

THE REMOTE CONTROL JOB

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CHAPTER ONE

About eighteen months before the "Tat Offensive" during the month of September sixty seven, Nick Spree (Nicholas Spreelski is his full name) known better in his outfit as "Sitting duck", fell into an enemy's ambush. He was caught alive against all odds, and was kept so in spite of the reigning jungle laws.

It took place when he was lagging several yards behind the last soldier in his squad, on a night patrol. A habit he had adapted just recently, which had nothing to do with physical weakness or sudden fatigue; but it served him as an instinctive safety measure, which did save his life several times on such similar occasions.

Whenever a fire encounter broke out he was far off and quite safe, away from the dangerous scene's heart, and he managed to reach it right after everything was over and done with.

This state of affairs that lasted successfully up to that certain encounter, failed him this time. He fell into the hands of his captor, a young and sturdy North Vietnamese as an over ripe fruit falling off a tree. Clutching his victim's throat with his left hand, the assailant was ready to stab Nick with a ready drawn dagger, (a USN commando knife by the way.). As Nick showed no signs of resistance and hanged limply backwards on his captor's firm frame without uttering a sound, the latter changed his mind and summoned a hidden partner of his, with a low and strange whistle; imitating some jungle fowl, and shoved his dagger back into its sheath.

They dragged Nick who was shocked with fear to a nearby trench, which was camouflaged in perfect skill. There they relieved him of all his weapons, tied him and gagged his mouth; and waited patiently till the rest of the enemy's squad, Nick's comrades in fact; regrouped, and spared just a few more moments to search him in vain and vanished into the jungle's depth.

About an hour later on a narrow path through the jungle's undergrowth leading north, Nick reached the highest level of physical fitness he could have ever reached, under curses, shouts and blows of his own rifle's butt.

Within three hectic days in which he hardly slept, had very little to eat and no rest at all; they reached at last a small jungle village at about sunset, which served as one of the Viet-Cong centers in the vicinity.

Nick was thrown into a bamboo cage and fell asleep almost immediately, right after having hit the cage's floor.

There were some more cages close to his own, of the same kind and for the same purpose; from some of those cages some other captives tried to contact him in vain. The low calls, the whispers died away soon and the steady chirps of the jungle's insects, dominated again the menacing darkness.

At about midnight they came to fetch him for his first interrogation, and though he was threatened, abused, slapped and beaten, he kept dozing on his feet mumbling furiously half asleep: 'Leave me alone, you stupid jerks...! Get off my back...! What the hell...!' Without realizing at all where he was, and what were the actual circumstances in which he was involved.

On the next morning of course, he did not and could not recall any of the details, which took place just a few hours earlier.

A group of villagers were brought along, led by a young man clad in black. They moved his cage to a tiny clearing a couple of hundred yards away; leaving him there under the scorching sun rays to roast slowly, prey to hordes of flies at day time and to feed the mosquitoes during the night.

In a short while after having been brought there, Nick conducted a delirious parley fervently and aloud in a series of incoherent shouts, turning into pleads and wailing; calling for help, his parents, his close relatives and friends, the girl he had and left behind in the states. But most of that time, he argued vehemently with his squad leader and his comrades, particularly with those who disliked him, explaining his motives trying to justify his deeds.

At noontime on the second day, they covered Nick's cage with palm leaves and on the third day, they had to treat him with care, as if he were a new born babe.

The harsh measures seemed to have failed and were abandoned, otherwise that certain experiment would have resulted with the captive's death.

Nick wasn't of course their first P.O.W. There were many others before him, who died or did somehow survive in captivity. His captors did not bother much whether the hated enemies of the proletariat died or went on living. But due to some rather strange and quite unexpected development that was taking place on the third day of his captivity, they moved his cage once again.

A second group of villagers arrived this time, to carry his cage back to the village. There on the dirt road in front of the one and only village's brick bungalow, his cage was loaded on a battered and old Russian made lorry amidst a load of livestock and a bunch of jeering villagers, which of them were members of the Viet-Cong or which of them were just plain villagers, he could not know and was not well enough yet to probe his mind on it. All he could grasp was that he is bound to be driven in some unknown direction, in quite a lively company.

During the first few days of the hard journey northward, he was treated with no less care than the livestock around his cage. But weak and helpless as he was at that early stage of the trip, he could not complain even if he wished to. Though he felt depressed and beaten he did regain quite fast his former good health, thanks to his youthful vitality, and thanks to the hidden efforts of his captors to keep him alive. But above all, he was a strong young man of twenty two years of age. Thus although the harsh conditions, the humiliation he had to endure, being kept in a cage like a hunted animal; he has not lost the spark of life, and did his utmost to survive.

The stench in the crowded lorry, the sordidness, the horrible odor of garlic and animal dung were somehow overcome with the passing days. He had no other choice but to get used to it.

These were just the lower hurdles. His fellow voyagers whom he have found astonishingly bearable particularly when he was left alone, became usually hostile and rough, whenever they were prey to air raids; or whenever some mishap hindered their progress north, as small as a flat tyre or lack of petrol.

But as soon as things straightened up once again, when the last of the enemy planes vanished, or their current problem was successfully solved and they rolled on north; the harsh atmosphere changed almost drastically into a tolerable one.

After three weeks almost of rough jungle dirt roads, long detours around destroyed bridges, and being bombed and strafed at by thunderous air demons time and again, and many other hardships they finally reached the outskirts of Hanoi. Nick could not have known it yet of course, but there his cage was unloaded beside the road, guarded still by the same couple so it seemed to him, those two that captured him some thirty days earlier.

When the old lorry started to move again, ejecting black smoke out of its exhaust pipe; his two captors were taking leave of all the rest of his ex fellow voyagers, ejaculating excitedly, laughing and shouting very loud at the top of their voices in that guttural and strange language of theirs.

The lorry vanished after the road's first curve in the dense jungle's green wall, while his two captors became silent and grim again. Without paying any attention to Nick, the two of them hurried towards a lone sentry, who was keeping his post at the entrance of a well hidden building.

So well was that building camouflaged and hidden from sight that Nick whose cage was laid just some thirty yards away, managed to notice it only after his two captors were marching in its direction.

After a short exchange of a few sentences one of them was let in, while the other one was left behind and kept the sentry's company.

A small group of armed men came out of the building, clad in black the lot of them. They were approaching his cage in a menacing manner, holding their automatic weapons ready at their waists, as if they were set out to shower him with lead there and then.

They did get on his nerves and for just a fraction of a second Nick panicked, and numbed with fear he kept watching them coming closer.

But they could have killed me long before, in the jungle or just a bit later, in that village... Or they could do with me anytime they wished to. Why did they bother to bring me during those three long weeks then, all along that harsh and exhausting trip?

The way they surrounded his cage, did more than impress him. But they were not as hostile as he expected them to be. Contrary to his fears they pulled him out of his cage with much care and alertness; and gave him a hand to support his first steps outside his cage. As he spent three weeks crouching, sitting and lying on the sordid floor of his cage, weakened him that much that he could hardly stand up, or walk erect without support.

Led amidst his anonymous escort, towering well above them, Nick kept stumbling like a two years baby, taking his first steps on his own two legs.

In the wide and almost empty hall, which they all entered, behind a small and square table a man was sitting, watching him, and waiting for him to get nearer?

Is he an officer or an official of some Sort? Nick did not know and did not wish to rake his brains with, nor did he try to discern the man's features. He was weak and too tired to make such an effort. The fear and excitement he experienced and the efforts he had to exert to overcome it, just a short while ago left him utterly exhausted.

As they approached the sitting figure Nick was suddenly pushed forward rudely, and fell down on his knees before that man, while one of his supporters kept his hands on Nick's shoulders pinning him down to the floor.

During the short interview which ensued, he was asked some routine questions, such as his name, rank and age, and his personal number; while he was kept in that humiliating position, in front of his interrogator. The questions were asked in English, but with a heavy accent of a man who must have been more at ease with French. After some hesitation Nick answered him briskly, and looking up at the man's face and on the rest of them all around him. He could perceive their disappointment and surprise. His low rank must have been the cause. He was not an officer, not even a non commissioned officer.

The sitting man cleared his throat several times, and the rest of those who were present there, fidgeted nervously on their feet with uneasiness. Nick lowered his head once more, hiding his face. It was the only consolation he could find in that desperate situation; but he did not wish to provoke them. He heard many a time, and knew well enough how cruel and ruthless they could be.

The short interrogation was over and two of them led him through the building's passages, taking him down a staircase a large cellar. After having served for eighteen months already in "Nam", still they all looked the same to him whether they were South-Viets, or North-Viets, it did not matter at all they looked just the same. He simply could not find any difference between any of them, and did not bother to. He had his own life and safety to worry about. and right now more than ever.

There were five doors on each side of the cellar's corridor, ten lousy cells.

In any case it can't be worse than my bamboo cage... He thought with some optimism.

At the end of the corridor at the fifth door, they stopped. One of his escorts pulled out a key, unlocked and pushed open the heavy door. As he stepped inside the short fellow switched on the electric light and stood there smiling invitingly at Nick. An exposed bulb hanged down from the ceiling, flooding the small cell with its yellow light. There were a shower and a toilet in a second small cell, just opposite facing him, but without a partition of any kind, or a door to separate it from the main cell. But why should he care? He did not expect such luxury after all; a room equipped with everything he needed almost, electricity and running water. He simply could not believe his own eyes.

The second escort behind him pushed him slightly forward, and Nick crossed the threshold and entered his new lodgings, and stopped stupefied in the middle of the cell. His escorts were in the corridor already behind his cell's shut door, locking him inside it with a series of loud clicks.

Nick did not mind at all being shut there, on the contrary he was glad to be left alone at last, and waited patiently till the echoes of the guards footsteps died away. He was dizzy still with weakness and much excitement, and moved slowly around checking his new lodgings.

'My furnished suite' he mused under his breath with wonder. An iron bed, big enough thank god, a mattress and a bed cover, with clean sheets beneath it. Who would have believed it?

A low small cupboard stood at the bed's head that could serve as a table, if he were to sit on his bed. An enamel basin was placed on that cupboard.

At the opposite corner of his room stood a desk carved out of some local heavy wood, a rectangular piece with two chairs next to it; several books were lined on top of that desk, leaning diagonally on the wall. That's the lot of it, poor furniture, a cement floor, and bare walls. But he knew very well how lucky he was to have it at all. He lowered his huge frame down, and opened the small cupboard's one door. It contained a clean towel, a bar of soap of some obnoxious make, clean cloths, which seemed as some kind of uniform; and a pair of cheap sandals, but no socks and no underwear.

'How careless of them', he muttered aloud amused, in a rare short moment of fleeting elation. In a few quick and decisive movements, as if he feared yet of being shut in his cage again, he undressed hastily, getting rid of his uniform's soiled remnants, took his boots off at last, and stepped stark naked into his open bathroom. The shower's flow was steady and strong, but there was just one lonely tap, no hot water. Even so, it was more than he could have wished or hoped for, in such circumstances.

Incredible, it's simply incredible... He thought bewildered afterwards, stretched on his bed, clad in clean suit of clothes and feeling a bit better, as if some heavy load was taken off his back.

A filthy den, torture he feared he would not be able to endure, that's what he expected; night long interrogations accompanied with threats on his life...

Who knows what they've got in store for me? He shuddered with fear, for that's what he had been told back in his unit. That was just the little he knew about it. He leaped off his bed and started to pace the cement floor of his cell, from wall to wall like an automaton and dizzy with anxiety. From time to time he stopped and watched suspiciously the heavy door of his cell, with the spy-hole in its center; or went over to the desk, trying to find some interest in the books lined over there.

These books were left for my own "benefit", no doubt. He concluded worried and undecided. The books were in English every one of them and every one of these books as he soon found out dealt with communist theories, doctrines, and all other sorts of such boring bullshit. From pamphlets by "Ho Chi Minh" and General Giappe, to more extensive works and essays by famous names like Marx, Angles and Lenin, names that even he heard of; books he did not think he would ever read or bother to put his hands on. Just what the hell for? He thought as he returned to pace his cell's floor disappointed.

About a couple of hours later that day they came to fetch him again, the same couple of Viets that brought him to his cell; so it seemed to him, though it might have been just some completely different couple of them. But that was not the question that busied his mind; he was scared to death again.

On that certain occasion he was taken to an office, and was left alone with a man, the same one who interrogated him at the hall, when he has just arrived there. Nick was faced with a rather old man that's how he seemed to him. This man had a shock of white hair, and an impressive wrinkled face, an old Viet.

The meeting itself to Nick's pleasant surprise, turned out to be a friendly chat, as the old man himself termed it: a discussion, in which he talked and Nick had to listen. Nick was made to understand and was expected to believe that he, Nick Spree, was "a hard nut to crack". Why he merited that title, what has he done to gain it, he simply could not understand; but although he was not in any mood for such riddles, it flattered him, made him smile against his own will; but puzzled still, Nick did not utter a single word in that meeting.

While Nick was out at the meeting, his new cell was visited. The soiled rags he left behind him on the cement floor in a heap, his boots and socks vanished. His new light garments, white and convenient but a bit short for his size, were but a set of prison uniform, too conspicuous; without his boots any thought of escape was a mere illusion, a dream, never to be realized. On top of some harder facts, as being shut in a seller's cement cell with two exits; the heavy locked door and a ventilation duct of some four inches wide, leading upward, a small round opening in the cement ceiling.

As his wrist watch had been taken away from him on the very first day of his captivity, he lost all tracks of time.

I would not be able to tell day from night from now on. He thought worried recalling the tales he heard of such circumstances back in his unit's barracks, when such circumstances seemed so far off...

The electric bulb would burn on, twenty-four hours a day. Nobody had instructed him what he should do yet, and no one had to. He did not dare of course, to switch it off. His only means to mark the passing days would be his meals. But these trifles, the small inconveniences, did not discourage him. As the fear that somehow, in a very sophisticated way, they might brainwash him.

Yes, that must be it, that's why I was brought all the way up to that lone villa, which must have been turned into a jail; that's why I enjoy such formidable luxurious conditions. They would probably force me to appear on air, on their special broadcasts to the states, and who knows what else... Anyway, there must be some other prisoners in the neighboring cells, I'll have to check it somehow in due time, to find out what they did suffer and experience.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, a short while after Nick had his first breakfast in his cell; and after his table was cleaned up and the heavy cell's door was safely locked; Nick heard their footsteps again in the corridor, they were talking in their guttural strange language, laughing aloud excitedly. As they reached his door again they stopped, and their chatter turned into whispers. The key was inserted into the door lock and with loud series of clicks, which he was already familiar with, his door opened up the second time this very morning. A woman came in, a young Vietnamese chick, skinny, small, just like most of their females. Her black uniform was hanging loosely on her lithe and frail body.

One of the guards came smiling embarrassedly right after her to have a look around, to see if everything was in order, so it seemed and turned on his heels and left right away.

When they were left alone at last, she explained to Nick her task in her Pidgin English, which was no less than to teach him; or to indoctrinate him as a matter of fact in the humble "Proletariat" ways of life. While he was scratching his four weeks growth of beard, Nick watched her with amazement. Apart from booze, poker games, dice and those slanted eyed skinny chicks, which he was not too fond of; there were no other means of entertainment back in Saigon, in the days prior to his captivity. He was not the type that could date some of the few females at headquarters, or get in touch with the dwindling French community; he was not that lucky. Thus whenever he needed a woman, just one choice was left for him, Saigon's brothels. Right now he needed a woman badly, and being alone with that female, reminded him that fact rather urgently. He was sitting on his bed beside her, and did his best to understand her slow and soft prattle; and kept waiting restlessly for his chance to come. After quite a while, he had her twice on his bed and it came about surprisingly easy; but not before she read to him a dull and terribly boring chapter out of some book of his small library. She stayed the night with him, and let him satisfy his urges completely without the slightest objection. When he woke up the next morning, she was already gone. He did not leave his cell or saw anyone during that week, except the usual couple of his ever changing guardians, whenever his meals were brought in. He did not have to suffer anymore

interrogations or discussions or anything of the sort; nor did he have to suffer any other unexpected meetings in the coming weeks. There was one thing that kept bothering him in these first days, the behavior of his pair of guards on duty; who kept changing according to their shifts, but did not change their mute and hostile attitude towards him, and not one single word was uttered in his presence. They were silent and grim, each time they had to pay him a visit radiating their heated resentment. There was nothing else left for him to do but read those dull and boring books in his assorted library, which were piled up on his table, he had no other choice. But above all the fear he might wind up a crackpot, lose his mind in some weird way, kept haunting him on, since his first days of captivity.

The old theories and the ideologies on universal equality and fraternity, which he could hardly grasp; and the little he did understand, he could not agree with. Although his background was rather badly off he was never attracted to those issues. He was not what one would have called a bright pupil in his college days, but even he could see that the ideas expressed in his library books did not fit anymore. The arguments expressed in these books were too farfetched, archaic, and in some cases simply absurd. He was wise enough though not to contradict or argue with any of his female instructors, neither with the first one nor with those who came in her wake; for that has become his weekly routine, week in week out, along these three months of his internment at the "villa". Thus at intervals of five to seven days a young local woman would show up in his cell, and spend the next twenty four hours with him.

But in cases in which he happened to be disobedient, which meant he did not know the right answers, or did not pay enough attention to his lessons; the visits were cut short and right away before the craven prize was awarded. The strange thing was that on the only time that such a thing did happen, the young woman present at that time did not raise her voice to call out or make any other sign. The door just opened up, and off she went.

He did not turn into an expert on communist theories and ideologies in such a short time, but he could be defined as a learned person in the essence of those theories. He knew all the popular slogans by heart, and could quote some of the most important excerpts in his books, which expressed the thinking and the justification of the communist system. What's more, he could recall successfully the different authors of each of the quoted excerpts. Never before did he believe that he could have exerted such efforts of himself, to remember by heart those dull and boring hateful lines, which in fact had only one meaning for him, his prize at the end of each encounter. The game rules were very clear and simple; he had to adapt himself to their way of thinking, or face isolation and sexual starvation, after having tasted and enjoyed it so abundantly.

He had plenty of time to think things over and reflect; at that stage of his captivity it did not seem bad at all. They did not deprive him of food or of other necessities, and if he were to compare it with his first days in his bamboo cage in that forlorn jungle village; well then, it's a golden cage in which he is kept now. Above all, there was that kind of barter deal, in which he had to make some real efforts at the start, but it was not hard anymore, he could handle it now and win his prize.

They were sent to his cell in an everlasting chain, these taciturn and frail chicks, not even one of them visited him more than once; each visit a different one appeared, different in all aspects, and whenever he showed a remarkable progress, the intervals between their visits shortened. Though he was aware to the growing influence of those bizarre studies, and how more and more addicted he became to that process, and he kept on studying, out of his own free will.

How they haunted him these tiny sweet creatures, it was simply incredible. Their bashful smiles, their soft voices, their frail and warm bodies, served as a metaphor to his own freedom, the urge to break away, to escape and leave behind him his cell's walls, the hostile guards! The possibility to have a few words with someone who listened to him at last, the short embarrassment at the beginning of each encounter, and the mutual understanding at its end... But on top of it all making love to them was like soaring up in the sky, gliding like a free eagle on the warm air streams, away from his locked cell. The fact each visit brought with it a new face, did not seem strange to him nor did it make him too suspicious. But although Nick could have guessed that he shall have to pay at the end with some harder cash than his studies, he drove these thoughts out of his mind; as if he shut a door in haste, and kept blocking it with his shoulder. So worked up was he with his fears, his studies, his wild dreams of rescue; all mingled up with so much tension and longing, preventing him most of his time from concentration and thought even for a few seconds. Thus out of his own free will he did not make the slightest effort to try and find out, what it was all about. There was no need to extend the link or to develop a more emotional tie, with any of enigmatic female visitors. But whenever he tried to get closer to them, learn their names for instance or get any other personal details about them, out of sheer curiosity; they used to shrug their delicate shoulders or mutter with a bashful smile: 'not important... no matter...'

Meanwhile those that conducted this bizarre and secretive operation learned his whims and tastes thoroughly, up to the last one. The preparative phase was over and the next stage was at his threshold.

A young and exotic Eurasian was selected for it. She was somewhat taller than the average Vietnamese female, had well shaped legs, a firm and abundant bosom; but above all she had an extraordinary pretty face, plus a sharp brain behind that pretty mask of hers. Although the local community in general, despised Eurasians, her large blue eyes, her enchanting smile and her shrewdness, were her passport to the higher party echelons. They had some trouble though in convincing her boss, the party's prominent member in the Northern Province close to the Capital. She was his secretary and mistress at the same time of course. But when the time was ripe to introduce her to Nick, her boss had to part with her. After all he could not jeopardize his own career, and would not stand in her way, as she was supposed to serve party and country alike. The fact she was his mistress was never mentioned of course. When her assignment would be done and over with, he was promised to have her back. But he knew quite well, that as far as he was concerned she was lost

forever. He was lucky enough to have her all for himself for almost two years by now, and could well divine and understand that someone much more powerful than him fancied her, just like he himself did two years earlier.

Lee Chen Woe was her name, but she was to introduce herself before Nick as Nicole her new "Nom de Guerre", the name she was ordered to use for that certain operation.

She was the illegitimate daughter of an unknown French settler, who left Indochina before she was born – nineteen years earlier, just two decades before Nick had the chance to set his eyes on her.

Young she was there could not be any doubts about that fact, anyone could note it quite easily. She was still in her teens one might say, but the load of life experience that she was towing after her was simply incredible she was a living myth. From the early age of thirteen, she was used to accompany powerful men, adorn their company with her splendid appearance and satisfy their lusts humbly. Whether they were rich merchants, illiterate gang leaders, Viet-Cong officers and party commissars; she was used by them all and had been exchanged body and soul between different patrons, at least a dozen times before she reached Hanoi.

There was no need to prepare her for her certain part in that operation, in quite a short briefing she was told her task. She had to enslave Nick with her own means and in her own time, nobody rushed her. Her cover story was not different from the one that served all her predecessors so successfully; political indoctrination, in other words pure brainwash. During the three or four first days or the "honey-moon", as her superiors termed it in their jargon, she was expected to emerge for a fresh breath of air from time to time. In case she would have some special developments to report on, or if she'll need to consult them; or if she'll simply need a change of atmosphere. In short, she was given almost a free hand, to run it as her own show.

Her conquest was immediate and undeniable, right after she crossed the cell's threshold. The door was shut with a thud behind her back, while Nick sitting on his bed watching her with utter surprise missed a heartbeat; meeting her eyes brought another wave of heat to his brain. He was breathing hard, and could not even if he would have made his hardest efforts, to conceal his growing excitement.

She was not the glamorous type the way movie stars are, and was not attired as one, quite the contrary; the same coarse and simple cloths that all of them wore, men and women alike covered her young and lovely body.

'The day has come...' She said standing before him right at the middle of the cell, looking at Nick's face, as if she addressed an audience in surprisingly fluent English, without a trace of any foreign accent; and taking advantage of the unexpected shock her appearance caused him, she repeated her short announcement loud and clear, as she was told to do by the head commissar.

'What's that...? What did you say...?' Nick stammered awkwardly, in utter confusion.

'My name is Nicole comrade Spree.' She said smiling haughtily at him, in a common show off of self-confidence, ignoring his question.

'I am your guide from now on, no objections I suppose?' She added with obvious sarcasm and without waiting for his answer she went on: 'Let's not waste our time.'

She had never attended any ideological courses herself, and her whole political knowledge was accumulated haphazardly, as she was climbing rather rapidly up the party's ladder. But she was not supposed to broaden his views or his horizons, nor was she supposed to add anything in particular to his little store of useless data. All she had to do was to make him read his library, think it over and over again and repeat endlessly the new "wisdom" they were so eager to stuff his brain with.

They were both a bit reserved at first. Though she played her role as well as she could, but it was her first time to meet face to face with the enemy. Nick on the other hand, in the hazy stupor that blurred his mind since she appeared in his cell, simply could not have noticed her reactions, and the mere fact that she was as nearly excited as he himself was.

What a face... What a gorgeous figure she has...! He kept thinking, without being able to relax. He did not have the knowledge or the experience to grasp the impact of her personality, in such a close encounter. But he did feel it and did submit to her superior personality unconsciously.

With the same sarcastic smile on her lips, she sat on one of the chairs next to the small table, leaning back on its wooden support. But as Nick rose up and crossed the short space to join her, she watched his unusual huge frame with surprise and alarm. The expression on her lovely face has not changed a bit though. She kept on smiling with tight lips, but was conscious to the feeling of uneasiness and mistrust that his last few movements caused her.

The loathsome American! The hated enemy! But is he really my enemy this miserable wreck? For mentally he's quite a wreck, isn't he? No, I mustn't treat him as a conventional symbol, an object of hatred... Nonsense! Men could never be her enemies. She clung to them like a limpet to a rock, was loyal to each one of them in his turn, till a stronger one popped up. She did not have to make the switch herself; they themselves did it, as they snatched her from each other's hold. Who could have dared to blame her then with infidelity? But there he is the operation's subject, right in front of her.

The sight of Nick did not thrill her, neither his looks nor his unusual huge frame. She was swept with elation though, for a whole week already, long before meeting her objective for the first time. At last she reached the main core of power in any communist regime, and for the time being it's the highest peak she has ever reached in her career so far. The outcome of the operation, small and unimportant as this operation seemed to be, is in her hands exclusively. Its subject comrade Spree did not impress her much, nor did his powerful built impress her, which did scare her somewhat at first; but had not any additional influence on her feelings. As she sat listening to his stammer and awkward answers, she knew she was not going to fail; on the contrary, an easy job was awaiting her.

At the end of the day, a fact they both realized when the guards brought in their last meal, she was attacked with a fit of yawns. In other circumstances, she hardly retired before midnight. She was used to long and busy hours, the men she faced or lived with, the problems she had to tackle daily, needed cunning and wit. Nick was not such a challenge, she realized it soon enough. So out of sheer boredom and disappointment, she grew tired and restless. Taking her bowl of food in one hand she was stifling another yawn with the other one...

The guards left shutting the heavy door behind them, and they were left to munch their supper in an embarrassing silence. The way he handled his chop sticks, nearly made her laugh aloud. But she did prefer to ignore it, at that sensitive moment and turned her attention to her own bowl. The mutual awareness to the coming night made them both uneasy and tense. When the guards returned to remove their empty dishes, they seemed to Nick nervous and hostile more than ever. They did their job with angry and jerky movements and left them in a rush, as if they were glad their task was over. Under Nick's watchful and restless gaze, she went over to the bed, standing before it she told him with quite a forced smile to switch off the light.

Finally when all was over and done with, she was lying awake at the side of the American's sleeping body. Recalling how long it took her to relax him.

How tight and clumsy he was...! I had to encourage him all along, to caress him, stroke his hair and neck, feign desire, whisper love words in his ears... Oh how tired and sick I am! All her early enthusiasm faded away all of a sudden. The bed was not too narrow, but beside his huge frame she could hardly move.

Should I get up and call the guards? Should I walk out, and leave him in his slumber? Do I loathe and despise him that much, as to demonstrate such 'bourgeois' weakness, and risk my promising career!

What was it that bothered her and kept her wide awake she wondered, though she was so tired and wanted so much to sleep? Has the easy conquest over comrade Spree weakened her mind, and her will power? Does the continuation of that treatment seem futile to her, now?

What's wrong with me? She thought in despair. Has this man stirred my father's blood in my veins? What could we have found in him, in that dull moron? What can we expect of him, except a few appearances on air, in that routine and out of date propaganda program? Is he supposed to become a cocoon, back in his own country? It's simply incredible! What can we expect of this wretched specimen of western superiority?

But no, she must not busy herself with the American's obscure future. If her superiors approved this plan, and found it to be sound, that must be her own way of thinking. The details of that plan, which seem so strange to her, are none of her business; she must adhere to her part in it without any doubts or any deviations, she concluded to herself decisively.

After a short while regaining her natural cold blooded calm, she could understand the reasons for her sudden feeling of depression and its full weight and impact. It had nothing to do with the operation itself, nothing at all. It was a deep feeling of self humiliation that haunted her. She had an unconscious strange feeling that bothered her, as if she became a cheap whore of the lowest grade.

To share a distinguished person's life even for a short while, though no more than a mistress was a dignified deed. Nobody dared to scorn her; she was respected and envied at the same time. But this job, well she was wrong, she did not realize, yes it's this job! It's her comrades' good will, the sophisticated cooperation she receives... The sly jokes behind her back, the ambiguousness. Is it supposed to push her to do her utmost? Or is she being pushed to the head commissar's bed? Well she doesn't think so, and even if she's wrong, it can't be his doings. Anyway it's nothing but a hunch, and the answer to that riddle, which stopped worrying her at last, after having reached these conclusions will soon be solved.

But would he share me with the American? What a pity he isn't younger, or more attractive. She could not deny herself the soothing thoughts, the exaggerated and unrealistic dreams, with which even she used to let her mind adrift sometimes. One more thing busied her mind and must have been the real cause to her bad feelings, the lack of privacy, the harsh and rough exposure she did already suffer from. She was very well acquainted in a way with such issues, had her own experience to support herself, and nothing of that kind hindered her or limited her before; quite the contrary, it was an asset she knew well enough to exploit. But to be exposed to some hidden and unknown sophisticated devices, to submit oral and written reports on every syllable she uttered, on every single move she did... To be almost day and night ceaselessly under constant surveillance through the spy-hole and through some other sophisticated means no doubt...

Well that's quite a different matter! That's why I ordered the American to switch off the light, without a second thought and against the regulations...! But isn't it my own show? I'll deal with such problems in my own way. After all it's my legitimate right! And there are some more aspects. Why throw in all my charms right from the start, from the very first night? Let that moron of an American sweat in expectation! That's it! That would be my argument should anyone start to nag, or poke his nose in my affairs. But above all, if I aspire to get in a closer touch with the head commissar, I wouldn't have liked to have my bodily merits and my sexual feats discussed by the entire reeducation center staff, would I?

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, as soon as Nick woke up, he could sense that she was not in bed beside him. He opened his eyes with difficulty, and saw her sitting next to the table across the short space that divided them. Her covered back with that black shirt of hers was turned to him, but she was still in his cell...

A warm feeling of relief and gratitude swept his heart, as he watched her silky cascade of jet black hair streaming down to her shoulders. Last night's sensations, the bliss they shared together, just a few hours ago, invaded his brain vividly. The bed squeaked as he was leaving it, rising to his feet excitedly, overtaken with joy, on his way to reach her, to clutch her in his arms again.

'Put your cloths on comrade, dress up!' She ordered him coldly, without bothering to turn her head around and look at his face.

He stopped still in the middle of the cell, downhearted and hurt; and like an automaton he turned back to the bed, grabbed his cloths and put them on in haste. As he turned to her direction at last she was already facing him, with a business like stern look on her lovely face.

Nick approached her again with a baffled smile sending forth his powerful arms, yearning to embrace her, to draw her lovely and abundant body to his chest.

'Mind your paws, comrade Spree!' She sneered at him with tight lips, narrowing her large blue and slanted eyes.

A delicate touch of contempt, that's what he needs, flattery won't do with types like him. He might become too hard to handle. She thought watching intently Nick's frustrated face. I'll have to restore his self-confidence though from time to time, in bed of course. A bittersweet treatment, yes, that's the right process in this case.

'Have you slept well?' She asked him, laughing freely in his puzzled face. The least she could do was to pass her time agreeably in his dull company, and have her job done at the same time. He turned out to be such a poor lover. But with some encouragement and patience, he'll improve no doubt. He's a fine man after all.

'Where did you pick that Limey lingo?' He mumbled in wonder standing upright before her. Although she was surprised by his unexpected question for just a friction of a second, and her smile was still lingering on her lips, her eyes were set ablaze with anger. There were two things she hated being reminded of; the fact she was a half-caste, and any reference to her way of life. Though she was able to control herself well enough and hide her weaknesses when necessary, but the slightest hint or insinuation on those issues flared her up instantly.

'Never mind, well, that's simply none of your business.' She braced herself quickly, realizing she must have underestimated him; he was not that simpleton she thought him to be.

'You had better prepare yourself for breakfast.' She added gently. 'They are bound to come any moment now.' She was still stressing on purpose that 'limey lingo' of hers, and with a wave of her hand sent him to tidy himself up.

Like most of her compatriots she spoke French fluently, and hated it just like all of them; though her motive was a more complex one, the shadow of a French father, which she never had the chance to know.

The fluent English she learned from one of her early patrons, a hoodlum who had been educated in England; a university graduate that served his country for several years as a member of its diplomatic corpus over there, before returning to Burma his native country. After he committed a sordid crime, its details she never dared to ask or wished to know, he stealthily crossed the border into Indochina under the French rule. She was young then and inexperienced at that time; thus his influence over her was so formidable that she was using his adapted traits still, and his witty phrases... The author of these witty phrases was dead and forgotten long ago, as far as she was concerned. But she liked that language, and took a real fancy it, and made efforts to extend her knowledge in it whenever she could. It came about handy those traits after all, which were hers alone now and her continuous efforts to improve it; and to cherish that 'limey-lingo', as the American comrade Spree termed it. It was not a bad or a useless habit, it brought her that peculiar job. But that is of course, none of the American's business.

'Do you have any particular requests; is there anything I can do for you?' She asked Nick as they sat face to face eating their breakfast, which was brought in a few moments earlier.

He stopped munching and watched her in alarm. Just what is she up to now? He thought suspiciously. Is it some kind of a farewell present, and that would be it. I'll never see her again?

'What's wrong, what are you afraid of?' She was laughing again. 'You need a hair cut badly, and that beard of yours that becomes you so much, has to be trimmed don't you think?' She kept on eating loading bits of food on her chopsticks, casting curious glances at him.

'Don't you wish to breathe some fresh air once in a while, to see the sky? You're allowed to leave your room once a day, don't you know it?' Seeing his surprised and baffled expression, she went straight on. 'That's why I'm here, don't you see? Just go ahead and say yes thank you, that's all you have to do.'

What a bloody fool he is! She thought disgusted, pushing her empty bowl away from her. Isn't he going to answer me? Well, I need a break and I am going to get it even if I'll have to shove the bloody answer down his throat! I don't intend to sit on under that stare of his, not even one more second! When that door opens up again, I'm off!

'Your conduct has been excellent, so I've been informed, well in that case I'm authorized to settle your requests, right away; requests that we can cope with of course, what's your answer then? Go ahead just say it, that's all.'

'If that's so, I want to send a word to my parents.' He stammered at last. 'To let them know I'm still alive.'

So that's it. That's why he is staring at me with that beseeching stare of his! The quick thought crossed Lee Chen Woe's mind. He's still tied to the outside world then. Well, it's just the beginning, but he shall forget them all, his parents, his girl friend if there is one, his home town, soon enough!

'Oh I see.' She raised her voice with feigned compassion. 'You must be on the missing in action list by now, that should be the right term if I am not wrong; I can't promise you anything on that matter yet, sorry. I'm awfully sorry indeed, but I'll see what can be done, don't despair.'

They could hear now the guards' footsteps approaching the cell's door, and the noise the key did while being inserted in the door's lock; and then the series of clicks, as the door was being unlocked.

'Anyhow, I'll get you an answer...' With these words she rose to her feet. The door opened up with a screech, and nodding her head to the two entering guards, off she went, rushing out between the two of them. Nick stood up, his head and shoulders towering above the guards, and watched her leave in amazement. As she was in mid crossing the threshold, she stopped and turned her pretty face back to him, smiling. 'See you at lunch time comrade.'

'She isn't as tough as they asserted her to be, it seems.' Remarked the jail commander to his guest, and switched off the intercom. They were both sitting in the commander's office. The guest sat at the head of the desk near the wall, occupying the jail commander's comfortable chair.

'We can't know yet what she's capable of; it's too early to draw any conclusions.' His guest retorted. He was the head of the operation, the one who has chosen and assigned Lee Chen Woe to that certain job. The scornful criticism of that young man's remark irritated and angered him. He had a deep dislike to those sleek and ambitious young men, who were ever so eager to remove anyone aside by any possible mean, to shorten their way to the top. No more than two seasons earlier, he was still heading the biggest net in Asia; their one and only source of reliable intelligence from Saigon, the enemy's heart. While this efficient clerk, in whose comfortable office they were sitting right now never left Hanoi, from the day he was installed in this same office; or who knows, even before all along his short career.

'Where is she now?' The head commissar asked dismissing angrily his irrelevant thoughts.

The commander switched on the intercom again, and passed on the question. 'She's sitting on the stairs leading to the back-yard.' The answer echoed against the office's bare walls.

'Tell him to her to report at your office!' The Head Commissar ordered. He has already read her file several times, but that was all he knew about her right now. What are files after all? No more than a few dry dubious facts and several opinions, of several people. The accuracy of such opinions, in most cases is rather doubtful. Nevertheless, she was his best choice and still is. There is no fault in her emerging that early, on the second day. It's a hard and tedious task she is faced with; no one knows it better than him, not even Lee Chen Woe herself.

There was a slight knock on the office door and she was ushered in. As the door closed behind her she took a few steps forward and stood before them, bowing her head in obedience.

How extremely good looking she is! He did not realize it at all, the head commissar thought amazed; though he did somehow have just a few glimpses of her good looks before, but he haven't given it enough thought.

It can turn into a real threat! She might get into trouble very easily... To leave her among those young ruffians might be a fatal error, and the way this young man is ogling her!

'Sit down comrade.' He ordered her briefly, showing her to the chair opposite the jail commander, with a brisk movement of his hand.

I must be very cautious, keep a watchful eye over her, being a half-caste makes her an easy prey. I'd better use her for my own ends, than let others use her as a weapon against me. He concluded decisively.

'Well, how do you find our operation's subject, what are your first impressions?' He asked her casting a warning glance at the jail commander.

'He's very well prepared; I keep in mind your advice and adhere with strictness to your instructions, comrade commissar.' She answered lowering her head again, obediently.

He exchanged a quick glance with the jail commander, and made an effort to hide his satisfaction.

She is getting on fine no doubt, and above all, I can rely on her blindfolded.

His revered title "head commissar" was a practical joke; and a very old one, going back to his days in the resistance movement against the French. Long before the country was divided into North and South; funny enough, it served him well that old joke, up to this very day. Few veterans like himself knew his real name, and his real occupation.

'Have you encountered with any difficulties?' He asked briskly.

'There is one problem...' She answered haltingly. 'He expressed a wish to send a letter to his parents.'

'Yes I know it's out of the question right now. We've no direct connections with the capitalists, but we'll arrange it somehow, through one of the neutral consulates. Do tell him he may write his letters, we'll find a way to dispatch his correspondence. Now back to your task. It's his weaknesses you have to exploit, to deepen his dependence on you. But on the other hand, you'll have to start building his faith in you. You must convince him, that you're his only ally. To begin with, make him believe that he is the only man in your life, the only one that counts; the only man that made you ever happy... Do it with patience and care, and don't ever dare to underestimate him. He has many useful qualities.'

He made a short pause, watching her nod her head in obedience, and added: 'You'll retire to your own room now, to prepare a written report. You'll have to prepare a written report after each time you withdraw from comrade Spree's company.'

'She may use my office any time she needs to...' The jail commander suggested.

'No, I don't want her to be disturbed nor accosted by anyone except myself. That's an order! You may leave now comrade Lee.' He turned once more to Lee Chen Woe. 'I'll be in daily touch with you.'

The moment she left he turned his attention to the commander. 'She is not to be approached by anyone of the staff, including yourself! Unless I'll order it; she is free to come and go inside your base and leave it whenever she needs to, even if she just thinks she needs to... In case she decides to take the American with her, the responsibility for his safety is hers alone. If she'll express a need for your cooperation and aide, you'll have to comply! These are my orders!'

When the guards finished their work and went their way, leaving him at last; Nick grabbed at random one of the books in his panic, and facing the spy-hole he sat at the clean table as if he was reading it. His thoughts were racing wildly in his brain in a maddening whirl, the printed letters in the open page danced before his eyes like tiny licking flames reaching up to his face. His parents, the letters he wished to send them, his obligations, to his past and his future, the few hopes he had harbored in his mind. Thoughts that had grown into shape and burdened his conscious just this morning were dismissed driven away, wiped out entirely, at the very moment Nicole left his cell.

Was it the last time I ever saw her? The fear he'll never see her again, invaded his brain in an actual piercing pain. As time oozed by he calmed down gradually. He had his share of ordeals, and though his experience in captivity was not too harsh physically; he had to face some mental stress trials and survived it somehow. This time things seemed a bit tougher. It was not just another aftermath of a short relationship with one more of his incognito female guides, the interval with its tense expectancy for the next one to come. It was not love either, not even what could be termed as a self inflicted infatuation. It was an emotional bond much stronger than those quite ordinary definitions, a bond he could not yet fathom and was not conscious to its hold upon his mind. He knew he could not do without her, that's how it really felt like. That was the only thing he was conscious of. Although he must have impressed her very poorly, he was not as dumb as she thought. His awkwardness, his almost retarded behavior in her presence, was not due to the confusion her charms alone caused him. She was not just the casual blind tool, to advance him from one point to another, like those before her. The fact was quite obvious, and even he in his desperate mental state could grasp it. Apart from her physical attractions and the vivid memory he had just recently of her enchanting personality, the incredible impact of her presence crushed him. But somehow, subconsciously, he could feel that she was his only salvation. If there was anyone who could get him out of this mess it's her – Nicole! How and when, with what means and ways, he did not dare to think of yet. But as things looked on that fateful morning, his hopes were bound to tumble down and crush with every passing hour.

Did they lead me to that high peak on purpose, just to push me down the slope, into deeper despair? He could not avoid the frightful thought. Well, I'd better prepare myself for the worst... I might end up in my bamboo cage once again, before this day is over!

About three hours later the self inflicted tortures, with which he did torment his own brain lost their grasp over him. She was back in his cell. He heard her melodious voice in the corridor, long before the door opened up and she was there with him again.

A sudden change of mood befell him as he was watching her pretty face. The morbid anxiety, which overpowered him with ever growing intensity, left him right away. She is to stay with him; she isn't a fleeting shadow like the rest of them. But yet, as if he could not believe his own eyes, he kept watching her in silence; taking pains not to upset her, with some foolish remark or some jerky movement. His true feelings were written all over his bewildered face. In fact he was too exhilarated, swept with joy and shocked by her return.

But how long would it last? Oh, what the hell! Enough! She's here with me, and nothing else matters! He thought excitedly, helping her to a chair.

'Be seated yourself comrade, don't keep standing.' She endowed him with a warm smile. 'I've promised you a few things, haven't I? Well, I've brought you good tidings.' She laughed contentedly, with good humor; putting down the pencil, envelopes and the sheets of paper she brought with her on the table. Funny, she thought. How both of us are pleased to see each other again. I've enough reasons to be pleased with. The fact I've breached the regulations last night was not even mentioned! He likes me and approves of every step I take; the head commissar there is no doubt about it. The authority he has! The jail commander doesn't count much in this game; I've an absolutely free hand! I roam the jail's passages just like the tiger roams the jungle's underbrush. No one dares to affront me! Well, he brought me good luck the American, and just for that I might even like him a little bit.

'What's the good news then?' Nick reminded her. He was tranquil and quite at ease, to his own surprise.

'I've submitted your request to the authorities.' She said choosing her words very carefully. 'The answer was given straight away, it's positive.' While watching his face very intently she made an emphatic pause, enabling him to grasp the full meaning of the generous gesture made for his sake alone. No other P.O.W could have enjoyed such incredibly favorable conditions and he knew it well enough.

'You're aware of the difficulties that we have to overcome, I hope? There are special measures to be taken, and there is the matter of censorship of course. So, there might be some delay. You do understand that, don't you?'

'Yes I see, thanks a lot, I do appreciate it very much!' He answered with much gratitude, his blood rushing to his face.

'All right then.' She smiled to him cheerfully. 'Now about that issue of censorship, it isn't as bad as it sounds, all you have to keep in mind is to avoid mentioning your surroundings and not a single word about us. To put it down clearly do not describe in your letters our base, neither anyone you've met in it, nor the circumstances that led to your captivity. Oh, let's forget the whole thing it's so unpleasant.' She added vehemently.

'I'll keep it in mind, thanks comrade Nicole.' He muttered deeply moved by her efforts to promote his interests, and her display of sincerity.

'There is one more thing I've arranged for you.' She told him, adding fuel to the fire, at the right time. 'I'll take you out for a stroll under the sky, right after lunch. It's time you should leave your room once a day for a short break, and stretch your big frame a bit.'

Meanwhile lunch was brought in, and they sat to eat together just like a happily married couple, although they knew each other no more than a couple of days. She was awfully sweet to him during their meal. She even left her seat once

to stand by his side, while showing him the right way to use his chopsticks. All that while she kept a very close watch on him to detect the tiniest changes in his face or behavior, while she brushed her lithe body against his or while their fingers met in a light and delicate touch.

When the meal was over, as soon as the guards returned to clean up, both of them left the cell at this time; Nicole led the way and he was moving freely behind her, as if he himself was one of the staff, leaving the guards behind, to clean after them.

Oh boy, what a feeling! To come out of this hole in such a style! An exceptional sensation that what it really was, to be in the open air again, and above all, to have Nicole by his side! He had to curb the urge to rush to her and pick her in his arms, to climb the cellar's steps running up to the lighted entrance. Anyway he did run the few steps that descended to the yard waiting for her at their feet, fighting back his tears of joy nearly shouting aloud, challenging the dense jungle growth towering over the yard's walls – the low hanging clouds that filtered the sun rays above their heads. He could have swept her off her feet as she came smiling towards him down the stairs, and dance with her in his arms across the empty yard. Agitated and breathing heavily, he kept throwing furtive glances in every direction turning always back to her, hardly seeing anything but her pretty face.

An armed guard stood on top of the villa's flat roof, but seemed to pay his attention somewhere else. Another one appeared at the far entrance once, popping his head outside curiously, but disappeared right away in the interior shadows. Out of the five wide windows that overlooked the yard, only one was open. Someone was watching their steps, no doubt.

The strange fit of mute enthusiasm, that gripped comrade Spree amused and worried Lee Chen Woe at the same time; she had never met with such forms of uncontrolled behavior before. He was walking beside her as if he was stepping on red hot embers with bare feet. Checking and rechecking his long strides, slowing his pace to stay at her side and not leave her behind him. At first she had to bite her lips to prevent herself from laughing, such a pitiful sight he was. But it was no laughing matter. He was in the right state of mind to swallow anything; whatever she would want him to. In about an hour's time without consulting her watch, she led the way back, while he followed her as if he was a stray lamb, finding his way back to the herd at last.