

Shaken and Stirred
by Doranna Durgin

Somehow it's always a warehouse. Bethany Riggs ran through the mental checklist of the weapons at her disposal, checked again that her Sig-Sauer P226 was an easy reach in the square cargo pocket of her deceptively casual squall parka, and eased out into the pre-dawn gloom surrounding the entire dock area. Not always a warehouse in Cape Town, South Africa...but a warehouse nonetheless.

Tonight...she'd bring a spy in from the cold.

Making a mild face at the drama of the thought, Beth hunched her shoulders into her medium-weight parka, chilled by hours of lurking in the fifty-degree night. She'd arrived early to scope out the site after Lyeta Denisov made contact late the evening before, leaving Beth no opportunity to examine the southern arm of the Table Bay docks in the daylight. A long jetty filled with warehouses, cargo docks and the mixed atmosphere of diesel fuel and sea foam, it was the perfect location for a late night meet.

If only she'd had the chance to vet it more thoroughly.

Then again, neither had anyone else, which was no doubt Lyeta's intent. There were plenty of people who wanted Lyeta Denisov...wanted her back, wanted her stopped...wanted her dead.

But Beth was the one who would get her--albeit on Lyeta's terms. The Russian woman,

betrayed by her lover and hunting both safety and revenge, offered information on the man's internationally notorious, terrorist-friendly spy organization in return for protection. Beth's handler from Stony Man Farm was only too glad to give it to her. Stony Man, MI6, the CIA...they all wanted spymaster Kapoch Egorov. But after a botched rendezvous with the CIA, Lyeta had turned to Stony Man. As black as black ops got.

Yeah, I'd be careful, too. Beth crouched briefly at the end of the long series of warehouses and cargo cranes, easy in the black leg warmers she'd pulled up over low-riding jeans. Her flexible Capezio high-top dance sneakers weren't the warmest footwear, but left her confident she could move exactly when and how she wanted. Soon enough Lyeta Denisov would arrive, just before the docks began the slow warm-up steps to the daily rhythms of activity. For now, only one ship floated beside the long, straight dock; the cargo containers were neatly stacked inside the warehouses, leaving the dock itself empty and desolate. The heavy scent of night-time sea lay over the area, and the constant rhythm of the waves lapped against Beth's ears.

One might even call it peaceful.

Beth didn't. The underlying tension of the night kept her alert and ultra-aware of the open nature of this area, and of its vulnerability. Too many exit scenarios called for diving into the cold, cold water of Table Bay; too many possibilities led to entrapment at the end of the jetty. The looming skeletons of the stationary cargo cranes offered so much visual clutter in their foreshortened line-up that she found it nearly impossible to decipher the structure of one from another. Still, she pulled a Phantom night vision scope from one of the parka's roomy pockets, sweeping its monocular view across the docks, across the ship deck, up and down the line of cranes. The man she'd previously spotted on the ship hadn't moved; he remained slumped over

the far rail, the thick glowing dot of his cigar marking his position. There was no one else in evidence.

Which didn't mean they weren't here. Lurking, as she was. Hidden.

She glanced down at her sturdy field watch. Not much longer. Then she'd have to come out from hiding and so would Lyeta Denisov. They'd meet, assess each other...and then Lyeta would come with Beth.

Or she wouldn't.

Well, she wouldn't actually have a choice, not once things progressed that far. Barbara Price of Stony Man Farm had made it quite clear that Stony Man wanted this woman. Wanted. And without a safe haven, Lyeta Denisov's days were numbered.

Beth swept the area again, glanced at her watch, and tucked the Phantom scope away. She stood, shook out her legs, and bounced up and down in place a few times. No dancer went out onto the stage without warming up, and this performance would be pure improv. Maybe a casual stroll, maybe some nice modern aerobic work...

She started off with the casual stroll, breaking cover from the warehouse to walk the long dock without apparent concern. Her hands, tucked into her pockets for warmth, curled around the Sig's custom Nill grips on her left and a collapsible baton on her right.

Since 1652 this port had earned its nickname for the warm welcome supplies it offered weary travelers. Tavern of the Seas. Time to see just how warm a welcome Lyeta Denisov would receive.

Or if she'd show up at all.

Beth walked the length of the dock, hesitated at the far end to check the area with her

night scope--cigar man had finished his smoke and gone below, but she saw evidence of no one else. Except...except there was a rounded shadow by the warehouse, and it caught Beth's eye. Closer examination revealed nothing specific--but it had caught her eye, and she'd learned to heed her eye. The skin up the back of her legs tightened, all the way up the back of her thighs and higher. Here we go.

She walked back out on the dock, dawdling conveniently near the shadow she'd seen.

The shadow did not disappoint her. Hard soles scuffed the pavement, just enough of a clue so Beth whirled to face the shadow spot, abandoning subtleties.

"Not a good place for a walk," said the man who emerged from the shadows, a burly fellow with all the bulky muscle of a dock laborer readily evident under his thin jacket. He spoke with the thickest of South African accents, words clipped and difficult--although Beth had no difficulty following his meaning, no difficulty at all. "I was getting cold, till I saw you."

"Go away," she said shortly. "I'm busy."

"American," he said, not sounding surprised so much as pleased. "I've never had an American."

"Yeah, yeah." She made a shooping motion. "Busy, I said. Go away."

"Americans are nice," he said, moving closer. He had a billed cap pulled down over lank hair, enough stubble to count up a week or so, and the definite odor of old beer. "But so ignorant of other places, other cultures. They make stupid mistakes all the time."

Annoyed, Beth said, "Possibly I'm stupid, but I'm not nice." A glance at her watch inspired an inward curse at the oaf's timing. She walked away, brisker now, wanting to put distance between them before things escalated into an exchange that might distract her.

He made no attempt at stealth; two long strides and he was upon her, his hand--the one she'd been waiting for--landing heavily on her shoulder and clenching the fabric of her parka. He spun her back around, but the anticipation on his face turned to surprise as she offered no resistance, moving easily under his hand--adding her own spin to his pull so she came around quicker than he'd ever considered. She saw that, too, on his face--just before she gave the baton an expert flick to extend it, whipping it across the big muscle of his thigh.

He gave a supremely startled "Uh!", bending over the pain to come face to face with the barrel of her Sig. She tucked the muzzle under his chin and lifted his face to look up at her. "His name is Wyatt," Beth cooed, lifting the muzzle just enough to let the end sight dig into stubbled skin. "Steadier than any boyfriend I ever had, but prone to premature...ejaculation, if you get my drift. Now...did I hear you say something about going away? Perhaps about walking in the opposite direction, really fast? Because as I think I've already mentioned...I'm busy."

Through clenched teeth he said, "Wouldn't...want...to...keep...you."

"Funny, that's what most of my men say," Beth told him, stepping back just far enough to indicate she would give him the chance to leave.

He took it. Hobbling, cursing--"You befok, stukkie!"--he headed up the dock and went beyond, toward the dawn-quiet Victoria and Albert Waterfront. Where American tourists belonged.

Unfortunate for him that Beth was far from a tourist. She spared him not a second thought, replacing Wyatt in her pocket and collapsing the baton against her hand.

"Pig." The words came from a deeper darkness beside the building, laced with disdain and a cultured Russian accent. "You should have hurt him."

"I did," Beth said mildly. Now here's a woman packing a grudge. "He deserved more-- but he wasn't worth jeopardizing my contact with...you."

"Yes. With me." Lyeta stepped away from the stack of pallets leaning up against the building. The scant moonlight painted her hair dark and her eyes impenetrable, but there was no mistaking her lean elegance, or the costly cut of the long, muted coat she wore. "You have come with proof that you are who I expect?"

"Sure," Beth said. "If I'd been anyone else, I'd have screwed up just then. I didn't. Let's go."

"So simple." Lyeta said the words with amusement. "You don't even ask for the information I promised?"

"I say we get away from these docks before we run into any more of its friendly inhabitants. We can be a nice cozy hotel room before the dock workers show up. You don't come up with the goods there, I can still walk away and leave you to everyone else."

"You could have someone waiting at that cozy hotel room."

"You choose it, then. Though you're going to have to trust me at some point--or else stay behind." Not that Beth would let it happen. But for now, Lyeta could think as much.

Lyeta tipped her head back to eye Beth, her shoulder-length hair swinging slightly with the movement--but not as freely as it might have. Dirty, Beth thought. Wherever Lyeta had spent the night, it hadn't been a cozy hotel room. At least, not one with running water. Then the woman gave a sudden sigh. "It does not do to stand out in the open."

"Your choice," Beth reminded her, keeping the woman in her peripheral vision as she gave the dock another once-over. Mr. Friendly could come back. He could even bring Mr.

Friendly II, or a whole gang of Mr. Friendlies.

"I did not know when I chose this place..." Lyeta hesitated. "There have been attempts," she said. "Your CIA, I am certain--the debacle at my attempted meet with them was no coincidence. They are not secure."

"Not my CIA," Beth said with a little snort. "Come on, then. Plenty of hotels right here on the waterfront. We'll give each other narrow-eyed looks for a while, you can hand over your little token of good faith, and we'll call for room service." Not exactly standard room service...Lyeta might need food, but she wouldn't get it until she was packed up in a nice anonymous car headed for the airport and Stony Man's waiting jet.

"My little token of good faith," Lyeta said, offended. "Only the innermost workings of Egorov's organization, laid out for your pleasure."

More than offended. There was pain behind that affected haughtiness.

"It's true," Beth said, recalling her briefing. That they were lovers...and that Egorov, dying or not, had begun jockeying his fortune around, making plans to shut Lyeta out. "You do love him."

"He betrayed me." Lyeta's voice turned chipped-ice cold. She tightened the belt on her already sleek coat and stepped out beside Beth, setting a stiff pace.

"So you betray him," Beth said. "Natch. That's the way it works, isn't it?"

"I buy my own safety, first and foremost." Lyeta's boot heels clipped against the pavement, masking Beth's nearly silent progress. Then her pace faltered, and a softer, saddened tone made a brief appearance in her voice. "It is of no matter. He dies soon anyway. Nothing I do here today will truly reach him."

For Kapoch Egorov was dying. Lyeta's information would give Stony Man the ability to strike during his organization during its most vulnerable time...the leadership transition after Egorov's death.

"He'll know you did it," Beth pointed out as they approached the last of the cranes. "That would sure as hell annoy me, if I were in his shoes. It would reach me."

Lyeta stopped, whirling to face her with a cold ferocity that spoke of her formidable nature...and told Beth just exactly how this woman had survived and flourished within Egorov's cutthroat organization. She reached inside her camel-hair coat and only the coolly aristocratic arch of her fine brow kept Beth's finger from tightening on the trigger of the gun that, as quickly as that, filled her hand. Still within its pocket, but Lyeta had no doubt of its presence, and Beth made no pretense of hiding it.

They locked gazes for a long moment, and then Lyeta brought out a mini-disc, preferring it between her first and second fingers in a graceful gesture. Beth took it without removing her gaze from Lyeta's, her own fingers brushing against gloves of the finest, supple kid leather. Lyeta said, "There. That is the information I have for you. In exchange for this early gift, you will not burden me with your opinions."

Beth shrugged, opening her parka just enough to tuck the mini-cd into the flat zippered pouch velcroed inside her jeans behind her hip. Snug fit. "Okay," she said. "But let's not dawdle, huh? Did you know that an average four foot, ten-second wave puts out more energy than 35,000 horsepower per mile of coast? And these waves are cold, besides. I don't want to have to find out just exactly how cold and energetic." In other words, we've been out in the open long enough already--

Too long.

The crack of the rifle hit Beth's ears the same moment Lyeta jerked backward, her expression stunned. Even as Lyeta crumpled, Beth grabbed her by the shoulder of her expensive coat and yanked her toward cover, scrambling to get them both behind the massive steel leg of the crane.

"Told you," Lyeta gasped in a breathy whisper. "CIA--"

"Why would they kill you?" Beth said fiercely, yanking Lyeta's coat open to assess the damage. "They might want you, yes, but kill you?" Seeing the dark stain across Lyeta's chest, she didn't bother for her night scope or even her mini-flashlight; dawn's faintest light told her everything she needed to know, and she patted the coat back into place with resignation.

Dammit, this woman was her charge, in her hands. She looked up along the line of cranes. Perfect sniper nest even with the scrutiny she'd given it, and the very reason Beth wouldn't have chosen this location...but Beth had not been consulted about location.

Lyeta touched her chest, lifting her fingers to see the stain on her glove. "Not the CIA...someone within it. On Egorov's payroll. I'm certain of it. He knows I have the key..."

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