



HELIX MAGAZINE

LITERATURE + ART

THE HELIX

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Sea Legs

KIMBERLY PARISH

"It's fitting the old bastard was found with his dong in his hand."

"Charming, Tom."

"It happens, Charlotte. Even the best of us stand there taking a whiz, backs to the weather—never give it a thought. A big wave hits and it's 'Man overboard!' If the boat's underway and the dumbass is alone on deck, he's a goner."

"Surely that's an exaggeration." The whisky-voiced woman rattled the ice in her glass, raised it to her wrinkled lips, and sipped, leaving a waxy pink stain on the rim. She was much older than the man beside her, and the skin-tight, sleeveless t-shirt she wore did nothing to complement her figure. "Why couldn't he just swim ashore?"

They were the only two people in the bar. Apart from the strip club up the road, there was no place else to go on a Tuesday night.

"Nah, hypothermia sets in long before you can get ashore unless you're right on the beach." Tom shook his head and played with a paper coaster in a small puddle on the bar. "Now, if you're at sea, there's nothing sticking above the surface but a head, and that's damned hard to see if you don't know where to look for it, but in this case, the boat was at anchor, but I guarantee you he was drunk. Maybe he had a heart attack or something. It doesn't sound like he even tried to swim. Never even let go of his pecker."

Charlotte made a *tsk* sound.

"Yachting Times said the crew was ashore and he just wasn't there when they got back to the boat. By the time they found him, his body was halfway to Union Island. It's a wonder the sharks didn't take him." Tom signaled to the bartender for another beer. "I couldn't believe he still owned that boat."

"Mmmm," hummed the barfly. "Where's Union Island?"

"Way down in the Grenadines—almost to Grenada."

"Who found him?"

"Some cruisers radioed the authorities. I told you I used to skipper for the guy, Right?"

"Did you?"

"He was a piece of work. There was this one time we were in Corsica for a regatta—"

"A what?"

"A regatta. It's a yacht race, kind of a pissing contest for the rich bastards. They like to get together every year and find out who has the best boat. It's all broken down into classes so the boats are evenly matched."

"Oh."

"The boss was bored one day and he went off exploring Bonifacio on foot. It's a narrow little harbor—wall-to-wall restaurants and bars. No telling how much he drank. When he came back, he fell right off the dock. Sally and I were working. We didn't hear a thing, but some French sailors saw him go in. He'd never have gotten out on his own."

"So'd they fish him out?"

"Yeah. It was lay day—that's a day-off in the middle of the regatta—and we'd spent the day stocking up and getting ready for the old man's guests to arrive." Tom gazed off into the distance as the memory took shape.

"We heard 'Permission to come aboard!' and Sally peeped out over the companionway. I saw her eyes get big, and she ran up on deck. I was just coming out of the engine room. When I got up on deck there were these two big Froggies in uniform carrying Fiedler onto the boat wringing wet.

"What happened?" Sally asked. Then she said it again in French then dithered about whether to help carry him or turn around and grab towels.

"You go get the towels," I told her, and took the old man off the sailors' hands.

"Sally told the sailors, 'Merci beaucoup,' and they left. She always did the translating. I sure did miss that once she left.

"I got my ass chewed the next day because Fiedler'd got drunk and made a fool of himself—like I could stop him!—I had to wonder who saved him from messing up when he was home. It sure wasn't his wife or his prissy son. He lost his glasses when he went in the drink too, but I fished 'em out."

"Sounds to me," said Charlotte, "like it was a good thing those sailors saw him fall in, or you might have been the ones fishing his corpse out of the water."

"Probably so. That was a hell of a trip. The next day this big dude named Jäger, like the drink, turned up. Looked like a bear. I never was sure what he did for a living, but he had something on Fiedler. And Fiedler told me the woman with Jäger was a call-girl. Beate—that was her name. She said she was a rep for a drug company. T'any rate, Jäger arrives the next day with his lady friend. Sally had been prepped to do some major entertaining, and she had caviar and champagne chilled; polished the silver and what not, but they wanted to see the island, so they took Fiedler off in a taxi, and me and Sally had time for a nice lunch and a skin full of wine with a Danish couple we knew who were running an aluminum hulled sloop. They were about three slips over, tied up stern-to like we were.

"They all came draggin' in about six o'clock, and the old man was legless again. The big bear, Jäger, hauls him off to his cabin and they have a shouting match in German, then Jäger and Beate go out again. Nobody seemed to want to talk to us, so me and Sally went out for dinner. Why mess up the galley? Ended up about ten of us yachties at one big table. We got pretty toasted, but we were still *compos mentis*. Then, way past midnight, after we were all tucked

up in our bunks, I hear Fiedler out tip-toeing around calling 'Beate, is that you?' Like he was expecting her to come get in bed with him!"

"Did Jäger break his face?" Charlotte asked.

"I wish he had. I ended up clearing up the blocked head he left instead. The two of them were packed and off the boat before breakfast in the morning. He didn't say 'thank you' or 'kiss my ass' to me or Sally, and the old man never came out of his cabin—just called for V8 juice and stuck his arm out through a crack in the door when Sally brought it to him. Worst part was that big hairy bastard left the biggest turd you ever saw—like a brick, but I suppose it could have been worse."

"That is disgusting, Tom." The barfly made a face and stuck her tongue out. "Don't you know any stories that aren't nasty?"

"No darlin'. Those rich bastards are just like that."

On the walk to his boat that night, Tom kept thinking of Herr Fiedler. That led to thinking about Sally. He did a quick calculation of what time it would be in Australia and fired up his computer.

"Tom! Blinkin' Heck! What's the time there?" Sally bumbled over the patchy Skype connection.

"Late, Sal, I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd see if you were home yet."

"Yeah. Just pulled in the drive from picking up the kiddos from school. It's good to hear your voice. How long's it been?"

"Too long. Listen, what got me thinking of you was I read that old Fiedler died."

"No! Really?"

"Yeah, they fished him out of the water down by Mayreau. Boat was anchored up in Saltwhistle Bay, where we used to stop."

"What happened?"

"Apparently, he was taking a piss—"

"Language, Tom, little ears."

"Right, it looks like he fell in the water, with the boat sitting right there at anchor, and nobody knew it till it was too late."

"Likely bloody story!"

"The crew were ashore, and there was nobody else in the bay."

"He was bound to have been paralytic."

"Goes without saying."

"If the missus had been there, I'd lay money she knocked him in the head and pushed him overboard," Sally said. "But what is there for the crew to be doing ashore on Mayreau?"

"No telling. Article didn't say, but I looked it up. The island got electricity in 2002. There's a little resort there now."

"I guess it's all changed since we were there. Don't suppose I'd recognize it."

You been down island lately, Tom?"

"Nah. I did an Atlantic crossing with Billy Jefferson a couple of years ago."

"From Silver Fish?"

"Yeah. He's running a sweet Perini Navi 54 meter called Mnemosyne. Great trip. We only got clobbered once—between the Azores and Gibraltar."

"Oh! Wasn't Billy Jefferson the guy who pulled us off when we ran aground in the Port of Andratx?"

"One and the same. I try to forget about that night." Tom flashed back to their first night sailing with Fiedler and his gay, emo son. The old man had been so excited to be out on the new boat he insisted that they sail onto the anchor. The previous skipper had warned Tom to always set the anchor hard because the boat was so heavy, but Fiedler wouldn't even let Tom turn the engine on. He was showing off, and they hadn't established the chain of command yet since Tom was too green to assert himself. They'd all gone to sleep when the boat heeled over and wallowed onto her port side. After falling out of their bunks, everyone had stumbled up on deck to find that they were hard aground, right in front of Ollie's Bar.

"Thank God the bar was closed!" said Tom.

Sally laughed. "Yeah. It's a good thing that Billy guy kept it to himself. We'd never have been able to live it down."

"I thought my career was over and done right there. And Fiedler laughed it off. Remember? He said, 'Ach, you should have seen the time I went aground in the Bodensee!'"

Pixelated Sally nodded. Her mouth wasn't moving in sync with her voice. "I've wondered about them over the years. What made them so miserable, Tom?"

"I don't know, Sally, but I can tell you for sure that I have yet to work for a happy millionaire. I should have taken up a trade or gone back to college or something. Too late for that now."

"Those people ruined yachting for me—I couldn't deal with their filth anymore."

"I should have quit with you, Sal, but I thought I had something to prove. I was making good money and I was still immortal."

"I know, Tom."

"How are Kevin and the little nippers?"

"Not so little anymore. Julian's 12 years old now. When you coming to see us?"

"When I win the lottery, I guess, Sal. I need to stick close for my Mom."

Hearing Sally's voice brought back a flood of memories from the years they had spent together on Fiedler's yacht. Tom closed his eyes and remembered the night he and Sally first met the Fiedlers. Sally had pushed him

to get his captain's license. They thought they were in love, and that running a boat together would be perfect. Sebastian and Claudia Fiedler looked like aging movie stars. He had thick salt-and-pepper hair that he wore on the long side, slicked back with a little Hitler 'stache. She was tall and excruciatingly thin with a thick accent and waves in her hair. Herr Fiedler had been giddy about buying the boat. It was the biggest boat he'd owned, and Frau Fiedler made it clear that she was "allowing" him to buy it for nearly two million dollars because they'd just sold her father's company.

They were odd, but Tom was twenty-two years old; to him, all rich people were odd. It had been his first real interview for a captain's job, and he would have agreed to anything. The Fiedlers had been oh-so-polite. The wine had flowed, and by the time it was over, Tom and Sally had signed a shitty contract, but they were happy as the job began aboard the Claudia—the new name to honor Mrs. Fiedler. As he was drifting off, Tom thought, that should have been my warning; you never change a boat's name...

Sally served boiled potatoes, roast chicken, salad and bread, just like Fiedler liked it. Boring, but it filled the empty spot. They were on an informal trip with just Fiedler and his friend, Mr. Schöll.

"It has become completely crazy," said Mr. Fiedler. "On these new cable channels, you could even see your next-door neighbor having sex with his secretary."

Sally looked at Mr. Schöll. "Really? Anybody can just put up a homemade porno movie?"

"Ya. It's true."

"That's disturbing," said Sally. "How can you stand to look your neighbors in the face ever again?"

Fiedler and Schöll just looked at the table wagging their heads from side-to-side. As he cleared the dishes, Tom wondered if they had filmed themselves with their secretaries. He chucked the chicken bones over the side and came back with a fourth bottle of wine.

"I don't know what went wrong," Fiedler said. "I worked my best years away, and now I don't even know my family. They prefer it when I am away from home. I interrupt their lives."

"Oh, Mr. Fiedler, surely that isn't true," Sally said.

"But it is the truth. My wife is so ugly, I can't even stand the sight of her."

"Your wife is a lovely woman, Mr. F."

"No, Sally. She is horrible. Like the wicked witch. Maybe I deserve such a woman."

"But, Mr. F., you are such a nice man. How can you say that?"

"I am not a nice man, Sally. I am not a nice man."

Mr. Schöll nudged Fiedler, and they excused themselves.

Tom woke up with a headache. It took him a few minutes to realize he was not aboard the Claudia. For just a moment, he thought Sally must already be up. Then he remembered where he was and pulled on his shorts and shoes and jogged around the bay to his mother's bungalow. He'd been lucky to find a job on a sport fishing boat in the little south Florida backwater where his mother lived. He let himself in the back door and found the coffee pot full and biscuits in the oven.

"Mom," he called.

"I'll be right out," came a childlike voice from down the hallway.

Tom poured two cups of coffee and peeked in the oven.

"Good morning, sweetheart," she said as she came into the kitchen. She kissed his cheek and frowned as she leaned back to look him over. "You look exhausted. Trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah. I tossed and turned all night."

"What's the matter? Indigestion?"

"Nah. I was thinking about my old boss. I found out yesterday that he died."

"Oh dear, that's too bad."

"Nah, he was such a miserable bastard it was probably a blessing."

The little woman frowned at the coarse language, but said, "What happened? Had he been ill?"

"He was an alcoholic. Sad case. Had everything money could buy, but his family were like strangers to him."

"Which one was this, dear?"

"Fiedler, the German Sally and I worked for."

"Dear Sally. How is she anyway?"

"Sounds good. I called her on Skype last night to tell her about Fiedler. She sounds happy. Her oldest boy is twelve years old already. Can you believe that?"

"Time flies. Isn't it amazing to be able to see your old friends—even in Australia? I wish you'd stayed with that girl. She was a keeper."

"Yeah, Mom, but I wasn't smart enough to do that."

"You want eggs?"

"No. Got any bacon or sausage to go with those biscuits?"

"Of course. Give me a minute and I'll finish off the gravy. Tell me again why you let her leave that boat without you?"

"Because I'm an idiot, Mom. I stayed for the money—thought the job was more important."

"But you changed jobs right after that, didn't you?"

"Old S. O. B. fired me once Sally was gone. Worked my tail off that summer like he was punishing me. Then, when the engine seized up and he had to replace it, he blamed me. I tried to tell him it needed rebuilding before

we left Antibes, but he had discovered that the mechanic I'd been using was African, thought a black man couldn't possibly rebuild his German engine."

"And you still didn't go after Sally?"

"She'd gone home to Australia, Mom. I called her, but she blew me off. Said she was through with yachts and the jerks who owned them. She didn't care if she never saw another sailboat. What was I supposed to do? Give up everything I'd worked for?"

"You were young. You could have started again." She set a steaming plate in front of him. "Never mind."

"I should have started again. Here I am, forty-five and not a damned thing to show for all those years of hard work on somebody else's boat."

"Okay. You're an idiot, son, but you're my idiot. Now, what's your schedule today?"

"Guests arrive at nine, fishing till mid-afternoon, then home. The usual."

"You want me to fix a lunch basket for you?"

"No, thanks, Mom. I ordered lunch from the deli. You don't need to cook for these knuckleheads. They'll just puke it up. It's choppy out there today."

The Messenger

KIMBERLY PARISH

14 February 1918

South of Rostov-on-the-Don, Ukraine

The sky hung heavy over the steppe. It pressed through the man's coat, and his horse shivered with each gust of the frozen wind. Blowing snow stung his face and blinded him. The only sound was wind in his ears. The horse trudged through snow drifts, dragging its hooves, leaning into the gale. Frozen claws gripped the reins, and the man wondered how long the horse could continue.

And then what? He supposed he would freeze to death. No, he must go on. The memory of his Katya demanded it. If he could not do this one small thing, why had God spared his life?

The images from that day still sat—a carrion crow feeding on every beautiful memory, devouring every reminder of the happiness that went before it. He had dismissed his morning French class early and headed home to surprise Katya. With a small bouquet in one hand, he whistled a little tune as he walked along the cobbled street. He had been a professor of languages at the University of Lviv for three years, and it was the first anniversary of his marriage to the beautiful Katarina Nikolaevna Piotrowski. The bright autumn day was golden.

Approaching his house on Nalyvka street, he heard a commotion; several young men ran past him.

"What is happening?" he called.

"Cossacks!" returned a boy, his eyes wild. "They're killing people!"

The young professor, Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski, walked faster, then ran as he caught the scent of smoke. When he came to the bottom of his street he could hear the screams. Chaos unfolded before him. Houses were burning and women were running hunched over as they tried to protect their children. Soldiers on horseback ran them down, shooting and slashing and impaling people indiscriminately. Soldiers on foot went from house to house raping women, slaughtering children and setting what they did not steal alight.

Aleksandr found Katya in a pool of blood just outside their house. Her dress was shredded. Her throat was cut. Her mouth and eyes were open, and blood stained her beautiful hair.

"Katya, Oh my God! Katya." Aleksandr ran to her and cradled her in his arms. The flames from his burning house singed his hair as he sat rocking her on the steps. The flowers he carried lay in a crimson pool, and he wept as he waited for one of the horsemen to thunder past and impale him. None came.

Through frozen eyelashes he saw a smudge in the clouds ahead and stared

at it, unsure if he could trust his eyes. He prayed that it was smoke, and then he prayed that it was not smoke as he imagined the smoldering ruins of yet another village waiting up ahead for him to bear witness. The horse made a rumbling sound deep in its chest that vibrated up through its body. The exhausted animal threw its head up and tried to dance sideways. The snow was too deep and all the beast could manage was to bounce up and down, but the horse's hope gave the man hope, and he leaned forward in the saddle, pushing his hands forward to encourage the animal to try harder. The promise of warmth pulled them on.

Cresting a small hill, Aleksandr was able to look down on a small dacha with a stand of bare trees to the northwest; it was just a shepherd's cabin, with a small sheep pen and some outbuildings. Someone else was there. The snowy ground around the buildings had been pounded to mush. Fresh snow had not yet reclaimed the muddy earth. No one was outside, and the path leading in from the north was beginning to frost over. They must be inside. At least it was not a burning village.

This was a land of confusion and suspicion. Sometimes only a small strip of color on a hat or sleeve marked a person as friend or foe. He had no way of knowing who waited, but he must warm up, trade for a fresh horse, then get underway again as quickly as possible. The message he carried from the French general could be vital to the Red Army. He had been riding for three days from the southern tip of the Ukraine, and he could afford no delays.

As Piotrowski trotted into the space between the buildings, his breath formed a cloud around his head. A wolf-sized dog barked a warning from the end of its chain. The horse shied, and Piotrowski leapt off its back, stumbling on frozen legs. He somehow managed to calm the spooked horse and tie it to a post at the northern end of the muddy space between the buildings. Sheep bleated from the pen to the south, while a barn and some sheds blocked the cold east wind. The cabin with the smoking chimney squatted in the lee of the barn, its porch in shade as the weak sun approached the western horizon at its back. Piotrowski knocked on the door of the cabin where he could see the dirty boot prints of the men who must still be inside. The barrel of a gun greeted him as the door opened. He backed up, looking above the gun to a pair of Cossack blue eyes and a dirty scarf. The woman was short and stout, her creased face stern.

She waited for the man to state his business.

"Please, Missus, is there a seat at your fire? A stable for my horse? I will only trouble you for a few hours." The old woman stepped back and allowed him to enter before too much precious warmth escaped.

The room had a fire, a stove, and a long table with benches on either side. The men at the table turned wind-burned faces and suspicious eyes on him.

They wore the tall fur hats and long coats of the Don Cossacks with short sabers at their waists. Their ammunition was sewn across their breasts beneath badges of honor and gilded ribbons. The silent question on each man's lips was plain: "Who is this? Who does he fight for?"

The Dons were White Army, and Piotrowski's heart skipped a beat. He had hoped to avoid them on this journey, but the unexpected storm had slowed his progress.

"You have something to bring to the table?" the old woman demanded.

He pulled a bottle of vodka and a loaf of frozen bread from his pack, and the men at the table relaxed and resumed their conversations.

"I can pay," he said. "I just need a bite to eat and a chance to warm up. Then I would trade for a fresh horse if you have one."

"Humph, you and all the rest," she said, letting him know that the men at the table were travelers too. Her face creased in what passed for a smile. "Maybe one of them will trade his horse for yours." And she laughed. The soldiers laughed. A Cossack's horse was dearer than his wife. There would be no horse swapping this day.

The man took his time arranging his greatcoat near the fire before he walked over to the table and took the only empty seat.

A bowl of porridge, a cup of weak tea, and a vodka sat waiting for him. He tossed back the vodka and began on the porridge. His mind raced, and he kept his head down making a production of eating while he rehearsed his story. The questions would begin as soon as he looked up from the food. He had been lucky up to now, but if these men discovered that he was a Bolshevik, he would die before he could stand up again. He poured a second vodka and drank it before he leaned back letting the tea mug warm his hands. The leader of the group, with the bars of a Kapitan, addressed him.

"Where do you travel in such a hurry?" he asked. The man scowled beneath his black fur papakha.

"I might ask you the same thing," the newcomer replied.

"We were in Novocherkassk when the Reds took it two days ago," the man said. "We got separated from our regiment in the storm. We will rejoin them in the morning once the storm has passed."

"I am riding from Pavlovskaya, south of here," Piotrowski lied. He hoped he had chosen a town far enough away that he would not be questioned too closely.

"And what is so important that you ride in this weather?"

"I carry a message to Alexei Maximovich Kaledin. It must get through." The lie rolled easily off the messenger's tongue.

"Well. . ." The Kapitan leaned back and gave the man an appraising look. "Kaledin himself. You must be special," he said. "I had not heard that the command had moved so far to the south."

"No, you misunderstand my mission, Kapitan. It is not a message from

the command that I carry. It is a message of a personal nature. I am no soldier."

"And yet you ride as if it were a matter of life and death. Is it a matter of life and death?"

"It may be, Kapitan. It may be."

"What is your name?"

"Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski."

"And your papers?"

The messenger extracted the documents from his coat. They showed him to be a teacher from the southern Ukraine.

"A teacher. Who sends you on this crazy ride?"

"It is a woman, Kapitan. I cannot say anymore."

"A woman!" The Kapitan laughed and slapped the table. His men laughed with him. "Of course, some woman believes herself to be as important as the fate of Mother Russia! Ha, ha, ha! I suppose this woman offered you some very special payment, did she?"

Piotrowski made no reply, just stared at the floor trying to appear embarrassed.

Turning to a young cavalryman who had yet to acquire braid or medals, the Kapitan barked, "Volodymyr, show this very important messenger to the stable with his horse."

"Thank you. That will be good," Piotrowski said. He threw back one last shot of vodka and passed the bottle to the nearest man.

Volodymyr pulled the barn door closed as Piotrowski turned to his horse.

"Sorry for leaving you out in the cold, old fellow. I had to introduce myself." He unsaddled the horse and gave him hay while the soldier carried a bucket and an axe outside to the water trough. The axe was necessary to break through the surface and reach the water beneath. The messenger took the opportunity appraise the other horses before Volodymyr came back.

After holding the water bucket while the horse drank, Volodymyr walked to the other side of the animal and joined in the rubdown.

"You must not be a Cossack. We would not leave a horse in the cold after such a hard ride. This poor beast is exhausted." He reached down and lifted one of the animal's hooves and began cleaning it with a small hooked knife he produced from his pocket. "Where did you say you came from?" The horse tried to jerk his hoof away as Volodymyr touched a tender spot.

Piotrowski wasn't listening. He looked around the barn as he worked. There was a big black stallion that looked fit and rested. He imagined sneaking back out here and riding silently away on that strong horse. It might be several hours before anyone missed him. The wind and the snow would work to his advantage, and they would never catch him. That assumed, of course, that he could make it back to the barn without alerting the Cossacks. He would have to leave before the wind died down so they would not be able to follow his trail

in the snow.

"Don't answer, then. I like talking to myself," Volodymyr said.

The messenger brought his distant gaze back to the face of the young soldier who was looking at him across the horse's back. "Sorry. I was lost in thought."

"How long were you riding in this storm to wear this poor horse out this way?" His tone of voice had grown rougher.

"I started at first light. I was told this message could not wait. What town is near to us?" Piotrowski made half-hearted swipes at the horse's side while he tried to visualize the map of the region. He should have been in Rostov-on-Don already.

"Poor horse. He's lame, and half frozen to death," Volodymyr mumbled. "Should have been seen to immediately."

"We must be close to Rostov," said the messenger, thinking out loud.

"You say you rode for six hours in this storm? From Pavlovskaya?"

"What is the nearest town? Zemograd? Kirovskaya?"

"Where are you trying to go? General Kaledin? Where did they say you would find him?"

"Rostov. On the Don. I am supposed to find him in Rostov-on-the-Don." Of course, it was not Kaledin that Piotrowski was to meet, but rather the Red Army Lieutenant Golubov. He was in control of the Red Army in this region.

"You missed him. Maybe we will find him when we meet up with our troops tomorrow or the next day. You should ride with us."

"Yes, maybe then. That is a good plan." Piotrowski knew that his only hope was to leave before the storm was over.

As darkness fell, the men settled down to get what rest they could before returning to the fight. But, as the Cossacks began to snore around him, the messenger lay waiting. He watched and listened until all was quiet around him, then he eased up and made his way out as if he was going to the outhouse. Volodymyr woke the Kapitan as the door closed.

His heart racing, Aleksandr Nikolayevich threw his saddle onto the large, black horse. It was a powerful animal, and he worked to hold it back as he ducked to ride out of the barn. He thought he was clear when the damned dog rushed out at him. This horse also reared up in response to the challenge of that demon beast, and this time Aleksandr landed on his back. The horse jerked the reins from his hands, but Volodymyr caught them.

Volodymyr pointed his handgun at the messenger and said in a jovial voice, "Ah, there you are. I came to pry your frozen ass off the seat, but I see you were just trying to do the Kapitan a favor and give his horse some exercise." At that, the Kapitan strolled over and led Piotrowski back into the building while Volodymyr tied the horse.

"It seems our new friend was trying to leave us in a hurry," he announced to his men. He forced the stranger to take a seat and walked around to confront him face to face, "Where have you come from?" he demanded.

Someone had lit a lantern that hung above the table, and the Cossack soldiers stood just beyond the pool of light it cast growling like a restless pack of wolves.

"Pavlovskaya. I told you," Piotrowski said. He tried to sound exasperated, but he only managed to sound tired. He had accomplished nothing. He closed his eyes and saw Katya.

"And we told you that you might ride with us, but instead you have tried to steal my horse. Why is that?" Steel came into the Kapitan's voice.

"I apologize for that. I was in a hurry, and I left mine in exchange."

The men all laughed.

"Perhaps you do not know how these things are done in the Don. It is like arranging a marriage. I think you have not a big enough dowry to take this horse. Maybe you should have traded with one of the other men!" The others laughed. "Why do you try to run away in the night?"

"I have an important message for General Kaledin. It cannot wait until morning," he said, attempting to maintain the lie.

"A message from a woman. What message from any woman can be so important? There is always another woman in the next village! Let me see this message."

"I cannot do that. I am under orders that it should be placed in the general's hands only."

"Orders? I thought you were not a soldier. What woman commands you?" The men laughed again.

"And she sent you on a horse? Was the telegraph broken? The train?"

"Indeed. The telegraph lines have been cut, and the train tracks are blocked with snow," he said. Of course, he knew that traveling alone on horseback was supposed to give him the greatest chance of getting through without being intercepted, and here he had ridden right into a nest of the Don Cossacks.

The Kapitan leaned down and considered the eyes of the messenger. "Kaledin is dead. If you were any part of the White Army you would know this."

"I told you. I am no soldier. Please, I have been traveling night and day," Piotrowski tried to counter, but the Kapitan kept on talking.

"I can see you are not a Cossack. Are you even Russian? I think maybe you are not one of us at all. Maybe you are a dirty Red sympathizer from Germany?"

The messenger answered with the only plausible explanation he could come up with, the truth. "No, I am from Lviv originally. My father was Polish.

I am a teacher for the children in the small villages to the south." It was almost all true.

The Don Cossacks, now members of the volunteer White Army, had rolled through the old town near the University in Lviv. They had raped and murdered his Katya, and he tasted bile in his mouth as he recalled that day. Maybe these same men had been there. Maybe one of them had raped her and slit her throat. He remembered their flared coats and their tall wool hats. He remembered their sabers and their pikes and their guns.

Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski had traveled to Kiev and signed on with the Red Army. His gift with languages was prized, and he had been carrying messages between the Red commanders and their foreign allies for months. He had seen villages destroyed and ordinary people slaughtered by both the reds and the whites. He was tired. He had seen too much.

One of the soldiers jumped up and removed his hat. "He looks like a German to me." The rumbling of chairs on the floor and the hissing of sabers followed. The shepherd woman ducked behind a curtain in a doorway at the back. Best to become invisible. No telling what this pack of killers would do once the blood-letting began.

"Is this true? Are you German?" asked the Kapitan. He had fought the Germans in 1915 and would be happy to send all of them to hell personally.

"No. I am from Lviv."

"So you said. We know Lviv, don't we boys?" The Cossacks laughed, but the messenger could contain himself no longer. Now he knew that these were the very men who had destroyed his life.

"You bastards. I saw you there—on my street. You killed my wife." Two of the soldiers grabbed his arms as he lunged at the Kapitan, who stood his ground, cool and calm. The bench tumbled over as they dragged the messenger outside.

"Your wife. Is that what this is all about?" The Kapitan turned his head to speak to the men behind him. "It's true then, a woman drove this poor fool out into the storm," said the Kapitan. "Get my horse out of the way."

The soldiers led the horse to the barn and tied the messenger to the post. The old woman peered out of the cabin and made the sign of the cross. Her craggy old face softened with silent tears.

The Cossack Kapitan touched his revolver to the messenger's head.

Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski gazed on the stars in the frozen black sky that went on forever. .

Chumming for Sharks

KIMBERLY PARISH

Cash at the end of the day. That's all I was after. I knew I wouldn't be able to trade on my looks forever, but if my bikini helped me to land a job, so be it. Who was I to turn down work on a rich man's boat? I was winding up a varnishing job in a little marina just south of Ft. Lauderdale in Dania, and I'd gone up to the café for lunch when all hell broke loose.

It started with the big powerboat at the end of the T-dock suddenly going quiet—generators and everything. Next thing I knew people were yelling and running. The cops got there fast. You couldn't really see much from then on once the ambulance came to take away what was left of the poor guy. Somehow the sign the captain swears he hung on the ignition key in the wheelhouse wasn't there when the mate switched on the mains. You know, the one that says, "DIVER DOWN. DO NOT START MAIN ENGINE." He claims the captain radioed and told him to fire it up to test something and there wasn't any sign. The captain says he wasn't even there when it happened. He never called the mate, and there's nobody to corroborate his story. Poor guy. The cops hauled him off.

Pretty much everybody who'd been milling around trying to see what was going on headed to the café for a beer. It was only one o'clock, but the accident convinced us to give up on doing anything meaningful for the rest of the afternoon. It was our way of showing respect for the dead. I found myself seated next to a deep-sea fishing boat captain whose shirt had "Deep Sea Dan" embroidered over his left breast pocket. He had crinkly leather skin, a gold signet ring, and greasy hair slicked back like the Atlantic City crowd that wintered in South Florida.

"Haven't seen you here before," he said.

"I'm doing some varnishing up in the yard."

"That would explain the dust." He looked me over, taking in the bandana around my head, the clear patches where my sunglasses had been, my bikini top and cut-off jeans—all of it covered in the fine yellow dust that clung to anyone stripping old varnish.

"Yeah, we're taking a sweet little Chris-Craft back to bare wood. She is going to be gorgeous."

"Oh right. On the hard. You pass it coming in from the parking lot."

"That's the one." I sipped my beer. "Any idea who that diver was?"

"Some Italian kid. Guarino? I can't remember. He's scraped barnacles off my boat's hull before." Dan took a pull from his beer and said, "So do you only do varnishing?"

"No, no. I do just about any kind of day-work. I'll be looking for another

job next week. You need your boat washed? Bilges painted?"

"Well," said Deep Sea Dan, "I might. Do you have a card?"

"Yes sir!" I whipped out my business card. It said, "Olivia Cleans Boats" and my phone number.

That evening, back aboard *Gypsy*, my guy Talbot and I were just finishing dinner and he said, "So you gave this old geezer your card?"

Tal's a tall skinny guy who used to do custom cabinetry, but he also used to run drugs from Colombia, and he got caught. He'd nearly finished ten years as a guest of the State of Florida—he only had six months or parole left to serve, and until that was up he had to work at a licensed facility that paid peanuts.

"He wasn't that bad, but yeah. I got nothing for next week. One of us needs a job that pays something."

"Don't get sassy with me, girl. I worry about you. You never know who you're working for," Talbot said.

"Maybe, but it beats the hell out of me riding the bike all over Ft. Lauderdale just to find a job every morning."

"At least get the guy's name. 'Deep Sea Dan' tells me nothing."

Captain Dan called me early that Friday morning.

"Olivia? This is Dan Johnson. You remember? From the *Lulabel*?"

"Deep Sea Dan?"

He chuckled. "That's right."

"Yes, Captain. How can I help you?"

"I wonder if you might be interested in going out on the boat today? My regular mate isn't available."

"What would you need me to do?"

"Helm and clean-up mostly. There's nothing to it. I handle the fishing lines. A hundred dollars for the day. It's just the owner going out today. He won't stay too long. He just likes to take a ride, catch a nice dolphin for dinner. How soon can you get here?"

The old man, Mr. Agnoli, was no trouble at all. He traveled with a fox terrier named Pookie. (I shit you not. Pookie!) I hardly spoke to him. Dan showed me how to drive the boat once we cleared the cut. *Lulabel's* big twin diesels made her easy to handle. He went down and looked after the boss. He didn't just bait the hooks, he even landed the fish. The boss just sat smoking a cigar and enjoying the breeze. Dude wore horn-rimmed coke-bottle glasses tinted a shade of green I'd only ever seen on old men. Little bits of dialogue drifted up to me in the tuna tower. It sounded like they were speaking Italian. When we got back to the dock, Dan showed me how he liked the fish fileted. Then I washed the boat down and went home.

We rocked along like that with Dan calling two or three days a week, and it was almost always the boss. Sometimes with and sometimes without his wife. The only thing that came up was when the missus, Lucile, the *Lu* in *Lulabel*, with daughters Laura and Isabella accounting for the *La* and the *Bel*, told Dan that I was to keep my blouse buttoned up at all times. Guess the old man had commented on my bikini top. It irked me, but I respected the old girl's wishes. From then on, I wore khakis, boat shoes, and a buttoned white blouse. I'd only ever strip down to the bathing suit once everybody'd gone, so I could clean fish and wash down.

Dan would go off to the bar with them and leave me to put the boat to bed. He came back one evening as I was finishing up and pulled the creeper routine on me, though. Grossed me right out. When I told Talbot about it, he acted like he was gonna go confront Captain Dan.

"Man! I don't trust that guy." He stomped around on deck, grumbling.

"He's harmless. Probably can't even get it up," I said.

"You don't find many Italians named Johnson. I bet that's not even his real name."

"Tal, what is your problem? It's easy work, and I'm making the money for two weeks' worth of groceries in a day. Who cares if the dude doesn't use his real name?"

It wasn't long after that we took the *Desideris* out. Captain Dan called later than he usually did. I was already on the bike asking around at the small marinas on 17th Street.

"Can you go fishing today? I got a last-minute charter. There's some tip money in it."

Turns out it was a guy named *Desideri* and his son. The son's name was Rick, and he might have been twenty. It was hard to tell. He could have been younger too. Dan gave the dad a funny look when they arrived, and the guy smiled and said something I didn't quite catch, but it put Dan in a bad mood for the whole trip. Never took his eyes off those two. He sent me up the tuna tower immediately—even let me take her out through Port Everglades—like he didn't trust our guests alone on deck. He came up to spell me for a few minutes about mid-morning and saw I was sweating.

"The boss's wife isn't here. You can peel down to the swimsuit if you want. Might add to the tips."

The *Desideris* wanted to go shark fishing, and Dan had just poured out the bloody, smelly mess he mixed up to chum for sharks when a huge tiger shark struck. The kid fought for three solid hours. Nobody spelled him. Pissed me off when his dad shot the shark. Dan kept a shotgun propped up on the stern for emergencies, but this guy pulled his own handgun. It was Florida, after all, so I didn't think much about the fact that he'd brought a handgun. I just figured they'd cut the shark loose. That's what Dan had told me he

usually did with sharks. Instead, we dragged her, all twelve feet of her, in to the dock for pictures. Dan used my phone to take the pictures since his old-school camera used film, and the Desideris wanted pictures they could share right away.

Desideri didn't even want the meat. Just the jaws. Dan didn't want the meat either, so Talbot came and butchered the carcass. We still have shark meat in our freezer.

The Desideri boys were gone when Tal got there. He'd had to dinghy all the way around from Lake Sylvia where *Gypsy* was anchored. It was faster on the bike, but we needed a way to get all that meat home. It was still light out, but only for about an hour. Bottom line is he didn't get a look at Tommy Desideri until I showed him the pictures we took with the shark that afternoon. He snatched the phone out of my hand.

"What did you say this guy's name was?"

"Desideri."

"Tommy?"

"Maybe. The Kid's name is Rick."

"Do you know who Tommy Desideri is?"

"No, should I?"

"He's a hit-man, Olivia. Big time."

"Seriously?" I thought about it a minute. "He did have a gun. And Dan sure gave him the hairy eyeball. Kind of acted like a jerk all day."

"He was probably scared shitless. I guarantee you Dan knew who this guy was. I'd be willing to bet you Dan has connections working for Agnoli and all."

Tal had already dredged up an old article that showed Mr. Agnoli walking out of a New York courtroom when he was younger. Apparently, the old guy had retired from the life, but he still knew people.

"Okay, but Desideri's kid was with him. I'm sure he was just there to fish. Mr. Agnoli probably owed him a favor or something."

"A favor, yeah. Baby, I don't want you working for these people anymore. They carry guns. What if Desideri's visit wasn't innocent? These guys don't leave witnesses."

Once again I didn't take Tal's advice. Dan wanted me to come clean the boat. What could be the harm in that? I went down there.

Dan was organizing his tackle, and like an idiot, I said, "Can you believe Talbot thought Mr. Desideri was a hit man?"

"Did he? Wonder what gave him that idea?" Dan didn't look up.

"I don't know. He's from New Jersey, you know?"

I finished my work. Then on the way up the dock to the ATM Dan says, "I've enjoyed having you work with me, Liv." He gave me a weird little sideways nod.

I caught this expression on his face for just a second out of the corner of my eye. It was, I don't know, regretful? I didn't know what to say.

Then as we passed by the stern of this big gin palace reversing into a slip, Dan shoved me, hard, into the water. A second later and I'd have been chewed up by those props. I dove right down into the mud and swam under the boats till I had to come up for air. I peeked up over the edge of the dock, and I could see Dan about three slips away looking for me in the water. He had a gun in his hand. He didn't see me, so I ducked back down and swam to the fuel dock where there were always three or four dinghies tied up. I borrowed one and headed for *Gypsy*.

"You said what?" Talbot shouted at me. He had both hands on my shoulders.

"I told him what you said about Tommy Desideri." I clenched my teeth to keep them from chattering. "I'm a blabbermouth." I half expected Talbot to smack me—he looked so angry—but he let out a growl and hugged me instead.

"So he tried to push you into a running prop?"

"Yeah."

"And you saw him with a gun in his hand?"

"Yeah."

He let me go and his voice got serious. "We have to move the boat. Now."

We were almost through the Cut when I heard Captain Dan on the radio. "Port Everglades Pilot, Port Everglades Pilot, This is *Lulabel*, Whiskey Yankee Papa sixteen twenty-nine."

"Oh my God, Tal! That's him."

"I hear. Get the binoculars. See if you can see him. We need to disappear."

I couldn't see *Lulabel*, but I knew *Gypsy'd* never outrun her if Dan saw us. I gave up looking and hopped back into the cockpit.

"What are we going to do now?" I know I must have looked desperate. I was still shaking.

"We're going to outsmart him. Get the main up. We'll hide among the other sailboats. It'll be a good downwind run to the Keys."

That's when I remembered Rick Desideri's number was still in my phone. I had texted the shark pictures to him. *Thank God for waterproof cases*, I thought.

We tucked *Gypsy* into a little hurricane hole Tal knew about. It was in the mangroves north of Key Largo—a deep canal had been dredged so sailboats could shelter in rough weather. At least that's what Tal said he'd used it for. I figured he knew it from his drug-running days. Right now, that didn't matter. We were hidden—just not very well—especially if you were up on the US 1 Bridge.

It was late afternoon when we heard big engines slow to an idle near the entrance of our canal. We figured Dan would be hunting *Gypsy's* mast poking up above the mangroves, so we were in the dinghy hidden back among the mosquitoes in the swamp.

I had the binoculars and saw Dan start down the ladder from the tower. That's when his head exploded. I swung the bins up to look at the bridge, but I couldn't see anybody.

"Here we go." Talbot took a deep breath and gunned the outboard. "Stay low."

As we had waited for Dan to find us, Tal had told me there was a good chance Desideri would try to take us out too, so I knew it wasn't over yet.

Tal tied the dinghy's painter to the mid-ships cleat. He started *Gypsy's* engine while I ran up on deck to make sure the anchor chain didn't foul coming aboard as it so often did. We couldn't afford to let anything slow us down. Tal steered us straight out to sea.

Up on the bridge, Tommy Desideri clapped his son on the shoulder. "Good shooting, boy."

Rick watched *Gypsy* fade into the distance. "You should have let me take them too, Dad."

"They did us a solid setting old Stefano up for us like that. We can afford to give them a head start. It's more sporting that way."

"That's not what you taught me. I hope you're right. That girl has pictures of us."

"We got the one we came for. Crazy Stefano Gabrielli. Not bad for your first contract hit. Old dude was legendary back in the day. He got to enjoy the sun for a while down here, but don't get cocky, kid. You give out your phone number to a girl again and I'll pop you myself."

"Come on, Dad. You have to admit she's hot."

"Old Stefano got distracted on account of that girl, and we got lucky. It won't always be this easy. I think he went soft."

"Oh? And aren't you the one who killed the wrong shark when we were out on the boat? I think you went soft."

"He wasn't supposed to have any crew on the boat."

"And if it hadn't been a pretty girl would you have hesitated?"