

BOOK ONE

ARBAT SQUARE

By

John S. Halbert

Except for certain historical figures, locations, and events and certain news and entertainment figures, all the accounts and characters in this story are fiction. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, or to any entity, is coincidental.

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To Cate

PROLOGUE

A NEW NIGERIA

Lagos, Nigeria; Tuesday, August 9, 2011:

Stooping out through the little airliner's curved open door, at the top of the steps Kip Leeds gripped the tubular handrail and started down. With his first breath, the West African air was just as he remembered it from that first time—steamy and salt-laced from the nearby equatorial Atlantic. Still stiff after the droning flight from Frankfurt, the American swayed down the spindly steps of the diminutive 'Gulfstream' jetliner onto the shimmering, sun-baked concrete apron and gazed about. Before him, on the face of the monstrous, multi-storied concrete-and-glass main terminal, a big lighted sign proclaimed the place to be the 'MURTALA MOHAMMED AIRPORT LAGOS'. Below it was a newer-looking billboard: "Welcome to Lagos," it declared. Kip gave an involuntary shudder. If the signs were telling the truth, things had changed greatly since his first trip to Nigeria, when he had felt anything *but* welcome—or safe. Had it really been nearly two decades since he came to Lagos that time with the fifty-thousand dollars strapped underneath his clothes to meet with all those men who had turned out to be criminals?

A trim-looking black man in casual slacks and a pullover shirt was stepping across the way toward him, his hand extended. "Leeds!" The man gave a grin, his perfect white teeth contrasting with his very dark, shiny face.

"Colonel Ajiboy!" Kip grabbed the man's hand. The African pulled the American to him in a hug. "It is good to see you, again . . . it has been a long time, my friend!" He looked the pale-skinned newcomer over and grinned again. The Nigerian motioned his guest toward a side door of the terminal. "By the way, I am now 'Major General Solomon Ajiboy—retired'." The

slender, fit-looking older man pulled on a door handle. “When the political situation got better, I gave it all up to be with my grandchildren.” Inside, the cool air was in sharp contrast to what Kip remembered about the gigantic structure on his first visit to the cavernous place, with its humid atmosphere that time and the stomach-turning smells inside the vast building. Ajiboy glanced at his visitor. “You are going to see many changes in Nigeria since you were here, before.”

As they stepped along the concourse, he gestured at a mahogany door, beside which was a sign that read, “Chapel”. “That was once the terrible ‘Interrogation Room’, where that Ukrainian ‘*General Retchko’s*’ ‘murder-squad’ beat people to death.” Just then, the door opened and an African couple in flowery native dress and ribboned headpieces came out, followed by a smiling black man in clerical garb, a Crucifix in his hand. The woman was fingering a rosary. Ajiboy nodded at the two. A happy look crossed his face. “I say, Nigeria is much better, now.”

“I’m looking forward to getting around . . . I’ve heard many good things, lately.”

“You will be here for some time?”

“I’ve planned a couple of days, here. Then, I’m returning to Frankfurt. My wife and our teenaged son are visiting her relatives, there. Then, we’re traveling to Moscow, to a wedding.”

“You are going to Moscow to a wedding?”

“You remember that Russian soldier, ‘*Terenty Suslov*’? The fellow about my age who came here that time with the others to blow up the refinery down at Tanuta City?”

“Yes, a diplomat-military officer. ‘*Russian Special Forces*’, he was.”

“His daughter is getting married to a young American whose mother is an old friend of mine in Texas. Her husband was an agent of the American ‘Investigation Bureau’ and now works with us. We all became friends after what happened that time in Madrid—at ‘*Plaza Mayor*’.”

Ajiboy led the way into a suite. “This is the ‘Security Office’.”

Kip looked around; the place was palatial; elegant, even. He took the plush leather seat the African offered him.

“Tea?”

“Sure.”

Ajiboy nodded at a soldier who came back with a pot of water and a pair of teacups.

As the fellow poured the men cups, Kip went on. “When Suslov came here with the others and destroyed that refinery, it was the end of the ‘Cartel’.”

Ajiboy shrugged. “But their former clients still cause much trouble for the world.” The Nigerian narrowed his eyes. “Suslov was with the Americans and that older Russian—what was his name?”

“Golubko—‘*General Rodion Golubko*’ He was a colonel, then . . . he’s now retired from the Russian military and is working with us. I’ll see him in Moscow at the wedding.” Kip produced a wry grin. “It was pretty amazing, actually, how it all worked out.”

A big smile creased Ajiboy’s face. I know your people were behind the overthrow of the old dictator here in Nigeria—”. The African gave a smirk. “*They say he died ‘naturally’, but we know better, do we not?*” He looked thoughtful. “Give Golubko my regards. That Russian was a good soldier—a fine man.” Ajiboy looked at Kip. “So tell me . . . what have *you* been doing these many days?”

“When I got all that money, I invested a lot of it in the private crime-fighting operation out of Zurich . . . as an investment, it’s worked out very well for me.” The American stirred his cup. “Since I got out of the oil trading business, I’ve worked with the Swiss Inspector, ‘*Tarliani*’, along with ‘*Livshits*’, the Russian . . . and ‘*Watering*’, in Washington.” The American went on, “Even though all of us came from different parts of the world with different politics, working together, we’ve captured or killed some important ‘terrorists’ and criminals.” He paused. “Except for the ‘*September-Eleventh*’ attacks, of course—that was our big failure.” Kip stirred the tea slowly, thoughtfully, then downed the cup’s contents all at once. “That big terrorist—‘*Agent U*’, they called him—he was the mastermind of much trouble we went through for a long time.”

“Thank God he is dead, now.”

“We believe it was the Israelis who killed him. But Retchko is still up there, somewhere.”

“Ah, yes . . . the old Soviet general—we’ve come to know plenty about *him*.”

“Retchko controlled the old crime ‘Cartel’ from the ‘*Tanuta Refinery*’. He was—and is—an evil man.”

Through the glass door Kip saw well-dressed people going about in the corridor.

Ajiboy smiled. “We’ve made a lot of progress, here in Nigeria” He reached for his hat. “I will show you around the airport . . . then we will go downtown. I believe you will find the changes—since you were here last—to be interesting . . . for one thing, they say Lagos will be the biggest city in the world, in a few years.” The retired, civilian-dressed general motioned to a soldier in fatigues, who came to respectful attention. “Corporal, bring around the staff car . . . we are leaving, now.”

* * *

Dusk, the Next Day, Wednesday, August 10, 2011:

“You say it will be an all-night flight to Frankfurt?” General Ajiboy squinted into the penetrating orange glare of the setting sun. Out on the apron the fuel truck was pulling away from the little airliner. As the two pilots came out of the briefing room and stepped across the concrete in the direction of the corporate jet, Ajiboy looked the aircraft over with obvious admiration. “It is your organization’s airplane?”

Kip Leeds nodded. “We use it to fly our people to assignments around the world . . . they carry weapons and other gear with them.” He gave a shrug. “We couldn’t do that on a regular airliner, of course—not with the security issues after ‘Nine-Eleven’.” He watched as the pilots took their places in the cockpit. In a minute he would have to get aboard.

A wistful look came over the African’s creased face. “Well, Mister Leeds, this has been a pleasant time for me . . . seeing you again, like this. It was certainly better than that first time we met in ‘*Busa’s*’ living room!”

Who could forget that scene! You were pretty intimidating.”

“I had to be—I was responsible for the safety of all that money. You certainly put it to good use, didn’t you!”

“Next to marrying my wife, it was my best investment!”

The cockpit window slid open. “We must leave, now, sir---”

“See you next time!” Kip said, shaking the Nigerian’s hand.

Inside the cabin, he took a left-side seat, buckled the belt, and looked out. Solomon Ajiboy was giving a final wave. As the jet nosed toward the taxiway and the African was lost from view, an unexpected pensive feeling came over Kip.

For this short, pleasant trip had been a closure, of sorts, to that intense, anxiety-ridden first journey he had made to Nigeria, now almost two decades past. It was hard to believe it had been that long ago.

* * *

A few minutes later, when the trim little airliner lifted from the runway and set a northerly course toward Europe, Kip stared down at the nondescript grassy landscape, waving in the slanted rays of the sun, now low on the horizon. As darkness settled over West Africa, the American’s thoughts drifted back to that time when he first came to Nigeria with the fifty-thousand dollars strapped beneath his clothes and those desperate moments when he was not sure if he would ever again see his homeland.



BOOK TWO

PLAZA MAYOR

By

John S. Halbert

Except for certain historical figures, locations, and events and certain entertainment figures, all the accounts and characters in this story are fiction. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, or to any entity, is coincidental.

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To Salem

PROLOGUE

A WEDDING IN MOSCOW

Moscow, Saturday, August 13, 2011:

The guests stood by the curb, watching, as the receding red tail-lights of the enormous ZIL limousine turned onto the wide boulevard and blended into the late-evening Moscow traffic. Jim Randolph put his arm across Terenty Suslov's shoulder as they made their way back toward the pavilion. "It's official, now! Our two families are connected across the distance."

The Russian patted the American's back, smiling. "This is a happy time for all of us."

Nearby, Nixie Garten Leeds took Kip Leeds's hand and looked with admiration at her husband's profile. "I, too, am happy these young people found each other." She spoke to the hosts in Russian, then in English with an accent that was German, her native language.

Jim's wife, Texas native Sloane Ferry Randolph, reached for the hand of Tamara Suslova in the Russian custom she had observed the past few days since they arrived for the wedding of Nick and Larisa. "That time Larisa came to Texas to visit us, I believe it was love at first sight between those two." Sloane glanced at the smiling mother of the bride and once more marveled at how attractive and young-looking the woman was. She and Tamara were about the same age, she guessed, but there was not the slightest trace of gray in Tamara's magnificent long auburn hair. She still looked almost the same as that day back in Madrid nineteen years earlier, when they had first seen each other as they crouched together under the outdoor restaurant table for protection from the deadly gunfire.

After that, the two families had kept in touch, at first through Holiday greeting cards. Then when Terenty had retired from the

Russian military, he and Tamara had visited Jim and Sloane in Texas. Shortly afterward, Terenty had joined Jim Randolph, Kip Leeds, and the other men in the international crime-fighting operation. Two summers ago, when Larisa came to visit them in West Dallas, the girl, about to start her first year at Moscow State University, and their son, Nick, also headed for his first college semester, became fast friends. In time, their relationship led to Moscow, and their wedding-registration today at the *'Department of Registration of Civil Statuses'*, a classic Soviet-era-like wedding hall; then the vows before the Orthodox priest and all the guests.

Glancing about, Sloane saw several mixed couples around the tables—young Russians and Americans—who seemed to be hitting it off. The language differences did not seem to matter, she observed, as most of the *'Muscovites'* she had met so far spoke English just fine. Probably their schooling, Sloane guessed. And in the few days they had been in Moscow, Sloane had been impressed by how beautiful many of the Russian girls were. In particular, she had noticed one of Larisa's attendants, a brunette teenager with flashing, dark-blue eyes, who had caught the attentions of the younger male guests, with whom she seemed very popular. Several of the young men had sought her out during the dances, including Kip's and Nixie's outgoing son, Bart Leeds, who looked to be about her age and who now held her attention in an animated conversation. Wouldn't it be interesting, Sloane thought, if someday there was *another* wedding between an American and a Russian! For Sloane's first exposure to Moscow society had introduced her to a culture that she was enjoying very much.

She looked around the table at the other women and smiled. "I am glad we will be here a few days more—there are a lot of things I want to see. This city fascinates me." Nixie Leeds nodded in agreement.

Tamara leaned across the table. "We will go to the Kremlin tomorrow . . . then on Monday to *'Arbat Square'* and the *'White House'*, where we saw Yeltsin climb up onto the tank, that time," she said in accented English.

Sloane's and Nixie's eyebrows went up. "You were *there*?"

“We were in the middle of it—Terenty and I, and my cousin and her boyfriend.”

Just then, Tamara’s mother and a middle-aged woman took seats at the table. “This is my ‘Aunt Helen’,” Tamara said, in her measured English, then translated for the newcomers. The women extended their hands.

Sloane had seen the middle-aged woman at the ceremony and had thought she looked solemn or perhaps even sad; certainly not as joyful as would have been expected on this occasion.

“Aunt Helen is the mother of my cousin, who is not here, now.” Tamara saw Sloane’s uncertain look. “‘*Galina*’ died in a plane crash . . . she was the wife of our friend, ‘*Gennady*’, who was shot in Madrid, that time, as I am sure you remember.”

Of course, Sloane could never forget that terrible day at ‘*Plaza Mayor*’. Except for the aunt, the bridegroom, and the priest, all the adult guests she knew at the wedding had been there.

“We named our son after him,” Tamara added. Sloane remembered the handsome, light-haired adolescent who had been in the wedding group, whose name was “Gennady”.

Tamara turned to the older women and said something in Russian, then in English. “My aunt’s husband, who was once Terenty’s commanding general, died not long ago.”

No wonder the woman looks sad, Sloane thought.

Nixie turned to Tamara. “Kip tells me you and your husband met when he saved Larisa from being run-over by a streetcar.”

Tamara translated for the two Russian women, who nodded, then told Nixie and Sloane about the time when she was a young single mother, Terenty had run into the street to pull back her little daughter from in front of a speeding tram. “Larisa was only two years old.”

The other two gasped, their eyes wide. “My God!” Nixie burst out, “how heroic!”

Tamara looked across the way where her husband was in conversation with the men at the other table. “Terenty has *always* been my hero.” Her words prompted nods from the others, as she translated for the other two women.

She turned to Sloane. “How did you and your husband meet?”

The dark-haired American woman told about being kidnapped by the “Cartel’s” agents and stuffed unconscious into a wooden coffin-like crate; how she was discovered in a trailer-truck at the Mexico border of Texas by Customs officers; and that she and Jim Randolph had met when he had taken over the case as a government investigator. After the tragic event at “Plaza Mayor” in Madrid, they had continued to see each other and were married the next year. “Then we had our daughter, who is over there.” Sloane motioned at a slender teen-aged girl with long, dark-brown hair who was talking and laughing with her new Russian friends. “She was very happy when Larisa wanted her to be an attendant.”

Vera Kuznetsova, Tamara’s elderly mother, said something that her daughter translated into English. “She says the girl has beautiful hair.”

“She got it from my mother, who was from Australia. She and my father met there.” She paused. “My mother died of cancer when I was eleven.”

“My father passed ten years ago,” Tamara said. “My mother has lived with us ever since.”

“My father lives by himself—he’s pretty independent!” Sloane put in.

“It is *difficult* to do that, in Moscow—but things are getting better.” Tamara turned to Nixie. “How did you and Kip meet?”

The blonde woman told the others how she and Kip had first seen each other at the Frankfurt airport while waiting for a flight to Lagos, Nigeria; that they had talked to each other on the airplane; she had been a flight attendant and a translator. Nixie went on about how Kip had later called her to “translate” for him in Madrid at the time of the event at “Plaza Mayor”; that afterward they had traveled to Germany and had met her family; how she had moved to Dallas, Texas, USA, and that she and Kip had been married seventeen years. Nixie glanced across the pavilion at her husband, who was talking with the other men.

* * *

At a nearby circular table, two upper-middle-aged individuals had motioned for the other men to sit with them. “You remember the general,” Terenty said to Kip Leeds and Jim Randolph.

“General Golubko!” There followed a round of bonding hugs and male kisses in the Russian custom that the American guests were still getting used to.

The former Russian general nodded. “It has been a while since we were all together.”

To Kip, the man’s excellent English, with no discernable accent, sounded perfect. He wondered how he did it—most of the “Muscovites” he had met so far spoke English with a noticeable brogue.

Kip put out his hand to the next man. “Livshits! It is good to see you, again.”

The angular Russian nodded, at the same time pushing his plastic-rimmed eyeglasses back up on his nose.

The five men took seats, leaned across the table with their heads close together, and began what the other guests would have taken to be a convivial conversation with much nodding. A waiter came around with a fresh Vodka bottle and filled their glasses.

From one end of the pavilion came a sudden burst of music from accordions and a red-colored, triangle-shaped, guitar-like instrument. A fit-looking young man in shiny military boots, a red bandana around his neck, bounded out in front of the musicians, crossed his arms across his chest and dropped to his haunches in a furious bouncing-kicking dance, then leaped into the air, his outstretched fingertips touching the toes of his boots—again and again to the music and to the shouts and applause of the guests.

The men stopped their conversation; the music was too loud for talking. Livshits spoke over the sounds. “Let us meet at my office Monday morning!” The husbands broke away to re-join the women. Livshits motioned to General Golubko. The two men turned in the direction of the bar.

* * *

Tverskaya District; Moscow, Monday August 15, 2011:

Terenty Suslov maneuvered the Mercedes along broad, bustling *'Tverskaya Ulitsa'*. In the front passenger seat, Jim Randolph gazed out, fascinated by the massive, Stalin-era buildings they were passing. He glanced at Terenty, then turned about to Kip Leeds, who was sitting in the back seat. "It looks about like I would have expected," he said, "except for all the shoppers."

Terenty motioned at the pedestrians stepping along the sidewalks and in crosswalks. "This is one of the main shopping districts in Moscow," he said. "Tamara is taking the others to the markets, today." The Russian turned the vehicle onto another street, swinging the wheel to avoid a delivery truck that pulled out in front of them. "We are not far from the Kremlin."

"The Kremlin, yesterday, was terrific!" Jim Randolph spoke up. "Nixie and our son, Bart, were fascinated by all the jewels and the buildings. It was not what we had expected."

Terenty laughed. "Did you expect a 'concentration camp', or something? I believe if you Americans would spend more time, here, the world would better off!" The others chuckled. Terenty went on, "Tonight, we will go to *'Arbat Square'* for dinner and then walk out to the *'White House'*." He pointed at a massive, yellow-hued, columned building to their left, glowing golden in the morning sunshine. An equestrian statue stood on top of it. "That is the *'Bolshoi Theater'* . . . they are closed, now, because the dancers are on tour."

"We will go there, next time," Jim said. He knew that Sloane and the others already wanted to come back to Moscow for more visits.

A few blocks farther on, Terenty turned the car into a narrow cobblestone driveway and pulled up behind an older-looking, yellow-stuccoed house surrounded by tall flowering plants. "This is Livshits's place—the others will meet us here. *'Tarliani'* flew in from Zurich, yesterday."

Terenty stepped out of the car. "General Golubko will be here, too."

“How about ‘*Watering*’?” The American was one of the founders of their crime-fighting organization.

“He could not be with us . . . he is working on a drug case at the border of Colombia and Venezuela.”

Livshits answered Terenty’s knock. The men stepped into a parlor furnished with an overstuffed sofa and chairs with slipcovers; the papered, flower-print walls were lined with books; white lace curtains covered the windows.

Two other men came into the room. The four greeted Tarliani, the Swiss investigator, and the former Russian Special Forces general, Rodion Golubko, another partner.

While they shook hands all around, Jim Randolph glanced about. One wall was covered with framed commendations—some from the ‘*KGB*’; others from the ‘*Federal Security Bureau*’ that Jim knew was the current name of the Russian investigative apparatus. Livshits had retired from that organization to help them start the private anti-terrorist venture, then Terenty Suslov had come on board. When Rodion Golubko had left the Russian armed forces with the rank of “Major General”, Terenty had jumped at the chance to take-in his former “Spetsnaz” leader, who now headed the paramilitary arm of their group. Randolph also knew that Kip Leeds had invested much of the twenty-million dollars he had obtained from that “black-money” Nigerian deal to underwrite the operation that had scored many successes against worldwide criminals—including some of the “black-money” men, themselves. The returns from the private operation had made all the men in this room wealthy.

Jim spotted on a buffet table a brass, pot-like object with a slender cylindrical chimney atop it, under which glowed tiny coals. The soft bubbling sound of boiling water came from it

“Tea?” Livshits noted the American’s look of interest as he pulled some porcelain cups from a shelf. “It is what we call a ‘*samovar*’ . . . for boiling tea.” To Jim, the perky little boiler seemed to epitomize the congenial culture the Americans had found in Russia.

Tarliani motioned for the men to gather around a large table. “We will now review the history and progress of our

organization,” he said. Stepping up, Kip saw that documents and photographs were laid out on the tabletop.

Tarliani held a picture of a heavysset black man. “Busa!” Kip burst out. “The guy who disappeared that time with the receipts for the fifty-thousand dollars I deposited in that Lagos bank that started it all.”

“‘Busa’ was the ‘front-man’ for the ‘Cartel’. He duped people into working without their knowledge for the criminals’ purposes.”

Kip laughed. “But I turned the tables on them—I *kept their money!*”

Jim Randolph looked at him. “You never told us how you did that.”

“The Nigerian judges ruled that since the money had been signed-over to me by a government representative—a very corrupt government, for sure—the money was mine.” Kip gave a smirk. “I paid the judges a million dollars for them to rule in my favor!”

“Did you say the money was *blackened?*”

“As part of the agreement, I got the formulas for ‘cleaning’ the money and I was able to convert the bills back to original. Then I deposited them in a numbered account, arranged by Tarliani, here.” He glanced at the Swiss agent. “Tarliani, Livshits and Watering came to me with the plan to put together an organization. That’s how we started.” He looked around at the men. “I’m sure you will agree it’s been a very good investment for all of us.” The others nodded.

Tarliani lifted a picture. “This woman was a real success story.” The men passed around the photograph of an attractive-looking female. “She and two other agents fed ‘INTERNOL’—the international police organization I was with at the time—vital Intelligence about the ‘Cartel’ that operated out of the ‘*Tanuta Refinery*’ in Nigeria.”

Livshits pulled a rolled document from a shelf. “By the way, do you want to see what the ‘Tanuta Refinery’ now looks like?” He spread out the paper that looked like a large aerial photograph of a forest. The Russian tapped the print. “The refinery’s wreckage is underneath this jungle cover—they never rebuilt it.”

Kip stared at the featureless foilage “I had heard of it, but never saw it.” On the outsized picture he recognized a tiny object at the edge of the jungle as the remains of a truck that gave the leafy green canopy its awesome scale.

Livshits shrugged. “After a few years, the jungle re-claimed it.”

“And to think—at one time, it was the center of the world’s terrorist network!”

Tarliani picked up a picture of a light-haired man. “This fellow was American and helped this other electronics expert.” He pointed at the picture of a young-looking, cream-colored female. “They installed the system. We believe they set up a control link from the ‘Tanuta Refinery’ to ‘Tora Bora’ in the mountains of Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. It used computer chips in their wrists—very clever of them. They actually hijacked a channel one of the American military satellites and used it to relay back-and-forth their coded messages!”

Jim Randolph spoke up. “Where did you get all these pictures of people?”

Tarliani tapped the pile of photographs. “Most of them came from our agents, using tiny cameras. Livshits’s operatives were responsible for the others.”

He pulled from the collection another photograph of the light-skinned black woman. “This female was the brains behind the Cartel’s electronic operations—her name was ‘*Lisa Anaya*’. She designed the ‘chip implant’ system for Retchko. She and the American put it together.” The Swiss Inspector paused. “But ‘INTERNOL’ later believed that she and the American man were duped—or forced—by Retchko to do it.”

Rodion Golubko spoke up. “We used the same type system of wrist-chips in Russia.”

“They gave our ‘K-G-B’ agents a tremendous advantage over the ‘C-I-A,’” Livshits put in. “Using satellites, we could track our people to anywhere on the planet, right down to the very room they were in!”

Kip was looking at a paper. “What about the ‘invisible technology’? I was told the United States never used it.”

Tarliani shrugged. “Your government killed it—very foolish of them. But the man we called, ‘*Agent U*’, the Middle-Easterner—*his people made it work*.”

“They used it for a long time on the Texas-Mexico border,” Randolph said, “in the people- smuggling operation.”

Kip was incredulous. “They made people *invisible* to take them across the border?”

“They did it for many years!”

Kip stared at a photograph of another blond man and a young woman. “Who are these two?”

General Golubko squinted at the picture of the man and an athletic-looking female. “That woman looks familiar, to me.” His eyes went wide. “Of course! I trained her at the ‘Spetsnaz Academy’! One of two females we ever had! She was a tough little fighter. She actually bested some of our men in hand-to-hand combat exercises! But how did she get to Nigeria?”

Tarliani turned over the photograph. “Her name was ‘*Marisol Montoya*’ and she was a Havana policewoman . . . she flew to Nigeria on the Cartel’s cargo airplane. Retchko gave her security duties.

“The American’s name was ‘*Landay*’ . . . ‘*Lawrence J. Landay*’. Went under the name, ‘*Larry Landay*’.” Tarliani read more off the back of the picture. “He was a fugitive from American Justice. Landay helped ‘*Lisa Anaya*’ build the ‘chip-implant’ system for Retchko. We believe the Cuban woman and this Landay are now somewhere in South America.”

Tarliani shuffled the prints and came up with a photograph of a large airplane. “This was the Cartel’s ‘*Seven-Forty-Seven*’. They used it to carry contraband military weapons and hardware all over the world. Even nuclear materials!”

“They really were big-time!” Kip Leeds burst out.

Randolph stared at the picture of the enormous aircraft. “How did they *obtain* this plane? A ‘*Seven-Forty-Seven*’ is a big thing to have.”

Tarliani tapped the photograph. “When Iraq invaded Kuwait back in ‘ninety, all the ‘*Iraqi Airlines*’ airplanes flew to Iran. The ‘*Cartel*’ bought one and stripped it out to carry cargo. It was spotted all over the world—people remember it because it did not

have any markings or numbers on it. It flew for several years.” The Swiss Inspector shrugged. “It disappeared in the mid-’nineties—we believe the American air force shot it down between Cuba and Florida.” He glanced at Rodion Golubko. “We know some former Soviet bomber pilots were flying it.”

Kip saw a blue vein come up on the Russian general’s temple. He had issues with that, evidently.

Kip picked out a photograph of a trim, very dark African in a three-piece business suit. “I remember this guy! ‘*Doctor Krasheev*’, they called him . . . he was a big man with the ‘*Nation Bank of Nigeria*’. I signed the papers for the twenty-million dollars in his office.”

Tarliani glanced at Kip and gave a smirk. “What happened to Krasheev was ironic—when the ‘Seven-Forty-Seven’ flew out of Nigeria, it carried the bad guys first to Madrid, where everything happened at ‘Plaza Mayor’ . . . then, it went to Libya, and on to Iran. But Krasheev missed the plane when it left Lagos! ‘INTERNOL’ arrested him on a warrant issued by the United States. The evidence against him for racketeering and having illegal overseas bank accounts was so solid, even his friends in the Nigerian government would not help him! We believe he is somewhere in prison, now.”

Kip picked up a portrait of a very dark man. “This guy followed me on the airplane that time I came back from Nigeria. He kidnapped and mis-treated Sloane. We rescued her at the border.”

Jim Randolph frowned. “His name was ‘Ezego’. I hated him for what he did to her.”

Tarliani gave a sneer. “He is—ah . . . ‘no longer with us’, as they say.”

Rodion Golubko spoke up. “That was the first time we all worked together on a mission.”

Kip pulled up a photograph of another very dark African. “This was ‘*Adwadube*’—the Nigerian lawyer.”

Jim Randolph looked over his shoulder and frowned. “God! Look at those eyes!”

“His eyes were horrible-looking . . . scary—creepy.” Kip went over how the man had demanded a huge sum of money from him to “clean” the “black money”.

“We were never able to pin anything on him,” Tarliani said.

Kip sifted through the loose stack of documents and pictures on the table. “Ah, yes! This is *Ajiboy*. He was the security man at the Lagos airport after the end of the Cartel.” Kip looked at General Golubko. “I saw him a few days ago . . . he gives you his regards.”

Rodion Golubko nodded. “Ajiboy was one of the few in Nigeria who was honest. After Retchko got away, we worked with him to clean up the terrible situation at that airport.”

“It’s now one of the best, anywhere,” Kip said. “But it sure wasn’t the *first* time I was there! I thought I would be killed.” He recounted to them his narrow escapes at the airport. “When I was leaving, Retchko’s soldiers were pulling some Americans off the airliner at gunpoint!”

“Many people were killed at that airport while Retchko was there.”

Kip lifted the photograph of a small-looking, bald-headed black man in a three-piece suit. “This man was the manager of the bank in Lagos. We now know he was the real ‘Chief’ of the Cartel. He still owes me the fifty-thousand dollars he took from me.”

Tarliani gave a sneer. “Good luck on that—he is now one of the Finance Ministers of Iran!”

“Our most important operation, of course, was when we found and disarmed that nuclear device that the terrorists had planted in Houston.”

“A very close call!” Jim Randolph said. There was a nodding of agreement among the men.

Tarliani passed around several photographs. “This was the bomb.” The pictures showed a regular-looking shipping container in a small warehouse. In the background, loomed a “Port of Houston” crane; the device had been located on the “Ship Channel”, at the “Turning Basin”, near downtown. A close-up showed cables leading from a control box into the big wooden crate.

“In another two minutes, the whole of downtown Houston would have gone up in a nuclear fireball. We calculated that all of the skyscraper towers would have gone down in the blast—two-hundred-thousand would have been killed at once.” Tarliani tapped a chart. “Ten-square miles of central Houston would have been too radioactive to enter for weeks or months.”

Jim Randolph spoke up. “The detonator was rigged to go off on a code signal from a telephone—probably from somewhere overseas. Somebody would have called the number, entered some figures on a keypad and the bomb would have gone off.”

“We kept it out of the newspapers and off the TV. There would have been panic.”

“That was our most important success,” Randolph added.

Tarlini looked around at the others. “We now know that the culprits were ‘Agent U’ and Retchko, and their criminal organization.”

Livshits pulled a picture from the stack. “‘Agent U!’” the men said in unison, as they stared at the familiar form of the man who for years was known world-wide as the most dangerous of all the terrorists.

“He was in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan for years until the Israelis killed him in a commando raid.”

“Retchko is still in Pakistan, we believe,” Tarliani said.

The Swiss Inspector pointed to a grainy picture of a bald-headed white man. “You all remember ‘Retchko’, of course.”

Kip stared at the telephoto of the man taken at Plaza Mayor, at the time of the event. Who could forget the man who remained one of the most wanted fugitives in the world? His eyes widened—in the same picture he spotted Nixie in the background. It was when she had gone to Madrid to “translate” for him and they had gotten caught up in the events of that awful day.

“That is the only photograph we have of Retchko, other than—*this* one.” Livshits held up another print. “This picture was taken by the security camerat the Moscow train station the same night he got away.” The Russian agent tapped the picture. “It shows a different-looking ‘Semen Putridchenko’ of the

“Academy” in Moscow. At that time, he was bushy-haired with a dark mustache.”

General Golubko, who was staring at the picture over Kip’s shoulder, spoke up. “Only minutes before, I had stopped him from shooting Yeltsin and Gorbachev at the ‘White House’!”

Tarliani glanced at the silver-haired, retired Russian Special Forces officer. “You still have a personal ‘*vendetta*’ against him, do you not?”

The blue vein stood out on the general’s temple. He nodded. “‘Putridchenko’—that is his real name—had been a security officer in the G-R-U Division of the Soviet General Staff at the Defense Ministry. We found out he had been giving the Chechen rebels advance information about our movements. Many of our brave Russian soldiers died in Grozny because of what that traitor did. I have wanted to catch him ever since.”

Terenty spoke. “He captured my best friend while we were in Chechnya and made him work for the ‘Cartel’.” He picked up a picture of a handsome, blond-haired young man in a military uniform and stared at it with grim lips, shaking his head. “It is difficult to believe he has been gone now almost twenty years . . .”

Tarliani looked around the table at the other men. “Gentlemen—and ‘comrades’ . . . we shall now pledge to keep after Retchko and the other criminals . . . for the peoples of the world—and for ourselves.” The partners in the crime-fighting organization nodded; they were all now well-to-do from the proceeds of their efforts over the past several years. Their private war against international criminals and terrorists would go on.

The Swiss criminologist spoke again. “For a long time, Retchko and the others have been our enemies . . . we must continue our efforts to kill or capture them.”

