

COMMON ENEMY

By Richard David Bach

CHAPTER 1

“Sit.” Viktor Viken’s imperious wave ended with a finger pointed at a straight-back chair centered precisely in front of his massive Louis XVI desk. Most people, myself included, dreaded that chair. Stiff and uncomfortable, Viktor’s chair conjured up visions of the principal’s office, and past experience had taught me that a session in that chair could be every bit as emasculating as Delilah’s scissors. I stayed standing.

“Sit,” he ordered for a second time. “I have a job for you.”

No *‘welcome home, Raam.’* No *‘nice to see you, Raam.’* No *‘how did it go in Afghanistan, Raam?’* He didn’t even make his usual snide remark about *‘Raam, the Bomb.’* This was the first time Viktor Viken had seen me in two years, and all he could think about was one of his dirty jobs. I wasn’t surprised — he wasn’t known for social graces, but it still pissed me off and I wasn’t about to sit at his command or in that chair. One reason being that I had been sitting in the backseat of his limousine squeezed between two of his ex-KGB bodyguards for the past hour and a half.

Grisha and Arkady, both huge, bald and surly, had barged into my apartment and roused me from the couch, which is as far as I had gotten before twenty-four hours of no sleep on Air Force cargo planes from Kabul to California had caught up with me and put me out. Neither of Viktor’s goons would tell me why Viktor had summoned me, and neither was particularly talkative, which was just as well because it gave me time to try to convince myself I would not let Viktor Viken intimidate me again.

I tried to be sarcastic, even though I knew it would be futile. “Hi, Viktor. Nice to see you, too.” Sarcasm usually flew right over Viktor’s head and I could only assume that the massive shock of white hair covering most of his scalp acted like an insulator. “How did you manage to stay out of jail while I was away saving western civilization from al-Qaeda?”

He came to his feet, hands spread in an apologetic gesture and mouth stretched in an embarrassed grin. “I am sorry, my boy. Yes, yes.” He gave me a mock bow.

“Welcome home, Captain Commoner. You must forgive me. I have a lot on my mind. But I am glad to have you back ... Now I won’t have to deal with that schmuck Bartholomew

you left in charge of my legal affairs while you were away. Get rid of him. He sucks up too much and he gives me heartburn. You're my lawyer and I do not want anyone else."

Viktor Viken stood erect, the tall, slim body still fit from daily workouts even at eighty, but with some noticeable deterioration in the two years since I was last here. He came around from behind his desk, walked over to where I was still standing, and hugged me. That did surprise me. I'd known Viktor Viken for twenty years, and I'd been sanitizing his messes for about five of those years, and never once had he ever hugged me before. Either he bought himself a personality transplant while I was gone or his PR people persuaded him to go to charm school. Either way, I wasn't about to let myself be charmed. I knew him too well. I pried myself loose and pushed him away.

"Look, Viktor. I got home this morning after two shitty years handling shitty court-martials and handing out shitty reparations to the families of Afghanis who got in the way of our missiles and bombs. I don't want to go back to work yet and I especially don't want another one of your shitty jobs."

"I could have kept you from going over there. You wouldn't let me."

Of course he could have. Viktor Viken had connections everywhere. With one telephone call he could have gotten me assigned to weekend calisthenics in Cucamonga while the rest of my unit went into harm's way. My life has been slightly bent at times, but my father's imprinted sense of duty trumped any leanings towards self-preservation and made the decision easy. Besides, I figured a tour in Afghanistan would get me away from Viktor for a while. Of course, I wouldn't tell him about the nights in Kabul with mortar rounds going off all around when I questioned the wisdom of my noble gesture.

"C'mon, Viktor. I told you then and I'm telling you now. They activated my reserve unit after 9/11, and I had to go."

Viktor's grin widened to a smile and once again I wondered why, with all his money, he didn't get his teeth fixed or get a haircut. He shrugged and motioned across the room to where Cliff Murray was sitting quietly on the couch on the far side of Viktor's office. A little paunchier than when I had last seen him, Cliff and I had exchanged waves when I first walked in. He shook his head and tossed me a look that clearly said *'Don't look at me ... this wasn't my idea,'* but his presence let me know that Viktor's job for me had something to do with security at Camelot Cruise Lines — Viktor Viken's pride and joy and the iconic centerpiece of the far-flung

business empire that made him one of the richest and most powerful men in the world. Cliff Murray was Camelot's Vice President for Personnel and Security. I had always thought pretty highly of him. A former mid-western county sheriff, smart, competent, good cop instincts.

Viktor reached up, put a hand on my arm and turned me to face Cliff. "That is why I love this boy," said Viktor with a fatherly pride. "He gives me no respect. Only my wife and my mistress talk to me that way. His daddy was the same way. Best damn pilot I ever had. Danny Commoner should still be flying me around in my Gulfstream."

Viktor turned back to me. "How old is he now, Raam, and how is his heart?"

"He's seventy-two. And as far as I know, the transplant's holding and he's getting back to normal. I haven't seen him in two years, Viktor. I was planning on going to see my folks as soon as I had a nap. But then your two goons woke me up and dragged me down here."

"Again, Raam, I am sorry for that, but this is important. Please tell your father that I've missed him."

"And I'm sure he misses you as much as I did." Again the sarcasm flew by him without making any impression, and I suppressed the urge to tell him the only good thing about being in Afghanistan was the seven thousand seven hundred miles of ocean, desert and mountains between him and me; at least until one of his companies showed up in Kabul as a civilian contractor — bodyguards to U.S. trade missions — with instructions to look me up if they had any problems with the military.

"Give him my best. And your mother, too," said Viktor. Then he turned serious, and faced me with his hands outstretched. "Raam, please. I need you." I didn't remember ever hearing him say 'please' either.

I was dog-tired and wanted nothing more than to go back to bed, either alone or, preferably, next to a warm soft body if any of my old girlfriends were still around, but this uncharacteristic vulnerability was finding a chink in my resolve. Like the tongue that's drawn to the sore tooth, years of experience with this man drew me right to the most probable question: *What fine mess have you gotten yourself into this time?*

I sucked it up, found the chink and stuck my finger in. "Can't it wait, Viktor? I haven't had a day off in over a year, and I'm looking forward to some down time. I might even take a cruise." I nodded towards the huge plate-glass window that opened one whole wall of his penthouse office atop Camelot Tower to a breathtaking view of Long Beach Harbor and the

Pacific Ocean, offering an unrestricted look out at *Excelsior Queen* tied up to a nearby dock while she was being prepped for her inaugural cruise.

“Two years in the deserts of Afghanistan sucked all the moisture out of me. I’m a Pisces and I need water.”

“I’ll buy you a hot tub. I need you now.” He waved towards his CSO. “Clifford. Show Raam the video.”

Viktor’s wave freed Cliff Murray from the couch. In Viktor Viken’s office one did not speak or move about without his permission, but once Cliff had that permission he stood, came over to where I was still standing in front of Viktor’s desk, and shook my hand. “Nice to see you again, Raam.”

He set a laptop on the desk and rotated the screen in my direction. Four or five mouse clicks brought up a video. “Watch this.” He clicked on ‘play.’

Shadows darkened the face and blurred the image on the screen. Probably a male voice, but obviously run through a filter and distorted. The words and message, on the other hand, couldn’t have been more clear.

“Good day, Mr. Viken. Permit me to introduce myself. You may call me Mr. Dinia. My existence will come to ride your nightmares when you recognize that ego has expanded my name.”

What was that? Some kind of riddle? I looked at Cliff for some understanding, but he just shrugged and the video continued.

“My lineage and my fame will destroy you, Mr. Viken, but you need not fear for the moment because my fame would necessarily herald the end of my career and I am not prepared to end my career quite yet ... at least not until I have achieved my goal.”

The distortion in his voice made rumbling sounds as if he were gargling, but an icy menace coated every word. I shivered.

“But for the time being it is sufficient that you know that I am what the media and law enforcement pundits would refer to as a ‘serial killer.’ A gross understatement, of course. My accomplishments guarantee me an honored place in the Serial Killers’ Hall of Fame, and when the time comes I will claim recognition as the most imaginative and prolific serial killer of our time. Imaginative because only I could conceive and implement a series of undetected murders on cruise ships; and prolific because I am currently responsible for a record setting total of

eighty-nine unsolved murders and disappearances, on land and sea, now including nine from your cruise ships over the past three years. Prior to today, two of my favorite treats were Sandy Kramer and Carolyn Bookman. I would love doing Carolyn again."

Right up until he said *'prior to today'* I figured someone was playing some kind of sick joke, and I was about to suggest that to Cliff when I heard the rest of the sentence and suddenly had proof of the old cliché about hairs on the back of your neck.

"Don't bother to waste your time searching for Miranda Briggs. Even as you watch this, her smooth firm young body, which I so lovingly caressed and fondled as her eyes pleaded with me to stop, is providing sustenance to a multitude of marine organisms somewhere between St. Thomas and St. Kitts. There will be more, and my tenth will be an exceptional pleasure because I will have told you where and when I will strike and I will snatch my victim out from under your protection ... should you be clever enough to decipher my clues."

A long pause, and when the voice came back the words had been dipped in hatred. *"You and I, Mr. Viken, have much in common. Soon, Mr. Viken, very soon, you will pay."*