

Berlin Sting

Vee Monroe

The executive lounge of the Berlin Hilton was empty apart from my target, Mikhail, and a bull of a guy who must be his heavy muscle. They were sitting on a brown leather sofa facing the lounge entrance. A black briefcase sat between the bull's fat knee and the low glossy coffee table. A gun? Perhaps not. There was a suspicious bulge in the calf pocket of the bull's combat trousers. The bull saw me looking and crossed his bare arms against his denim waistcoat. He had a slow mean stare.

Mikhail jumped up. "Rodrigo?"

"Mikhail."

I knew Mikhail's face, of course. Raymond, the agency guy, had given me a full briefing with photographs. He looked like a typical logistics guy. A man who dressed smart to give the customer confidence that he was in control. He had light muscles from the gym and wore a fitted leather jacket. His jeans had no creases. Perhaps he had put them in a trouser press.

He was around the coffee table before I could study the bull or the briefcase. His smile was sly like a Gila monster, a deadly lizard from my home. His handshake was firm. I knew he had played tennis for Russia in his youth.

"Rodrigo? Delighted to meet you finally, in person." He kissed me on both cheeks with soft lips.

I was not Rodrigo, of course. Rodrigo was a baby, the youngest of my four sons. They and my wife Bastidas, God praise them, were thousands of miles away in Queens, New York. Perhaps they were getting ready for Sunday mass. Bastidas would be in her silk shift, bare brown feet on the kitchen tiles, cooking pork and peas.

Mikhail put a slim hand on my back and his head too close to my ear.

"Let's go somewhere else."

"Trouble?"

The bull was no longer looking at us. He was alert to danger, searching for someone through the big glass windows that faced onto Mohrenstraße. Tourists and a few office workers were passing by, but there was not a lot to see. The Americans were in a hotel across the river.

"The fucking CIA is chasing me," said Mikhail.

Fucking Americans. Raymond's guys shouldn't be following Mikhail when I was meeting with him. They knew where he would go today.

"You sure?"

Mikhail opened his blue eyes wide, startled. Fuck.

"I saw three of their punks outside this morning. This isn't safe for us, here. I think they are listening." He clenched his fists. Spittle flecked his pencil moustache and his voice was shrill. "It's crap, all crap. They should leave me alone. I'm a legitimate businessman."

Fuck. \$7 million was not enough if Raymond made my target feel hunted, made my work more risky. My job is not a suicide mission. For the CIA sting to work, Mikhail must trust me.

"Go where?"

"There's a quiet café across the street."

Raymond's guys weren't in the crowds on Mohrenstraße. Mikhail strode quickly along the wide street, looking right and left into the windows of parked cars. The bull flanked him with the suitcase gripped in his meaty paw. Rain earlier that morning still sparkled on the tarmac, but it was getting hot. Sweat ran beneath my baseball cap as we crossed into the next street, Friedrichstraße. My gun felt heavy against my chest. It was a Beretta Bobcat, a little

semi-automatic that is good at short range, but willful about its bullets. I had hidden it beside my bugged cellphone in my inside suit pocket.

The Sovrano was a crowded tourist café on the ground floor of a white-walled office block. Too small and light to spy, it was noisy with chatter and muzak. A person could not spy on a table unnoticed. If the cellphone picked up the white noise and lost Mikhail's voice, the sting would fail. Raymond had said the cell's technology would not allow this to happen.

Mikhail and the bull squeezed into plastic chairs beside the window. A big white 'Coca-Cola' sign was scrawled across the glass. The bull went to the glass-topped counter to get a coke, and Mikhail an espresso and carrot cake. When he came back, Mikhail cupped the pale china in his palms.

"Sergey said you might have a deal for me. We could maybe do business." He bit into the carrot cake, and flicked the crumbs off his suit sleeves.

Sergey, Mikhail's former business partner, had brokered the first contact. He had agreed in a deal with the Americans to avoid jail. I made a similar deal with the DEA before I left Guatemala. They called me a tumbador then, a narco, a drug trafficker.

I put both elbows on the table. "We want to buy agricultural equipment and sugar worth \$20 million." These were Sergey's code for Russian AK-47s and AT4 rocket launchers, Swedish made. "Sergey said you would understand our struggle, the politics, the urgency of our struggle."

As Mikhail frowned into his cup, I looked around the café. I had been in the game a long time, I knew wariness. And Mikhail had history. If he got foolish, the operation would get nasty. Preppy young people in t-shirts and jeans packed the square tables. I couldn't shoot without hitting a civilian. The agency would be buried in German military paperwork and get miserly about paying my fee. Fucking Americans.

"It's not my business. I'm a logistics man. My obligation is to put shit onto planes. I don't care where it goes."

"But you can ship agricultural equipment, sugar, to Colombia? With no problem?"

"Perhaps. There are questions to be answered, things to agree, your preferences, shipping dates, which airports, suppliers. Then the authorities, legalities, any paperwork. You understand?" Mikhail tapped his empty plate with one finger. "It can be simple as buying cake. Or not."

"Yes."

Mikhail pushed away his espresso cup. "I've got to check some shit before we sign a contract. And I'll talk to a friend of mine. He shipped sugar to Syria recently."

Something got my attention on the opposite side of the Friedrichstraße. One of Raymond's guys, Luis, climbed out of a silver hatchback. Why was he here? Was the bugged cell not transmitting? Had they found me gone from the Hilton?

While he talked, I kept one eye on the window. Luis checked his reflection in the hatchback's rear window. After smoothing his tight Armani t-shirt, he took a call on his cell. Once or twice he glanced across the road, directly into the café. So my cell was working. Raymond knew where I was, but Luis had got too close. I had to get Mikhail to agree a sale before the sting went bad.

The bull was watching the street. He tapped Mikhail on the arm, leaned over, and whispered in his ear. When he looked at me, he was sneering.

Mikhail frowned. "You know them."

Another of Raymond's men, Brett, crossed the junction of Friedrichstraße and Mohrenstraße. He was texting with his head down.

"Know who?"

"The CIA punks outside who've been following me all morning."

Sweat ran down my back and pooled above my heavy leather belt. Mikhail knew I wasn't a commander in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, in Berlin to buy weapons.

Should I risk pretending to know nothing? Perhaps Mikhail would calm down, grasp the eagle's balls and close the deal. That would save my face with the Americans. But Mikhail was a mad man in a corner. Push too hard and he could do anything.

A girl at the next table laughed. She had loose brown hair and long limbs. I shot a girl like her once, in a muddy field, without regret. She was running away. I'd felt I had no choice. Now I did, and this girl's laugh was sweet as Bastidas' when I bring breakfast in bed. America makes a man soft, unwilling to be bold, take risks to get a job done. Fuck America.

I kept my eyes on the bull's hands, hidden beneath the table. His watery blue eyes watched me stand up.

"Fine. You can't help. No deal," I said. My job, my judgement. Raymond would be angry. Fuck Raymond.

Mikhail knocked over his plastic chair as he leapt up. Leaning forwards, he thumped his palms on the table top.

"Fuck you. I know who you are and I evade you easily. I'm not a criminal. I'm no friend to you Americans and your politics. You live in a police state, you people."

Mikhail continued shouting as I walked slowly to the door. My back was turned to them. The pressure was lifted. The bull wouldn't shoot. When I passed the brown-haired girl's table, she stopped looking at Mikhail and stared at me. Her pink lips were parted. I thought again of Bastidas waiting for me. I have sinned, dear lord, and am serving my penance. A woman's body, a child's laughter, these are sweet fruits to savour before I burn in hell.