

Prologue

Impatiently, she glanced over her shoulder at the door to the parking apron and freedom. Her last obstacle stood across the counter, meticulously droning his weather briefing. “The Intertropical Convergence Zone is well south of us.” The African meteorologist tapped the weather chart with the eraser side of his pencil. “You should have a pleasant flight.”

Anna Karolenko smiled back. “The winds pushing it back will slow me down over the Sahara.”

“C’est la vie, mademoiselle. There’s always reason to complain about the weather.”

“I never complain when the news is delivered by charming people.” Anna gathered the charts and shoved them into her flight bag.

“I hope your visit to our country has been rewarding.”

“I’ll be back.” She lied.

“We are always at your service.”

“Aurevoir, monsieur, and thank you.” Anna turned and tried not to make her departure seem too hasty.

Expecting Longo or his minions to appear at any moment, she stepped out into the overheated tarmac. After the hum and rattle of air conditioners inside the airport offices, the silence on the parking apron was almost eerie. Controlling her urge to run, she strode toward the twin-engine Aerostar on loan from the CIA. It was a beautiful, fast airplane, a pleasure to fly. With refueling stops in Khartoum and Cairo, she would land in Crete in ten hours.

Her CIA contact was an urbane gentleman of the old school and she was guaranteed an excellent dinner while he debriefed her.

Going against normal preflight routine, she climbed in without inspecting the airplane.

It didn’t matter that she was going to fly over some of the most desolate geography on earth. She had to get out!

Without using the checklist, she fired up the engines and taxied at high speed. Skipping a run-up check, she called on the radio, “Aerostar alpha-victor-bravo is ready for takeoff.”

To her relief, the tower answered. “Wind is calm, cleared for takeoff,

contact departure control on one-two-two-seven.”

Anna smiled. Tower, Departure, and Approach Controls were the same guy talking into three different radios.

Oil pressure, oil temperature, all gauges indicated normal. The airplane gained speed and soon was airborne. “Gear up, flaps up,” she said as if she was flying a large transport airplane.

The city of Turako vanished under the wings. Anna turned north. She loosened her seat belt, shifted in her seat, and engaged the autopilot at five-thousand feet. The thought that in a few minutes she would be out of Zengawali airspace almost made her dizzy and her legs began to shake.

Anna lit a cigarette, reclined the back of her chair and propped her feet on the instrument panel. That prevented her legs from shaking. She thought about her arrival in Crete. Free of fear, she would treat herself to two glasses of wine.

The terrain ahead was becoming arid, rolling plains sparsely covered with scrub and crisscrossed by dry riverbeds.

Passing seven-thousand feet, a sharp bang on the port side rattled the airplane. Anna’s heart made a double beat and her skin felt as if a thousand ants crawled over her.

A thin veil of gray smoke poured out of the left engine’s cowling.

“Damn.” Her facial muscles sagged. Turako was only twenty minutes away. She didn’t want to go back there. There was an airstrip in Wow. That was an hour-and-a-half away--but in the Sudan. She would go there.

The oil pressure gauge had fallen into the red.

Anna punched the feathering button and watched the propeller come to a stop. The airplane could maintain five-thousand feet with one engine out. She watched the airspeed bleed to a hundred-and-sixty knots. She reestimated her ETA. Two hours to Wow.

Smoke stopped coming out of the engine.

Anna trimmed the rudder to help her keep a straight course.

She wondered who was in control of Wow--the Sudanese government, some local warlord, or one of several rebel groups? For all she knew, she could end up in a harem.

Movement of the wing drew her attention. The damn thing was wobbly. “Damn, damn, damn.” She pulled the throttle of the good engine back a little to reduce speed and stress on the wing, and scanned for an open field where she could make an emergency landing. “Longo, you bastard!” That hadn’t been a cylinder swallowing a valve or tie rod busting. The son of a whore had placed a bomb!

The airplane was getting difficult to control and developed a nasty

vibration. Anna eased the wounded machine to the left a little, aiming for an area free of huts. She hoped the fences were not stone. All the cultivated fields were too small to land at and the non-farmed areas had scattered trees.

Going through four-thousand feet, she saw it--a school with a soccer field next to it, good enough for a belly landing.

Turbulence rocked the plane. Now, the wing was actually flapping and the nose corkscrewing. The engine cowling separated from the wing and flew off. Anna battled the controls. The airplane no longer flew. It swayed through the air. "Keep flying!" she hollered.

About five-hundred meters to go. "We're going to make it."

The turbulence increased as she got closer to the ground. She had the yoke twisted all the way to the right and her right foot fully depressed on the rudder pedal.

Another bump rattled the plane. The wing separated, the airplane flipped and entered a into a graveyard spiral. "Longo, you bastard!" was the last thing Anna said.

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The children in the school scrambled outside. Several goats, their hair aflame, ran from the ball of fire on the ground.

Part I

Dead on Departure

Chapter 1

“Enough!” John Trager growled through clenched teeth. He wanted to spit on the note and jam it down Blanky’s throat.

Lunch at the Frog place, noon.

Closing his hand into a fist, he scrunched the arrogant communication. “Enough,” he repeated to the walls of the austere office in the attic of his Georgetown townhouse. With a growing sense of bravado, he fed the note together with an incriminating copy of the ISAS--Institute for Strategic Advanced Studies--report to the shredder.

The voracious machine buzzed, a happy vandal, singing a song of rebellion.

Humming along, Trager hit send on his computer. The newsletter, a paraphrased version of the ISAS report, was on its circuitous way. Seventy-three clients in the White House, Pentagon and Senate would eat it up. Though he hated himself for doing it, Trager slanted the report to what the White House wanted to hear. At two-hundred bucks a pop, today’s issue would bring the Merrill kids’ trust fund up to the level required to see them through college.

Free of his moral obligation, he was unfettered to move on. Blankenship--Blanky behind his back--would shit when he heard what Trager had to say.

Thinking of the upcoming change in his life, he gazed at the framed photographs on the wall, all of them fifteen years or older, as if his life had stopped when he left the Marine Corps. Trager shook his head. Fifteen years of drifting from mission to mission with brief interludes in between. Like an avaricious collector, every time he returned to Washington, he bought a piece of fine furniture or a painting to plush up his house. *What in the hell for?* To impress cockroaches and Norwegian rats who proliferated during his absences? He swiveled his chair and his gaze rested on the neatly made-up bunk, which could pass boot camp inspection. That was all he needed, a place to lay his head. In the rest of the house, he felt like a visitor from his earlier life of genteel poverty. Were his parents still alive, he would have given the house to them. They would have liked it.

Trager sighed. Time to go see Blanky, the gourmet prick.

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Ignoring the muggy July heat, Trager strode down M Street toward La Cigalle. Elation, doubt, fear spun in his mind, accelerating his heartbeat. After all the years of working with Blanky, Trager knew the old spook's reaction would not be a pat on the back and a good luck speech. He pushed the restaurant's frosted glass door open. A shock of cold air made his light gray tropical suit cling like a leech. Like aliens from another world, the denizens of the nation's capital lived much of their lives in artificial environments shielding them from the realities of the planet. Trager waited for the *maitre d'* to emerge.

"Bonjour Monsieur."

"Bonjour Etienne, il fait froid ici."

Etienne smiled and winked. "Shortly, when our clientele arrives, we'll enjoy plenty of hot air."

Trager followed Etienne to the plush corner booth Blankenship always reserved. For an experienced case officer, it was bad tradecraft. Or maybe Blankenship had the booth bugged. Next time, he would refuse to sit there. Next time? Trager reminded himself he and Blankenship were finished. Severing a relationship with the CIA was final and total. Trager would instantly become an outsider to be warily observed from a distance. The few friends Trager had would vanish from his map.

A fanatic for psychological advantage, Blankenship never arrived early to a meeting with an agent. He always gave the poor wretch at least ten minutes to feel nervous and insecure. He probably lurked in the lobby of the building across the street, watching the restaurant to see if anyone followed Trager. Even in DC, Blankenship acted as if he were in Moscow at the height of the Cold War.

The old spook would make it difficult for Trager to quit. Wishing he were in Arles or Aix en Provence, or anywhere out of Blanky's reach, Trager poured water into his Ricard and swirled the drink, watching it turn from clear amber into milky vanilla.

To Trager's surprise, only two minutes late, Blankenship huffed up the steps to the dining room. He bulldozed past Etienne and slid his bulk into the booth. Ignoring Trager, he let out a grunt and turned to the waiter, who rushed over as if his life depended on swift action. "*Martini, Monsieur?*"

"Oui, comme toujours," Blankenship growled.

Trager sipped his drink while he studied his boss. The carefully trimmed, ash-colored beard gave Blankenship a sinister appearance. He no

longer wore comfortably shabby but well-tailored suits. His almost new seersucker, already too tight, barely hid the Colt .45 in a shoulder holster. Except when inside the Pickle Factory, Blankenship and his pistol never parted company.

In less than a minute, the waiter returned with the martini.

Blankenship raised his glass. "It's good to see you, Johnny."

Surprised at Blanky's bonhomie, Trager chuckled, trying to disguise his anxiety. "This is our farewell lunch," he blurted.

Blankenship tilted his head to one side. "What do you think about the elections in Kenya?"

Trager wondered why Blankenship bothered to ask such a banal question--compared to Trager's--Blanky's expertise of African politics was encyclopedic. "My parting pearls of wisdom--about time they got rid of Moi--but I doubt Kibaki can clean up the mess."

The waiter returned.

Finished ordering, Trager turned to Blankenship with a wicked smile. "And a bottle of the best Burgundy in the house."

Blankenship frowned as the waiter left. "Isn't that extravagant?"

"My last chance to skin the poor, meek tax-paying stiff."

Blankenship shook his head and launched a startling bomb. "Remember Dankov?"

Trager swallowed the wrong way. He jerked the blue decorative handkerchief from his outside breast pocket and coughed into it.

Blankenship seemed amused as he watched Trager's distress.

Recovered from his coughing fit, Trager gave Blankenship a hard look, took a sip of his drink. When the tickling in his throat stopped, he said, "I came here to gracefully--"

"Remember Dankov?"

"Who?" Trager answered as if interrogated by a foreign security service.

"Dankov. Your *compadre*."

"He always gave me indigestion." Trager didn't know whether to blame Dankov, Blankenship, or himself for what happened in Bratislava. But that was ancient history.

"I want you to find him."

Trager laughed. "That's a good one. You gave him such an effective new identity you lost him?"

"This isn't funny. Your show of amusement is impolite."

"You've screwed up. Now you want me to wash your dirty skivvies--the answer is *no*. Would you like me to spell it?"

Blankenship's face reddened. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but the food arrived.

"*Bon appetit*," the waiter said as he withdrew.

"Listen to me. I'll spell out a couple of things for you." Blankenship's face returned to its normal gray. "Rosemarie Merrill. Would you like to see the nice lady go to jail?"

Trager fought to control himself, put down his fork. Rosemarie provided him with copies of the ISAS reports, which helped him make the newsletter such a success. "You're talking gibberish."

"I can also give the IRS your list of subscribers. They'll find it fascinating."

Trager wondered how Blankenship found out about his newsletter, which was re-transmitted from an Internet café in Barcelona. Threatening Rosemarie was incredibly low. What made it more galling was that during the Gulf War an American plane had drilled her husband. With Chuck in a wheelchair and two kids to raise, she had a hard time. Intelligence officers like Blankenship were sewer rats with good table manners. "Are you willing to admit to engaging in domestic spying?"

Without looking up, Blankenship answered. "Haven't you heard of anonymous tips?"

"Can't you find something pleasant to say? After all, this is an expensive lunch. I'd like to finish it."

"Dankov left his suburban Iowa house, deserted his American wife, and reverted to his real identity."

This wasn't surprising. Trager couldn't imagine the outrageous Dankov happy as a suburbanite. "So what? The Cold War is over. Defector goes home. It's not even newsworthy."

"He's morphed into a troublemaker."

"He was always a troublemaker, always caused problems." Trager tasted his crepe. It was superb.

"He's now working against U.S. interests."

"I have trouble believing that."

"I want you to find him."

"Okay, I'll go to Russia tomorrow and whack him. This is back in fashion, I hear."

Blankenship sighed loudly and rolled his eyes, looking at the ceiling as if seeking divine inspiration. His gaze returned to Trager. "You'll find him in Africa." After delivering this last bit of information, he got busy harpooning snails.

Trager's stomach knotted. After two more bites of his crepe, he felt full.

“Eat,” Blankenship said. “The worst sin is the waste of taxpayer’s money.” With a piece of bread Blankenship sopped the last of the garlic oil, shrugged, took Trager’s crepe, and ate it, too.

Trager toyed with his fork, wanting to twist it inside Blanky’s gut.

Blankenship daubed his lips with a napkin. “You have two weeks to find Dankov.”

“Send someone else.”

“I have. They failed. I want you to ask him what the fuck he’s up to--and give him my personal, warmest regards.” Blankenship smiled. “He used to call me Uncle Dougie.”

“How touching.”

“You lack understanding of warmth in human relations.”

“Uncle Dougie--this side of you I’ve never seen.”

“You don’t deserve it.”

“I’m tired. I want a fresh start. I want to have long-term human contact in my real identity. I’m searching for a polite way to tell you to go fuck yourself.”

“Johnny, you are impulsive. Don’t burn the house that sheltered you just because it’s ugly.”

“It stinks.”

“You have two weeks to find out what Dankov is up to. By then, you will have found a way to express your feelings of abhorrence or reconsider.” Blankenship’s expression softened. “One last favor for Uncle Doug.”

Trager took a deep breath. Two more weeks under Blanky’s thumb wasn’t the end of the world. He always knew severing his ties to the Agency would be difficult. “Where in Africa is he?”

“Zengawal. He’s running a bunch of mercs. And I’m getting bad vibes.” Blankenship took an envelope out of his pocket and slid it across the table. “You fly to Brussels tonight, connect with Sabena for your flight to Kinshasa. You’ll probably need to bribe someone there to get you a seat on Air Zengawal. I need the info *pronto*.”

“Okay, I’m giving you two week’s notice *now*.”

Blankenship nodded. His eyes narrowed and the corners of his mouth sagged.

“Who’s my contact?”

“Nobody. We don’t have an embassy in Turako and no station.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t have to. Fact--no local contact.” Blankenship shook his head and sighed. “We don’t even have a consulate there.”

“Come on.” Trager was sure Blankenship was lying. “Not even one guy under commercial cover?”

“You know perfectly well that in the last few years we’ve been decapitated. On 9/11, the FBI had more agents in New York City alone than we had case officers worldwide.”

Trager hated to agree with Blanky. Inept foreign policy, politics, turf wars and bureaucracy had dramatically eroded the CIA’s human intelligence collection capabilities.

Blankenship placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “You’re flying solo. Commercial cover.”

Trager lifted the envelope. “Pretty thin briefing.”

“One sheet, one mug shot. The expense money is in your account.”

Trager opened the envelope and inspected the photograph of a brunette. The fourth-generation copy of the passport photo couldn’t hide a striking face. “Who is she?”

“Mademoiselle Simone Lorient. Dankov was last seen in her company.”

Blankenship grinned. “A pretty woman, a lead.”

“Who is she?”

“That’s what you’ll find out and report.”

“I thought you were interested in Dankov.”

“Yeah, and his Axis of Evil.”

Trager wanted to smile but didn’t. Blankenship’s contempt for politicians was well known in the Agency. After President Bush’s Axis of Evil speech, Blankenship took to carrying a roll of duct tape when walking the Pickle Factory’s corridors and asking for volunteers to wrap tape around Bush’s mouth. It was rumored the director had Blankenship on the carpet over it.

Trager slid the photograph back into the envelope.

“If I accept this assignment, will you destroy whatever evidence you have on Mrs. Merrill?”

“If? Dear boy, you misread me again.” Blankenship touched his beard. “You have no choice.”

“I asked you a question.”

“Extortionists *never* destroy the goods.”

“Driven by desperation, after lunch, I’ll go to the Dupont Metro station and jump in front of a train,” he said only half-joking, worried about Rosemarie.

“I wish I could go with you and watch.”

“Give me your word you’ll destroy the evidence.”

Blankenship sighed. “Okay, you have my word.”

Without illusions about Blankenship's sense of honor, Trager pulled out the rest of the contents of the envelope--airline tickets and some pocket litter. "You call this a briefing?"

"Mademoiselle Lorient works in the Ministry of Education."

"A white woman in an African government?"

"Interesting, isn't it?"

"Is she with the UN?"

The question brought a grin to Blankenship's face. "Supposedly she's a French national. But the French claim to have zero on her. A Simone Lorient worked for the UN refugee organization in Bosnia." He reached over. "Now give me the picture back. You don't want to be caught carrying it."

"Since I'm not the first assigned to this job, what happened to the others?"

"They failed to contact Dankov."

"That's obvious--why did they fail?"

Blankenship shifted in his seat. "You have access to Dankov, you and he were buddies."

"What happened to them?" Trager tapped the table with his fingers.

Blankenship's expression grew dark. "You're good at finding the truth. When you return, *you'll* let me know." He reached inside his jacket and drew out an American passport. "Use the Davenport identity."

