

THE DELIVERY

by
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“Think this is where Marco Polo dropped anchor?” Jesse asked, stretching. The forty two day sail from Honiara in the Solomon Islands had been exhausting.

“Can’t imagine anywhere else. This seems to be the best protected anchorage on the north coast.” Kirk was staring at the hill, the northern-most point of the island of Sumatra, they had anchored behind. “And the river mouth is just over there so they could have gone inland in their small boats. Did you check out the fishing boats?”

“Yeah, all wood, all the same design, small and needing paint. Don’t imagine this is a prosperous or modern community.” She wrapped her arms around him, “We made it, my Love, Indonesia! Tomorrow makes five years since we left the States.”

Kirk began kissing her, sighed, “Go below, my little Cherokee. Rocks have eyes and they may not approve of what I’m going to do to that fine body of yours.”

Jesse laughed and went below, unbuttoning her shirt as she went. Flashing him one bare brown breast, she disappeared into the aft cabin.

Standing in the cockpit, he took a look around, setting in his mind’s eye the landmarks in relation to ‘Talofa’, their 40ft sloop. They had firmly set her anchor but he was always very attentive in a new place. Hearing an outboard, he turned to see three uniforms approaching from the river.

“Damn. Good timing,” he groaned and stepped below. “Put on some

clothes and hide your horns. Customs bureaucrats are heading our way. I'll take care of you later." He gave a dirty laugh and went on deck with the waterproof folder that held their passports and the ship's papers.

Jesse put on her shirt, had to search for the long skirt she had especially for predominately Islamic areas. The boat was always trashed after a long sail so she did a cursory tidy just in case they came below. First impression was important when arriving in a sailboat, especially in a remote village like Banda Aceh.

She was stepping on deck as they pulled away. "That was quick. What happened?"

Shaking his head, he gave a rueful laugh and shrugged. "Not sure. One spoke English. He was polite but they are not pleased that we're four days late. I guess the permit we got from Bernard's lawyer is regarded as a contract. They will collect us in the morning at 9 to go check in. Can't leave the boat 'til then, of course. He had been fine at first, but his jaw set when I asked if he would show us Mr. Bujra's hotel afterwards. Then they charged off."

"You didn't mention the package?"

"No. Wish I hadn't mentioned Bujra. Bad vibes. Where is it?"

"Under the seat, in the locker with our cash and valuables."

Kirk frowned, "Why would you put it there?"

"Just a feeling. Whatever is in that box is valuable, Kirk. Bernard asked us to deliver it unopened. You know if those guys had wanted to search us they could have and if that box had been out they could have opened it. The red wax covering each end would have drawn them to it."

"I just hope that Bujra's not on the outs with the powers that be. That's all we need." His brown eyes danced, "What if there are secret plans for another revolution in that box?"

Jesse smiled, began unzipping his jeans, "I have secret plans, but the sun's not

down yet so you'd better follow me to the bunk."

When she awoke Kirk was not beside her. Sitting at the table in the saloon, he had the small box before him. She laughed, kissed his neck and went to make mint tea.

"I just want to know what's in it. I mean, we could be handing over a germ that'd wipe out the population of the whole island. Then how would we feel?" He picked it up, shook it, smelled it, held it beside his ear.

"Bernard helped us so much, and we both felt good about him. There's nothing bad in it, I'm sure of that. I hope he's okay. BBC reported the typhoon that hit the island did a lot of damage. His home was right on the beach."

Kirk shook his head, "He can take care of himself, no worry. Yeah, he's a good man. We'll hide this away 'til we're cleared in, then discreetly get it Mr. Bujra. Just a quick 'hello', 'here it is', and we split. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

By noon they were walking through the open market in the oppressive equatorial heat, buying supplies. They were careful not to stare, but the locals stared at them. Here, as in most of the world, they expected Americans to be white. Jesse's tawny Cherokee skin was highlighted by her Irish mother's red hair. Kirk's upbringing in a California commune meant his mixed heritage was indistinct, perhaps French Canadian and Jamaican.

Jesse was enthralled. "Aren't the smells glorious?! The Spice Islands."

They ate at a rickety table in the thatched shade of a small stand where a short hefty woman smiled with serene confidence at their obvious appreciation.

Jesse was well into the mound of rice and melange of pungent curries on her banana leaf when she beamed, "This may be the best meal I've ever had, I'm happy."

Kirk frowned, "I'd be happier if our bechak driver weren't hovering around.

Probably speaks English, though he pretends not. First they interrogate us at customs then they insist we keep Maho for the day. Safer, they say. Sure.”

Jesse sipped her sweet tea, nodded, “Too right. I’m sure they didn’t believe us, though I’m not sure why or about what. Definitely suspicious about our interest in Bujra.”

They had Maho take them to the Sudara Hotel and left him to guard their purchases in his bechak. In the black marble reception area the young woman behind the desk gave them a shy smile but her dark eyes were clear and direct.

“He will come for you,” she carefully enunciated the English words after cradling the phone.

Moments later a short, slightly rounded Chinese man with receding hairline and neatly tailored dark blue suit entered. He gave a slight bob of his head to Jesse, extended his hand to Kirk.

“Hello, I am Mr. Bujra. How may I help you?”

Taking his hand, Kirk introduced them and asked if they could talk in private. Again the slight nod and, “Please follow me.”

In the small, tidy, windowless room he settled behind his desk. On his face was the shadow of a smile. “So, it is you Bernard has sent.” When they visibly relaxed his smile enlarged. “It is so hot outside. Would you like a coke, or something stronger?”

Jesse leaned forward, “A coke would be fine, thanks. Have you heard from Bernard? Is he okay? You know of the typhoon?”

Raising his hand for silence, he spoke into the phone, replaced it. “Bernard is fine. He lost the house, but not everything was there.”

A quiet knock and a tall young man entered with two cokes on a tray. “This is my son, Syad. He speaks English and will stay with us if you do not mind.”

With Syad standing beside the door, and the couple more at ease, he said, “I can tell Bernard Fong has told you little. He thinks very highly of you or he

would not have entrusted you with such valuable cargo. If I may have the package I will complete the puzzle.”

Kirk glanced at Jesse to ascertain agreement, then removed the box from his knapsack. Mr. Bujra took the parcel gingerly. After a casual glance, he placed it on the desk.

He nodded, “My younger brother is very resourceful. He looks more like our mother. This contains her ashes.”

The room was as quiet as the ashes. All eyes were trained on the unique package.

“In the ‘*revolution*’ of 1966 that purged Indonesia of ‘*communists*’, I saw my father killed. I was hidden under the stairs of this hotel. My father had been about half-way through building it. After the militia had gone I was found by a woman whom I did not know. She was draped in the black *kafka*, worn by all Muslim women in those days. She took me and her little boy, Bernard, to her brother’s fishing boat and we sailed in the cover of night for Singapore. That Muslim woman, disowned by her parents for her marriage to a Chinese, was my mother. I had been told that she died in birthing me. However, she had lived with her brother, receiving our father in secret on rare occasions. She had seen me, her first-born, only from a distance, had always prayed the laws would change.

‘We grew up in Singapore. There my father, reading the set of the wind, had secreted money and the papers for our property here in Aceh. I returned as soon as the laws allowed to claim what is ours. Bernard moved to Honiara after Mother died. He had no stomach for a place that had caused such a gentle woman such suffering. You have done a noble thing. Her wish was to return to the land of her birth.’”

Kirk shifted, cleared his throat, “You should know that the officials are not happy we were looking for you. They questioned us extensively. Luckily we knew nothing so there was little lying. We didn’t mention Bernard or the

package, told them we'd heard about your hotel at the Honiara Yacht Club. May I ask why your name isn't Fong?"

He looked tired, older, when he answered, "They let me return and finish the hotel, but the only language and names allowed were Indonesian. That has not changed. However, they have realized that they need Chinese and Indian business acumen, so things have relaxed and our life is good. They do not trust us, we are closely watched. Of course, there are ways to work around most of the obstacles."

Syad spoke for the first time, "Excuse me, but you should go now. Maho works for the police. He will give a full report and it will not look good if you are here too long." He looked young, perhaps eighteen, but exuded confidence.

When they returned to 'Talofa', Kirk went into a temper. "I'm telling you someone has been on this boat. That companionway was locked, you know how careful I am about that."

"I can't find that anything's missing, but I'm sure you're right, I can just feel it." She was reassembling their secret compartment. "Kirk, I'm thinking that we should move on. We don't need anyone else's problems."

"I'll not be driven off. We just got here." His jaw was set, shoulders squared, no negotiating. Jesse put on mellow music and opened a bottle of wine. The light softened as the sun moved west, the day's heat forgotten.

Through supper they discussed the situation to exhaustion, drawing no solid conclusion. With a gentle breeze and a sliver of moon the stars were radiant as they sipped cognac in the cockpit. Both tensed at the splash of oars. A small boat was approaching.

"Who's there," Kirk demanded as Jesse moved to get a torch.

"It's Syad," he said quietly, advancing alongside. "Please speak low. I need to talk with you."

"Good, come aboard, Syad," Jesse whispered.

"I cannot stay. My father was questioned this afternoon. They call you 'the Americans' and want to know why you are here. They think that you are lying and that you could not have come from Honiara without stopping, that you must have pulled in somewhere. He told them that he knew nothing, that you were thinking of taking a room. They know nothing of Bernard or our story. Father advises, regretfully, that you leave tonight. I am sorry for I would like to get to know you and about your unusual life, but he is right."

Kirk and Jesse looked at each other. No words were needed after their years at sea together. Hands touching automatically, they both nodded.

"Well, this is goodbye," Kirk said to Syad with a smile.

Syad reached inside his light jacket and pulled out a small box.

"My father wants you to have this. It was his mother's most cherished possession, given to her by my grandfather. And I thank you. Go safely." He rowed away, silently swallowed by the night.

Preparation took less than an hour.

"We're breaking our golden rule, 'Never leave or enter a port at night,'" Kirk said as he began lifting the anchor.

"But, we both know it's the right move this time." Jesse was wearing the delicate, intricately etched silver pendant that had been in the box. She felt it between her breasts, smiled, "Such secrets it holds. . .of discreet rendezvous, heartbreak, their desperate escape. I'll never take it off."

With Kirk at the helm and Jesse on the bow they motored out slowly, following the exact route of entry. Once clear they raised sail, reaching toward the Strait of Malacca, a westerly breeze gently pushing 'Talofa' away from the Sumatran coast.

Kirk hugged her as they ghosted along. "Let's see, my Dear, shall we head NE to Thailand, due E to Malaysia, SE to Singapore, or S to Medan?"

She sighed, "Ah, such decisions. . .I love this life!"

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