

Terminal Rock



A Wes Franklin Novel

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Terminal Rock

“Howard Carter and I stood in the Pharaoh’s tomb in silent awe. All around us were incredible artifacts from a glorious age, and in the middle of the room, a golden sarcophagus. Ours were the first eyes to behold this scene in more than three thousand years! But though our discovery should have been an occasion of great joy, when my eyes fell on a golden Harp in one corner of the room, I began to weep. The real treasure was the music that had been played on this instrument—the music we would never hear...forever!”

Prof. Robert Reid Clark

University of Edinburgh

Co-Founder, The Cloister of Akhenaten, 1927

1

MINUSINSK, SIBERIA...1988

KIRA VOLKOVSKY THREW BACK A SHOT OF VODKA, slammed the empty glass on the wooden table for effect, and studied Lenka’s eyes for any sign of hesitation.

“These construction delays are costing me money, Lenka.”

The new lighting company under construction in Minusinsk would, when finished, provide a great many jobs to the area, badly needed jobs in a very troubled economy teetering on the brink of total failure. In turn, the success of the new manufacturing business

would make Kira Volkovsky a great deal of money. But Volkovsky was not merely interested in money. He made plenty of that with his illegal ventures. No, if the lighting company succeeded—and he was determined it would—Volkovsky would finally be able to come out of the shadows and live a more respectable life.

It was the dawn of a new Russia; the period of ‘perestroika’ and ‘glasnost’, with the Soviet Union’s final economic collapse only a few years off. Moscow, under Gorbachev’s direction, had legalized private entrepreneurship, allowing free trade, but had so far neglected to say anything about regulations and security for their nascent market economy. With this oversight the politburo had essentially created the perfect environment for Russkaya Mafiya to expand its operations, and in so doing, generate a cadre of government workers desperate for money and eager to join its ranks.

Lenka Kozlov was just this kind of official. He was very comfortable in the Minusinsk government but changing times made his future uncertain. He was a political creature through and through and wanted desperately to play a significant role in whatever government emerged from Gorbachev’s dangerous experiment. He had tied himself to Volkovsky’s building project right from the start as the government face that made the whole undertaking legitimate. He took care of all building permits and inspection reports, making sure no bureaucrat made Volkovsky’s life miserable. And he was the face and voice of the project to the local media, putting the best possible spin on it every step of the way. He had promised great things to his people and now they would know without a doubt that he was a man of his word, a force for good in their midst, an influential man with the power to make their lives better.

Yes, Kira Volkovsky and Lenka Kozlov had much to gain by the success of this new company. But that was of no concern to Gregor Batálov, the government’s building and safety inspector.

Volkovsky added, “I pay you to keep zealous bureaucrats like Batálov off my back.”

Lenka answered nervously, “I’ve stopped his reports from going any further, but I’m afraid he will go over my head to Moscow if his discrepancy findings are not corrected.”

Volkovsky rolled the shot glass between his fingers, his eyes studying the glass as if it were fine crystal, his expression that of one on the verge of an angry growl.

Kozlov’s eyes moved from the tattoos on Volkovsky’s knuckles to the blue-black ink that snaked up from beneath his shirt collar, some sort of reptilian tail. Kozlov did not need to see the tattooed shoulders to know Volkovsky was highly ranked in the Russian Mafia. He had taken it upon himself to review Volkovsky’s prison records before deciding to do business with the man, so he was acutely aware of the crimes that had earned him his incarceration. This was no man to have as an enemy.

“His last report set the nineteenth for a follow-up inspection. That’s one week from today,” said Kozlov. Speaking cautiously, trying to strike just the right tone, he added, “Batálov’s citation is for electrical wiring defects. Will you have those fixed on time?”

Volkovsky’s mouth formed a malevolent grin. “The problem will be fixed. Have Batálov come to the site at the end of the day on Monday. I will personally take him around the building.”

* * * * *

THE PICKUP’S HEADLIGHTS GLISTENED off a newly fallen, light dusting of snow, lying in contrast to the older, dirtier snow pushed into a dozen small mounds around the building site. It was 6 pm and all the workers had long since left for a warm house and a hot meal. Only two cars remained on the lot: a well-used, dark blue VAZ 2112 and a new black GAZ-24-10 Volga, which told Gregor Batálov that someone important was here.

“Is this where you work, daddy?”

Batálov explained to his four-year-old, “This is one of the places I work, son. Daddy’s job is to look at new buildings and make sure

they are being built properly, that they are safe for people to be in.”

This seemed to placate the little boy for the moment as his attention was drawn back to the building and the large equipment scattered around it. His curious eyes darted from machine to machine, firing his imagination with grand thoughts of operating the heavy equipment someday...when he was big enough.

“Would you like to see the inside with me?”

The boy excitedly climbed down from his seat and reached up to take his father’s hand. Together they crunched through the snow, four little tracks for every two large ones, until they arrived at the front door. Batálov went to reach for the handle, but the door swung open as if automatically triggered at their approach. Standing directly in front of him was government official Lenka Kozlov. Kozlov said hello then quickly introduced Batálov to the building’s owner, Kira Volkovsky. At the sight of Volkovsky’s large, tattooed hands and menacing face, the little boy instinctively took shelter behind his father, his tiny arms wrapped tightly around daddy’s leg. Batálov looked down at his son, smiled and patted him on the head to reassure him all was well.

“Dobriy vyecher. Good evening, Minister. You wanted to show me something?”

Volkovsky spoke instead of Kozlov. “Yes, I asked Lenka to arrange this meeting so we could discuss the reports you have filed. Please,” said Volkovsky, gesturing to the temporary lift.

As the men and boy rode to the fourth floor, Volkovsky spoke his concern over the deleterious effect Batálov’s reports were having on the schedule for completing the building. He tried to impress upon Batálov that a great many jobs would result from the project, and that delays were having a negative impact on the workers of the community who were desperate to have jobs again. Throughout, Volkovsky maintained a stiff smile so as to mask the anger roiling inside. In the end, Batálov was unmoved.

On the fourth floor the men walked toward an electrical junction

box on the wall, while the boy ran off to inspect a table saw and various other tools lying about.

“Your latest inspection cited us for violations to the electrical code,” said Volkovsky.

“Yes, the MPOT, the Occupational Health and Safety Rules for the Operation of Electrical Installations govern how your...”

“Yes, yes, I’m aware of the codes.” Volkovsky’s irritation was beginning to show. “I was simply hoping we might find some suitable way around the work that has already been done so we might avoid the cost and hassle of tearing out walls. I’m sure you know how much that kind of rework would cost, both in money and time. And then there are all those workers who are anxious for operations to begin so they can feed their families. It is so difficult for families these days,” said Volkovsky. He turned to Kozlov. “Lenka, you have a family, right?”

The tension was palpable and Kozlov was momentarily surprised by the question. He recovered and smiled clumsily. “Yes, two boys and a baby girl on the way.”

“I, too, have a son,” said Volkovsky, glancing at the boy across the room. “He is about the same age as yours.” He turned back to Batálov. “You know how it is to fret over their welfare, how we would do anything to protect and care for them, to keep them safe.”

Batálov objected, “Yes, I would do anything for my son, anything in my power that is. But it would not serve my family for me to lose my job for malfeasance.”

“No, no, of course not,” said Volkovsky. “But you must admit, if you were to withdraw your report, your action would save me a considerable amount of money. And for my part, I could show my gratitude by sharing those savings with you.”

Gregor Batálov was incensed at the blatant offer. “Mr. Minister,” he said to Lenka Kozlov, “are you hearing this? This man is trying to bribe me—right in front of a government official! This is outrageous. I demand that charges be filed in this matter.”

Volkovsky was a man accustomed to getting his way and Batálov didn't seem to understand that Volkovsky's offer was actually an order. Volkovsky's patience was at an end and he finally snapped. "Listen, you low-life bureaucrat!" He grabbed Batálov with both hands and yanked him close. "I offer to make your life better and you piss on my shoes! You've already cost me more than eighty million rubles and almost six months off my schedule. I've had enough of you! I'm sure the next petty inspector will be more amenable."

Volkovsky spun Batálov around and with no more care than tossing an apple core to the curb threw Gregor Batálov out the empty window frame.

From across the room a small voice screamed out in horror!

Kozlov and Volkovsky turned quickly toward the boy. The terrified child stood frozen, his little mouth opened wide but his lungs too paralyzed from fear to cry out.

Volkovsky glared at the child, a hideous, frightening scowl and moved toward the boy. There could be no witnesses.

"No," shouted Lenka in a panic and knowing full well what Volkovsky intended. "We must call this in. This was an accident. Batálov slipped and fell. That is all. The boy will say nothing."

Volkovsky stopped and glared back at Kozlov, the horrified manager's eyes pleading for restraint.

He looked again at the boy, grunted, and turned away toward the lift.

2

HAMBURG, GERMANY...2009

HE HATED ALMOST EVERYTHING about St. Pauli and the Reeperbahn but this was where she spent nearly all of her nights and he needed to study her. At least she had the good sense to spend her days—when she wasn't sleeping—at the Hamburger Kunsthalle or Ballinstadt museum. Some days she would spend hours walking the cobblestone streets of the Warehouse District, or window shopping at Alster Arkaden. He knew she couldn't afford to buy anything there as she was barely making enough from her nighttime gigs to survive, but he would change all that when the time was right.

On Wednesdays and Fridays she spent the better part of an hour at St. Michaelis. Above the church's portal was a large bronze statue of the archangel Michael defeating the devil. He assumed she went in to pray but he didn't feel at ease in these kinds of places and never followed her in to find out. She, too, wasn't given much to prayer but she did have a spiritual side. Where St. Michaelis was concerned, she mostly just liked to climb the spire to the top where she could

meditate on the sweeping views of the cityscape or the harbor and dream about what her life could be. In those moments of quiet and solitude, she could almost see and hear her spirit come to life. Perhaps this *was* a kind of prayer after all.

At least one day a week she loved to spend time at the Beatles-Platz, gazing at the five metal cutout statues and imagining days gone by. The statues represented John, Paul, George, and Stuart, with a hybrid statue of Pete and Ringo. She knew their history inside and out, and if he ventured close enough, he could often overhear her explaining the statues to tourists as if she were the official Beatles-Platz tour guide. “This one is Stuart Sutcliffe,” she’d say. “He was their first bass player but he really couldn’t play very well. Most of the time he’d play with his back to the audience so they couldn’t see him searching for the right notes.” She was meticulous in her history lesson, making sure the people understood that Stuart was really an artist more than a musician but was dragged into the band because he was a close friend of John Lennon—and because Stuart had once come up with enough money to buy a bass, which the band really needed. Stuart would have preferred to use the money for art supplies and school, but John could be very persuasive. “It was Stuart’s girlfriend,” she would go on, “who actually gave the Beatles their famous hairstyle. *Her* name was Astrid Kirchherr and she was a well-known photographer at the time. Anyway, she did Stuart’s hair first, and eventually convinced the others to go along. Pete didn’t, but that wasn’t why he left the band.” She chronicled the events that led to Ringo replacing Pete Best as if she had been at their sides through the whole transition. She recounted how Stuart died early of a brain tumor and how upset John had been. “That’s when Paul became their bass player,” she would say. She would always conclude her little stories with a quote attributed to Lennon. “John used to say he was born in Liverpool but grew up in Hamburg.” Secretly she felt the same about herself; that while she wasn’t born here, it was in Hamburg that she would grow up.

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There were many days when her stories actually attracted sizable crowds, who erupted in spontaneous applause when she finished. Her natural ability to draw people to her and keep them enthralled was one of the things he found most alluring about her. In the months that he had been studying her every move, this was her most consistent trait, which convinced him she was the one he needed; that and her incredible singing voice.

God, she could sing!

And it seemed there wasn't a style of music she hadn't mastered or a lyric she didn't know by heart.

At the Stage Club in the Neue Flora theatre complex, he watched her stand in with the house band every so often. She sang jazz like she was born to it. She would sing duets with the likes of Michael Bubl  or Peter Cincotti, the New York piano crooner, and bring down the house. At Angie's Nightclub she sang soul like she was The Queen of Soul herself, Aretha Franklin. But it was at the Kaiserkeller that her voice seemed to reach its zenith in musical expression: Rock'n'Roll. This is where he would approach her.

Unannounced, the fantastically popular Russian band, Zeerok, dropped in to the Kaiserkeller to do a free concert. Zhenya Rock, the singer and guitar player of the band, had let the owner know they would be stopping in, so the band that was originally set to play that night was cancelled. As always, the house was packed. She would probably have been there anyway but this night she was there because Tim and Jimmy Shanks, the bassist and drummer with the band and longtime friends of hers, had asked her to be there.

He sat in the back of the club, in the shadows, as far from the stage as possible, watching.

When the manager announced that Zeerok would be the night's entertainment, the place erupted in screams and applause. As Zhenya laid down the first pulsing notes for *All About You* on the guitar, heads began to bob and sway in time with the beat. Long hair flew from side to side and shoulders twisted and turned to the rhythm. As

Zhenya finished the introductory licks, she walked out from the side of the stage to join him at the mic. At 5'4" she was just a few inches shorter than Zhenya. She wore a loose-fitting blouse that hid her exquisitely proportioned figure, but one didn't need to see more to appreciate her beauty. Though only 18, she exuded an innocent sex appeal beyond her years as she seemed to fairly glide across the stage. Her graceful movement produced a gentle breeze that lifted her sandy, shoulder length hair away from her delicate cheeks. Her lavender eyes glistened and smiled out at the crowd. Fully in command of her body, it was immediately apparent she owned the stage. With the first few honeyed tones of her voice, she would own the room. When he was finished with her, he thought to himself, she would own the world.

On seeing her, the crowd, already nearing a fevered pitch, exploded even more loudly in wild appreciation. She was known all around the city.

He sat quietly taking it all in. This was incredible, unbelievable, astonishing. Even with one of the hottest rock groups around, her simple presence elevated the music to a whole other level. What the two men had assured him, what he had hoped all along might be true, he now knew with certainty.

She *was* the one he wanted.

She remained onstage for almost the entire set, then with impeccable timing, exited as stylishly as she had entered. She kissed Zhenya on the cheek, blew kisses to Tim and Jimmy, then waved her thanks to the audience and slipped out of sight behind the curtains; the consummate entertainer.

At the end of the night the manager approached her backstage where she was visiting with the band and whispered in her ear that a man was waiting to speak with her at the back of the club. She pushed aside the curtain and glanced in his direction but could not make out his features in the dark. The manager smiled kindly, knowingly, and added, "He is a man who can make things happen

for you, good things.”

As she neared his table, she smiled.

He rose to greet her.

“My name is Dmitri, Dmitri Gregorovich; my friends call me Dima.”

“Hello, Dima. I’m Valeria Kempter.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at her innocence. “Yes, my dear. I know who *you* are.” He gestured to a chair and signaled the manager to bring over the bottle of Champagne he had arranged. “I have a proposition for you, Valeria Kempter.”

“Oh?” she said cautiously.

“There are some people I would like you to meet.”

“What people?”

“Some musicians. They are the band that I manage.”

She raised an eyebrow. This sounded interesting.

“I know most of the bands that play around here. Which band is yours?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Their former name is of no consequence. They will soon be called REVOLVER; when you join them. I want you to be their lead singer. And I can promise you this: Together, you will be the next big thing.”

3

DIMA HAD BEEN UPFRONT WITH THE BAND about his vision for their future. From the first time he heard them play back home in Russia, he sensed there was something special about them and he planned to take them all the way to the top. But they had to agree to follow his direction without question. He knew there were limited opportunities in their own country and if they were to reach a wider audience, they would need to make the scene in Europe. At twenty-five he had six years on them, which to the band seemed like a lifetime, so they happily deferred to him, caring more for their music than the business of music.

Dima had left them to their practice while he went to Hamburg to set up their first bookings. While scouting appropriate venues that would give the band a series of successes on which to build a following, he had been told of a singer who had the voice of an angel: Valeria Kempter. He had been stricken by the girl from the moment he first saw her but followed her for months to be certain his initial impression was right. By the time he approached her with

his offer, he had already smoothed the way with Tatiana and Viktor, who had handled the vocals for their group till now. He assured them their voices were excellent but that he had found a girl with a transcendent talent. He could understand their initial skepticism but so certain was he about Valeria that if they did not agree after hearing her, he would say nothing more about it and the band would continue on without her. Now they were about to hear her for themselves.

Valeria was nervous about meeting the band, especially since she was there to replace whoever had been singing lead vocals. She could imagine how she might feel were the tables reversed. What she never imagined was that meeting the band would be like coming home after a long absence.

“Band, Valeria. Valeria, the band,” said Dima.

Viktor Zhuravlev let the 6-string Rickenbacker go taut on its strap as he raised his hand to wave a three-finger salute, his flat pick pinched between thumb and forefinger. “I like it,” he said with a broad, toothy smile. Viktor was a striking figure: manly-handsome though only nineteen, his blonde hair and green eyes were perfect accents to his lanky 6’3” frame. Viktor had a beautiful tenor voice that was just made to sing rock’n’roll. But more than that, he was a world-class guitarist with long, nimble fingers that could gently caress the most languid, silky tones from the strings or fly lightning fast across the frets to scratch out the raunchiest of rock riffs. He was a great optimist and a natural born peacemaker, which in a band of highly gifted artists was an indispensable trait.

I like it, too, thought Valeria smiling back at Viktor.

Sergei Kruzsko, the bass player, was a Jim Morrison look-alike. He was 5’6” with long, brown hair that hung in a loose curl to his shoulders. A heavy smoker, Sergei was partial to dark science fiction and magazines on all the latest tech trends. He was a born pessimist but the tight friendships in the band kept him on the brighter side of the highway. He nodded to Valeria and gave what for him was a big

smile, though in reality not much more than a tight-lipped, self-conscious grin.

Valeria let her eyes slip quickly away from Sergei to drummer Shura Mostovoy.

Shura was the intellectual of the band, the soul-searcher. Like Sergei, he was a heavy smoker with a dark side, but his dark side bordered on paranoia in his more plaintive moments. Shura had a Cheshire-cat personality and was prone to asking Socratically-leading questions. He could seem unsociable, almost hostile, till he got to know someone, so it came as quite a surprise to his band mates when he offered Valeria a rather good-natured ‘hello’. Shura wrote most of the lyrics to Viktor’s and Tatiana’s melodies.

Tatiana Eliseeva played keyboards with classical perfection but could hammer out solid rock with equal proficiency. Like her band mates, Tatiana was nineteen and looked like she was born to be on a stage or a runway. She was a long-legged 5’10, with curly, light beige-blond hair streaked with various colors to great effect. Her energy and constant laughter were contagious, and she was a great motivator for the group. When the band reached agreement on a particular arrangement or musical crossroad, she was usually the first to call out a commanding “let’s do it” to kick things into gear. It was Tatiana’s melodious soprano voice that Valeria was here to replace, but if there was any ego conflict for her at meeting her replacement, she didn’t show it.

By prior arrangement through Dima, both the band and Valeria were ready to jump into a driving rock song that would get their juices flowing and let them scream away any nervousness at this first meeting.

“Let’s do it,” shouted Tatiana.

Shura raised his sticks, clicked four times to set the pace, and on the fifth beat crashed his cymbals as the rest of the band kicked into full rock mode with the Beatles’ *Helter Skelter*.

Valeria charged in with the lyric like they’d been playing

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together for years.

When I get to the bottom
I go back to the top of the slide
Where I stop and I turn and I go for a ride
Till I get to the bottom and I see you again

She hit the final note with so much throaty rock'n'roll raunch that Tatiana let out an involuntary scream of delight as she and Viktor chimed in with the Beatles' signature "Yeah, yeah, yeah!" and Sergei drove the bass line home.

By the end of the song the adrenaline in the room could have powered a small army for a week!

While the band looked to each other with euphoric laughter, Dima summed up the groups obvious decision.

"So," he shouted, "we have our band?"

Shura shot a drum roll and cymbal crash and everyone shouted out in unison "Rock'n'roll!"

* * * * *

YEAR 1 – 2009

DIMA LAID OUT A CLEAR PATH FOR THEM. During the first two months they would keep to themselves, selecting the songs for their playlist and getting comfortable with each other as they sought their own distinctive sound. They had some original songs that weren't too bad, but for the most part they held to covering other artists' music. They played favorites from every decade of rock, from Buddy Holly's catalogue of the '50s to current hits from Cold Play, Foo Fighters, Fun, and Seether. They tried out songs from every genre—traditional, classic rock, alternative rock, hip-hop, country, Motown, grunge, garage, and world; even rap and show tunes were not off limits. They were searching for material that would be familiar but on which they could imprint their own style...whatever that was! They tended to gravitate to standard rock beats, but experimented with new sounds and riffs that put a unique twist on

even the classic songs their audiences would know.

Sergei and Shura had a great working relationship, which serviced the band's need for a strong foundation of drums and bass. As with all the band members, except for Valeria, they had known each other their whole lives growing up in Minusinsk and attending the same schools and community functions. They crafted subtle combinations of drum fills and bass riffs that gave even old songs new appeal. They had an intuitive feel for where the other was going, but when their instincts failed and their parts conflicted, they simply stopped and worked it out. Shura might say in such and such section I am using this fill, so simplify your bass part. Or Sergei might say to Shura listen to this bass line and see if you can create a syncopated accent, maybe with a tom fill or an extra beat on the kick. They would practice the section till they had it just right, at which time these two dark souls would light up in wide-eyed smiles and drive on.

Viktor and Tatiana had a similar *sympatico* for developing unusual arrangements. Each had an extensive repertoire of lissome fingerings, or selection of sounds and effects for their respective instruments. Occasionally their choices would collide, but they made adjustments with ease. It might be as simple as one of them changing octaves, or it might call for one of them to back off entirely, but as with Sergei and Shura, their egos always gave way for the sake of the music. Intuitively they knew what worked best for the art.

Though Valeria had no shared history with the others, she quickly developed a keen sensitivity with Viktor and Tatiana for the strongest vocal arrangements. She performed almost all the lead vocals, with Viktor and Tatiana on backing vocals—doo wops, echoed phrases, or intricate two- and three-part harmonies—but she graciously switched roles when a particular song seemed best suited to the tonal qualities of another. Interestingly, this willingness to share the spotlight enhanced the group's appeal; instead of having one front man, the band had three. The audiences, which invariably

had mixed attractions for one band member over another, got to hear from each of their favorites.

Their first year was spent in small venues, mostly around Hamburg, where they honed their sound and found out which songs and arrangements got the best reactions from their audiences.

* * * * *

YEAR 2 – 2010

BY THE SECOND YEAR DIMA expanded their sphere of influence. Their sound—the thing that set them apart from every other group—had come together nicely and it was time to let the rest of Europe hear it. Dima had been as thorough in finding the proper venues for them as the band had been in finding their unique sound. In Amsterdam, The Waterhole was the first club to feature REVOLVER, and the band did not disappoint. From there they went on to the Showcase in Paris, London’s Fabric, and on up to Edinburgh to play the Mood Nightclub before crossing the North Sea where Stockholm’s Sturecompagniet patrons fell instantly in love with them. By the time they played Valencia and Rome and started their trek home via Munich, Frankfurt, and Berlin, they had outgrown the smaller venues and now required larger halls to accommodate the swelling crowds anxious to hear them. Media buzz alone was creating a demand for the band even where they had not yet been heard or heard of! The name and reputation of REVOLVER preceded the band’s appearance in every town.

Dima knew it was now time to get them into a recording studio. And to his mind, there was only one producer/engineer he would trust his band to: Alan Parsons.

Parsons was the best of the best and had a string of successes over a span of five decades to prove it. As an engineer, Parsons recorded the Beatles ‘Abbey Road’ in ’69, Pink Floyd’s ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ in ’73, and Al Stewart’s ‘Year of the Cat’ in ’76. In the ‘80s he delivered Top 40 Hits like *I Wouldn’t Want to Be Like You*,

Games People Play, *Time*, and *Eye in the Sky*. He had no fewer than ten Grammy nominations to his credit and in 2007 won the Grammy for Best Surround Sound Album, ‘A Valid Path’.

The only question left unanswered was whether or not REVOLVER could write original songs worthy of Alan Parsons!

* * * * *

YEAR 3 – 2011

THE FIRST MEETING BETWEEN the band and Parsons was January 8, 2011 at London’s Abbey Road Studios. Even before the band finished auditioning its third song for him, Alan was on the phone to Simon Rhodes, a 20-year engineering maestro at the studio.

“Simon, Alan here. I have a band you have to meet. Fifteen minutes? Perfect. See you then.”

Parsons and the band talked casually while they waited for Rhodes to arrive. The more they chatted the more he was smitten with them. Viktor and Tatiana were naturally funny and cracked him up several times with their off-the-cuff responses to his various questions. Valeria was her usual gregarious self and, beauty aside, radiated a warmth and wit that he found irresistible. Sergei and Shura...well, they were Sergei and Shura. Their dark sides were in check but they stayed to the background, preferring to soak up their historic surroundings in relative silence.

When Rhodes arrived they all continued to chat casually and get used to each other until Alan finally said, “How about we roll some tape?”

The band looked around to each other alive with eager anticipation, prompting Tatiana to synthesize their collective enthusiasm into her well-known battle cry: “Let’s do it!”

Eight hours later Parsons and Rhodes sat at the recording console in disbelief. With no more than two takes per song—and that necessitated by only a few of the numbers—the band had laid down tracks for fifteen songs, three of which were original pieces they had

only written a couple of weeks earlier.

“This is Friday,” said Rhodes. “Give us the weekend and we’ll have these mixed and mastered for you by Monday.” He looked to Alan for confirmation and got a nod. “Right, then!”

Dima went round at noon on Monday to pick up the recording masters and met with an unexpected surprise. In their enthusiasm over this new group, Parsons and Rhodes had contacted Sir Terry Wogan, and since eight that morning the three of them had been listening—repeatedly—to the recordings and brainstorming for next steps to get this band in front of the public as quickly as possible. Sir Terry, whose twenty-seven year run in the breakfast slot had built up the largest morning show audience in Europe, had recently vowed to bring back the golden age of the BBC variety show and REVOLVER was exactly the kind of talent he wanted to showcase. In addition, the three of them—Alan, Simon, and Sir Terry—had put their heads together to generate a long list of friends who they were certain would be as interested in this new group as they were. They had even contacted their various legal representatives to draw up initial contracts to put all this in motion. By the end of the month they would have arranged radio and TV appearances in more than a dozen countries.

Between February and May, REVOLVER appeared on nearly fifty TV and radio shows. In between those bookings and a steady string of concert dates, the band had found time to go back into the recording studio. In four sessions they had managed to record another two dozen original songs, of which no fewer than ten were getting regular air play throughout the UK and Europe.

Dima had believed in the eventual success of the band, but even he could never have imagined things happening this fast. In November he called the band together for an announcement. On the phone he had sounded more serious than usual, perhaps even a bit depressed, and when the band assembled he displayed a somewhat dour expression.

As he called for their attention, he said, “Listen up my friends. I have a problem that I need your help with.”

Valeria, Tatiana, and Viktor suddenly became as quiet and grim as Sergei and Shura usually were. Viktor asked, “What’s up, boss?”

“I’m afraid we can no longer go on as we have been. We need to make a change and I need you to put your heads together and come up with a list of names.”

This didn’t sound good. Was someone going to be replaced? They looked around at each other, unable to identify a problem with any of them.

Valeria finally asked, “A list of names for what, Dima?”

Dima held his serious expression for as long as he could before breaking into a wide, knowing smile. “Well, I can’t have my prized band lugging its own equipment all over America, can I?”

America? they all seemed to ask at once. They looked to each other excitedly, then back to Dima, eager to hear more.

“Well, I’m pretty sure that’s where San Francisco is, right?” He took on a bewildered, befuddled expression to play out his farce. “If I’m wrong please let me know right away because that’s where REVOLVER opens its eight-city tour and I’d sure hate to go to the wrong country! We are going to need some roadies to help us out. Oh,” he added, “did I mention that REVOLVER currently holds the top three positions in the US Top 40?”

Cheers and hugs dominated the practice hall for the next several minutes as Dima broke out several bottles of Champagne he had hidden from view. In three short years he had brought them to the brink. By the time they finished their first U.S. tour next March, the band REVOLVER would have become the world’s Next Big Thing.

4

TWO CLUSTERS OF AIR BUBBLES RACED toward the surface of the sapphire blue water in search of the noonday sun. A moment later two heads broke the surface of the warm Caribbean. Wes Franklin and Ashley Jordan, on vacation in the Cayman Islands, had just finished an hour dive to the *Capt. Keith Tibbits* off Cayman Brac. Russian Destroyer #356, a 330 foot frigate originally built for Cuba in 1984, had been purchased by the Caymans in '96, renamed for a famous and colorful local politician/businessman, and scuttled as a diving site. One of only a couple of Russian warships ever to sink in the western hemisphere, the *Keith Tibbits* provided divers a great, multi-tiered diving experience. Stretching from its conn at a depth of about 30 feet to its keel at 100, it had quickly become one of the most popular dive sites in the area.

“That was fantastic,” said A.J. “Did you see Boris?” she asked, referring to a rather shy jewfish the locals had nicknamed.

“No, I missed him,” said Wes. “But I saw Charlie the moray eel. Boy, that is one ugly critter!”

Wes and A.J. tossed their dive fins into the boat and lugged

themselves up the back steps. Once aboard, Wes helped A.J. out of her Cressi BCD buoyancy compensation device, then turned around so she could help him out of his. After stowing their gear, A.J. coated herself with Coppertone and stretched out to soak up a little sun while Wes took the helm. He gently eased the throttle forward and turned the bow of their 27' Crownline starboard, back toward the west side of Grand Cayman.

Following back-to-back cases in October and November, one in The Netherlands that nearly cost Wes his life and the other involving the U.S. President and an extraordinary man named Jared Kennan Cain, Dr. Wes Franklin—a member of the international intelligence community known as the Cloister of Akhenaten, or Ankh Network—and Ashley Jordan, his computer-wiz girlfriend, had retreated to the Cayman Islands for Christmas and New Years for some badly needed rest and recuperation. They were staying at the Marriott Beach Resort on Grand Cayman's Seven Mile Beach and looking forward to getting back there for lunch.

* * * * *

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” ASKED WES, looking over the Hemingway's menu.

“I don't know; it all looks so delicious. The Tuna Ceviche sounds good. What are you going to get?”

“I'm leaning to the Lobster and Clam Chowder,” said Wes. “But I haven't tried the Havana Rum and Coconut Shrimp yet. That could be good!”

“You had the chowder yesterday, get the shrimp,” she said with a mischievous grin. “That way I can try it, too. I think I'll also have the Wild Mixed Greens.”

“Do you want any wine?” asked Wes.

She thought for a moment then said, “No, not now. Just an iced tea.”

They ordered lunch and sat at their beachfront table in the shade

of its umbrella, sipping tea and watching the waves lap slowly onto the shore. Their stretch of Seven Mile Beach was sparsely populated just now, probably too hot at this hour for most of the tourists. There were some small children of varying shades of black and brown at work on a sand castle and a dozen or so teens scattered up and down the beach sunbathing or splashing waist-deep in the water.

With a month of vacation behind them, both Wes and A.J. were tan and fit. Wes covered his 5'11", 175 lb muscular body with a pair of blue Tommy Bahama Hibiscus Camo swim trunks, a white T-shirt sporting the picture of a cold glass with a slice of lemon straddling the lip and the words Add Rum in large letters, and brown Skechers sandals. A.J., recently a brunette, had gone back to her naturally blonde hair since they would be in the sun so much. She wore a red coral two piece from Maaji, over which she had thrown a beaded V-neck silk chiffon caftan. Her athletic 5'5" body looked stunning in it, but then, to Wes, she looked stunning in anything she wore.

"Oh, look," said A.J., pointing to where a half-dozen horses and riders were romping along the beach. The horses, some of which were shoulder deep in the aquamarine water, appeared to be having as much fun playing in the surf as their riders. "We should go riding while we're here," she added.

Wes smiled. "Sure. Looks like fun."

After a few minutes, A.J. spotted a young woman walking alone along the wet sand from the north end of the beach. The scene was picture-perfect, like it had been staged for a Victoria's Secret magazine ad. The woman wore a turquoise print bikini that left little of her beautifully curved body to the imagination, as she ambled leisurely along the shore. Every few seconds the water ran up to tickle her feet then raced back out to sea as if playing an aquatic game of tag. Her long blond hair floated away from her face as she walked. She gazed mostly out to the horizon and seemed lost in thought as she came even with where Wes and A.J. were sitting.

In an instant A.J. bolted upright in her chair, pointing in the girl's

direction.

“Wes, look at that!”

Wes turned quickly to see what had caught A.J.’s attention and saw a man come swiftly up from behind the young woman and grab her shoulder. The young woman spun round to face the man, who then appeared to lean in and attempt to kiss her. At once her pensive demeanor changed to anger. She slapped the man’s face, pushed him back with both hands, and began yelling at the man and wagging a threatening finger in his face.

Wes was out of his chair in a flash, headed in the woman’s direction, his Skechers plodding as quickly as they could through the soft white sand. Neither Wes nor A.J. could make out what the girl was saying but it was obvious she was upset and the man was not backing away. Wes, being his naturally chivalrous self, was going to at least get close enough to help if the young woman needed assistance. As Wes got closer to them, the man looked in his direction then turned and walked quickly away.

Wes shouted out as he came closer, “Are you alright?”

The young woman seemed at first confused by Wes’s approach, but then answered, “Yes. Yes, thank you, I’m fine.”

“My friend and I were having lunch over there,” he pointed back toward A.J., “and we thought you might need some help.” In an instant her face registered with him. “Say, aren’t you Valeria Kempter of the band REVOLVER?” She nodded and smiled, amused that he would know her—he appeared to be older than the group’s typical fan. “What are you doing here in Grand Cayman?” he asked, but didn’t give her time to answer. “Listen, come join us for lunch,” he gestured back toward their table. She didn’t answer right away but didn’t seem to object. “I know A.J. would love to meet you.”

* * * * *

VALERIA KEMPTER ORDERED A SALAD and iced tea, as the three of them fell easily into conversation. When Wes asked her what she

was doing in the Caymans, she explained that the band was in Havana for some fun and sun prior to the start of their first-ever US tour. Havana was the natural Caribbean vacation spot for her Russian friends but she had always wanted to see the Cayman Islands. There was little difference between Cuba and Grand Cayman in the weather, terrain, or water, but there was a decidedly more relaxed feel to life on this little island.

“Where will you be playing in the States,” asked A.J.

“We have an eight city tour set up, but to tell you the truth, I only remember that we will begin in San Francisco at the Oakland Coliseum and end at Miami’s American Airlines Arena. All in all, we will be there ten days, I think.”

“Actually, the Oakland Coliseum is in Oakland,” corrected Wes. “Oakland and San Francisco are close to each other, but they’re two different cities.”

Valeria laughed at her mistake. “Sorry,” she said. “This will be my first time in America. I’m sure I will have a lot to learn.”

A.J. said, “Well, I know one of the first things you’ll learn is that America loves you! Your songs are being played on almost every station these days. People can’t seem to get enough of REVOLVER.”

Valeria smiled, “Thank you. I must admit I’m a little nervous, but that helps. Anyway, enough about me! Tell me something about yourselves. What kind of work do you do?”

Wes tried to offer a shorthand explanation of the Ankh Network but the girl’s natural affinity for Egyptian history, as well as Wes’s exquisite Lapis Lazuli ring in the shape of the Ankh, pressed her to ask for more. She casually took his hand in both of hers and unabashedly examined the ring as he told her about the Cloister of Akhenaten. A.J. smiled at the girl’s enthusiasm and innocence.

Wes recounted how Professor Robert Clark and his four archaeological colleagues had begun the group in the 1920s, built around Pharaoh Akhenaten’s dedication to truth and non-violence, as well as their understanding that science and human knowledge were

not fixed in time, but rather in a constant state of evolving and learning. The group's motto, Truth never happens in real time, had become something of a catchphrase for the group over time, and one that Wes, himself, was wont to say. He told her that Akhenaten had been the first human to declare a single, faceless God, and that historical accounts of Akhenaten's life had led Professor Clark and his associates to hypothesize that the Pharaoh Akhenaten and the Biblical figure of Moses were, in fact, one and the same person, a notion that was later advanced by none other than the father of modern psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud, though most scholars remained unconvinced. "The truth of this," said Wes, with a wry smile, "will just have to remain undecided in real time." He went on to explain that the Cloister of Akhenaten had expanded to include people of all disciplines, and since WWII had found its members involved in all manner of political, social, and scientific investigation. Wes told her that his services were available to governments, corporations, and individuals, alike, and that while he often received substantial payment for his services, he possessed significant personal wealth and often assisted people *pro bono*. In addition to his investigative work, he spent several months each year working with Doctors Without Borders.

Valeria looked to A.J. with a question. "And what do *you* do while this amazing man is running all over the globe doing good things for the world?"

A.J. laughed and joked, "I've become quite adept at needlepoint."

"Don't let her fool you, Valeria," said Wes. "Ashley Jordan is, among other things, an expert in computers and telecommunications, and indispensable to the work I do. If not for her, I couldn't accomplish half the things I get most of the credit for!"

"I thought this might be the case," said Valeria still looking at A.J. "You strike me as a woman who does not take a backseat to anyone, and a man as intelligent and talented as Wes would soon be

bored with a woman who was not at least his equal!”

They all had a good-natured laugh.

“So tell me, Wes, as busy as you are how do you manage to know my little rock and roll band, let alone recognize an insignificant girl on this tiny island in the middle of nowhere?”

Both Wes and A.J. gave an incredulous laugh.

Wes said, “Valeria, I’m only forty-six, so I was too young to know the Beatles, but as near as I can tell, there hasn’t been another group to even come close to generating the mania that the Fab Four created until REVOLVER came along!”

A.J. added, “I think you’ll have a better idea of this once you get to America. I’m eight years younger than Wes, and I can assure you I haven’t seen anything like this in my lifetime. You and your group are truly a modern phenomenon!”

Valeria Kempter felt humbled at the praise her new friends were heaping on her and her band. “Maybe you would like to come hear my band?”

Wes laughed aloud, “Sweetie, we would love to, but even with all the friends I have in the world and all the wealth I possess, I don’t think even *I* could finagle two tickets for one of your concerts at this late date!”

“You underestimate your power to charm,” said Valeria, with a puckish smile. “We are giving a private concert at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco before our first public concert. I just happen to have a little influence in the band and I am pretty sure I can arrange for you to have front row seats, as well as a backstage pass for a small party afterward. What do you think? You would like to come hear us play some songs?”

Wes and A.J. were almost speechless. “Absolutely!” they both said in unison.

“Then it is settled. I will leave tickets for you at the Will Call window and we will get a chance to talk some more after the show.” Valeria rose from the table to leave, but as she began to move away,

she turned back to Wes. She took his hand in hers and squeezed it affectionately. “My brave Don Quixote,” she said with a cryptic grin. “That man on the beach? He was not a threat to me, but you are my champion nonetheless.” She bent over and kissed Wes on the cheek then walked softly away.

* * * * *

WES AND A.J. SPENT THE REST of the day on their boat casually motoring around the island. Around 4:00 p.m. they arrived at Stingray City, where they eased themselves into the shallow water of the sandbar to frolic with their graceful aquatic friends. After a late dinner they turned in for the night, the soothing sound of the waves outside their room lulling them quickly to sleep.

The phone in their suite rang at seven the next morning.

Wes answered half awake, “Wes Franklin.”

“Wes, sorry to bother you so early,” said Don Chandler, owner of a local dive shop and longtime friend of Wes and Ashley. “I could use your help, buddy. A diver washed up on shore this morning right outside my shop. Wasn’t my customer, Wes, but a dead diver in full scuba gear on my property?...that isn’t going to be good for business!”

5

WES FRANKLIN PULLED INTO the diagonal parking space in front of Don Chandler's Dive Shop. A police car and ambulance were already there, as well as about a dozen civilians, though it was still too early to attract a larger crowd. Wes walked around the left side of the shop and followed the sandy boardwalk to the rear where the paramedics had already put the body on a gurney and covered it from view. Chandler, his back to Wes, was talking with two police officers. On seeing Franklin's approach, one policeman called out past Chandler, 'Sir, I'll have to ask you to stay back.' Chandler turned to see who the officer had addressed.

"Wes! Thanks for comin', buddy," said Don Chandler. He patted the Detective's shoulder. "He's alright, Lander. I called him this morning and asked him to come over." Chandler put a strong grip to his friend's hand. "Wes, this is Detective Lander Ebanks and Sergeant Arsène Watler." Chandler turned to the officers, "Dr. Franklin is a well-known investigator and expert in forensic medicine. I thought you might benefit from his assistance in this matter. Odds are it was an accidental drowning but..."

Detective Lander Ebanks gave Wes Franklin a guarded once-over, hiding his reticence at having an outsider get involved in this matter—it was strictly Grand Cayman police business. His demeanor was that of the pure ‘law enforcement professional.’

Don Chandler, on the other hand, was anxious to have this discovery declared an unfortunate accident. This was a small island and the word would spread fast. Chandler knew the stats on scuba diving deaths. And he knew people were familiar enough with scuba diving to believe it was safe, but when a story got out about a diving related death it was bound to have a chilling effect on business for awhile. As for Detective Ebanks and Sergeant Watler, well, the police didn’t need to complicate their lives with a drawn out investigation that would undoubtedly end in a finding of accidental drowning. This particular death had the appearance of an accident and Don Chandler was content to let it go at that.

Detective Lander Ebanks said, “We appreciate your credentials, Dr. Franklin, but I really don’t think you will be needed here. I’m confident our investigation will show this man is the victim of poor judgment or some other reasonable explanation leading to his drowning.”

It was obvious Wes was not wanted here and he had no reason to argue. He was, after all, on vacation. “I understand completely, Detective. Don, these gentlemen seem to have everything in hand, so I’ll see you later.” He turned to leave.

“No, wait!” Chandler wasn’t so ready to let Wes go. “Lander, Arsène, please! Dr. Franklin was kind enough to leave a comfortable bed at this early hour to help us. At least let him take a quick look. You’re probably right, but what could it hurt?”

Sergeant Watler spoke to his partner for the first time. “It can’t hurt anything for him to take a quick look, Landy. Who knows, it could make things go faster if we got a professional medical opinion right now.”

Ebanks let the statement hang in the air for a moment before

finally relenting. He tossed his head abruptly toward the covered body. “Have a look,” he said with just the faintest hint of disdain.

Wes Franklin moved toward the gurney, giving Don Chandler a look of What did you get me into? The deceased diver’s equipment lay on the ground next to the gurney. Wes glanced at it as he reached to pull back the cover. “Did you check the equipment for malfunctions?” he said to the group generally. Three men looked quickly to each other for a response, and in so doing, missed the momentary change in Wes’s expression when he withdrew the cover from the dead man’s face. The diver was the same man who had accosted Valeria Kempter on the beach the day before. That probably didn’t have any bearing on the man’s fate, but Wes couldn’t help but think in a perverted sort of way that yesterday hadn’t been an especially lucky day for this guy! He gets slapped around by the object of his affections, and then turns up dead, the apparent victim of a diving accident. In any case Wes didn’t need to share this tidbit for the moment. No need to muddy the waters.

Wes checked the man’s wrist and forearm muscles for signs of *rigor mortis* to estimate the time of death. He moved his hands to the man’s neck, pressing at the glands, before prying open the man’s mouth. Wes inspected the body with cold detachment, all the while saying nothing. At one point he gestured to the paramedics to flip the man onto his stomach. He remained silent throughout. He ran his eyes over the torso...the arms...the legs...he stopped to fold back the waistband of the man’s swim trunks, examined the label, then let it snap back into place. After a few minutes Wes removed his latex gloves and stood quietly, his hand to his mouth, a finger rubbing at his upper lip as he weighed the evidence before him. Finally he asked, “Who removed the man’s gear?”

The voice of a twenty-something EMT came weakly from behind. “Uh, that would be me, sir. I mean, it’s...uh, it is I, sir,” the young tech stammered, awkwardly searching for the appropriate level of formality. “I removed his tank and BCD, sir.”

Seeing the young man's nervousness, Wes smiled and signaled him to come closer. As the man moved forward, Wes casually glanced at the man's nametag, then smilingly put him at ease. "Hello, Mr. Jackson," he said, extending a hand. "I'm Dr. Wes Franklin, sir."

Wes Franklin's tanned hand clasped the much darker hand of the white-uniformed technician.

"Sekou, sir. Sekou Jackson." The man hesitated only briefly before adding, "But Sekou is fine."

"And I'm fine with Wes." Franklin led him around to where the gear lay on the ground. "Do you dive, Sekou?"

"Yes, sir, I'm PADI certified."

"Ah, the Professional Association of Diving Instructors. Excellent!" said Wes. "Sekou, tell me, did you notice any signs of equipment malfunction when you removed the gear? Any damage to the clips or buckles or gauges? Any points of leakage from the BCD or tanks?"

Sekou Jackson's eyes darted in thought for a moment, as if remembering how he had removed each of the items, before offering, "No, sir. But I do remember thinking that everything looked brand new."

Looking again at the equipment, Wes nodded, "Yes, I thought so too."

"What are you thinking, Wes?" asked Don Chandler.

"I think something isn't right," answered Wes. "The pressure reading indicates the tank is still full? Can you make sure the gauge is working?"

Chandler's agile, brown body moved quickly to the gear. He bent down, grabbed up the BCD and tank, and rushed off to his shop.

The detective looked to his sergeant with a puzzled expression. The two techs let their eyes scurry curiously around the scene.

A few minutes later Chandler emerged from his store and strode deliberately to where the others waited. His face said something was

wrong.

“The tank is full, isn’t it?” asked Wes.

Don Chandler had a studied expression. “Yes,” he said. “I checked the tank valve and the regulator, too. The tank valve was off but the regulator was working fine.”

“Mr. Jackson is PADI certified. I can’t imagine he accidentally turned off the tank valve when he removed the gear from the diver. I don’t know of a diver alive who doesn’t check his airflow *before* he actually gets in the water, so either he already wasn’t breathing when he went into the water, or once in, he reached back and turned off the valve for some reason. Given the location of the valve, that would have been a rather tricky maneuver, but I can think of one scenario in which the diver might have intentionally closed the valve thinking he was opening it.”

The Detective asked, “What would that be, Dr. Franklin?”

“If he suddenly had trouble breathing, he might think the valve was closed. He would naturally reach back to turn it on, unintentionally turning it off instead. In any case, he wouldn’t have had much time to react.”

Detective Ebanks was puzzled. “I’m not following this, Dr. Franklin. I hear some speculation about the man turning the valve on and off. What facts do you have that support this rather unusual chain of events?”

“I can appreciate your skepticism, Detective Ebanks. Let me try to explain my reasoning.” Wes raised a finger as if counting off points in a series. “First, the man definitely had trouble breathing. I checked his throat...it was swollen shut. Two,” Wes raised a second finger, “I believe he experienced a severe case of anaphylaxis, an allergic reaction to some kind of sting, either above water or below. If it happened before he got in the water, he might have gone into shock and fallen unconscious into the water before turning on his air, though it would have been more natural for him to turn on the valve before putting on the gear. However, once in the water, he might

suddenly have had difficulty breathing and mistakenly turned the valve off again, which would account for the full tank. But three,” another finger went up, “I don’t yet know what sent him into anaphylactic shock.”

Chandler asked, “What do you mean, Wes?”

Wes said, “There were no sting marks anywhere on the body. Even a bee sting would have raised a welt around the immediate area. If he had encountered something *in* the water, he would still have some area on his body that showed irritation. I know you have Fire Coral around here. Had he brushed up against it, he would have the marks to show it. But I’m also interested in knowing why an experienced Russian diver would dive alone...at night.”

“Russian! Who said the man was Russian?” exclaimed Ebanks.

Chandler added, “And with all new diving gear...who knows? This could have been the guy’s first dive! What makes you say he was an experienced diver?”

Wes hedged his answer. “I’m only guessing of course, but I saw a couple things that point in that direction. First, he had a Russian made Invicta 6548 diver’s watch. I’ve seen those go for as much as \$2,500. Based on his choice of watch, I’d say he was a man who spent a lot of time in the water. Second, his swim trunks had a label in Cyrillic text and appeared to be brand new. Don, do you know of anyone on the island who carries Russian bathing suits?”

Don Chandler shook his head.

“I didn’t think so,” said Wes. “That means he either brought it from home—somewhere in Russia—or he bought it at a nearby shop that carries Russian products. That would have to be Cuba. Also, it’s not the kind of swim suit a regular diver would wear. Sea water would rot it out in no time, and from the look of it, it’s an expensive suit, designed more for show than function. The elastic waistband was too tight to have been used much. Then there’s the new equipment.” Wes paused for a moment. “This one troubles me. Why would an experienced diver buy all new equipment instead of

bringing his own?"

Chandler said, "That one's easy, Wes. He hadn't expected to dive but when he got here, he changed his mind, went into a shop and bought new equipment."

"Instead of renting?" asked Sergeant Watler.

Wes interjected, "I'm less concerned about his choice of buying versus renting, than I am with *what* he bought."

Chandler said, "I don't follow, Wes."

"People with more than enough money are funny that way," said Wes. "They'd rather buy new than use something someone else has used before them. So here's a guy with enough money to afford a top-of-the-line diving watch but he buys bottom-of-the-line scuba gear?"

Detective Ebanks said, "This is absurd! The man bought new equipment. Top-of-the-line, bottom-of-the-line, who cares! He was rich enough to buy instead of rent and that is all there is to it. Maybe he was so rich he intended just to abandon the gear instead of taking it with him, and *that* is why he bought cheap gear," said Ebanks, becoming frustrated with a line of reasoning that seemed more and more *unreasonable* every minute.

Wes didn't care to debate the issue with the Detective just now. "Don, how many shops carry this brand of scuba gear?"

"Three that I know of, why?"

"Detective Ebanks, I don't think this was a simple diving accident." Wes raised his hand to stop any objections the Detective was about to voice. "If I'm wrong, it will only cost you a couple of hours of work. But if I'm right and you don't look into it now, there's a chance you will lose the killer and never find his trail again. From the state of *rigor mortis* in the body, I'd guess the man had been dead between four and six hours. That would put the time of death between midnight and two a.m. The killer only has two ways off this island: by sea or by air. The last cruise ship left three days ago. If he—or *she*—has his own boat, he's probably long gone. But

if he flew, he could have been on one of the first flights out of here this morning. If memory serves, the only early flights are bound for Cayman Brac, Kingston, or Miami.” Wes looked at his watch. “We’re too late for the first two but we can still check the Miami flight. Detective, if I were looking into this matter, I would probably want to see the passenger manifests for all flights in and out of here for the past week, paying particular attention to any Russian names. I might also want to take a picture of the deceased and check the three stores that sell this brand of equipment to see if any of them recognize the guy. Maybe someone was with him when he purchased the stuff.”

Detective Ebanks was slow to say thanks but quick to act. He sent Sergeant Watler with a picture of the diver out to talk with the shop owners, while he drove to the airport to check manifests.

Wes called out to the EMTs as they were putting the gurney into the ambulance. “Sekou, please ask the lab to expedite a blood panel on this guy. Tell them to pay special attention to any toxins that might have produced an allergic reaction. And if they do find any, see if they can figure out how the toxins got into the diver in the first place.”

While Chandler assisted the EMTs with some paperwork, Wes opened his phone and hit *redial*. After the second ring, Ashley Jordan said hello.

“A.J., I need your computer expertise for some quick research.”

“Now what are we working on?” objected A.J. “I thought we were on vacation!”

“We are, hon, but this won’t take long.”

“If it didn’t take long, you’d do it yourself! Okay, let me have it...what do you need?”

“I need some airline manifests,” said Wes. “I need manifests for every flight into Havana in the last two weeks. Then I need the manifests of every flight in and out of here for the last two days.”

“Are you kidding, Wes? This will take hours!”

“Then let’s shorten the search parameters for you. Get the manifests for flights into Havana that contain the name Kempter. At this point she is the only link to the dead diver. And I can’t help remember what she said to me when she was leaving. She said she had never been in danger from the man we saw her with on the beach. Is it possible they were friends? Or at least knew each other? How long did she say they’d been in Havana?”

A.J. said, “Two weeks. Valeria said they got there on the 18th. That was two weeks ago yesterday, and they’re flying out of Havana tomorrow, the second of February.”

“Perfect! Remember when I asked her how they were getting to San Francisco, since there were no direct flights allowed from Cuba? She said they were flying to Mexico City, and then on to San Francisco. Damn, I just thought of something. She said they were landing in LA first, then onto San Francisco. That complicates your search a bit if they change planes in LA. Anyway, first locate the manifest for their arrival in Cuba. Cross-reference those names with any matches on flights from Havana to Grand Cayman and back. I think a two-day window is more than enough if you need to refine your search more. After that, we’ll need the itinerary for flights matching the names on the arrival manifest that are also on flights going to Mexico City on February 2nd. When you determine what flight they’ll be on to San Francisco, call Aryana and tell him to meet their flight. Until we know differently, have him follow Valeria. If he needs a picture, just tell him to Google the band REVOLVER. You’ll probably want to find the hotel they’re all registered in. I’d say either the Westin or the Drake. When are we scheduled to fly back?”

A.J. said, “The third.”

Wes mumbled almost incoherently, “That’s the same day as the concert at the Masonic Auditorium. We’ll have just enough time to get home, get cleaned up, and get over to the show.”

A.J. raised an eyebrow at Wes’s babblings. “Now...” she said,

“would you mind telling me what this is all about?”

“Maybe it’s just an eerie coincidence but the diver that washed up on Don’s shore is the same guy Valeria slapped on the beach. The dead diver is Russian and so is the band, except for Valeria, of course. I don’t know. Maybe he was traveling with them. Maybe he wasn’t traveling with them but he saw her in Havana and followed her to Grand Cayman. Maybe he was already here and she has nothing to do with his death. I don’t have a lot to go on right now, but I’d just as soon pay attention to my hunch on this one.”

“All right,” said A.J. “Your revised parameters should make this a fairly straightforward search. Give me an hour?” she asked.

Wes smiled and shook his head. “You’re amazing! Yeah, I think an hour will be fine. Uh, does that include the call to Aryana, or will that take some more time?”

Ashley Jordan clucked dryly into the phone, “I’m going to hang up now!”

* * * * *

SEKOU JACKSON CALLED WES as soon as the blood work came back. The toxin was Fire Coral venom. But it was too concentrated to have come from casual contact in the water. Instead, it appeared to have been an injection on the hip. Had Wes removed the swim trunks, he would have likely noticed the mark. Also, there was a notable lack of water in the diver’s lungs, and what little there was, was definitely not the brackish seawater surrounding Grand Cayman. Wes found it very likely now the diver was already dead by the time his body hit the water. The swollen throat tissue probably kept water out of the lungs. But the presence of fresh water in the lungs was problematic.

Detective Ebanks was somewhat put out that his investigation turned up nothing. That is, none of the workers in the three dive shops recognized the dead man. At the one shop that did remember selling this particular equipment, the items were paid for in cash and the buyer, while he might have been roughly the same build as the

dead man, was non-descript in all other measures. Except for his accent, of course...which one of the clerks identified as being—as nearly as he could tell—Russian.

Wes Franklin sat quietly in the recliner, feet up, a very hot Bailey's and Decaf at his arm. He conjured possible causes and effects for the whole matter given the limited clues he had.

A.J. broke his trance. "I have a list of names, Wes," she said softly.

Wes looked up at her in surprise. "How long has it been?" he asked, at the same time looking at his watch.

"About forty minutes. It was easier than you might think."

Wes gave a wry smile. "Ash, I take longer to log onto my own bank account!" He kissed A.J. softly on the lips. "Thanks," he said in a tone that meant 'thanks' for so much more. He studied the names for a long second then said, "I recognize the names of the band members, and this I think is their manager, 'Dima', that Valeria told us about." He looked to A.J. for confirmation and got it. "But I don't know the rest of the names that are common to the booked flights. We'll have to see if one of the names falls off the manifest when they leave Havana. We know of at least one passenger who won't be leaving this island. If his name isn't on the Havana to Mexico City manifest, we should have the identity of our John Doe diver. We'll be able to verify his identity by comparing the fingerprints on file for the passport with those of the deceased."

A.J. asked, "And if the diver isn't connected to the band in any way?"

"I suppose I'll remain philosophical and remember the Ankh Network's saying, *Truth never happens in real time*. We know that the diver and Valeria are connected at the beach. We don't know *how* they are connected, though." Wes let his voice trail off. "Your list includes...."

WILL DRESSER

Valeria Kempter
Viktor Zhuravlev
Tatiana Eliseeva
Sergei Kruzhko
Shura Mostovoy
Dmitri Gregorovich

...and various unknown others with Russian-sounding names or people who are originally from Minusinsk, Siberia....

Konstantin Nagovitsin...
Gedeon Shalomitsky...
Bezlikiy Nevidimyy...
Alexei Dashkov...
Ivan Lutrova...
Yury Pilkin...
Aleksander Volkovsky...
Mikhail Kozlov...
Andrei Kozlov

“Well, by tomorrow we’ll know who didn’t make the flight!”
said Wes.

6

HAVANA, CUBA...JANUARY 2012

PALACIO DEL MARQUÉS DE SAN FELIPE y Santiago de Bejucal was a 5-Star hotel in Old Havana. Dima had reserved one suite for Valeria and Tatiana and one for Viktor, Sergei, and Shura, while he and the three investors each had their own. The six roadies were in three rooms with double beds, though nonetheless great accommodations. REVOLVER was definitely traveling in style for their first tour, but the twenty-two year-old band members weren't about to spend every night of the next two weeks sitting in a hotel room. They weren't the least bit interested in opulence when the Havana night was calling to them to come outside and live!

The band congregated in Viktor's room to discuss what to do about the curfew Dima had imposed on them. Sergei and Shura were smoking off a lot of nervous energy. The room was hazed in a grey veil.

"We need to stay in the hotel," said Viktor, trying to be the voice of reason and responsibility. "If anything were to happen to any one

of us, the whole tour could be canceled. Then where would we be?”

Shura was in one of his contentious moods. “Ah, c’mon, don’t give it to me! I can’t stay cooped up in this room—no matter how nice it might be!”

Sergei lit another cigarette and exhaled hard. “Shura is right. I wouldn’t care if the toilets were made of gold. I need to get out of here and breathe!”

Tatiana favored caution but had little conviction in her voice.

Shura and Sergei now looked to Valeria to break the tie.

Valeria tried to sidestep the issue with a question. “Where is Dima now?”

“He and the investors are out on the town,” answered Viktor, prompting Shura to jump in angrily.

“These fucking cheeckens, pardon the language! They control all the money and now they want to control our fun, too!”

“That’s not fair,” said Valeria. “You know as well as I that Dima is only looking out for our best interest. Viktor is right. If anything happened and we had to cancel the tour, everything we’ve been working for could be lost. We don’t know anything about this city and could easily end up in a bad section.”

Sergei had to fight back laughter. “Are you kidding, Valeria? We’ve spent most of the last three years in Hamburg! Hell, if Havana is anything like the Reeperbahn, that’s exactly where we’d feel the most at home.”

At Sergei’s pronouncement everyone, including Valeria, broke into laughter.

“Okay, okay,” Valeria conceded. “But we can’t just wander the streets. We need to ask the concierge to recommend where we should go.”

“And we need to stick together,” added Tatiana. “Remember: there’s strength in numbers!”

Viktor was the last in, but having at least been the voice of reason and then democratically overruled, he was not at all reluctant

to break out of their gilded prison. “All right, so what are we up for?”

Tatiana, arms raised high over her head, started twirling and laughing at their declaration of independence. “I want to dance,” she chimed, her rainbow hair fanning out in the air.

“That’s fine with me,” said Shura, “as long as they have beer and music.”

“Okay,” said Viktor, “what time should we go?”

Valeria glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s four now. Let’s meet downstairs for dinner at six and go from there.”

* * * * *

THE HOTEL CONCIERGE SUGGESTED they visit Salón Rosado Beny Moré at La Tropical, an open air venue where the regular, blue-collar population went to dance the night away. La Tropical was the very soul of the Cuban people, alive with endless dance gyrations, both sensual and sexual. Sweat-soaked bodies, with knees and elbows pumping in perpetual motion, seemed to dance even while standing in place.

Juan Cruz, an ever-smiling little old man, was the venerated Master of Ceremonies of Cuban Dance Music at Salón Rosado Beny Moré. And perhaps the best known and most beloved dance band in all of Cuba was Los Van Van, created in 1969 by bassist Juan Formell, now led primarily by Juan’s drummer son, Samuel. The band, often referred to as The Rolling Stones of Cuban music, had toured Europe a year or so before and had met the members of REVOLVER as they were gaining in popularity. The two bands had gotten along famously both as musicians and friends. The concierge had not known this when he suggested they visit this venue, but when someone or something is destined for greatness, even the stars conspire to herald their arrival and every step of the journey is animated by serendipity. So it was with REVOLVER.

The band took a taxi to La Tropical and upon arriving, passed

through security largely unnoticed by the other patrons. Wall-to-wall people moved to the music in seductive gyrations. The five REVOLVER musicians bounced and pulsated to the last strains of the unknown group on stage as they snaked nearer to the front of the crowd. At the completion of the band's final song, Juan Cruz stepped center stage and announced the next band, the legendary Los Van Van. The crowd began to applaud and cheer the announcement as the diminutive old man moved off stage right, but Juan Formell caught his arm, pulled him close, and whispered in his ear. Juan Cruz nodded and turned back to the mic at center stage. "Señors y Señoritas, por favor," he announced, "we have some very special friends in our midst tonight. Please give a warm Havana welcome to the members of REVOLVER, who are on their way to the United States for their first-ever tour of our neighbors to the north. We welcome you up to the stage to say hello!" said Juan Cruz with outstretched arms.

The band looked around to each other and all seemed to be in agreement. They moved quickly to the stage where their friend, Juan Formell, and the rest of Los Van Van gave them a warm hello, and in the same gesture, a rousing endorsement of their presence.

Juan Formell approached the mic and called out to the audience, "Perhaps with a little encouragement, our friends will play a number for us before we begin our set."

The crowd let loose with a rousing round of applause as some of the musicians in Los Van Van offered up their instruments to the impromptu guests.

Shura climbed behind the drums, as Sergei took up an extra bass from its stand. Cesar "Pupy" Pedroso bowed and gestured to his keyboard as Tatiana glided toward him, bowing back as she took her position. Valeria grabbed a pair of maracas, while Viktor strapped on a guitar and walked to the mic.

"On behalf of the band, may I say a very heartfelt muchas gracias to you for this very warm and unexpected reception!" He

TERMINAL ROCK

paused, looked around to his band, then turned back to the audience and hollered into the mic. “But like you, we came to dance!”

“So let’s do it!” shouted Tatiana in her inimical style, as Shura began pounding out a *songo* beat on congas while Valeria added sizzle with her maracas.

Sergei ‘cawed’ several times as Viktor stepped up to his mic to sing some hastily made up lyrics to The Rolling Stones tune, *Sympathy for the Devil*.

Please allow me to introduce the band
For we’ve not been here before
We only came here to dance for awhile
But your welcome has made our hearts soar

We never guessed in a million years
This could be such an awesome place
So let us sing you a favorite song
To bring a smile to your face

Pleased to meet you, REVOLVER is our name
(the others joined in on backing vocals,
Hoo-hoo, Hoo-hoo)
And entertaining you is the nature of our game
(Hoo-hoo, Hoo-hoo)

Just as Viktor finished his last line and the hoo-hoos faded away, Tatiana began playing a familiar, syncopated riff on the upper octave of the keyboard, augmented with an airy synthesized piccolo flute from another keyboard. Shura, who had abandoned the congas for a solid drum beat when Viktor began singing, now added in a strong cowbell to accompany Tatiana’s signature piano and flute riffs. For an instant the crowd, which had been clapping and swaying appreciatively to the music, became suddenly still as the realization of what was happening swept over them and goose bumps broke out on every arm. REVOLVER had deftly morphed *Sympathy for the Devil*

into Juan Formell's classic hit *Anda, Ven y Muevete*, and when Valeria stepped up to the mic and began singing the first verse in Spanish, the crowd exploded in jubilation and motion!

But if REVOLVER had become anything in the past three years, they had become masters at the art of bringing an audience slowly to crescendo—and they weren't nearly there yet!

As Valeria finished singing the first verse and the crowd joined in enthusiastically on the refrain, she announced, "Ladies and gentlemen...Pedrito Calvo!" and a rush of adrenaline sent the masses into yet another level of exaltation. The sea of bodies parted as Pedrito made his way to the stage from the back of the throng. He was dressed in white slacks and a canary yellow, double-breasted sport coat that was opened to expose a gold silk shirt. Atop his head was a white Panama hat, covering a gold bandana as he shouted the second verse into his wireless mic and danced his way to the stage. Adding to the crowd's exuberance was the fact that their beloved Pedrito had left the band awhile back and they were thrilled to see him once again with Los Van Van, if only for one magical night.

At the end of the second verse, Sergei stepped to the front of the stage and laid down a bass riff that would have made John Entwistle proud and ignited an already driving back beat. While Sergei ran his fingers up and down, bouncing and popping the heavy strings, Viktor signaled to a man with bleach-blonde hair and brown Scooby-doo chin whiskers to come forward. The lead guitarist for Los Van Van came to the front of the stage and, as cheers erupted for Sergei's superb bass solo, lit into a face-melting electric lead. As his fingers blurred up and down the fret board in a scorching solo, Viktor walked casually over to where the man stood and began playing the same riffs note-for-note. The two guitarists burst into broad smiles as they continued to mirror each other in a blistering, fiery duet—like they had done so many times in Hamburg—and as they came to a frenzied crescendo, the crowd erupted in thunderous appreciation.

Sergei pulled the bass strap over his head and placed the bass

back on its stand as Juan Formell took over the bottom, and Shura slipped away from his drums, handing the percussion duties back to Juan's son, Samuel. The five members of REVOLVER assembled at the front of the stage, bowed graciously as one to the audience, and then with hands raised high above their heads, clapped and danced their way single-file off the stage, twirling and bouncing to the music straight into the ocean of sweaty, cheering bodies. Los Van Van continued the song for nearly five more minutes as Valeria, Tatiana, Viktor, Sergei, and Shura dissolved into the swell of dancers, seeming to partner with every swaying body on the dance floor that night.

Till well past one in the morning they drank and danced and chatted with their new Cuban friends, finally collapsing into their beds somewhere near three a.m.

Word of the scene at La Tropical spread like wildfire throughout Havana the next day. The band had somehow taken Cuba by storm and won the hearts of the Cuban people in a single night without even trying to—and without even playing a single note of their own music! Even Dima was forced to concede the benefits of their unauthorized liberation, though he exacted their concession that this was not to happen when they got to America.

Each night for the next two weeks they ventured out to new venues—Casa de la Musica, Café Cantante Mi Habana, Hotel Ambos Mundos Rooftop Bar, Casa de la Amistad, Tikoá, El Túnel, La Zorra y el Cuervo, and Callejón de Hamel, to name a few. Every place they visited welcomed them with open arms as though they were long-lost friends who had just returned from some far away place. They were always asked to play something and they always did, though they were ever cautious not to upstage whoever was playing there that night. In every interaction they gave at least as much respect as they received, and always came away from their evening's entertainment with the sense of having gained friendships as well as fans.

The two weeks seemed to fly by until at last it was time to leave for the States. That morning at Havana's Jose Marti Airport, the band that had flown in unnoticed was treated to a send off by literally hundreds of cheering Cuban well-wishers. The band was stunned at the farewell and waved back enthusiastically as they boarded the plane for Mexico City.

Only Valeria Kempter had a wave of concern wash over her as Dima and the investors boarded the plane ahead of them.

Where there should have been three investors, there were only two.

7

ASHLEY JORDAN RETRIEVED A PIECE OF PAPER from the printer and took it to Wes, who was sitting on the veranda reading the latest Clive Cussler novel and listening to the sound of the morning waves gently lapping at the beach.

“I think we have the identity of your John Doe,” she said.

Wes crimped the corner of the page he was reading and set the book on the table. “Let me see what you have.”

A.J. pointed to a set of names. “These two men flew in from Cuba the day before Valeria Kempter. Valeria flew in and out on the same day we saw her, while *this* guy flew back the next afternoon. This other guy,” she said, pointing to the second man’s name, “never left the island—or at least he didn’t fly off. He fits our search criteria: he was listed on the manifest into Havana on the same flight as Valeria and the rest of the band; he’s Russian, with a passport showing he lives in Minusinsk; and he was supposed to have flown to Mexico City on the same flight as the band. He didn’t make that flight. From the name, I’m guessing he’s related to *this* guy,” said

A.J., pointing to yet another name on the paper. “Maybe a brother?”

“Could be,” said Wes. “In any event, this is good! It may save us having to contact the Russian passport officials for a fingerprint match. Now on a related matter, we know these two guys spent the night somewhere on the island. Is there any way you could access hotel registration logs?”

“Wes, there’s got to be at least two dozen hotels on this island! I could do it but it would take time. And in case you’ve forgotten,” she said playfully but with a dash of sarcasm, “we’re on vacation! Wouldn’t it be a whole lot faster just to get a phone book and call the hotels? We have names and dates, so it should be easy enough for them to check their registration logs. If you think the hotels won’t give us that information, have the police contact them. Heck, it’s their job anyway, isn’t it?”

“Good point,” said Wes, getting up from his chair and walking to the nightstand in their bedroom. Wes gave A.J. a wink and a flirtatious caress to the small of her back as he passed. He picked up the phone, punched the button for the front desk, and asked to be connected to the police department. When the police answered, Wes asked for Detective Ebanks and stood waiting another minute while the Detective was located. That gave A.J. enough time to respond to Wes’s mischievous pass by edging up to him and nuzzling his neck. She teasingly bit at his earlobe just as Ebanks answered.

“Detective Ebanks, Wes Franklin here.” Wes choked back a laugh at A.J.’s nibble. “I think we may have a lead for you as to the identity of that Russian diver. Can you check the hotels to see if any of them had an Andrei Kozlov register two days ago? It’s also possible that another man might have registered for both of them. If there’s no Kozlov listed, check for a Dmitri Gregorovich. Gregorovich would have checked out yesterday. He flew back to Havana on the afternoon flight. Yeah, thanks. Let us know what you come up with.”

Wes cradled the receiver. “Now, where were we? Ah yes, on

vacation!” he smiled devilishly, as he wrapped A.J. up in his arms and the two of them fell into bed.

* * * * *

DETECTIVE EBANKS PHONED BACK two hours later. “Dr. Franklin, you were right. Both men registered two days ago at the Ritz-Carlton. Gregorovich checked out yesterday just as you said. The other man, Andrei Kozlov, is still registered. I showed the photo of the diver to the receptionist. She thought it was the same man. She had a vague recollection of seeing him in the hotel lobby a couple of times.”

Wes said, “Thanks Detective Ebanks, I appreciate the call. What are you going to do next?”

“That depends,” said Ebanks. His voice had the tone of someone trying to sort out a puzzle. “I am curious about something, Dr. Franklin. The hotel records had these men signing in an hour apart. They were given rooms on different floors, though there were ample rooms available to put them closer together had they requested it. Other than the fact they both have Russian surnames and arrived in Grand Cayman on the same flight, what makes you think they were together?”

“Actually,” said Wes, “I’m just guessing myself and I could be wrong. So far the only additional connection I know of is that they both flew into Havana on the same flight a couple of weeks ago.”

Ebanks was surprised. “Oh? May I ask how you came by this information?”

“We contacted the airlines and were able to follow up on a hunch. But tell me,” said Wes, quickly putting some distance between himself and his loosely woven answer, “which of the two men signed in first?”

“Let me check my notes...uh, yes, here it is. Kozlov registered at 10:10 a.m. and Gregorovich signed in at 11:45.”

“So it was actually more like an hour-and-a-half between their two registrations,” said Wes.

“And how is that significant?” asked a curious Ebanks.

Wes shrugged and conceded, “It could be taken to mean that the two of them weren’t connected after all.” He then went on to think aloud some questions of his own. “I suppose it could also be inferred from their flying in together then separating on arrival, that they separated because Gregorovich—the second man to register—had something else to do before checking in. Perhaps he went somewhere to purchase the toxin. Maybe it was as innocent as getting a bite to eat. But, of course, we can’t know if any of this is true or what he might have done. But regardless, if this matters at all, it will have to be figured out later. When Gregorovich registered, it must not have mattered to him whether his room was near Kozlov’s or not. If, as you say, there were ample rooms available, it would seem an intentional choice on Gregorovich’s part *not* to request closer rooms. Speaking for myself, if I were traveling *with* someone and checked in after him, I would be inclined to ask which room my friend was in and if there were a room available nearer to his. Then again, if my traveling companion was simply a business associate, I might inquire as to which room he was in but not feel a need to take a room nearby. And if our traveling together had been strictly by coincidence, I wouldn’t care at all where the other man went.”

Detective Ebanks was baffled. “But where does *this* leave me, Dr. Franklin? They *are* together; they *aren’t* together!! And even if they *were* together, just because one man left before the other, doesn’t make him a murderer!” Ebanks was clearly exasperated and clueless as to what he was supposed to do next.

Wes didn’t want to get into the connection between Valeria Kempter and the dead diver, or that Dmitri Gregorovich was the same ‘Dima’ who managed her band, or that a second ‘Kozlov’ was on the manifest into Havana. Even Detective Ebanks hadn’t been able to get any of this information when he checked with the airport. And there was definitely no convenient way for Wes to explain to Ebanks how A.J. *discovered* that *Andrei* Kozlov was on the pre-

boarding manifest of a flight to Mexico City...along with yet *another* Kozlov, *Mikhail* Kozlov. But Wes was well aware that all of this wouldn't even matter at all, even if Gregorovich *was* the murderer, because, once he left the island, he was no longer under the Detective's jurisdiction. Wes, on the other hand, played on a considerably larger playing field than Detective Ebanks and he had every intention of looking deeper into this when he and A.J. returned home to San Francisco.

Wes said, "You're absolutely right, Detective! You don't have enough to go on yet. But you *do* know that the toxin in his blood was in a concentrated form..." Wes had to pause for a moment at an objection raised on the other end of the phone to Wes's reference to an as-yet phantom document. "...Well, I'm sure their report is on the way to you, you just haven't seen it yet. At any rate, *when* you get the lab report, you'll want to track down the source of the toxin. Who on the island could make a concentrated form of this toxin? Were there any inquiries for such a thing by a man with a Russian accent? Maybe you'll come up with a description."

The Detective, though still a bit confused, was satisfied to have a course of investigation to pursue. He hung up, giving Wes assurances that he would call if he found out anything about the toxin or if he had any other questions.

* * * * *

WES SAT ON THE EDGE of the bed thinking. "You know, Ash, I'm still bothered by the last thing Valeria Kempter said to me."

A.J. was getting dressed on the other side of the bed. "You mean about that guy not being a threat to her?"

"Yeah," said Wes, deep thought etching his brow. "She knew the guy; I'm sure of it. Is it possible she could have poisoned him before she flew back to Havana?"

"I thought you fixed the time of death between midnight and two?" said A.J. "I already confirmed that Valeria flew back on the

afternoon flight. When could she have had time?”

Wes shook his head. “I don’t know...maybe this toxin is slow acting. And I suppose I could have been mistaken on the time of death, though not by much. The water here is warm but not enough to delay the onset of *rigor* by any significant amount of time. And if the toxin had a delayed effect, wouldn’t you expect Kozlov to have put up some kind of fight when he felt someone stick a needle in his ass? The toxin must have been strong enough to affect him right away, especially if someone as small as Valeria were the one giving the shot. All this would seem to lead me to one conclusion: Valeria was long gone before Kozlov was.”

A.J. finished dressing and said, matter-of-factly, “Seems you and she will have plenty to talk about after the concert this week.”

Wes nodded absently, lost in thought.

Finally A.J. asked, “Do you think she’ll really leave tickets for us at Will Call?”

8

ROUZBEH ARYANA WAS ONE OF A HUNDRED people milling around the baggage claim area of SFO, waiting for his friends to arrive. At 6' 2", 225lbs of pure muscle, with shoulder-length, gray-streaked black hair, he wasn't your non-descript, average-looking bystander. The overhead monitor indicated that Flt 431, due to arrive at 11:52 a.m., was on the ground, so Wes and A.J. should be appearing any time now. Aryana, ever in 'vigilant' mode, meandered his way around the claim area, surreptitiously checking people out, studying the behaviors of 'regular' people so that in the future, when it might mean the difference between life and death, he would better recognize deviations from the norm. He had been enjoying the downtime since the Las Vegas case back in November but he wasn't the kind who could sit around very long before getting antsy for another assignment. He could let himself enjoy a play or a nice dinner out or a drive down to Monterey or over to Half Moon Bay, but his basic nature craved action. He kept in shape with daily workouts, Tai Chi, karate, or some other mind/body activity, but he was never happier, more alive, than when he was in a dangerous

reality. That warm flush over his skin and the acute mental focus produced by the pulsing of adrenaline through his veins, was, for him, intoxicating beyond belief.

Aryana saw Wes and A.J. on the escalator and padded over to greet them. He called out as he neared, “Welcome back! You look tanned and rested!”

A.J. hugged him. “Good to see you, too, sweetie.”

Wes and Aryana clenched hands and bro-hugged. “You’re looking fit, yourself,” said Wes. “All is well here, I assume?”

“Well, the cats are alive and the house didn’t burn down, if that’s what you mean.”

“Good thing, too,” said A.J. “We love those cats!”

“I see,” said Aryana. “The house could burn down, but as long as Goldfarb and Ringo are fine...”

“Gotta have your priorities straight,” said A.J.

Everyone laughed as they moved to the baggage carousel.

* * * * *

WES AND ARYANA STOOD ON THE PATIO of his house at Greenwich and Telegraph overlooking San Francisco Bay. To their right, seemingly close enough to touch, hung the two-level silver span of the Bay Bridge, brightly lighted and heavily trafficked on this clear winter’s eve. Out to the left lay Alcatraz, and beyond that, the iconic Golden Gate, its amber lights glistening off a steady stream of vehicles motoring north and south.

“I’ll tell you, Wes, I’ve never seen anything like it. The International arrivals gate was jam packed, mostly with screaming teenagers! The five of them were taken off to the side room where a bank of microphones and a gaggle of reporters waited for a first-ever Q & A with the group. I couldn’t get in without press credentials but I saw bits and pieces on television throughout the night.” Aryana raised his eyebrows. “This group REVOLVER is really something, Wes; funny, witty, sarcastic—in an admittedly endearing way. But I

don't get it, what did they do to get this kind of reception? I mean, don't get me wrong, I've heard their music and it's good, but this is way over the top."

"There's no explaining a 'phenomenon'," said Wes. "It happened with Frank Sinatra in the '40s, Elvis in the '50s, and the Beatles in the '60s. I guess we were overdue. There have certainly been extremely popular groups to come along since then—ABBA, U2, Nirvana, Aerosmith, to name a few—but as popular as they were, they just never rose to the level of 'international *phenom*'!"

Aryana said, "I'm surprised at you, Wes. You didn't put The Rolling Stones on that list."

Wes laughed at the seeming oversight. "That's because the Stones are on a list all their own," he said. "Now there's the perfect example of what I'm saying! Here's a group that began at the same time as the Beatles—with whom they were great contemporary friends, I should add—and they've continued strong decade after decade since their debut. They've turned out hit after hit; iconic hits that have held true over time. Nearing their seventies, they play to audiences of 70 - 80,000+ every time they tour. There's probably nowhere on the planet where Mick Jagger and Keith Richards aren't known. In fact, I'd bet that in almost any conversation you were in, if you made a simple reference to 'Mick', the person you were talking with would likely understand either immediately or after the briefest of pauses exactly who you meant. But even with all that, the Stones didn't enter that bubble of 'phenomenon' quite the way their good mates, the Beatles, did."

"Well, this REVOLVER band sure seems to be in that bubble as near as I can tell!"

Wes asked, "So you followed their limo to the Sir Francis Drake. What was the reception like there?"

"Pretty unremarkable, I'd say. No screaming teenagers. No reporters or paparazzi. The limo stopped at the Powell St. entrance, about six or seven people poured out, ran under the Drake canopy,

and disappeared through the doors. I watched the hotel until maybe one, one-thirty that night and didn't see any of them come back out. What time's the concert?"

"Eight o'clock." Wes pushed back his cuff-linked shirt sleeve and looked at his watch. "I thought we'd get there around seven or so."

Aryana grabbed Wes's wrist and pulled it toward him to get a closer look. "Nice watch. That's not the one you usually wear, is it?"

Wes chuckled. "No. This one's for special occasions."

"Very nice! How much?"

"Actually, it was a gift, but it goes for about eight sixty-eight."

Aryana whistled and shook his head. "*Phew*, \$868 is definitely more than I'd pay to get the time!"

"No, Aryana...that was eight hundred sixty-eight *thousand* dollars," corrected Wes. "Don't give me that look! I'm with you. I wouldn't pay much more than \$50 to keep track of the time. But this isn't just a watch. This one contains real pieces of the moon."

"What the...!" exclaimed Aryana. "Really? The Moon?"

"Yeah...This is a Louis Moinet Magistralis. It was built with pieces of a lunar meteorite that was over 2,000 years old. UC verified it. Moonstone is extremely rare...even more expensive than gold or platinum."

Aryana let loose Wes's wrist and the expensive watch dropped from view. "Anyway, how are you and A.J. getting to the Masonic tonight?"

"We'll take a cab. It's easier than screwing around with parking."

Aryana said, "I'll drive you. You can take a cab home. Wow!" he said in wide-eyed appreciation.

A.J. walked out to the patio. She looked absolutely ravishing in a light green, Grecian pleated halter gown.

"Let me guess," said Aryana. "A million bucks?"

"This old thing?" said A.J. smiling. "Try three eighteen."

Aryana smacked the heel of his hand to his forehead. “Holy... \$318,000!!”

A.J. gave a curious, surprised smile. “Huh? No, no, of course not; three hundred eighteen dol...” Suddenly she caught on. “Oh, Wes has been showing off his watch again, hasn’t he?”

Wes produced a guilty grin. “Listen, it isn’t how much something costs; it’s how you look wearing it that matters. And you...” he wagged his finger and smiled suggestively at her. “You, my dear, look like a million bucks!” Wes stepped nearer and kissed her on the cheek. “Mmmm...and you *smell* great, too! What is that?” sniffing lightly at her neck.

A.J. said “It’s called Imperial Majesty. It’s by Clive Christian. Glad you like it!” A.J. raised an impish eyebrow toward Aryana. “Now, that scent...the one that Wes seems to be so into, (he was nuzzling her behind the ear)...that was twenty-one fifty.” She gave Aryana a coy wink. “Two-thousand one-hundred fifty dollars.” She hesitated devilishly before enunciating slowly for exaggerated effect...“An ounce!”

9

ARYANA SWUNG HIS BENTLEY SNUGLY to the curb at the Masonic Auditorium, where Wes climbed out from the back seat then offered his hand to A.J. to help her out. They called out their thanks to Aryana and waved goodbye. The lobby was rapidly becoming wall-to-wall people, fed by the river of invited guests continuing to go through the front doors. Wes tugged at the silk lapel of his dinner jacket, gallantly gave A.J. his arm, and aimed them toward the Will Call window, lacing through the wave of other fresh arrivals, smiling and nodding affably as they went.

When it was their turn at the window, Wes asked the girl behind the glass somewhat tentatively, “You have tickets for Wes Franklin?”

He watched the young woman rifle through a filing box full of theatre-sized ticket envelopes. At last she withdrew one, studied it for a second, then excused herself and walked away. Wes looked over his shoulder at A.J. and shrugged his puzzlement at what was happening. A moment later the young woman returned, followed closely by a well-dressed man about A.J.’s age and height; a good

looking man in his early thirties with thick, wavy black hair. The man gave a courteously professional smile offering his apologies at any delay and gesturing them to a side door, away from the main entrance. As Wes and A.J. stepped to the door, it swung gently open. The man gestured them in saying, in a faint Jersey accent, “Dr. Franklin, Ms. Jordan, please...” as he backed away to hold the door open for them.

“My name is Nick, Nick Palumbo. I’m with the band, so-to-speak. I arrange special services on this tour for dignitaries and special guests, of which you and Ms. Jordan are certainly two of our most welcome guests. We have a secluded area where you’ll find beverages and snacks.” Palumbo led them through a darker, noticeably quieter area, to a black satin-shrouded, seemingly dead-end, wall. Palumbo pulled the fabric aside to expose a door, which opened on an exquisitely designed lounge area where a well-stocked bar and jovial bartender awaited their arrival. Palumbo gestured them in with a flourish then walked Wes and A.J. to the bar, where he introduced them to Woody Pennington, the tall, youthful bartender. “Dr. Franklin, Ms. Jordan, please let Woody know whatever you’d like to drink or eat. Please feel welcomed to mingle with the other guests as they arrive. This will be a small gathering but filled with interesting people, such as yourselves.” Palumbo turned to his left and cocked his head toward a group of five seated on two couches. “You probably recognize the older gentleman at the center of that group, Dr. Franklin; he’s your Mayor, Charles Henley. I know he would very much enjoy meeting you, and he will make sure you get to meet everyone else. I’ll be back to escort you to your seats when the concert is about to begin.”

Palumbo dipped his head deferentially, smiled to the bartender, and left through another door.

At their request, Pennington poured a Pinot Noir for Wes and a Chardonnay for A.J., and the two guests walked over to say hello to Mayor Henley. True to Palumbo’s prediction, Mayor Henley was

pleased and eager to meet Wes Franklin and Ashley Jordan, who he had never met but felt he knew from stories that cropped up about them from time to time in the halls or around the water coolers at City Hall. Mayor Henley was thrilled to be able to introduce Wes and A.J. to every new guest that entered the lounge. There were political figures, both state and national, presidents and founders of high tech companies from all over Silicon Valley, administrators from Stanford and Berkeley, and two or three venture capitalists. At times it seemed to Wes that the REVOLVER concert was secondary to the night's events; more an excuse to schmooze than from any love of music. But in fairness, the conversations always seemed to circle back to the concert and there was a genuine awareness of and fascination for this exceptional group of musicians. The fact that the band hailed from Siberia lent a sense of dark curiosity to the conversations because the typical American's view of Siberia was of frozen tundra and gulags, icons of desolation from the Cold War period of the recent past, and it was hard to fathom that such an interesting place as Minusinsk would exist in that remote, isolated part of Russia.

The lights in the lounge blinked twice, signaling the show was about to begin. Nick Palumbo and half a dozen assistants came in and gathered up their assigned guests. Palumbo approached Wes and A.J. as well as the Mayor and his group, and asked them to follow him.

The Masonic Auditorium was the perfect setting for this 'intimate' concert. The 3,165-seat hall was filled to capacity for this performance and, as one might have expected, every seat was filled, there wasn't a no-show in the crowd. The unique design of the auditorium allowed that no one was more than twenty-one rows from the stage, and the quality of the acoustics, together with the state-of-the-art dual sound systems and extensive array of lighting and audio-visual equipment, made this the perfect venue for the night.

Palumbo guided his guests to front-row-center seats, not more

than a few paces from the stage, which was in the shape of an oversized free-throw lane of a basketball court, and only slightly higher than ground level. The instruments—two electric and one acoustic guitar, three keyboard synthesizers, a bass, and a drum kit that included three toms, as well as various other percussion items—were in place, awaiting the arrival of the musicians. “When the show is over,” said Palumbo, “please wait here. I’ll come and get you for the ‘After’ party.” As Palumbo walked away the lights dimmed and an announcer’s voice suddenly boomed through the hall: “Ladies and gentlemen,” said the disembodied voice, “please put your hands together for tonight’s Master of Ceremonies...Mr. Robin Williams!”

Clapping and gleeful tittering filled the hall and smiles lit up on every face as the beloved comedian strode out from behind the curtain.

The choice of Williams as emcee for this show was by special request of the band. Williams was local to San Francisco and a worldwide celebrity, and therefore a reasonable choice. But more than that, the band members were all big fans of Williams not only for his comedy, but for his sensitive portrayal of a Russian musician seeking asylum in the movie ‘Moscow On The Hudson’ from some years earlier, before any of them had been born, actually. Two other considerations went into the selection of Williams as well: First, the growing stature of REVOLVER made them a hard act for any lesser band to open for, and second, Robin Williams was the perfect person to focus all the *buzz* and energy in the room and prepare everyone for what they were about to see.

True to form, Williams improvised his way through about ten minutes of stream-of-consciousness comedy as all the audience settled into their seats. He played off every new last-minute arrival to the absolute delight of the crowd, and the utter mortification of each new victim! At last, when he saw the doors close and the final couple take their seats, he slid easily into an impression of Ed Sullivan, the late stiff-necked variety show host with whom most of

this older audience was familiar, and then deftly brought the energy down to a quiet calm as he returned to his own persona. “It’s my honor and privilege,” he said with a certain *gravitas*, “to present, for the first time in America, the band that is rapidly taking the world by storm. Ladies and gentlemen...REVOLVER.”

Williams stepped directly off the front of the stage to take his seat next to Ashley Jordan in the front row as the house lights extinguished. The band members, appearing only vaguely as indistinct forms moving about the stage, took their positions in the blackness. The audience was as quiet as the auditorium was dark. Suddenly a thin column of blue light illuminated Sergei Krushko, whose bass thundered out the first pulsating notes of *Russia Unchained*, the REVOLVER tune that struck its indictment at the heart of Russian political corruption and which currently ranked number three in nearly all the U.S. charts. A wash of red brought Shura Mostovoy out of the dark as he tapped at the high hat, producing the syncopated *r-r-ring* of brass that uniquely identified the sound of this REVOLVER song. In the next instant, strobe tentacles flashed brightly and danced across the audience as Valeria Kempter, Viktor Zhuravlev, and Tatiana Eliseeva, bathed in lavender, brought their voices to life in a tingling three-part harmony that sent shivers of excitement and delight through everyone in the auditorium. Viktor’s electric guitar crunched out power chords and Tatiana’s delicate fingers danced across ivory keys in lively accompaniment to the tightly crafted vocal harmonies. The song blithely traversed its two verses, one chorus and a bridge, followed by a third verse and two final choruses in just under four minutes. And in those less-than-four-minutes the American introduction of the band was accomplished. The last concussive crash of Shura’s cymbals was met with an eruption of applause. Cheers and whistles unmasked the staid façade of tuxedos and gowns, exposing the throng for what it truly was: newly created, and now unabashed fans of REVOLVER!

The next ninety minutes were an incredible journey of sound and

light for both the audience and the band. REVOLVER had played to packed houses of lively and enthusiastic crowds over the past three years, but tonight there was something different coming from the audience, something almost terrifyingly electric in the air. Each musician felt it, and would discuss the feeling with the others later that night to try to get a handle on what was happening, but their immediate thought was that suddenly a wall of separation had gone up between their little band and the rest of the world. It was a feeling that would compound itself over the next ten days as the popularity of the band took on a life of its own. Tonight would be one of the last times these five people would ever enjoy the comfort of anonymity, the pleasure of simply smiling at a passing stranger, of sharing small talk with friends and new acquaintances.

At the end of their ninety minute set, at their final bow to the audience, the hall erupted in thunderous approval. Cheers, foot stomping and whistles vibrated the auditorium so forcefully the band froze in fear for an instant, thinking an earthquake was rumbling beneath them. When they each came to the realization that the ‘earthquake’ was them, they stood smiling out at the crowd, their eyes flitting from one glowing face to the next, secretly in stunned disbelief at what was happening here.

The band loved music almost more than life itself. They loved being together and playing together and they loved performing for their audiences. Their music was the expression of their very souls, and they desired nothing more than to play and sing for their fans. They had poured their hearts into their music, hoping to be a successful band one day. And now that day had come.

But the level of success they were about to achieve on this tour was something they could never have imagined possible.

It was a level of success they weren’t prepared for.

10

A.J. STOOD TALKING WITH ROBIN WILLIAMS. Wes and Mayor Henley were similarly engaged in small-talk when Nick Palumbo came to get them. Palumbo led them to the Masonic's California Room for the 'After' party. The room was set up with twenty tables covered in gray and burgundy linen, with china and crystal place settings for the 150 invitees, eight name cards to a table. A buffet of prime rib, seafood, and vegetarian offerings was available for those who wanted to eat, and Champagne was chilling at each table. Waiters circulated with red and white wines, and an open bar under Woody Pennington's supervision was set up in a far corner. Dima had thought of everything that would give REVOLVER a first-class send-off on their tour.

Small groups coalesced throughout the room, everyone engaged in lively conversation about the event they had just witnessed. The din of separate conversations, clanking silverware, and rattling glasses suddenly gave way to a ripple of applause which began at one end of the room and spread out across the floor as the band members made their entrance. The five musicians weren't sure what

to make of this reception. They had often mingled with their audiences after a performance, drinking and talking and dancing, but once off the stage, they had always been treated like anyone else there to have a good time that night. Even as recently as Havana this was the case. But tonight, with this audience, something was different. Perhaps it was the age of this group, or the fact that most were dressed in fancier clothes than REVOLVER's usual audience, but there was a decidedly deferential, almost reverential, atmosphere tonight. As the band fanned out to thank the people for coming to the show, they were met with smiles and varying congratulatory expressions, even a handshake or two, but the assembled crowd generally maintained a respectful distance almost as if they were meeting royalty.

Wes and A.J. made eye-contact with Valeria from across the room but she quickly broke it off as she got caught up in conversation with the nearest table. It took her nearly a half hour to cross the room and finally meet up with her Cayman friends at their table. She said 'Hello Wes and A.J.' but was precluded from saying much more as she also greeted Williams and Mayor Henley's group. Williams scrunched his face in an elastic smile and said, in a tone of comical innuendo, 'So you three know each other?' but as Wes laughed and began to answer 'Yes, we met in...' he was cut off by Valeria, who jumped in with 'Yes, these are special friends of mine'. She flashed an urgent look at Wes which seemed to be a plea to say no more about how they knew each other. Seeing this, A.J. shot Wes a curious look. Wes smiled vacantly and said nothing.

After a moment of lighthearted conversation, accented by a flurry of comical quips from Williams in several of his multiple personalities, Valeria left to join her band mates, along with Dima, and the two backers at their table. As the mass of buzzing guests quieted and took their seats, Dima rose to thank everyone for being there and helping to make this evening's concert a rousing success. A map of the United States with a red zigzagging line extending

from San Francisco to Miami and large red stars marking the eight cities the band would play was projected behind him on a large screen. As his general remarks concluded, Dima raised his Champagne flute and said, "In Russia we have a saying—*Na zdorovyе!* This means 'To your health!' So on behalf of REVOLVER, may I say to everyone here a very heartfelt *Na zdorovyе!*" To his surprise, the crowd of well-wishers echoed back a booming chorus of *Na zdorovyе* and the din of 160 clinking glasses filled the air.

A little over ninety minutes later the guests began to file out, taking one last opportunity to say goodbye to the band and offer their words of encouragement for what they were certain would be a concert tour to remember! Wes and A.J. hung back, milling around so as to have a final word with Valeria when the others had left. But in addition to sharing their own *bon chance* with her, they had a bit of unresolved business lingering from the events on Grand Cayman. Wes broached the subject away from any unwelcome ears.

"You recall that overly aggressive fan you encountered on the beach?" said Wes.

Valeria's smile flattened. She said a tentative, questioning, "Yes?"

"His body washed up on shore the next morning." Wes observed her eyes widen ever-so-slightly. He continued. "He apparently suffered anaphylactic shock from contact with some Fire Coral and drowned while on a dive." Wes now saw a small pool gather at the base of her eyes. His next words were more statement than question. "He wasn't a stranger to you, was he?" She lowered her eyes. Wes's suspicions were confirmed non-verbally as the puzzle started to come together. "That's why you told me he posed no threat to you, isn't it?" She sniffed quietly and caught her breath. Wes's voice was soft and calming now. "Do you want to tell us who he was? How you knew each other?"

Valeria lifted her chin and steeled herself. "He was one of our financial backers," she said.

Wes was fairly certain the tears she was fighting back were for more than a financial backer. He ventured into delicate territory with his next question. “Was he a lover, too?”

Valeria said “No!” so forcefully that Wes was convinced she was telling the truth.

Wes ventured deeper. “The airline records showed you came on different flights. He got there the day before you. Were you on your way to meet him for something?”

Again her denial was convincing.

“The airline also listed ‘Dmitri Gregorovich’ as a passenger. That’s your manager, Dima, isn’t it?” She nodded. “Were Dima and Kozlov—that’s his name, right? Andrei Kozlov?—were they there together on some business that you know of? Were you perhaps following Dima?”

Her eyes said ‘Yes’ but her lips didn’t have time to answer as Dima sidled up to the group.

“Valeria,” said Dima, quickly apologizing for the interruption. “We are all heading up to my room for a brief band meeting before turning in for the night. Tomorrow is a big day for us all!”

“Yes, of course,” said the girl. “Dima, may I introduce you to my new friends, Dr. Wes Franklin and Ms. Ashley Jordan. We’ve been having a very nice chat about tonight’s show.” Dima shook Wes’s hand and bowed slightly to A.J. “It turns out they might be in Las Vegas on business while we are there, so perhaps we’ll have a chance to visit some more.” She flashed an imploring look to Wes and A.J.

Wes was quick to take the cue. “Yes,” he chimed affably, “A.J. and I have some left over business from a case we worked on last November. It just so happens we will be there when you are and we were hoping to spend a little more time with Valeria.”

Dima’s curiosity was aroused. “You said you were working on a ‘case’ there last November? Valeria introduced you as ‘Dr. Franklin’ so I gather that was a medical case?”

Wes gave an ironic chuckle. “Yes, I suppose it was a ‘medical’ case in a manner of speaking. A rather unusual one at that.” Wes diverted the conversation. “Actually,” he said, “A.J. and I are very familiar with Las Vegas and would be more than happy to show you and the band around the town if you have time.”

“That is entirely possible,” said Dima graciously. “How did you say you knew Valeria?” he asked with an inquisitive smile.

Wes began to answer “We met...” but again Valeria jumped in.

“We met just this evening but we hit it off so well that I feel I have known them forever!” She smiled brightly as her eyes jumped between Dima, Wes, and A.J.

“Yes,” confirmed Wes. “Valeria has such an easy charm about her that it feels we have been friends for a long time.” Wes reached into his side pocket and withdrew a small leather card holder from which he took a couple of business cards and handed one to Dima and one to Valeria.

Dima looked at the card and raised an eyebrow as he read: Dr. Wes Franklin, The Cloister of Akhenaten. “I must say, this Cloister of Akhenaten has me very curious. What is it?”

Wes said, “It’s the name of a group I’m associated with. Perhaps we can discuss it at length in Las Vegas,” offered Wes cordially. “But for now, A.J. and I don’t want to keep you from your meeting.” He took the girl’s hand. “Valeria, again, the concert was unbelievably great tonight and we’re confident America will find you as lovely and enchanting as we have. Please give us a call when you get to Las Vegas and allow us to extend a little American hospitality to you and your band.” He extended his hand to Dima. “And by all means, you too, Dima. It was a pleasure meeting you. Valeria...” Wes bowed, gallantly kissed the back of her hand, and he and A.J. exited.

Climbing into the back of a cab Wes said to A.J., “That was interesting!”

“What do you think of her story?” asked A.J.

Wes said, "I think there's a lot she isn't telling us, and a lot more she wants to. Looks like we'll be spending a bit of time on the road again, starting in Las Vegas. I hope you haven't unpacked yet!"

"How could I? We've only been home an hour! It's a good thing you're so lovable. Besides," she said, "this will give you a chance to get me that ring I saw at Swarovski's in the Venetian!" She laid her head playfully on his shoulder and purred.

"I thought it was that ceramic giraffe."

"Well, of course, the giraffe; that goes without saying. But that's on last year's list. I swear, sweetie, you really need to keep up! Besides, the giraffe stays at home on a shelf, whereas the ring is something that can go out with me and I can show it to everyone and tell them how sweet and romantic you are. See...I'm really doing this for you!"

Wes twisted his neck so she could see the dirty look he was giving her. The strategy was right but the tactic was wrong. She was too pretty to argue with. He looked forward again. "We'll see."

She put her head back on his shoulder and smiled to herself. 'We'll see' was Ashley-ese for 'You win'.

11

THE OAKLAND COLISEUM HELD 63,000 PEOPLE, with additional seats set up in the infield. Ticket prices ranged from \$75 in the bleachers to \$250 in the premium seats. The average ticket price was about \$125, which meant this single concert would bring in nearly \$8M. Needless to say, this was the most the band had ever made for a single performance, but if Dima's projections were correct, it would be merely a fraction of what would be generated at the final concert in Miami, which would also be broadcast on Showtime's pay-per-view. All tolled Dima projected they would play to approximately 175,000 people in the eight cities, which would generate more than \$21M for the concerts alone. By the time REVOLVER reached Miami, Showtime ticket sales would reach an unprecedented five million TV sets, as well as closed-circuit showings in theatres around the country, setting an event record that would likely stand for many years to come. At \$50 per viewing, Showtime sales alone would bring in a quarter of a billion dollars! Exactly how much the band would net from all this was still unclear, but there was no doubt that Dima, the backers, and the band would be extremely wealthy by the

time they returned home. The band, however, remained sublimely ignorant of the finances of this endeavor. After all, that's what they had Dima for.

The Oakland concert was sold out, with an additional fifteen hundred people milling about the parking lot and the walkway to BART looking for scalpers. The few tickets that could be scalped went, according to the nightly news reports, for as much as five hundred dollars for a seventy-five dollar seat. Fearing a riot by the people who couldn't get tickets, Coliseum police relented and let the overflow crowd come in as far as the first level to watch the show on the monitors around the concession booths. The average age of the sixty-three thousand-plus throng was somewhere around fourteen or fifteen. Some overly rambunctious fans—mostly the younger ones—tried to get to the stage during the show but a curtain of blue uniforms and band security people successfully foiled those attempts. The first aid booths had a steady flow of kids overcome by emotion or claustrophobia from the crush of the crowd, and there were, as expected, dozens of teens for whom drugs and the emotional frenzy proved to be too much. Joints were passed brazenly up and down the rows such that the pungent aroma of marijuana escaped no one's detection, though security turned a blind eye. But for all the juvenile hormones and energy, the multitude, with few exceptions, displayed an amazing degree of self-control and civility. The music simultaneously fired their youthful exuberance and quieted their spirits, and in the end left everyone with a celebratory glow at having been part of this unforgettable event.

REVOLVER returned to the stage for a total of three encores, prompted by chants from fans calling on them to repeat favorite songs from earlier in the show. On their first encore there seemed to be a preponderance of callouts for the number three song *Russia Unchained*, which had opened the show nearly two hours earlier. The band dutifully obliged, waved good night, and departed the stage, only to return a few minutes later when the crowd took up the

call for *A Different Drum*, which was charting at number two across the country. Now the chant seemed to come from every one of the sixty-three thousand voices reverberating as one. When the band returned to take up their instruments and strike the opening chord of this tune one more time, the throng sent up a deafening roar of appreciation both for the song and for the band's acknowledgement of their request. At the final cymbal crash, the band once more waved goodnight and left the stage. A third tumultuous chant lasted two full minutes before the band reappeared to repeat their #1 hit *If Love Is Real*, the song which had closed the concert a mere fifteen minutes earlier. This time when the song ended, the band, as one, bowed three times, first to the center infield, then to the right grandstands, and then the left. Viktor waved his orange Gretsch guitar over his head in an energetic salute as the rest of the band blew kisses, and they all retreated for the last time.

The band was out of the Coliseum and on their rented tour bus even before the crowd, which seemed reluctant to ever leave, had started for the exits.

Dima had contracted Night Sky Travel to provide a 12-berth bus and driver for the tour. For the most part, they would all stay in hotels in the cities they would play, but on the few nights when they were between cities, the bus would provide an extremely comfortable hideaway. The post-show adrenaline had everyone so high that sleep was out of the question, so they just aimed the bus south on Hwy 101 and began the nine hour drive to Las Vegas. The next show would be to a significantly smaller audience of a little over sixteen thousand at the MGM Grand, where they would also stay a couple of nights before heading for Dallas.

"That was incredible!" chirped Tatiana, to agreements from the others.

"I've never felt anything like it!" added Viktor.

Even Sergei and Shura had smiles frozen on their faces, their dark sides seemingly in permanent abeyance at the wave of positive

energy generated by the show. Sergei clicked his lighter and raised it to the cigarette hanging from his lips, but his hand was shaking so much from the rush of adrenaline he could barely line up the flame to the tip and surrendered the futile effort to uncontrollable laughter. Shura hadn't even thought about smoking until he saw Sergei's failed attempt, and even then he could only crumple to the floor of the bus howling at the sight of his buddy's palsy.

Valeria said, "Can you believe those encores? Tens of thousands of people screaming in one voice to hear our songs again?"

Dima toasted the good fortune of the group then eased into his 'responsible parent' role advising them, "We'll be on the road all night so try to settle down and get some sleep. Tomorrow night's show won't be as big as tonight's but it will be just as important." Dima looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight. "We should be in Las Vegas around nine in the morning. You'll have some radio interviews during the day, but you'll also have time to rest in your rooms before the concert. I know you'll want to see The Strip but I don't want you getting lost in the casinos. You'll have plenty of time for that after the show, before we leave for Texas."

"Yes, papa!" said Viktor, which got a good laugh from everyone, including Dima.

"Okay, okay," replied Dima with a smile. "I just want you all well rested. Bobby," he called to the bus driver, "dim the lights back here, then turn them all the way down in an hour." He looked around to the band once more. His demeanor changed from 'responsible parent' to 'proud father'. "You were really great tonight!" he said softly. "Now, ladies, when you're ready to turn in, you take the berths in the back of the bus. You'll have more privacy back there. Roadies, you take the front. Viktor, Sergei, and Shura..."

The guys didn't let him finish. Shura playfully threw a crumpled napkin at Dima as the three of them called out good-natured jibes to let him know they got it and now he should go lie down and leave them alone.

Sergei and Shura lit up cigarettes as everyone settled into quieter conversations. About half an hour later, after the adrenaline high had worn off and Valeria stretched her arms with the first yawn, she and Tatiana headed for the back of the bus to clean up and crash for the night. The yawn was contagious and soon the others began to shut down, too.

As tired as she was Valeria couldn't close off her thoughts about the missing backer, Andrei Kozlov. She was stuck in time on the beach and the last time she saw him. Did she have to slap him so hard? Sure she was angry. But the choice was his, not hers. Why did their last words have to be a fight? She wanted to talk to Tatiana about it, she'd understand; it was a girl thing. She leaned out of her berth and whispered "Tatiana?" but her friend was already asleep. Valeria lay there staring at the ceiling. Every so often a tear would pool at the corner of her eye, then gush out, run across her temple, and get lost in her golden strands. She would mop the trail of moistness away with a finger and try to block the whole thing from her mind, but the scene just kept repeating itself, over and over and over again.

By one-fifteen the only sound in the bus was the soft drone of tires on the highway and the occasional snort of someone coming out of a deep sleep just long enough to roll over and fall quickly back under the dark veil. By one-thirty Valeria drifted away.

12

A LITTLE PAST NINE A.M. EVERYONE CROWDED to the left windows to get a glimpse of the famous ‘Welcome to Las Vegas’ sign. Up ahead on the left the morning sun glinted off the golden siding of Mandalay Bay and the Luxor pyramid just north of it. To the right was the Tropicana Resort. Ahead on the left they saw the turrets of Excalibur, the skyline facade of New York, New York, with its Statue of Liberty replica and the metal twists and turns of a roller coaster beckoning from the west side of Las Vegas Boulevard. Their senses were on fire with anticipation. Las Vegas was even more spectacular than they had imagined! And then they saw something that truly made their hearts skip a beat. Just outside the MGM Grand, where one would usually see the hypnotic gaze of grand illusionist David Copperfield, was a huge LCD picture showing the thirty-foot high faces of Valeria, Tatiana, Viktor, Sergei, and Shura and the brightly flashing caption ‘The MGM Grand Welcomes REVOLVER’.

The bus turned right onto Tropicana then made a quick left into the MGM entrance. When the bus rolled to a stop, Dima instructed everyone to sit tight while he went in to register. After a few minutes

he returned with room assignments and magnetic keycards. Everyone had their own room this time. Dima checked his watch, nine-thirty-five. “Okay, listen up, please.” The conversations quieted. “Get settled into your rooms, freshen up, and we’ll meet in my room at noon. We have a radio interview from one to two this afternoon. After that we can do some sightseeing but I want you to get some rest before the concert tonight, so don’t go wandering off alone. Any questions?” There were none. Everyone got off the bus and followed Dima to the elevators that would take them to their rooms on the twentieth floor.

Valeria checked the door number against her keycard sleeve, slipped the card into the slot, heard a *click*, and pushed the door open. The room was huge, with a massive bed under a white spread. She walked to the window and stood gazing out at The Strip below, mesmerized by the eclectic opulence until a knock at the door pulled her back from her reverie. A young man with a white-toothed smile and an MGM Grand nametag reading SHAWN delivered her suitcases. She began fishing through her jeans pockets for tip money but the young man waved her off saying ‘No ma’am, everything has been taken care of, thank you. Enjoy your stay.’ At the door he turned back to the girl. With a wink and a knowing smile, he said, ‘Knock ‘em dead tonight!’ then pulled the door shut behind him, leaving her again alone with her thoughts. Valeria paced the room nervously for a couple of minutes before locating her purse and retrieving a business card from an inside pocket. She looked at the instructions on the hotel phone and punched the number for an outside line. When the dial tone changed, she keyed in the numbers from the card. On the third ring a now-familiar and friendly voice answered.

“Wes Franklin.”

“Wes, this is Valeria. We just arrived in Las Vegas.”

“Valeria! Great to hear from you,” said Wes.

Valeria was hesitant but hopeful. “I know it was asking a lot of

you, Wes, but did you really come here? I'm sorry to have put you on the spot with Dima the other night but I didn't know what else to do."

Wes knew from their exchange at the Masonic that the girl had things on her mind she couldn't talk about regarding the dead man in the Caymans. He and A.J. had flown in the day before and taken their regular suite at the Bellagio. He put Valeria at ease with some chit chat before asking the key question. "Do you want to get together and talk about what happened on Grand Cayman?"

She was quiet for a long second but finally gave a resigned Yes, but she didn't want to talk on the phone.

"That's fine," said Wes. "A.J. and I will walk over and meet you. The casinos can be extremely confusing but I know the perfect place that will be very easy for you to find. Take the elevator to the first floor. When you get off, there will only be one way for you to go. At the top of the exit you'll see an arrow pointing to the Studio Walk. Follow the sign and within a few yards you'll see the Rouge lounge on your right. You can't miss it. It's all done up in red Ferrari leather and chrome and it's the first place you'll come to. Give us about fifteen minutes to get there."

Valeria continued to wander aimlessly around the room burning off tension, stopping at the window every so often, distractedly staring out at The Strip before walking around her room again to kill time. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand several times, agitated at the slow passage of time. Finally, after what felt like hours, the fifteen minutes were up. Remembering the gigantic billboard picture of her that greeted the band's arrival, she threw a scarf over her head and drew one end across her face like a veil. She hid her lavender eyes under a pair of heart-shaped rose-colored glasses, shoved the room key in her jeans pocket, and headed for the elevator. The ride down from twenty was uninterrupted. With a hushed *ding* the elevator door opened on the first floor and, just as Wes had described, there was only one way out of the elevator

alcove. Overhead three directional arrows etched in brown on the beige plaster pointed off to places of interest in the hotel, the center arrow pointing northwest toward another archway. She crossed what amounted to a pedestrian round-about, some six paces in all, and passed under the transom labeled Studio Walk. Not much more than ten or fifteen yards ahead on her right she saw the sign for the Rouge lounge. She stepped tentatively through the front entrance, looking around for Wes and A.J. In the far right corner she saw Wes waving to her and moved quickly to their table.

Wes rose and gave Valeria a reassuring hug hello. She slid into the booth between her friends, positioning herself so as to obscure anyone's view of her and removed the scarf from her face.

The waitress, one of the requisite beautiful models the lounge hired as servers, arrived with a tray of drinks. She placed two rose-colored drinks in front of the ladies and a Bailey's and decaf in front of Wes, saying 'Let me know if that's hot enough, sir'. Wes sipped at his drink, indicated it was just right, and the waitress smiled brightly and left.

A.J. said, "We didn't know what you would want to drink so we ordered a Cosmopolitan for you. If you don't like it, we can easily order something else."

Valeria touched the martini glass to her lips and sipped. "Mmmm," she said appreciatively. "Very nice! What's in it?"

"It's made with two-and-a-half ounces of cranberry juice, one shot of Citron flavored vodka, and one shot of Triplesec, with a small lime wedge," said A.J.

Valeria was smiling and trying to keep things light for the moment but Wes could read stress all over her face.

"I know we're here to talk about the Caymans, but go at your own pace, Val," he said. "Take as much time as you need."

She choked out a Thank you and fought back tears. She took a couple casual sips of her drink and apologized for lying to Dima the other night when she told him Wes and A.J. would be in Las Vegas.

She was embarrassed at having pulled them into her paranoia and was grateful that they were so willing to inconvenience themselves for her.

A.J. placed a hand on Valeria's and said softly, "This is what we do, sweetie; you aren't inconveniencing us. We're happy to help if we can."

The girl looked up at A.J. and then to Wes, gratitude filling her eyes. "You were right, Wes. I went there to stop Du from doing something he might regret."

"Du?" said Wes with a confused expression. "That would be Andrei Kozlov, I assume?"

"Yes. Du is a common nickname for Andrei."

"What was it he might regret?" asked A.J.

"Investing ten million dollars in this tour," answered Valeria. "That's a lot of money and there would be no guarantee we could ever repay him and Misha—Mikhail—back! I tried to talk them out of it before we left Germany but they were convinced the tour would be a great success and they would make ten times that amount in return." She took another sip and stared down at the table.

"Do you have any idea how much money your tour stands to gain?" asked Wes.

"No," said Valeria. "I'm not too good with money or mathematics. I've been poor all my life. But you don't have to know much about finance to know that ten million dollars is an enormous sum! Besides, Dima handles those matters for us."

"Okay, well, keep going," said Wes comfortingly.

"Shortly after we arrived in Havana, I overheard Dima and Du talking about flying to Grand Cayman. They let it be known they were going there for the scuba diving—Du is an avid diver...was," she corrected, swallowing a wave of emotion. "I knew they were going to the bank there to transfer the funds—they both had accounts in the Caymans. Misha tried to assure me not to worry, that everything was going to be great, but I was still worried. When I

realized I couldn't enlist Misha's help in stopping this transaction, I did the only thing I could think of. I flew there the next morning to try one last time to talk Du out of it."

"And the scene on the beach?" asked A.J. "You slapped him and pushed him away."

"Yes. I was angry with him for not listening to me. He told me they had already been to the bank. That's when I hit him. I pushed him away and yelled at him that he was stupid and deserved to lose his money." She could no longer hold back her tears.

Wes, his brow wrinkled in concentration, shot A.J. a question mark expression. The girl had earlier denied she and Andrei Kozlov were lovers. Exactly what they *were*, however, was not yet clear. Rather strange behavior from a benefactor. Most businesses don't try to talk investors *out* of giving them money; they usually try to get as much as they can. And there was something in the way she talked about Kozlov—her tone mostly—that gave the distinct impression she and Kozlov were more than casual business acquaintances. Much more, if he read her right.

The girl patted a tissue to her eyes and went on. "I flew back to Havana that same day." She dabbed the Kleenex to her nose and sniffled. "That evening I didn't mention my Cayman trip to the band. They wouldn't have understood, and anyway, the question was moot now. When Dima returned the next day, he got the band together to discuss our upcoming departure and make sure everyone and everything was set to go. He told us at that meeting that Du—Andrei—would be catching up with us in California; that he had decided to stay in the Cayman's for an extra couple of days to do some more diving, that there were some special dive sites he had always wanted to see, and as long as he was already there, yada, yada, yada."

Wes saw puzzlement etched on Valeria's brow. "You don't buy that story?" The girl shook her head, shook it several times, in fact, as if to amplify her No by repetition. "What was the problem?"

"Nothing." She hesitated. "Everything." Valeria felt waves of

confusion hit her on many levels. “Some things just didn’t add up for me,” she said. “First, Dima had never briefed us on the comings and goings of our financial backers before. He had only recently introduced them to us as he began putting plans together for the tour. Even in the days leading up to our flight to Havana, Dima had never once found it necessary to explain anything about the backers. In fact, it was only by accident I even learned of the trip to Grand Cayman that he and Andrei were planning. They left us in Havana that morning without so much as a wave goodbye. Now suddenly Dima feels we should all know that Andrei will not be traveling with us from Havana to Mexico but will catch up with us in the States in a couple of days?”

A.J. said, “Maybe, with your big concert tour about to begin, Dima simply wanted to make sure everyone had a clear understanding of what would be happening. You know, better to over-communicate than to overlook something. He didn’t want you and the band to misinterpret it when your financier wasn’t on the plane with you.”

Wes could see Valeria was not convinced. “You’re still not buying it,” he said matter-of-factly. “A.J.’s suggestion sounds reasonable to me. What else is troubling you, Val.?”

Valeria nervously twirled the stem of her glass on the table. “At the time, I believed what Dima told us. It wasn’t until you told me at the Masonic that Andrei was dead...” she caught her breath as though her stomach had just flipped at a sudden fall off a mountain ledge. Hearing herself say aloud what she didn’t even want to acknowledge in her thoughts—that Andrei was dead—made her dizzy, made her feel like she was living in a parallel universe with some other Valeria Kempter. This couldn’t really be happening in *her* reality! “Du was an experienced diver,” she blurted out. “He would never have planned a dive at night in unfamiliar waters—and certainly not a solo dive! And just what was so urgently happening under the sea that this dive couldn’t wait till morning? No, it makes

no sense to me.” She sat in silence for a long while shaking her head, her eyes flitting from item to item on the table, unwilling to alight anywhere for fear of getting stuck there too long.

Wes and A.J. exchanged a surreptitious glance. They could really feel the girl’s predicament. Fifteen seconds of silence stretched out like so many minutes as they watched the girl struggle with her emotions.

When she finally spoke again, Valeria’s voice was soft but with a tone that suggested both resignation and resolve. “I don’t know *what* I’m supposed to believe,” her eyes slid easily from Wes to A.J. and back to Wes again, “but I damn well know what I don’t believe! I don’t believe Du had a diving *accident*.”

Wes said cautiously, “Then you’re suggesting....”

“I’m not *suggesting* anything. I’m saying it. Du was murdered.”

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DAVID ALLEN WASN'T PRONE to fits of anxiety. Yet in the past twenty-five minutes he'd walked the forty feet from his Program Director's office to the front lobby of the KKLZ suites not fewer than seven times in restless anticipation of REVOLVER's arrival. Each time he'd flash a distracted smile to Mindy, the station's receptionist, as he stepped to the front door for a peek out at the parking lot, then give her a second nervous smile as he slinked back to his office. The radio station had built up the arrival of REVOLVER to its Las Vegas listeners for the last two weeks with daily give-aways of tickets for the event—ten pairs per day. And as an extra added bonus, two pairs of tickets per day included backstage passes to personally hang with the band after the show. On Allen's fifth and sixth treks through the lobby, six listeners had come in and were now standing in line to pick up their tickets. He nodded and smiled, asking pleasantly, "You looking forward to the show tonight?" All six gave an exuberant reply, causing Allen to laugh outright. This was probably the biggest event in all his years in radio, and the biggest interview he had ever arranged. If it was only rock'n'roll, why did he have such a bad case of indigestion waiting for the band?

By the time David Allen made his seventh trip to the front door there were eight different people awaiting tickets and six people walking up the sidewalk toward the entrance. Allen rushed to the door of Studio A, pushed it open and called to his Ace DJ, Terrie Springs, “They’re here!” then hurried back across the lobby, which was now abuzz with excitement. Allen took his place at the front door. “Okay, now, everyone be on your best behavior” he said with a playful grin. He wasn’t looking for a room full of statues but he also didn’t want chaos...well, not *too much* chaos!

On the other side of the door, Dima was offering similar counsel to his band. This was purely ritual, however. They seldom paid him any attention anyway. But on the positive side, they always seemed to display just the right amount of energy under these circumstances.

Valeria was the first through the door, as David Allen extended a hand and introduced himself. Following up behind were Tatiana, Viktor, Sergei, and Shura, each getting a handshake and a smiling “Welcome” from Allen. Dima was the last in and the most serious of the lot in his role as businessman and mother-hen. As the band gathered in the lobby, the people in line all rushed over to greet them, enthusiastically chattering their gleeful appreciation. Terrie Springs popped her head out the door and tapped her wrist where a watch might have been if she wore one and the Program Director corralled his guests, separating them from their fans, herding them toward the side door and into Studio A.

Five stools, each bearing a set of headphones, formed an arc around two boom mics to be shared as the band answered questions. One mic on the business side of the console was dedicated to the host of the show, who preferred to remain standing when she worked. Terrie Springs, her strawberry blonde hair feathered delicately to her shoulders, was about the same height as Valeria, and dressed casually in jeans and a faded lavender pullover, open at the neck, accented by a silver cross dangling loosely outside the V of her blouse. Gold rimmed glasses rested easily on her high

cheekbones, red lipstick highlighted her bright smile. The ever-bullient host of the midday show at KKLZ, 96.3 FM, brought an infectious joy to each day's broadcast of timeless rock'n'roll classics, but today was an extra-special treat and a day she would long remember as she greeted the band one-by-one.

No sooner had she said a quick hello to each of the band members, than the familiar jingle cued the beginning of her show.

 ... 96.3 KKLZ ... Las Vegas ... 

Terrie: Terrie Springs here...and have we got a show for you today! Live in our studios, seated not five feet away from me, is the band that is taking the country by storm: REVOLVER! We have drummer, Shura Mostovoy. Did I say that right?

Shura: That's very good. Hello!

Terrie: Bass player, Sergei Kruzhko...

Sergei: Perfect, like a born Russian!

Terrie: Lead guitarist and singer, Viktor Zhuravlev...

Viktor: Very close...accent in the middle—Zhur-AHV-lev.

Terrie: Zhur-ahv-lev. Keyboardist and singer, Tatiana Eli-see-va?

Tatiana: Not bad...El-ih-SAY-vuh. Hi Terrie.

Terrie: El-ih-say-vuh. And finally, Valeria Kempter.

Valeria: The easy one! Hi Terrie.

Terrie: Excellent! Welcome all, and thank you so much for coming to spend time with us today! I have a million questions for you but before we get to that I want to tell our listeners about a very special surprise. As our regular listeners know, we've been giving out pairs of tickets to tonight's performance every day for the past two weeks, but this afternoon we have an even better offer...our 'Perfect Ten' give-away! Every ten minutes we'll take a question from our tenth caller.

The first nine people to call in will win a free pair of tickets. The tenth caller will not only get to ask a question...but he or she will also get a pair of tickets...and (Terrie hit a button on her console that played a trumpet fanfare) a backstage pass to meet the band and hang out for a very special 'After party' sponsored, of course, by 96.3 KKLZ and The Mirage. That's right, every ten minutes...1:10, 1:20, 1:30, 1:40, and 1:50. So let's synchronize our clocks. Our KKLZ clock now shows one-oh-five on my mark... five, four, three, two, one, mark. Now, band, tell me, what do you think of Las Vegas so far?

All: Fantastic, amazing, unbelievable!

Viktor: It's more spectacular than I think any of us imagined!

Shura: The buildings are unbelievable! It's like a giant play land!

Terrie: Where have you been so far...Tatiana?

Tatiana: We have been to New York, New York, and The Mirage, and Paris, and of course the MGM Grand, where we are staying...oops, should I have said that? (all laugh)

Terrie: Well the cat's out of the bag now! Any favorites so far? Sergei?

Sergei: New York, New York was amazing. It was like a miniature city, with its streets and shops and restaurants. I haven't been to New York but if it's even half as nice as that, I look forward to seeing it!

Terrie: New York City is on your tour, isn't it? When will you be there?

All: Uh, when will we be there? Next Thursday? Wednesday?

Valeria: What day is it today? (all laugh) I think we will be at the square garden next week.

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Terrie: That would be Madison Square Garden. And I see by the light on the console we have our first caller. Hello caller...what's your name and age please?

Caller 1: Susie...seventeen.

Terrie: Hi Susie, seventeen. And what's your question for REVOLVER?

Caller 1: My question is for Viktor. Viktor, do you have a girlfriend?

Viktor: (friendly teasing is heard from the band) With our tour schedule, finding time for personal relationships is not possible. But in a couple years I would hope to find a lovely lady and maybe even start a family.

Terrie: How about the rest of you? Any love interests on the horizon? (all laugh to each other) Well, there you have it...maybe some day but for now we get to enjoy their music! Valeria, how long have you been in the States?

Valeria: We arrived in San Francisco on Thursday, just two days ago.

Terrie: Tatiana, how do you like our country so far?

Tatiana: To be honest, until today we have mostly only seen the inside of our hotel rooms, the bus, and two concert venues. But I think I speak for the whole band when I say the welcome by our American audiences has been simply unbelievable.

Viktor: We never expected this kind of reception. We knew our records were doing alright, but we had no idea we would be greeted so wonderfully!

Terrie: You played the Oakland Coliseum last night to a crowd of about sixty-three thousand. Is that the biggest audience you've ever played to? (all give various answers in the affirmative) How did that feel?

Sergei: Absolutely phenomenal! The energy was incredible!

Viktor: And the cheers were deafening! We couldn't even hear each other on stage.

Terrie: Let's take another caller. Hello...you're live with REVOLVER. Give us your name and your question.

Caller 2: Hi Terrie. This is John, twenty. Great program! I listen everyday but this is unbelievable! My question is for Shura. Shura, where do your lyrics come from and do you write the lyrics first or the music?

Terrie: If you don't already know it, Shura is the primary lyricist for the band. Shura, what can you tell John about your song writing process?

Shura: I usually write lyrics for a tune that Tatiana or Viktor play for me. I don't know if I have a 'process' for writing lyrics. I just kinda listen to the music and the lyrics just come to me. I read a lot, so maybe I'm influenced by something I just read, whether it's a book, or a newspaper, or whatever. Most of the time it feels almost like automatic writing—you know, where you just let your mind go blank and the words sort of float through you.

Terrie: Bob Dylan once described it as songs just being out there in the ether somewhere, accessible to anyone.

Shura: Yeah, I think you just allow it to come to you and it does.

Terrie: Who are you influenced by? And for everyone, who are your favorite groups or singers these days? Viktor, you want to start us off?

Viktor: Well, for me, it's guitarists. There are some really great ones out there: Andreas Öberg, Bireli Lagrene, Allan Holdsworth, Brent Mason. There are easily a dozen more I could name. But lightning fast fingers aren't the whole story. I think that speed has to give way to melodic texture, and for that I have to reach

way back. George Harrison created some of the most beautiful guitar solos I've ever heard. I mean, how can you listen to his song *Something* and not be moved to tears?

Terrie: Interesting you should mention Harrison because a lot of music critics have likened your guitar solos to his, even going so far as to say they might be better.

Viktor: Well, I don't think 'better', but I'm flattered just by the comparison.

Terrie: Tatiana, how about you? Any favorite groups or singers?

Tatiana: I love Lady Gaga! Everything about her! *Poker Face* and *Just Dance* are great songs, but I find her performance art to be just as powerful. In a more traditional sense, Adele is wonderful. I loved her *Someone Like You*. And her version of Dylan's *Make You Feel My Love* was amazing.

Terrie: Valeria, what do you think? Lady Gaga, Adele, or does someone else do it for you?

Valeria: For raw sexuality, it's hard to beat Shakira. But I love to listen to Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, and Beyonce, too. But like Viktor, I have to reach back a ways. Ann Wilson of 'Heart' had an incredible voice. She could sing honey-sweet or raunchy rock'n'roll with the best of 'em.

Terrie: Funny you should mention her. My listeners know that for years I've said Ann Wilson was my favorite singer of all time. But I must make a confession. Since hearing you and Tatiana, I now have to say that, without a doubt, you are my favorites! I could listen to you all day. Oh, there's the signal. Let's take another call. Who do we have on the line?

Caller 3: Hi Terrie. This is Mary from Henderson.

- Terrie:* Hello Mary from Henderson. What's your question?
- Caller 3:* My question is for Tatiana. I just love your hair! Do you do it yourself, or does someone do it for you? And how do you pick the colors? I've seen several pictures of you and the streaks are always different.
- Terrie:* Well, Tatiana, what's your secret...or does only your hairdresser know for sure? (there was no reaction to Terrie's obscure reference to an old TV ad for Clairol hair coloring.)
- Tatiana:* Sometimes I do it myself, and sometimes Valeria helps...I've even got the boys to lend a hand on occasion. (the guys make catcalls and whistles in the background) As to the colors, well, that's just a reflection of whatever mood I'm in at the time. My natural color is sort of an extra light beige blonde, so I can run the whole rainbow of color combinations.
- Terrie:* Thanks for the call Mary. I know that all of you except Valeria are from Minusinsk, which is in Siberia. Most Americans, when they think of Siberia, think of a cold, desolate place of gulags and political prisoners. Is that the correct image?
- All:* No, no, not at all.
- Sergei:* You're thinking way north in Siberia. It's a big country. We are way down in the south and it's beautiful.
- Shura:* People say that Minusinsk is the Italy of Siberia; nice climates, historic villages, friendly people.
- Tatiana:* It can get cold there in the winter but summers are very much like English summers.
- Terrie:* When was the last time you were home?
- Viktor:* What year is this? (everyone laughs) We were there for a short visit about a year and a half ago.
- Terrie:* What do you miss most?

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Viktor: Fishing!

Shura: Buryat dumplings! (they all look to Shura and laugh)

Sergei: Shura misses all kinds of food! And the local vodka!
(again they all laugh)

Terrie: Tatiana, how about you? What do you miss most?

Tatiana: My little sister, Katyenka.

Terrie: Valeria, what do you miss most about your home in Germany?

Valeria: I think I miss most the freedom to walk the streets alone. In the months before we left Germany, it was getting hard to enjoy a quiet walk.

Terrie: I guess that's the price of fame.

Valeria: Yes. Don't get me wrong; I love our band and the people are always so friendly and supportive. But sometimes it's nice just to enjoy a peaceful walk along the river, or through the town.

Terrie: Ah, there's the light again. Hi, this is Terrie Springs with REVOLVER.

Caller 4: Hi, Terrie. This is Jolene. I love your show!

Terrie: Thanks Jolene. What's your question?

Caller 4: I'm fifteen and I read that in Russia and Germany kids can drink wine and beer and stuff from the time they're little. What does the band think of our drinking age?

Terrie: Well band, what do you think? Our legal drinking age is 21. Too strict?

Sergei: I think when you tell somebody they can't do something, they will be more curious about it and maybe do it on the sly...and often too much.

Shura: My parents would give me little bit of beer when I was young. I like beer but I don't drink too much. Just not that big a deal for me.

Valeria: I agree with Sergei. Everybody likes to go after the

forbidden fruit. If your government didn't make such a big deal of drinking, people would maybe not sneak around to do it.

Terrie: But wouldn't that lead to more alcoholism if people started drinking at an early age.

Tatiana: I don't think it would be more. I think probably less. But some people are going to be addicts just because that's the kind of people they are.

Terrie: Okay, Jolene. There you have it. Let's turn to the subject of money. Have you thought about what you'll do with all the money you are making from your records and this tour?

Viktor: What money? (they all laugh)

Terrie: Well, all projections suggest that by the end of your tour, you'll all be multi-millionaires.

Tatiana: Looks like we're going to have to have a little talk with Dima, eh gang? (they all mumble comedic agreements)

Valeria: Dima, our manager, is taking care of all the financial matters. But I must say, I hope you're right, Terrie! It would be great fun to be rich!

Terrie: Just enough time left for one last caller. Who do we have on the line?

Caller 5: Hi Terrie. Hi band! This is Bobby and I was wondering, how did you come up with the name REVOLVER? Great show, Terrie...love to listen every chance I get!

Terrie: Thanks Bobby. Well band, how about it? How did you come up with your name?

Sergei: It was from the day we were held up at gun point. (they all laugh)

Tatiana: Actually, Dima, our manager, came up with the name just before Valeria joined us. He said he picked the

name because it was the name of the first album the BEATLES made when they stopped touring in 1966. Their last tour ended in San Francisco and Dima said that's where we would begin our first tour...

Viktor: ...to pick up where the BEATLES left off. We all thought he was crazy, but we played along...and here we are!

Tatiana: ...If you're going to dream, you might as well dream big!

Terrie: Well, it seems that Dima knew what he was talking about! And I suppose we should end this interview and let you get on with conquering the world! I can't thank you all enough for taking the time to talk with me today. And I can't wait for the show tonight! I want to say thank you to all our callers today, as well. And a very special Thank You to your manager, Dima, who made it possible to give out one hundred pairs of tickets over the past two weeks. And to those callers who will also be receiving tickets to the back stage party after the show, I want to announce here and now that the 'back stage party' will actually be held at The Mirage, where you and the band will be treated to a special performance of The BEATLES LOVE show by Cirque du Soleil. See you all there! And now, what better way to end this most delightful interview than by playing the newest REVOLVER song to reach the #1 spot...*When Time Disappears!*

With that, Terrie Springs signed off, shaking hands with all the band, and saying her more personal goodbyes to each of them. She still had two hours of her show to do, but the success of this exclusive interview would have her floating through every minute of it. Outside the studio, a grinning David Allen blew her a kiss and gave her a 'job-well-done' wink as he shook the hand of each

emerging band member. Dima stood at the front door, poised to herd them all quickly back to the MGM Grand limo waiting at the curb. Valeria, Tatiana, Viktor, Sergei, and Shura danced out single file waving their goodbyes to Mindy the receptionist, as well as the five fans there to pick up their tickets for tonight.

* * * * *

Back in the MGM limo Dima offered his congratulations. “Great job, everyone!” He raised his wrist conspicuously, bending it to show them his watch. “Now...It’s two-fifteen. The show is at eight. You’re all adults so I don’t want to tell you how to spend your time between now and show time, but it’s going to be a long night and you probably didn’t get a lot of sleep on the bus last night. We leave for Dallas, Texas early Sunday morning, so you’ll have all day tomorrow to play. I don’t want you worn out by the third show so pace yourselves. This can be a very confusing town but if you just use Las Vegas Blvd. as your reference point, you won’t get lost. See that tall building that looks like it’s setting atop a golf tee?” Dima pointed toward the Stratosphere out the right side of the limo. “That’s the north end of The Strip. The MGM is at the south end, or as far south as you need to go,” he said. “Stay between those two landmarks and you’ll be fine. Also, I don’t want you wandering off alone. Stick together and you’ll be safe. Any questions?”

“What do we do for money?” asked Sergei.

“I thought that might be on your minds,” said Dima with a smile, withdrawing five envelopes from his inside breast pocket.” He held the envelopes out but as they reached to take one, he snapped them back to his chest with a cautionary admonition. “You’re here to *make* money; not lose it. There’s a thousand dollars in each envelope...and that should be plenty to get you through the next two days! Gamble if you must, but keep in mind, the odds favor the house. I don’t care if you lose it all, just try not to lose it all in one place...or too quickly!” He extended the envelopes once more and

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everyone snatched one away from him lightning fast.

As the limo reached the hotel and slowed to a stop, the doors flew open and the band dashed off with hardly a proper goodbye. Dima climbed slowly from the car and smiled after them as they raced off.

14

THEY HAD HEARD ABOUT THE WATER SHOW at the Bellagio but hadn't seen it yet, so they crossed to the New York, New York side of The Strip and headed north. The Bellagio Fountain, an eight acre pool with dozens of submerged water cannon, put on a display every half-hour to the delight of the passersby. The cannon shot plumes of water high into the air, swaying them back and forth rhythmically to music piped through speakers hidden in the surrounding walls. The Bellagio programmed the cannon to dance along to a dozen different tunes, from Celine Dion's *The Heart Will Go On* to Sarah Brightman and Andrea Bocelli singing *Time To Say Goodbye*, but on this particular day the water show was synchronized exclusively to REVOLVER tunes, a testimony to just how thoroughly the band had captured the imagination of this city, a city known for its first-class entertainment as much as for its casinos. The band, however, was unaware of the programming change.

Like five dots on a die, Valeria and Tatiana walked in front, with Viktor close behind and Sergei and Shura bringing up the rear.

Dressed like any other tourists, they drew little attention from the mass of pedestrians passing them. They noticed the occasional look from some of the younger people, who seemed to shake off their momentary recognition as simply celebrity look-alikes, but thus far no one had approached for an autograph. They arrived at the Fountain a few minutes before the three o'clock show and leaned casually against the wall, chatting easily about their dazzling surroundings. Across the boulevard was the Paris Hotel with its replica of the Eiffel Tower; to the right, Planet Hollywood and to the left, Bally's. Sergei and Shura smoked cigarettes and commented, mostly in Russian, on the river of tourists and the way many of them were dressed. It appeared that many had taken the "What happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas" motto to heart and packed the most outlandish outfits they could find in their frigid-winter Midwest closets. Valeria and Tatiana studied the women in the crowd, nudging each other and giggling each time they spotted a conspicuously buxom woman flaunting a body that had clearly gone years beyond its 'use by' date; fake tans, fake eyelashes, fake boobs, a booty tuck and an ever-appreciative old sugar daddy in tow! Viktor, leaning back against the waist-high wall, propped up on his elbows, struck his best James Dean pose and smiled seductively at the young girls passing by, as well as the classy Cougars that seemed to be everywhere in this town. Nine out of ten returned a salacious smile.

So absorbed in their surroundings were they, that they were caught completely by surprise as the first few notes of their own *Illusions of the Heart* caused the Fountain to spring to life. Valeria patted her hands in glee, while Tatiana and Viktor gave each other a congratulatory hug, and Sergei and Shura high-fived. However, this brief outburst cost them their anonymity, as a group of young tourists standing nearby immediately recognized the band and rushed over to get autographs and generally revel in their discovery. Even before the song's introductory bars had finished, a large crowd had

gathered round the musicians, ignoring the water show altogether. At a safe distance from this mash, two men in sunglasses and fedoras held serious expressions as they watched the scene, not the least bit interested in autographs but very interested in the five celebrities at the center of the whirlwind.

The band graciously signed caps and shirts and arms and anything else the crowd extended to them, but as the song and water show came to an end, they just as graciously excused themselves, sliding past the crush of bodies, smiling as they moved in the direction of the Bellagio porte-cochere. The two men studying the scene likewise moved toward the hotel, keeping an inconspicuous distance and an ever-vigilant eye on the musicians as they did. When a few late-comer fans set out in pursuit of the quintet, one of the men purposely stepped in front of the rushing group, causing one to stumble, slowing the whole group. At the first rude epithets over the collision, the two men turned to face the group, who quickly thought twice about escalating the encounter. This gave the band a few extra steps in putting some distance between their fans and the hotel entrance. The two men turned and hurried to catch up with the band.

The five squeezed through the Bellagio's revolving door into the lobby, hoping for some relief, but hadn't gotten ten feet into the hotel before they were again recognized by some young fans. They took a quick right in the direction of the doors leading out toward Caesar's Palace, receiving some unseen assistance from the two men who, once more, threw themselves between the band and their pursuers. Exiting the Bellagio, the band put their chins down in an effort to obscure their faces from further recognition. What had begun as a rush of excitement over their growing fame was quickly becoming a source of apprehension, as they sought a secluded spot in which to huddle until they could figure out an exit strategy to get back to the MGM Grand. Inside Caesar's they ducked into the first shop they could find that sold hats and dark glasses, not the least bit concerned for fashion, but looking desperately for cover. At the

counter, Valeria tore into her envelope of cash, withdrawing the bills needed to purchase the makeshift disguises for everyone, after which they all beat a hasty retreat.

Back outside again they crossed to the Paris side of The Strip and headed south, eager to cover the five blocks or so to the shelter of the MGM and the safety of their rooms. They kept their heads down as they slithered through the river of people, the chaotic currents of humanity flowing in both directions along the walkway. Behind them, unnoticed and struggling to keep pace with them were the two observers. It was perhaps the longest fifteen minutes of their lives before the group successfully evaded further accosting and slinked into the entrance to the MGM Grand. From a distance the two men watched until the band stepped into an elevator and the doors closed. The men took the next elevator up to the floor just below where the band was billeted and headed straight for their bosses room to give him a full account of what had transpired.

A few seconds after their knock, the door to suite 1920 swung open and Dima ushered them in.

“How’d it go?”

Nick Palumbo and Woody Pennington gave anxious smiles.

“They were recognized at the Bellagio Fountain,” reported Palumbo. “They signed a bunch of autographs, and I think they were actually having a good time with it at first.”

Pennington added, “I don’t think they were expecting just how aggressive the fans could get. But I must say, they did a nice job of getting away without offending anyone.”

Palumbo offered a sardonic smile. “We had to run a little interference for them a couple of times or they would have been overwhelmed again.”

Pennington laughed. “They didn’t get much of a chance to spend the money you gave them. Only shelled out for some hats and glasses to hide their faces long enough to get back here.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about them sneaking out to

the casinos any time soon,” added Palumbo. “My guess is they’ve learned their lesson.”

Dima gave a cheerless smile. “Good. They wouldn’t have listened to me if I’d tried to tell them what would happen.” He shook his head somewhat dejectedly. “They still don’t really get it.” He pursed his lips imagining their reaction for a moment then added, “I’m sorry they had to get scared, but better now than later. It’s only going to get worse before Miami.” Dima pulled the door open. “Thanks, guys. Good job. I’ll see you tonight. Try to be up here about a half hour before we go down for the show.”

Dima pushed the door shut and returned to the desk where he had been going over the night’s logistics on a note pad. For a good five minutes he sat twiddling a pen against his teeth, his thoughts too caught up in the report he had just received. He had hoped they would learn that life was different now, the crowds were different, and the fans that loved them could just as easily kill them with their love. Perhaps he wasn’t quite ready for the crowds, either. He abruptly felt a flush of panic at the realization he, too, may simply have gotten lucky this time. He had allowed them a long leash and could have just as easily hung himself with it. There wouldn’t be a second lapse of judgment. He wasn’t about to risk any more ‘lessons’ for his kids. From now till they boarded the plane out of Miami, REVOLVER was on lock down. He only hoped they were as aware of the potential dangers as he suddenly was.

15

BACK IN HER ROOM, VALERIA'S HANDS were shaking from the experience. They had been in bigger crowds in Havana but they'd never felt threatened. The Reeperbahn was far more dangerous than the streets of Las Vegas, but they never had a sense of fear, even late at night, strolling the streets after a gig. What was this new thing? The crowd had only asked for their autographs but somehow she sensed they wanted more. She didn't know quite what it was, but the fear started to eat at her that if she didn't freely give whatever it was they wanted, the crowd would simply take it from her—one way or another. They had gotten the first taste of this at the concert in San Francisco. The whole band felt it. But at the party afterward, those people had been very civil, genteel, black-tie proper. After the Oakland concert, the crowd gave them an ovation like the band had never heard before, but they were rushed onto the bus and driven out of town before the full impact of the show could settle in. But at least they had *performed* in those places. Here in Las Vegas they hadn't even played a note yet. They'd only given a radio interview!

She needed to talk about this to someone. Someone other than Dima.

Valeria nervously opened her door and peered up and down the empty hall. Oh, this is ridiculous, she thought, steeling herself for the walk to the elevator. She tried to calm herself as she waited for it to arrive, but as the doors *dinged* open, she felt another flood of nerves hit her. She breathed a sigh of relief when no one else was in the carriage. She pressed the button for the floor immediately below hers and a moment later stepped into the hall and turned right. At the intended room she knocked on the door. No one answered. She knocked again, this time a little harder. Still no one came. She tried a third time, loud enough to wake him if he was napping, but after a reasonable wait she knew he wasn't coming. She looked down at the carpet trying to fight back panic, then turned away to take the elevator back up to her own floor.

She knocked on another door. This time it opened.

“Was that for real?” she said, hurriedly slipping past Tatiana.

“I know...that was amazing!” Tatiana shut the door and moved toward the bed. “What a rush!”

“You weren't scared?”

Tatiana smiled broadly. “Scared? I don't think so. Just excited! It was crazy...first our song started playing, then suddenly all those people rushed toward us. Wow!” Tatiana could see concern etched on Valeria's face. “I mean, don't get me wrong,” she said, backpedaling a bit on her own lack of fear, “I was just as anxious as you to get away, but you have to admit it was kind of exhilarating, right?”

“I suppose so,” said Valeria, conceding the point though not fully committed to it.

Tatiana took her hand and led her over to the bed. “Look, even the guys got nervous. We've all had people approach us for autographs or just to tell us they like our music. I think there were just never as *many* before. We're in a strange, new, exciting city that constantly barrages our senses with lights and sights. There are thirty

foot high pictures of us on billboards. Our music is blasting in the streets. And then, on top of all that, we get rushed by bigger crowds than we've ever dealt with before. If you *weren't* upset by all of this, I'd wonder if there was something wrong with you!" She let go of Valeria's hand, draped her arm around her friend, and gave a gentle squeeze, kissing her lightly at the temple. "It will be alright, Valeria. We'll get used to this new level of fame and just go on from there. Let's just say it was a good lesson. We can't just wander off into the crowds, especially in unknown places. And we definitely shouldn't wander off alone!"

Valeria leaned her head affectionately on Tatiana's shoulder. "You're right," she said. "I know it will all be okay. I'm just still a little upset by Du's death, I think." She sat upright and took Tatiana's hand with both of hers. "Thanks, Tats. I'll be fine." She stood and moved toward the door. "I'm going to rest a little then get cleaned up for tonight. I'll come get you when it's time to go to Dima's room." The brightness was returning to her eyes. "We'll give them a great show tonight. If they think Oakland was good, I've got news for them...they ain't seen nothin' yet!"

"That's the spirit! Let's do it!" said Tatiana, happy to see that beautiful smile on Valeria's face again.

* * * * *

AT SEVEN EVERYONE ASSEMBLED in Dima's room for a quick pep-talk. Kostya Nagovitsin, the Road Manager, and Sasha Volkovsky, the backer, were there, as well as Nick Palumbo and Woody Pennington, the two men in charge of 'special services' for the tour. As Dima began to speak, he was interrupted by Valeria, who asked, "Shouldn't we wait for our other backer, Misha, to get here?" Dima told the group Misha had flown to Grand Cayman to arrange for his brother's body to be sent back to Minusinsk. Depending on how long those arrangements took, he would catch up with them in Chicago or New York, at the latest. Dima told the band how proud he was to be

their manager, and that he knew tonight's concert would be one for the record books. "You'll only have an audience of about sixteen-thousand tonight—nothing like the sixty-three thousand you played to last night—but I know they will be every bit as appreciative as the California crowd!" His reference to this smaller group was given tongue-in-cheek, as even sixteen thousand was a bigger crowd than they had ever played to, aside from the Oakland venue, and everyone laughed appropriately at the tease. Kostya gave his assurances to the band that the stage was all set for them, their instruments were all freshly strung and in tune, the acoustics were fantastic in the hall, and the sound board was working perfectly. He then scratched at his hairy chin and said, "What am I forgetting? I know I'm forgetting something, but what is it?" Then, smiling broadly, he said, "Oh yeah!" He extended his arm with a big thumbs-up and said, "You're gonna be great! Knock 'em dead!" The room gave a collective laugh as any pre-show tension dissipated into the rush of pre-show enthusiasm. Kostya and Sasha Volkovsky exited first then Dima waved a hand toward the door for the band to follow.

Taking one last look around the room to be sure nothing had been left behind Dima flicked out the light, pulled the door shut, and followed the procession to the special elevator leading to their dressing rooms.

16

THREE ENCORES WERE REQUIRED before the crowd reluctantly let the band make their final exit. Backstage REVOLVER met with yet another round of applause from those assembled for the post-show festivities. The ten couples who had received backstage passes during the KKLZ radio interview, as well as David Allen, Terrie Springs, and the rest of the station's on-air personalities and behind-the-scenes staff, were in attendance for a Champagne toast before piling into several MGM limos for the short drive to The Mirage, where the post-show celebration would be held in earnest. Wes and A.J. were also on hand, the special guests of both Valeria and Dima.

Ever the diplomat and public relations master strategist, Dima had extended After Party invitations to all the other radio stations in town, the television and newspaper personalities associated with the various entertainment sections of their media, key local politicians, heads of the casinos and their spouses, significant others or special guests. He also passed out enough free tickets throughout The Mirage to fill every available seat in the house. Rounding out tonight's special presentation of The BEATLE'S LOVE show were

two special guests who would make the night even more special than it already was.

Champagne was served to After Party guests in The BEATLES Revolution Lounge adjacent to the theatre. Though the room could accommodate four hundred, attendance was limited to one hundred to allow for more guest interaction. The volume of the background music, usually loud and exclusively BEATLES songs, was turned down to a level more conducive to conversation. The REVOLVER musicians never ventured too far from each other as they were engaged in the informal Q&A of their fans, still riding a wave of euphoria from the recently finished concert, but the crowd didn't pose the kind of threat the street encounters had produced earlier in the day. At one point Valeria, seeing Wes and A.J. standing at the bar just a few yards from her, politely excused herself and drew near to her two friends.

“Hi Wes, hi Ashley. I'm so glad you could make it tonight.”

They simultaneously said they wouldn't have missed it for anything and complimented her on what a great show they had put on. She thanked them, then moved closer so as to whisper her next words to them.

“I'm very worried,” she said. “Earlier this evening Dima told us that Misha, Mikhail Kozlov, one of our backers had left to go to the Caymans and make arrangements for transport of his brother's body back home.”

“Why does that worry you?” asked Wes, seeing no obvious reason for concern.

Valeria glanced around to make sure no one was listening. “I just don't think Misha would have left without saying something,” she said, whispering even more softly.

“I don't understand,” said Wes. “I would have thought financial backers were strictly background players. Did they usually interact with you all about things?”

“No,” she said, obviously uncomfortable about something.

“It seems pretty natural,” said A.J., sensing Valeria was not saying everything she was thinking. “Who else would go take care of his brother?” She watched the girl nervously sweep her eyes around the room, almost as much to avoid eye contact with A.J. as to see anything in particular in her surroundings. “I’m sure his brother’s death must have upset him. Maybe he was simply too preoccupied with his grief and didn’t see the need to personally tell you all when he was leaving. Having Dima make the announcement for him seems the most reasonable thing to do.”

Valeria saw Dima approaching from a corner of the room. She touched Wes’s arm gently, imploringly, “Please Wes, would you call your friends in the Caymans and see if it’s true?” She flashed an artificial smile in Dima’s direction, then stepped away to engage with another group of her fans.

“What was that all about,” asked Wes, but A.J. didn’t have time to answer before Dima joined them.

“Hello Dr. Franklin,” said Dima shaking his hand. “Ashley,” he half bowed, “you look especially lovely this evening.” Then generally to both of them he asked, “Are you having a good time, I hope? Isn’t this a wonderful turnout? I thought the band was especially good tonight and the crowd really responded in kind.” His words seemed practiced, as though he had probably said the same thing, or slight variations of it, to all the other guests in the room as he moved from group to group. He was good at sounding friendly while keeping conversation at a superficial level as he made his way around the room. He raised his wrist to glance at his watch. “We’ll be heading into the theatre in about ten minutes, so you have time for another drink,” he said smiling. He gave a friendly grip to Wes’s arm, saying, “I’ll see you inside,” then slipped away to greet another guest before Wes or A.J. ever said a word.

“That was pretty strange,” said A.J.

“Yeah. I think he just wants to make sure everything is perfect. He has a big responsibility. It can’t be easy managing a band like

REVOLVER. There must be a million details, all needing his utmost attention.”

A.J. watched Dima flit around the room. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” But her woman’s intuition told her there was more to it.

The lights in the Revolution Lounge flickered twice, signaling it was time to begin moving to the theatre. Woody Pennington had the roadies start ushering people to their seats, while he and Nick Palumbo isolated their particular guests to personally walk them to their assigned seats. Wes and A.J. were the last of the guests, with Dima and the band following behind some little way, so as to be the last to enter and be seated.

Resounding applause erupted as the band entered the theatre, waving and smiling to their fans as they made their way to their front row seats. Wes and A.J. were seated next to Valeria, with the rest of the band to her left. Dima was on the aisle seat, with two empty seats between him and Viktor. As Dima took his seat the lights went down and a deep, rich voice announced: “Ladies and Gentlemen, Cirque du Soleil and The Mirage are proud to welcome you to this special presentation of The BEATLES LOVE Show. And here to offer an extra special welcome are two gentlemen who need no introduction. Please welcome Sir Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr.”

The two remaining BEATLES emerged through the floor to massive, thunderous applause, punctuated by cheers and whistles reminiscent of their own glory days of the ‘60s. Their welcome to REVOLVER was both heartfelt and warm, wishing them all the best in their days ahead, much as Elvis and Col. Parker had greeted the BEATLES arrival to the States on the Ed Sullivan show so many years before. Their gracious welcome, however, was concluded with Paul offering a comedic wag of his finger and a faux admonition to the band that they still had a long way to go to equal the Fab Four’s profound influence and contribution to rock’n’roll. Paul and Ringo took their seats between Dima and Viktor, and as they settled in, thousands of speakers around the theatre thundered the iconic first

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chord of *A Hard Days Night*, immediately followed by Ringo's famous drum solo from 'Abbey Road', which then slid comfortably into the rhythm guitars on *Get Back* and the show was underway.

17

WES FRANKLIN WAS NOTHING if not a man of his word and he had promised Jim and Carol Marshall the next time he was in Vegas, he and A.J. would spend some time with them; catch a show, go to dinner, something fun that had nothing to do with work. The REVOLVER bus had left for Dallas early that morning, and though he hadn't heard from Detective Ebanks yet regarding the disposition of Kozlov's body, it was time to check in with his friend.

Jim was ex-Navy, a retired Rear Admiral whose specialty had been forensic medicine. He and Wes had become good friends about fifteen years earlier when Wes conducted a series of seminars for the Navy in Monterey. In his current position as a forensic pathologist with the Forensic Division, it was Jim's task to determine, with the rest of his team, which cases would require a criminal investigation. The previous Thanksgiving Jim had gone way out on a covert limb for Wes in the disposition of a John Doe body in a highly publicized case. But tonight was strictly a social get-together, a repayment of

sorts for that special favor. Earlier that evening they had all gone to see 'Jersey Boys' at the Paris Theatre. Following the show, the four of them rode the elevator up to the Eiffel Tower Restaurant. They exited the elevator and moved to the right toward the restaurant. Sharon Boudreau, the restaurant's manager, was standing at the bar talking with one of the bartenders when she caught a glimpse of Wes and A.J. heading her way.

"Wes...A.J.," she smiled, "how are you? And what fun have we been up to tonight?"

"We just caught the show downstairs," said Wes, "and now we're ready for dinner. Sharon, let me introduce you to Jim and Carol Marshall."

Sharon took Jim's hand, saying, "It's a pleasure Dr. Marshall. I recognize you from your picture in the Review-Journal last week." She was referring to an article by Dan Hamilton that had appeared in the local paper. "And Mrs. Marshall...welcome to our restaurant. Wes, when I saw your name on the reservation list, I took the liberty of holding a table for you near the window, overlooking the Fountain. Tammy will seat you and I'll be over to check on you a little later. Tammy," she said to the hostess, "would you show our special guests to their table."

The hostess, menus in hand, smiled and invited the party to follow her. She led them to a window table overlooking The Strip, with a view of the Bellagio Fountain immediately in front of them, handed out the menus and the wine list when they were settled, then introduced Jean-Paul as their waiter for the evening. Jean-Paul's accent was authentically French and Wes, being in an especially playful mood following 'Jersey Boys', decided to have some fun. Speaking with an impeccable French accent, Wes introduced Jean-Paul to everyone at the table and after exchanging a few pleasantries with their waiter, ordered *Le Grand Plateau de Fruits de Mer pour deux Personnes et Le Foie Gras Cuit au Torchon, Jambon de Canard, Compote de Figs*. From the wine list, he ordered the 2000 Pinot

Noir for the men and the 1999 Chardonnay Reserve for the ladies, both from California's Anderson Valley. When Jean-Paul left to get the wine, Jim joked that if any of that turned out to be pickled pigs feet or shark spleen, Wes would have to eat it all himself, which got a good laugh from everyone. Jean-Paul returned directly and poured the wine. Both Jim and Carol acknowledged that Wes had certainly made a fine choice with the wine but they remained non-committal on the food for the time being. When the appetizers were delivered a few minutes later by two servers, the cold foie gras torchon, duck prosciutto, fig compote, and a grand seafood platter displaying lobster, shrimp, crab, oysters and clams garnered the appropriate *oohs* and *aahs* and Jim and Carol completely surrendered to Wes's suggestions for their entrees. Wes pointed out a few favorites from the menu and in the end they ordered the roasted rack of lamb, the Muscovy duck breast, olive oil poached Halibut, and Dover Sole. They slipped easily into conversation, sipping their wine and occasionally commenting on the flow of tourists wandering up and down The Strip.

Most of the conversation centered around the show. Wes and A.J. recognized nearly all the songs but the tunes had a more visceral affect on Jim and Carol. This was music from their generation and conjured up a lot of memories of their early dating years. The show was doubly enjoyable for them because they hadn't known much of the Four Seasons' back story until tonight.

Eventually, though, the conversations split along gender lines as A.J. and Carol went off on 'family' discussions, mostly centered around Carol's kids and grandkids, while Wes and Jim went off on a tangent of forensic matters. Asked how the Medical Examiner cases were going, Jim recapped several cases his team was working on. There were two shooting deaths, likely homicides, a heart attack, which seemed innocent, if unexpected, in a forty-three year old man, and a hit-and-run accident involving a seventy-one year old. The hit-and-run victim, Dennis Grady, was a colorful local character, well-

known and highly thought of by all the casino regulars. Witnesses said that Captain Grady, as he was known from his earlier days as a charter fishing boat operator in Florida, fell off his Harley while waiting at a stop light and was subsequently run over by a dump truck. The driver of the truck stopped to look at Grady, then promptly drove off. Through witnesses the police found the truck and the driver and were following up on that aspect of the accident but what wasn't immediately clear was what caused Grady to fall off the bike in the first place. Jim's team was working on this and the other cases, all of which were fairly routine. But the case that was causing them the most consternation was a John Doe that had been brought in early the previous morning. This was a young man, probably in his late twenties, who appeared to have died of anaphylactic shock. The initial assumption was that he had most likely eaten something he shouldn't have, though a tarantula or some other insect bite might have been the cause.

On hearing this, Wes sat upright then leaned intently into the table to hear better over the sounds of clanking silverware and the din of dozens of other conversations to which he had fairly habituated. What had Jim and his team so baffled? he wanted to know. Jim explained that the toxicology report indicated Fire Coral was the cause of the man's death. Since there was no natural local source for this, his team had to determine where in the city the man might have come in contact with it—a local exotic aquarium, for instance. This would require them to know who the man's friends might be, but at this point they didn't even know the identity of the dead man. He had been found in an alley with no identification on him. Short of finding some other reasonable explanation for his death, they would have to treat it as a homicide and turn it over to the police.

“Jim, I'd like to see the body if you don't mind. I just had a similar case in the Caymans; also a young man in his late twenties. A Russian man traveling with the band, REVOLVER. At least in the

Caymans there was a natural source for the toxin, though the death suggested either a profound reaction to it, or more of the toxin than he might have innocently come in contact with. He had been found washed up on shore in full diving gear. I was told the brother of the dead man had left here to go to the Caymans to take care of his brother's body. I put a call through to the lead detective asking him to call me once the brother showed up. I haven't heard back from him and now it might be clear why—the man may never have left Las Vegas.”

“Sure. Do you want to come by in the morning?”

“Actually, no. Tonight if you don't mind. If this is who I think it is, there might be implications for others associated with the band. Maybe even the band itself.”

The intensity of the conversation next to them had caused A.J. and Carol to drop their own and tune into Wes and Jim.

“Did I hear something about the dead man in the Caymans?” asked A.J.

“Yeah. Sorry, Ash, but I'm going to need to go to the morgue for a little while.”

“You want me to get the check so you and Jim can take off?”

“No, no.” Wes looked at his watch. Ten forty-five. “Another half hour or so isn't going to make any difference. Aryana won't be able to get a flight till morning anyway.”

“Where's Aryana flying to?”

“Nashville. Same place you and I are going to in the morning.” Wes gave a reassuring smile to Jim and Carol. “Let's have some coffee and dessert. Then, if you don't mind, Jim, we can take a quick run by your office when we're done here.”

* * * * *

WES AND COMPANY LEFT PARIS around eleven-thirty and went directly to Jim's office. It took only a few minutes to pull the tray from the cooler, unzip the body bag, and identify the body. It was

Mikhail Kozlov, the twin brother of Andre Kozlov who had died in the Caymans. It was now clear to Wes that Valeria had been right in her suspicions. But how did she know? And why had she been so certain that Andre's death wasn't an accident? She wasn't telling Wes everything he needed to know if he was going to help her.

Wes retrieved his cell phone and hit #2 on his speed dial. By the third ring Aryana had answered.

“Aryana, you need to fly to Nashville in the morning. There's an American flight that gets you there before noon. A.J. and I will meet you there. Keep an eye on the band till we get there. Do it discreetly. I'll call you when we arrive. They're scheduled to play the Bridgestone Arena, so you can expect to see them show up there early to check things out.”

18

ARYANA REMAINED IN HIS First-Class aisle seat at the Dallas/Fort Worth gate, the end of the first leg of American Flight #1262 taking him to Nashville. His shoulder-length black hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, strands of gray creating an intriguing accent above his ears on either side of his head. His muscular body was draped in a Scabal steel blue custom tailored suit, a pastel blue shirt with white collar and cuffs, the French-style cuffs clasped with wrap-around silver cufflinks highlighted with small inset sapphires. Around his neck was a blue and silver patterned tie from Stefano Ricci. The olive brown face, often hidden behind camo greasepaint or various degrees of a sculpted beard, was clean shaven and faintly scented with a specially blended fragrance from Dolce & Gabbana. The overall affect was to create an exotic image; a man who looked and smelled like he might be an Arab sheik or a Colombian drug lord or an international movie star. Most certainly a man of strength and confidence, whatever his background.

The flight out of San Francisco had been a full one but once the passengers staying in Dallas deplaned, much of the plane was empty,

leaving Aryana as the sole remaining First-Class passenger. He sat quietly reading an article in 'Entertainment Weekly' as he waited for passengers to begin boarding for the final leg of the trip to Nashville. The article that currently had his attention was one of several in this issue about REVOLVER and their first U.S. tour, complete with pictures of the band and their manager, a schedule of tour stops, and bios that were exciting and colorful, if not entirely accurate.

Normal boarding procedure was to have First-Class passengers board ahead of other passengers but even before anyone entered the plane Aryana knew something was up. He noted a certain anticipation and animation among the flight crew. They were smiling and whispering excitedly to each other, straightening their vests and skirts and generally assuring each other they looked their professional best. His curiosity at their primping was quickly assuaged when the first two female passengers entered the cabin, followed closely by their three male band mates and their slightly older manager. It seems Dima had decided to fly them to their next city rather than tire the band with a long bus ride. But there was also a security consideration for his cherished band as the Texas crowds had become, shall we say, more exuberant and enthusiastic in their appreciation than he was comfortable with. He thought it safer and wiser to get the band to Nashville and their hotel quickly, with a minimum of energy and delay so they could settle in before the next show. The band, too, was beginning to feel on edge with this heightened level of fan appreciation, something they had never experienced before.

Valeria and Tatiana were smiling and chatting easily as they entered the plane but at the first sight of Aryana, the two women began behaving very much like the young girls they still were, flashing their giddy smiles at this strikingly attractive gentleman.

"Hello," said Valeria to Aryana's smiling acknowledgement. She leaned close to Tatiana's ear and, feeling safely hidden within her German-accented Russian, said, without diverting her eyes from this

exquisite man, “Ya khochu imet’ yego detey!”

Aryana fought off a smile as he averted his eyes back to the magazine.

Tatiana’s rejoinder nearly caused him to explode in laughter when she said, “Ne dlya menya. Ya prosto khochu, chtoby vvernut’ svoi mozgi.”

The girls had no way of knowing nor any expectation that this handsome man was as fluent in Russian as either of them. And it took all his will-power not to let on when he first heard Valeria say, while gazing deeply into the deep brown pools that were his eyes, “I want to have his children.” This was followed by Tatiana’s unabashed assertion of “Not me. I just want to screw his brains out!” as the two girls slid laughingly into the seats opposite Aryana’s.

Sergei and Shura took the seats directly in front of the girls, while Victor and Dima settled into the seats immediately in front of Aryana. From this vantage point, Aryana could discretely follow the several conversations during the hour-and-forty-minute flight to see if he could glean any of Wes’s concerns from what he overheard.

Wes had explained about the dead brothers and charged Aryana with keeping an eye on the band until they rendezvoused in Nashville. The band’s unexpected appearance on this flight made that assignment much easier. The question was also raised about Valeria’s heightened interest and concern for the two financial backers, especially in light of the fact that one of them had apparently accosted her on a Grand Cayman beach, and directly washed up dead on shore.

Aryana flipped indifferently through the pages of his magazine, his attention fixed firmly on the far more interesting and timely conversations taking place around him. Shura and Sergei, speaking exclusively in English, mostly discussed music: other bands and band members they felt were a cut above the norm, songs they liked—both their own and others—sections of their own music they would concentrate on tightening, though to any other listener they

couldn't get any tighter than they already were. The only comment of interest was a reference to a Dr. Roberts, who Shura was eager to visit after their final show in Miami. The context for that meeting was unclear.

Dima and Victor also spoke English, though they didn't engage in much dialogue, and what little conversation they had consisted mostly of comments about how the tour was going so far. Dima did voice a concern for the band's safety given the unaccustomed fanaticism their audiences were beginning to show, but while Victor concurred, he seemed mostly to make assurances to Dima that they would all be fine. Aryana, however, sensed Victor was hiding his true level of apprehension while trying to comfort their manager.

The girls spoke both Russian and English and while that in itself would be enough of a curiosity for the casual American eavesdropper, Aryana was most intrigued by the topics that prompted the switch from English to Russian. When talking about the music, the shows, or the fans, the girls remained comfortably with English. But when the discussion turned to the events in the Cayman Islands or other references to the backers or to others in their entourage, Valeria would suddenly switch to Russian as if to intentionally cloak her comments. It was clear, too, from the discussion that Tatiana was as yet unaware that Valeria had actually gone to Grand Cayman, nor that she had had a confrontation on the beach with Andrei Kozlov. And it was the case that, while Valeria seemed agitated at the unaccounted-for absence of Mikhail Kozlov, brother of the deceased, she was not yet aware of the death of the second brother, or at least, if she was, chose not to disclose it. Her concern seemed to Aryana to rest solely in the idea that Misha—as she affectionately referred to him—would not have left to claim his brother's remains without informing her first. Valeria actually said “without informing the band” but Aryana got the distinct impression she was referring to herself, not the collective. Though the discussion seemed at times tense, the young women were generally

upbeat, enjoying the tour and the sights, and spent most of their time in happy reflection on their experiences thus far. The ninety minutes or so of the flight passed quickly, brought to an end with the flight attendant announcing their arrival in Nashville.

When the plane came to a full stop at the gate and a *ding* signaled they could now remove their seatbelts, Aryana remained in his seat while the band and Dima rose to deplane. Once again the girls smiled coquetishly at Aryana and offered a smiling goodbye.

Aryana's reply, however, caused their mouths to open and their eyes to go wide when he said "I love your music. Have a great tour." Well, what he actually said—in an impeccable Russian accent—was "Ya lyublyu vashu muzyku. Imeyte bol'shoy tur."

The realization that he had fully understood what they had said upon first greeting him caused the girls to lean their heads into each other in feigned embarrassment and giggle a Thank you in English.

For his part, Aryana smiled broadly and gave them a seductive wink. Had he been twenty years younger, he might have offered a more alluring response.

19

WES AND A.J. STOOD WAITING at American's baggage carousel #1. As Aryana neared, he called out from behind them.

"Hi boss. Hi A.J."

Wes turned and, smiling, stuck out his hand. "Good flight, I trust."

Aryana clasped Wes's hand as A.J. leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek. "Mmmm," she hummed appreciatively. "You smell great. New cologne?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "You approve?" Her purr said it all. "You won't believe who was on my flight."

Wes looked out beyond Aryana's shoulder. "I'm guessing it was them," he said toward a commotion building at the escalator.

A.J.'s eyes had already zeroed in on the frenzied scene as Aryana turned to see REVOLVER and Dima surrounded by six of Nashville's finest gliding down the stairs toward a gathering swarm of reporters and fans.

"News travels fast," said Aryana.

"Indeed," said Wes. "Wait here for the bags," he added, slipping past Aryana.

The police captain called to the mob to move back as he and his detail escorted the band to a makeshift stage hastily set up after the pilot radioed a heads-up about his special passengers. A banner with the band's name was pinned to a wall of portable partitions behind a bank of microphones arranged for an impromptu press conference. Wes caught Dima's eye just as the band stepped laughing onto the platform. When Valeria's eyes picked Wes out of the crowd, her smile went flat. Making matters worse was the fact that Wes appeared to cast an artificial smile her way then quickly shift his attention to Dima.

"Dr. Franklin!" said the surprised manager. "I believed you were a fan but I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

As the men shook hands, Wes took hold of Dima's elbow and gently guided him away from the stage. Leaning in to Dima's ear so as not to yell over the hubbub, Wes said, "May I have a word with you in private? Well, as private as the circumstance allows."

"Certainly," said Dima as the two stepped off to the side. Noting a subtle change in Wes's expression, he added, "Is there a problem?"

Wes sidestepped the question for the moment and smiled up toward the stage. "I gather life on the bus wasn't as appealing or romantic as *Rolling Stone* would have it seem."

Dima smiled politely. "It does have its drawbacks. But I don't think you're doing a piece for *Rolling Stone*, Dr. Franklin. So, please tell me, is there a problem I should be aware of?"

"I wanted to follow up with you about your backer, the man who drowned in the Caymans. Actually, it's about the brother... Mikhail."

"Yes, of course," said Dima. "What of him? I'd have you talk with him yourself but he's gone off to tend to the body of his brother. He flew to the Cayman's to make arrangements to send the body home."

"When did you last speak with him?" asked Wes.

"During the show at the MGM in Las Vegas. He booked a flight out as soon as he learned of the accident. He was quite upset, as you

might expect. He said he would rejoin us in Chicago in a couple of days, once everything had been taken care of.”

“And you haven’t had contact with him since?”

“No, but I didn’t expect to hear from him till later this week. Dr. Franklin, I must say, you’re beginning to worry me. Is there some problem?”

“Mikhail Kozlov never left Las Vegas. His body was found in an alley near the MGM Grand.”

Dima’s mouth dropped open as he stammered for words. “Bozhe moy, mertv!” he said, shaking his head, repeating softly, this time in English, “My God, dead! How? I mean, what happened? Was he in an accident? What...” his voice trailed off.

“The Medical Examiner is reporting it as a homicide,” said Wes.

“Murdered? But who...why?”

“We don’t know who or why. But we do know how. It was the same thing that killed his brother. Anaphylactic shock induced by a strong dose of Fire Coral venom. That virtually assures me that his brother’s death was no mere drowning accident. And it suggests that whoever killed Mikhail was also present on Grand Cayman when you and Andrei were there.”

Dima’s expression, at first stunned and pensive, suddenly turned to indignation. “You’re not suggesting that I...”

Wes interrupted. “I’m not suggesting anything, Dima. I’m only submitting that, since the method was unique and the deaths happened in two different places, the likelihood is very high that the same person would have to have been in both places. That is, if there was only one killer.” Wes studied Dima’s face as it went thoughtful again. “To your knowledge, was anyone else from your entourage on Grand Cayman when you and Andrei Kozlov were there?” Dima shook his head. “Who all knew you were going there?”

“Everyone knew. We weren’t hiding the trip from anyone. We didn’t tell anyone about the real reason we were going, but that was of no concern to anyone but Andrei and me. I don’t involve the band

in the financial aspects of the tour. They need only be concerned with their concerts. They know I handle everything else. Andrei needed to transfer funds from one account to another and he needed to do that in person as it was a rather large amount.”

“May I ask just how large?” asked Wes.

“Ten million dollars,” said Dima flatly. “That was our arrangement. The Kozlov’s put up ten million dollars with the understanding that a successful tour could net them ten times that amount by the time we were finished.”

“And your other backer? Aleksander Volkovsky, Sasha? What did he bring to the party?”

“The same. Ten million. As I’ve said, this has been a very big undertaking.” Dima had a slight edge to his tone.

“And Volkovsky’s funds? Also in the Caymans?”

“No. He gave me the money at home in Russia. There were many expenses incurred just setting up the tour; advance fees, plane fares, hotel reservations. All the logistics of a major event like this.”

“I would think he might want to stay close to his investment, too,” said Wes.

“Yes, of course,” said Dima, noting a slightly sarcastic tone in Wes’s statement. “He has a lot of money at stake here. But like I said, he stands to make ten times that by the time we are done. He is here because he believes in the band and loves their music.”

Wes looked back over his shoulder to the stage. The band was fielding the same questions they were asked in every town they played, doing their best to make their answers sound spontaneous. All were smiling and animated, as polished and professional as acts with decades more time in the limelight. Valeria, too, wore a steady smile, all the while shooting furtive glances in the direction of Wes and Dima. But her steady smile masked something else, something others would probably miss, but something that didn’t escape Wes’s practiced eye. Only her mouth smiled. Her eyes held apprehension, apprehension that had nothing to do with her growing fame.

Turning back to Dima, Wes said, “What security measures have you taken for the band?”

“As you can see, Dr. Franklin, they are surrounded by police. This has been arranged in advance for every stop. This escort will continue all the way to the hotel. I’ve even requested a motorcade to take us from the hotel to the concert at the Bridgestone Arena. The hotel is only a couple of blocks from there, so by the time we leave the hotel, I would expect the audience to be already in their seats. But why are you asking this question? Surely you don’t think anyone would try to harm the band?”

Ignoring Dima’s question, Wes asked, “Have you or anyone in your party received any threats?” Dima shook his head. “None?” challenged Wes. “No matter how trivial or non-credible?”

“No. Nothing,” said Dima.

“You’re sure about this? Any chance someone in the band was threatened but didn’t tell you about it?”

“No, of course not. My band would definitely tell me if something like that occurred.”

“How long have you known the people traveling with you? The roadies for instance?”

“The stage crew came to us through a friend of the band— Kostya Nagovitsin. He’s known the band all his life, since their early school days.”

“And the party planners traveling with you, the men I met in San Francisco and again in Las Vegas; Nick Palumbo and Woody Pennington?”

The manager tensed his brow in thought as his eyes fell down and away. “Not long,” he said, seeming less than candid, adding quickly, “but they came highly recommended.”

“Recommended by whom?”

Dima became quiet and nervous.

“Who, Dima? Who recommended these two men to you?”

“Vladimir Shalomitsky.”

“Who’s Shalomitsky?” asked Wes.

“He is Moscow,” said Dima. “That is, he is with the government. Specifically, he is the Minister of Communications and Mass Media. He runs the Commission on the Development of Television and Radio Broadcasting.”

“And what’s he got to do with this?”

Dima gave a derisive laugh. “I manage the most important rock group since the famous Beatles. Do you think this band can just come and go from Russia as it pleases? No. There are documents to get in order. There are passports, visas, other papers necessary to travel all over the world. This band will generate a lot of money, Dr. Franklin, a lot of money for Mother Russia. This kind of success does not go unnoticed by Moscow. Do you think Mr. Palumbo and Mr. Pennington are here just to serve drinks and keep our highly placed guests amused before a show? They are here to make sure nothing happens to this Golden Goose. It would be very unfortunate for anyone who tried to get too close to the band, to threaten them in any way.”

“Yet apparently someone *has* gotten ‘too close’, as you put it, to the financial mainline of this band. How do you explain that?”

“How do I explain that? Mr. Palumbo and Mr. Pennington are not here to protect some insignificant backers. There are many rich people, many sources of money, Dr. Franklin. They can be replaced in a heartbeat. There are only five musicians in the world who comprise REVOLVER. If anyone were to try to harm this band, they would find that Mr. Palumbo and Mr. Pennington have some very specific skills beyond public relations, some very *unsociable* skills. So, you see Wes, these two men were not simply ‘recommended’ to me. It is more that they were assigned to me. And if you look just past the stage to the right, you will see they take their assignment very seriously.”

Wes looked out past the right side of the makeshift stage.

Nick Palumbo and Woody Pennington stared icily back.

20

“WE’RE IN THE COUNTRY MUSIC CAPITAL of the world and we’re stuck here in this hotel room?” Shura Mostovoy took a deep drag off his Marlboro and blew angry smoke at the ceiling fan. “What the hell is Dima’s problem? He’s becoming one of those fucking Moskvichi chickens, pardon the language.”

“Ne potey, bratok. Don’t sweat it my little brother.” Sergei agreed with Shura but knew they couldn’t *both* be pissed at the same time. “Dima is watching out for us. You saw what happened in Dallas. We almost got in a fight with those two cowboys just because their girlfriends flirted with us.”

“Ah c’mon, don’t give it to me. I swear, Sergei! Tonight, after Dima and those two watchdogs of his are convinced we are tucked tightly away in these penthouse prisons, I’m going out to have some fun. When do you think we’re ever going to be back here? I say we—what’s the expression, ‘grab the gusto’—and live a little.”

“Shura, you’re going to be the death of me.”

The drummer laughed aloud. “Rebel without a clue, my brother.

‘Live fast, die young, and leave a good looking corpse!’ James Dean.”

“It’s *cause*,” said Sergei.

“Huh? What’s cause?”

“It’s *cause*...rebel without a *cause*. And how are you going to leave a good looking corpse? Have you checked the mirror lately?”

Shura threw a sharp right jab to Sergei’s arm. Sergei grabbed at his bicep with a grimace and yelled “Ow...that hurt” and almost immediately the two fell to laughing.

Across the hall Viktor and the girls were in a similar funk.

Tatiana, sitting on the floor with her back against the foot of the bed, wore a new baggy sweatshirt, pink with a sequined Eiffel Tower and the words *Paris Las Vegas* embroidered in silver. Metal clips held freshly colored strands of hair in place; blue, green, and magenta accents streaming through her beige-blond hair. Skinny jeans hugged her hips and clung seductively to her long legs, leading down to a favorite pair of well-worn bunny slippers. Valeria lay on the bed staring at the ceiling in a pink nightshirt she had picked up at the M&M store near the MGM Grand. The green M&M character on the front of the shirt held a newspaper in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other while proudly declaring ‘I Don’t Do Mornings’. The cotton drawstring pajama bottoms, covered in multi-colored polka-dots bearing the iconic **m**, led down to fuzzy red M&M slippers. Viktor, boring by comparison, wore a navy blue t-shirt sporting a guitar body with psychedelic images of Jimi Hendrix and the Hard Rock logo, and faded Levis. He sat crumpled in a chair, one long leg dangling casually over the side as he nervously plucked a guitar pick at his front teeth.

Shura’s rhythmic shave-and-a-haircut knock pulled the three sets of eyes to the door. Viktor called out, “Come on in. It’s open.”

“How are my fellow prisoners doing?” said Shura as he and Sergei let the door swing shut behind them.

“We’re fucking bored to death,” grumbled Viktor.

“Well, then,” said Shura, “perhaps you would like to join us in a little diversion.” He broke into a mischievous grin as he held out his hand and magically produced a fat marijuana joint.

Tatiana instantly perked up. “Where’d you get that?” she said with an eager smile.

“Room service,” answered Sergei.

“We have fans in the kitchen,” added Shura, handing the joint and a lighter down to her. “They gave us each one and wished us a happy tour.”

Viktor swung his leg around and leaned forward in his chair as Sergei plopped down on the other and Shura took a corner of the bed. Tatiana flicked a flame to the tip, took a deep drag, and passed the precious treat to Shura on her left. The potent cigarette made its way counterclockwise around the group till it reached Valeria, who took a half-hearted toke, mostly to be sociable, and extended it to Tatiana. The second time it reached Valeria she didn’t even feign interest and simply waved it off.

Sergei gave it to Tatiana inquiring of Valeria “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said unconvincingly, but the others, assuming their five-star incarceration was at the heart of the matter, simply let the refusal stand.

“Not to worry,” said Shura. “Sergei and I have been talking and we want to include you in our little plot. We have decided to pull a Havana after the show tonight and get out to meet our Nashville friends. What do you say?”

“I like it,” cheered Viktor.

Tatiana piped in with her enthusiastic approval. “Let’s do it!”

Even Valeria seemed to take to the idea, though she wanted a bit more of the plan first. “What do you have in mind?” she asked.

Sergei deferred to his drummer. “Shura,” he said with a gesture as if yielding the floor.

Shura rubbed his hands and gave a devious smile. “Sergei and I

have been doing a little research on the Internet. First, we come back to our rooms after the show tonight like good little children. We let Dima and his two goons think we have surrendered to their control.” Shura took the smoldering joint from Tatiana, took a hit, and passed it to Viktor. He held in the smoke as long as he could before exhaling explosively, then continued. “We sneak out by way of the stairs so we don’t go past Nick and Woody’s room. That way they don’t hear anyone at the elevator and poke their heads out to make sure it isn’t us.”

“I like it,” said Viktor, getting into ‘secret agent’ mode.

“Our first stop is the Blue Bird Café,” said Shura.

“The Blue Bird Café? Like in Amsterdam?” asked Tatiana.

“Same name but I don’t think it’s quite the same,” he said with a shrug. “But hey,” he smiled. “Maybe our friends from the kitchen will be there.” There was laughter all around. “Anyway, this place is perfect. Amateurs and new song-writers. No big names. Real, unpolished talent. Mostly locals go there. From there we go to the Exit/In. And if time permits, we can head over to 12th & Porter. It’s supposed to have great acoustics. A lot of live albums are recorded there, so it could be interesting. Maybe someone is recording there tonight.”

“So what do you think?” interjected Sergei.

“I like it,” said Viktor again.

“I think I just found some new energy for tonight’s show,” said Valeria, reaching for the returning joint, this time touching it briefly to her lips. “What do you think?” she said to Tatiana.

“Let’s do it!”

“I love it when a plan comes together,” said Shura, lighting up in a wide Cheshire-cat grin.

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