feeling sick, but what he had overheard gave him the strength he needed to get moving.

The chance he was looking for came after Felice finally arrived some twenty minutes later. Brenda went to her office and closed the door while Felice and Weinstein remained together in the living room.

Moving stealthily, and carrying his shoes in his hand, he tipped down the stairs and was gone out of the back door without anyone ever being wise to him.

He walked to Forty-seventh Street and sat in a tavern nursing a beer for a couple of hours before returning to the mansion. Brenda let him in the front door and went back to whatever she was doing in her office. Her mood seemed sour. The lawyer had gone. Felice was in her room. He felt sure that no one knew that he had been in the house and overheard all the awful talk.

CHAPTER 16

“I was thinking maybe we should take a trip, Shafi,” Brenda said while stretched out nude across her bed. “Go somewhere warm, like Bermuda or the Indies. Get away from all this ice and snow.”

Shafi was sitting on the bed beside her, wearing only a tee-shirt, running his fingers gently across her buttocks.

“It would be strictly a pleasure trip for me, for a change,” Brenda went on. “You could come along. We could have some fun in the sun, as they say.”

Shafi kissed her buns and she let out a purr.

“Just think about it, Shafi. We could make love on the beach, beneath the moonlit sky. And we could swim together naked and make love underwater.”

“Sounds like something very special,” Shafi replied.

She turned over and spread her legs. “I can’t get enough of your dick, Shafi. I want you on top of me and inside of me some more, right now.”

He leaned over and kissed her on the breast and licked the nipple. “Not yet, Brenda. I’m not hard again.”

“What’s the matter with you, dearest? Have you gotten your fill of me?”

He thought about the conversation he had overheard between her and the lawyer the day before. Perhaps she was right. She didn’t look the same to him anymore. She was still very beautiful, but something else about her was different. He chuckled when he thought about the possibility that money could make him get hard.

“Are you laughing at me, Shafi?”

“No, Brenda. Just thinking about something that happened a long time ago when I was a boy in Ethiopia.”

“When you were a boy? Tell me what it was like when you were a boy. What were your parents like? What were your days like? You never want to talk about your life in Africa.”

“There’s not that much to tell. My father worked hard as a farmer. Sometimes the food grew and sometimes it didn’t. Sometimes we ate and sometimes we went hungry. Everyone was poor in Ethiopia, except for the Emperor and the people who were his lackeys. And everyone is still poor. But the people accept this condition as their fate.”

“Sounds like you had a hard life.”

“A hard life? You can say that.”

“But you’re an educated man. An intelligent man. How did you get to go to school? Didn’t you say that you went to a university in England?”

“I was fortunate. One of the Emperor’s administrators took a liking to me and pushed me forward. I was very good with my studies. And my father begged him a lot, too.”

Shafi didn’t like talking about his youth in Ethiopia. He was afraid something might slip out about his communist ties and lead up to what happened in Leipzig with the Zenovievs. He didn’t want to maintain any links with that part of his life.

“There are Ethiopians living here in Chicago,” Brenda said. “Have you made contact with any of them?”

Shafi cringed and shook his head. He didn’t want to have anything to do with his countrymen. He didn’t want to take a chance on anyone recognizing him. He wanted to flaunt his triumphs in the faces of his former rulers, but he wasn’t ready yet. He needed time to establish himself.

“You’re a loner,” Brenda went on. “I can tell. And that’s kind of out of character for a man in your line of business.”

“I get along,” he replied. “I have my own way of doing things.”

Suddenly, Brenda threw her arms around him and pulled him down close to her. They kissed for a long time while he rubbed the hairy place between her thighs.

“Oh, Shafi,” she gasped. “You keep me so hot.”

A bumping sound in the hall outside the door startled them, and Brenda held her finger up to her lips, signaling for quiet.

“Who’s that?” she called out.

“It’s me, Mrs. Page,” Priscilla answered. “Got here a little early this morning.”

“Fine, Priscilla.” Brenda pushed Shafi away and got up.

“Do you think she heard us?” Shafi whispered.

Again Brenda shushed him with a finger up to her lips as she eased over to the door and leaned her ear against the wood.

Shafi slipped back to his room a few minutes later. He showered and listened to some music on the radio while getting dressed. A newscaster’s voice came on talking about Ronald Reagan’s upcoming run for the United States’ Presidency. He listened with a bit more interest to a commentary concerning the Soviet Union’s continuing military involvement in Afghanistan. It was too bad, he thought, that the Americans continually insisted upon maintaining such an aggressive program against any and all communist and communist-backed governments in the world. He certainly couldn’t see where the capitalist system was all that better. That was why he chose to thumb his nose at all of them and go completely for himself.

Breakfast turned out to be rushed for everyone. Brenda had an early appointment with a potential buyer and Felice had to be present for a history class exam. Shafi didn’t say anything about his plans for the day, but he pretended to be in a hurry like everyone else.

He let Brenda leave the house first, taking a steaming cup of coffee with her to drink in the car. Then he waited to see what Felice was going to do.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drop you off someplace on the way Downtown?” Felice asked, expecting him to decline her offer as he usually did.

But this time he surprised her. “I’d appreciate it, Felice. I need to go to State and Madison.”

She was visibly delighted and smiled warmly. “They say that’s the busiest corner in this city. One of the busiest corners in the world.”

She disappeared into her bathroom for a few minutes to primp herself in the mirror before they left the house together. It irked him when Priscilla happened to be passing by the front door just as they were leaving. The housemaid rolled her eyes and gave him a nasty scowl.

“So you finally decided to let me be nice to you,” Felice said as they cruised east in her red compact Buick along Forty-seventh Street toward Lake Shore Drive. “I was beginning to think you were afraid of me.”

Shafi laughed. “I think you’re a very nice girl.”

They stopped for a red light just before entering the short tunnel under the railroad tracks. He glanced over at her. She looked almost as beautiful as Brenda. Not quite as filled out. And her breasts weren’t quite as large. Whereas Brenda was a worldly woman, Felice still radiated youthful innocence. Harry Page had taken very good care of his only child, that was for sure.

They turned onto Lake Shore Drive and Felice swung immediately into the fast-moving left lane. The lake was still frozen, despite the recent thaw. In the distance, the tops of the Downtown skyscrapers were obscured by low-hanging clouds.

“I like the way this little car handles,” Felice said. “But I’m going to trade it in on something with a bit more power.”

“You like to drive?” Shafi replied.

“It can be very relaxing sometimes. It can make you feel like you’re getting away from it all when you step on the gas and watch all the other cars fall behind you.”

“Sounds like you want a sports car. A Jaguar, perhaps.”

“Maybe. My father had a Jag one time.”

Shafi shrugged. His gaze followed an attractive light-skinned woman whizzing past them in a Cadillac in the next lane.

“I know you said you weren’t married,” Felice began, “but I was just wondering if you’ve ever thought about being married?”

“That was a rather sudden change of subjects,” he replied.

They both chuckled.

“I guess I’d get married if the right woman came along.”

“You and my stepmother seem to get along quite well.”

“Mrs. Page has been very generous and helpful to me and my business since I’ve been in this country. I owe her so much. She has let me stay in your home.”

“Yes, Brenda is a very nice person.”

Shafi thought back to the conversation he had overheard between Brenda and the lawyer. Felice was the intended prey for several predators.

They were quiet for a short time as they sped past McCormick Place, the expansive exposition center on the lake, and Soldiers’ Field where the football team played. And there were the famous tourist traps: The Field Museum, with its gothic stone columns, the Shedd Aquarium with its wide, high bank of stone steps, and the round planetarium, sitting alone on the tip of a peninsula in the lake.

“Will you still be Downtown at lunchtime?” Felice asked.

“I suppose so,” Shafi replied. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do Downtown that day. Maybe browse through the bookstores.

“Maybe we could have lunch together?” There was excitement in the girl’s voice.

Shafi hesitated and looked up in the air, as though he were contemplating his busy schedule.

“I can pick you up and we can go somewhere real nice.”

“I suppose I can do that,” Shafi said. “You can pick me up where you drop me off. And I’d like to ask you a question, if I may.”

“Go ahead.”

“Don’t you have steady boyfriend? Or maybe fiance?”

She chuckled. “There’s no man in my life to object to us having lunch together.”

She dropped Shafi off at State and Madison, in front of Walgreen’s, and promised to pick him up there at noon so that they could go to lunch together. Shafi stood at the curb and watched the car disappear around the next corner. The constantly moving crowd was made up of fast walking people on their way to their office jobs. Pigeons strutted around near the waste baskets, pecking at little scraps of popcorn and bread crusts on the ground. He looked up at the big clock that was mounted over the entrance to Carson’s department store. It was almost nine. He had three hours to kill.

It was too early for him to hit the Downtown bars. He walked north a couple of blocks on State Street, then turned east on Randolph until he came to the Cultural Center. He decided to stop in and listen to recordings and read magazines for a while. If he got engrossed in something, the time would pass quickly.

A photography exhibit on the main floor of the building caught his eye when he came through the door. He took his time and studied each print. Black and white shots of historical Chicago landmarks. He stood for a long time in front of a picture of an old black man with sweaty skin like wrinkled leather, white beard and scraggly white hair, sitting on a fireplug with his eyes closed, strumming a guitar and moaning the blues. This was what the black man had become in America, Shafi mused. An almost comic caricature of his true African self. But still recognizable to the ancestors.

Now Shafi was ready to listen to recorded music and read magazines. He headed for the elevator. There were still very few people in the building so that he didn't have to wait but a few seconds. A chill surged through him when the car arrived and the doors opened. A man he recognized from his home country was getting off.

"Doldi!" the man exclaimed in Amharic. "I don't believe it."

Shafi flashed a half-smile. "Ahkman. Is it really you?"

They stared at each other for a long moment as the elevator doors closed. Ahkman was a short, wiry man with big, brown eyes. His skin was the color of dipping snuff. He was wearing a dark-colored suit and overcoat, and carrying a tattered briefcase on which one of the handles was being held together with tape and wire.

"It's been five years, Doldi," said Ahkman, continuing to speak in their native tongue. "What're you doing here in Chicago?"

"I've only been here for a short time." Shafi hadn't spoken Amharic for a while. His heart started beating rapidly. He wasn't thinking quickly enough. His answer hadn't made sense. He sounded evasive. One of his worst underlying fears had become reality. He had been seen and recognized too soon by a fellow countryman.

"I'm completing my studies at university here," said Ahkman. "Northwestern."

"I'm doing the same," Shafi replied. And he immediately realized that he had said the wrong thing. Ethiopians in academia would probably know of each other in this town. There weren't that many of them.

Ahkman frowned for a moment before his smile returned. "I'm going to have coffee. Join me, Doldi. We can talk. So much has happened back home."

Shafi wanted to hurry up and get away from the man, but at the same time he didn't want to arouse suspicion. If the Soviets or his own government were looking for him, now they would have a thread by which they could pick up his trail.

The men left the building and walked together to a restaurant around the corner on Wabash, beneath the el tracks. Shafi felt as though he were moving in a daze.

The eatery was a small place that served light breakfasts and sandwiches. A crane-necked man with stringy black hair greeted them at the door with menus in hand and showed them to a booth. A blonde waitress with heavily penciled-in eyebrows and false lashes came over and took their orders. Ahkman asked for coffee and a roll. Shafi had the same.

“At what university are you conducting your studies, Doldi?” Ahkman asked, again in Amharic, showing his small, sharp teeth.

“University of Chicago,” Shafi replied.

Ahkman raised his eyebrows and nodded. Shafi knew he had given another wrong answer. Either Ahkman knew he was lying already or he was going to quickly find out he was lying. Ahkman had been a struggling teacher in Addis Ababa, and had left the country in Seventy-four during the first bloody stages of the revolution. He knew first-hand of Shafi’s Marxist activities, and had discouraged him from getting involved. But Shafi had argued vehemently with Ahkman back then and lambasted him for being a loyalist toward the Emperor. They had been friends up until then. And their fathers had been friends before them.

“I heard you had become more involved in Communist politics back home,” Ahkman said. “You had been sent to further your studies in Moscow or some place like that.”

“So now we run into each other here in America,” Shafi said, shrugging.

The waitress brought their coffees and rolls and smiled tepidly at the men before moving away.

“I’m glad to see you, Doldi.” Ahkman mixed cream and sugar into his coffee and sliced his roll and spread it with butter. “But I’m glad to see any of my countrymen.”

“And I feel likewise,” Shafi lied.

“So, have you forsaken your Marxist friends and ideals?”

“I see you’re still very concerned with my political beliefs, Ahkman. But you were never one to change very much. You’re still the same Akman I knew when I last saw you five years ago. And you were the same then as when we were boys.”