



Prologue

Schaffer O'Grady sat a bottle of Hendry Block 8 Cabernet Sauvignon on the counter and looked around for whoever was on duty.

Waiting for the clerk to arrive, he flipped through several of the photographs he'd taken of scantily clad prostitutes. Without moving an eye, he realized a presence. "If this were my old job," he said, "I'd have to run you in for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Whatever." Dismissing Schaffer with a flip of her hand, she walked behind the counter. "It's been three years and you still haven't stopped talking about that job. Maybe you should go back."

"No way. That job wouldn't allow me to come in here and get wine before going to work." Schaffer tapped the pictures against the counter to straighten them out and placed them under his arm.

"From the looks of those," she said, pointing at the photos, "work is the last thing you have on your mind. God help me, I can't understand why a man who looks as good as you would waste a forty dollar bottle of wine on women like that."

"Who says they're incapable of appreciating fine wine? You should stop being such a hard ass, Shelia." He held one of the pictures in front of her face. "Look at this girl, she's just what I'm looking for — tentative, fearful, and apprehensive. You can tell she's new to the streets. She'd be willing to take my money, and thank me for sparing her from having to bob her head up and down in some man's crotch, or bounce with him in the back seat of his car."

Sheila grasped the bottle of wine by the neck and waved it as if she planned to smash Schaffer over the head. "I always knew you were a kinky SOB."

Schaffer sucked in air, making a sizzling sound. "'Baby, I'm so freaky I hope I can save any one of these women from their destiny."

Sheila smiled and slid the wine into a bag. "How does a guy who's been shot at, been shot up, and seen some of the crap you've seen still have room for idealism?"

"S & M," Schaffer said, and instinctively rubbed the spot on his back where the bullet entered three years earlier. "That was the job at the time."

"Yeah, and you've never stopped talking about it."



“It’s okay. I get to live vicariously through others. That’s enough for me.”

Sheila slid the bag toward him. “Is it really?”

Schaffer lifted the bag and cradled it like a newborn. “Fourteenth Street is waiting. I have a lot of hookers to interview to get this story finished. If they’re not too busy, I should be able to complete the interviews by tonight.”

“Good luck, honey. Remember, don’t go wasting that wine on those girls.”

He held the bag in the air. “I may have a swig or two with them. The rest I’ll drink when I log the story on the computer.”

W W W W

Schaffer sipped wine as he waited for the computer to display his e-mails. There was only one new message, from a longtime friend and former Recon commando, Tito Valencia. Tito’s exit from the Marine Corps led him on a different path from Schaffer, straight to the CIA. The two of them often shared their exploits serving in different areas of government service. Although Schaffer had left the Secret Service, Tito still filled him in on the excitement in his life as directed by the CIA.

Schaffer knew that some may have considered their exchange questionable, but once someone reached a clearance level as high as his, he was never really out of service.

Reading Tito’s message, Schaffer already couldn’t wait for a follow-up:

I am on my way to Cuba. It seems Castro has been sitting on a goldmine and is none the wiser. Our four man team is posing as a group investigating plausible ways to end the embargo. I’ll be in touch soon.

Tito

W W W W

Tito and his team had completed their dive of the ocean floor just off the coast of Havana. They huddled in the hotel suite, logging their findings with CIA headquarters. Tito used a military encryption garnered from his days in his Recon unit just in case his message was intercepted.

A forceful knock at the door threatened to dislodge it from the hinges, quickly followed by threatening shouts in Spanish. Before any of the team



could respond, the Cuban military burst through the jamb, dislodging the wooden frame and thrusting their AK-47s towards the men in the room, halting all activity.

Tito looked up from the computer, but his fingers never stopped moving across the keys. The encrypted message disappeared from the screen, replaced by a blank e-mail screen.

The Cuban soldiers tossed the four men to the floor and continued shouting in Spanish.

Tito recently installed a Red Dragon talk-type program on his computer and Schaffer's e-mail address was the only one he'd set up. He spoke quickly: "Schaffer O, at *Washington Post* dot com enter. Diplomatic mission, enter. Here on diplomatic mission for United States government period. Why are you barging in our room waving guns yelling about spies period. It's a setup, if you don't find us, we're dead, send."

One of the Cuban soldiers noticed the computer. "Sir," he shouted in Spanish, "the machine is typing something out, in English."

The soldier leading the group spun, training his gun on Tito. In Spanish he shouted, "Turn it off! Unplug it! Stop the damned thing. He may be trying to send a message."

The underling yanked the cord from the wall, but the battery power kept it running. The soldier standing over the computer smashed the butt of his gun into the laptop, shutting it down forever.

The leader pressed his gun barrel into Tito's neck. "What were you doing just now? Sending a call for help?"

Tito took care not to move. "No," he responded. "I was saying to you that we are here on a diplomatic mission on behalf of the United States government. The treatment we're receiving isn't going to help your president get a treaty signed." Tito hoped the program had functioned properly, that the message had transmitted. He hoped Schaffer would rally the necessary help. A moment of panic overcame Tito. Had he correctly entered the bypass code? If he hadn't, the message would first pass through the computers at Langley and be 'cleaned' before reaching its destination. There was no telling what Schaffer would know if that happened.

The leader of the Cuban soldiers swung his gun, crashing the butt against Tito's head. His world went dark.

