

The Expendable Man by Peter G. Pollak

Chapter 1: 11:00 A.M. Tuesday, May 1; Washington, D.C.

“One more fuckup like this and you’re history. You know that, right?”

State Department South Asia regional manager Lois Potter was on the proverbial carpet. She had authorized the sale of a modern radar detection system to the government of Turkmenistan ostensibly to be installed at each of its two international airports. However, she had failed to clear the deal with the Defense Department, which had gone ballistic when they learned of the impending sale. They were sure the Turkmenistan military would try to get their hands on the system to reverse engineer it for military purposes.

The packet that Potter had prepared containing the deal particulars had been routed to the wrong desk at Defense and she had not bothered to find out why she hadn’t heard back from them before approving the sale. Now ten days before the deal was to be consummated in Turkmenistan’s capital Ashgabat, officials at the Defense Department were on the warpath and so was Secretary of State Constance Stone.

Potter was standing in front of Stone’s desk with her immediate report, Andy Lomantano. During the meeting that took place before he escorted Potter to Stone’s office, the most attractive option Lomantano proposed for her next posting was the U.S. Embassy in Outer Mongolia. Potter wasn’t sure there was such an embassy.

“The sale of this system jeopardizes Defense’s surveillance flights out of Uzbekistan over Iran and the region’s other West-loving countries,” Stone was saying. “So my lovelies, the deal must be stopped, cancelled, killed. *Capisce?*”

“Understood,” Lomantano said, and then hesitated. “But, on what grounds?”

“I don’t care on what grounds,” Stone replied her voice rising. “But let me be very clear. You not only need to kill the deal, but you need to do so in a way that can’t be traced back to the U.S. government or to this agency. Got it?”

Both Potter and Lomantano nodded.

“You understand the consequences if this goes through, right?” said Bryce Philipson, Lomantano’s CIA counterpart who had come over from Langley for the meeting.

“President Niyazov has made it quite clear that he is opposed to U.S. surveillance flights over his airspace. We’ve been able to conduct flights for the past year because right now the Turkmenistan military, such as it is, cannot detect our planes. However, once the Turkmenistan military gets its hands on the radar system that you have approved to sell to them, they should be able to build a system in six to nine months capable of detecting our flights. If that were to happen, Congress would have the president’s ass wrapped in a sling so tight he could go swimming in a pool of piranha and not feel a nibble.”

“But how can we stop the deal without withdrawing the license?” Potter asked.

“I’m not going to tell you how to do it because I don’t want to know the details,” Stone interjected. “What I want to hear from you in less than a week’s time is that it’s no longer a problem. So the two of you need to go back to Langley with Mr. Philipson here and find a way to kill the deal without making it look like we’re behind it. That means this meeting never happened and nothing you do gets put on paper. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Madam. Secretary,” Lomantano and Potter answered in chorus. Stone motioned with her hand that they were dismissed.

“Don’t mess up Potter or you’re finished!” Stone said as Potter was leaving the office. “You hear me?”

Potter stopped and turned to answer. “Yes, Madam. Secretary.” She waited a second, then seeing Stone had turned her attention to something else, left the office. She knew her face was beet red. She hoped she wouldn’t see anyone she knew on her way out of the building.