

Waltz in Syncopated Time

Part 5

August 16, 1987 - 6:30 AM

He thought he had escaped the nightmares, but now they were back. Frightening, phantasmal images ran through his mind, haunting him even after he awoke - Amanda kneeling on the floor, a faceless figure holding a shotgun to her face as she begged for her life; Amanda bleeding to death; and then, her lifeless body being dumped into the unfathomable, blue waters of the Danube.

He rolled over, scrubbing a hand over his face. Seeing that it was finally morning, he rolled out of bed. Dressing quickly, he checked a few notes in his day planner, and then slipped out of the room.

As he'd expected, Amanda's hotel room had been sealed. He was similarly unsurprised to see that it was unguarded. It took him little effort to break peel back the tape and slip through the door unnoticed.

Standing in the middle of the small room, he inhaled deeply. Her scent still lingered in the air, and he was almost convinced that he would turn around and see her in the bed. He imagined her waking, surprise and pleasure lighting her eyes when she saw him.

Recognizing the senselessness of his reverie, he set to work on his primary task - a methodical search of her room. He started with the dresser. Opening drawer after drawer, he found nothing but carefully folded skirts and slacks - nothing that would reveal where she was hidden.

He then moved to the small closet. There, too, he found nothing out of order. Her skirts hung neatly; her sweaters all faced the same direction. It was as though she had only stepped out for the afternoon.

He knelt down and picked up her suitcase. Carrying it to the bed, he twisted the combination lock, 1-0-0-3, and popped it open. Inside, in the hidden space between the inner and outer shells, he found what he suspected he would, the small velvet box that held her wedding set. Though the victory was small, he felt a rush with the knowledge that she'd had enough time to hide it. Pocketing it, he returned the suitcase to the closet and retreated from the room.

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8:30 AM

She arrived at the train station early and asked a heavily whiskered conductor for the location to the train to Bratislava.

"Platz D," he answered gruffly without looking at her and then pointed. "Vis-à-vis."

"Danke, danke." Amanda nodded in thanks, barely noting the irony of a Viennese man offering her directions in French, and hurried in the direction indicated, wrapping her fingers tightly around her ticket.

"Car fifteen," she repeated to herself as she looked down at her ticket. Walking alongside the bright red and yellow train, she scanned the numbers until she found her car. She climbed the steep, narrow steps and took a deep breath. She was voluntarily entering Eastern Europe and she was scared to death.

No, she corrected herself. She was not entering voluntarily. She was entering, because, if she didn't, she, and now possibly her husband, would be killed. She was entering, because four days ago, Peter Winkel had held a gun to her head and announced that he did not work for Austrian intelligence, but Stasi, the East German secret police. She was entering, because as long as she stayed alive, there was a chance that she may find a way out.

So lost was she in thought that she jumped when the train lurched forward from the platform. Her cabin was empty. Though she was certain Winkel had arranged it to prevent her from seeking help or passing information, she

was still thankful. She wasn't sure she would be good company, and the ride would give her time to think.

She peered absently out the window, watching rambling Bohemian farmhouses give way to vast, empty fields that seemed almost to grow browner the further east the train traveled.

Finally, the train lurched to a stop, and ahead she saw two well-armed border guards jump from their booth and board the train.

She reached for her bag and removed the counterfeit passport. Scanning it again, she reminded herself that she was Galina Redetsky of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Looking more closely, a border guard would also see that the passport was a diplomatic one, and that she was with the KGB.

Finally, the door to her cabin opened, and a green-uniformed young man nodded at her. "Cestovni pas prosim," he requested her passport brusquely in Czech.

"Da," she answered him in Russian, "vot."

He scanned it quickly, comparing her photo to the face in front of him. "Spasibo." He returned her papers to her. "Do Svedanya."

He slid the door to her cabin shut, and she expelled a deep breath, sinking into the seat as though her backbone had been removed. She closed her eyes as the train began to lurch forward again, now on rougher, Soviet-made tracks. The rocking was soothing though, a reminder that she was alive, despite the peril in which she found herself.

She let her thoughts wander, playing memories over in her mind: running alongside Jamie as he rode a two-wheeler for the first time, watching Lee and Phillip toss a football on a recent picnic, saying good-bye to her husband at the airport, his whispered promise in her ear that 'when you get back, we're going to talk about this.'

She'd frowned at him then - unwilling to compromise on the matter of their secret marriage - not inclined to bridge the gap between her life with him and her life with her family. Now, though, she began to realize that her life with him and her life with her family were one and the same. Yes, if she got back, *when* she got back, she and Lee were going to talk about that.

Her flight of fancy was interrupted as the train lurched to a stop, and she gathered her belongings.

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He was shaving, the door to his small bathroom propped open to disperse the steam, when the second card arrived. He dropped his razor and bolted from the room, still lathered, and tackled the messenger within feet of the stairwell.

"Who are you?" Lee demanded. "What is this?" He shook the note card. "Where's Amanda?" His rage was increasing with each question. Straddling the legs of his captive, he grabbed the front of his shirt and drew him upward to stare him in the eyes. He was a young man of about nineteen; closely shorn blond hair framed a face that was filled with terror.

"Please," he implored his lower lip quivering and his large blue eyes brimming with tears. "Please . . . the man, he give me money. He say, 'bring to room 512.' I do not know what it is . . . please."

"Okay," Lee relented, convinced he was going to get nothing more from the young man. "Come with me." He took the teen by the elbow and led him to his room.

Pointing to a chair, he instructed, "Wait there."

He grabbed a towel and scrubbed the remaining shaving cream from his face with one hand while knocking on the door to Billy's room with the other.

"What is it, Scarecrow?" Billy answered the door with the heavy-lidded look of a man who had slept little the night before.

"I've got a lead on my pen pal," Lee responded. "Get dressed and meet me in my room. I don't want to give him a

chance to bolt."

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"Okay, here goes nothing," she spoke aloud again in the empty car, steeled her spine, and stepped off of the train.

Winkel had told her she'd be met when she crossed the border. To this point, however, she'd seen no one. Her eyes scanned the crowd. Everyone was a potential spy; anyone could be watching her just as she was now watching them.

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"Okay, son, let's start again." Billy affected a paternalistic attitude "You say a man came up to you on the street and paid you to deliver this note to Lee."

"Ja," the scared boy replied. "He give me thousand schilling note, but I do not know this man."

Lee began to speak, but Billy cut him off with a look and a nod. "That's okay," Billy answered and then asked, "Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Ja," he said after a moment of hesitation. "I think so."

Without waiting any longer, Billy picked up the room's telephone and spoke in harsh whispered German to the person on the other end. Hanging up, he relayed to Lee, "Austrian Intelligence is going to send a sketch artist. We should be able to get a composite."

"Good . . ." Lee responded without looking at Billy. His jaw tight, he absently studied the pattern in the wallpaper.

"Lee," Billy tried to regain some of the focus. "We're going to get her back. If she's alive out there somewhere, we'll find her."

"Not 'if,'" Lee answered. "She *is*". And damn it, Billy, I should be doing something about it -- not sitting in this hotel room drawing pictures with a von Trapp Family Singer." He shot a dirty look at the young man. Then, reaching for the doorknob, Lee looked up as though daring Billy to stop him before leaving the room.

END PART V