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MYS

A WEAK NOVEMBER sun, setting among the frost-touched fields and hills of Northern Virginia, reflected briefly off the cold metal window frames of the office in the Central Intelligence Agency before succumbing to a lowering bank of grey clouds and the lengthening night. The Man Behind the Desk folded his big hands behind his head and rocked back in his chair, looking at Ernie Sessena with half open eyes. "Something came to my attention this afternoon that just fusses me a little." The trace of a drawl hinted at his Southern origins.

"A civilian employee by the name of Bart Williams, cleared for top secret information, who works in the Office of Research and Development of the Department of the Army at the Pentagon, recently bought a ten thousand dollar Italian sports car in Italy and paid for the car in Italian lira which he obtained by converting South Vietnamese piasters in Zurich." He cocked his head and looked at Ernie Sessena quizzically. "Now isn't that interesting?" Sessena nodded. "That is interesting."

There was a short silence.

"Have they reported any problems at the Pentagon?" Sessena asked.

"No."

"What kind of a person is Williams?"

"Almost a goody two shoes. Single, thirty, and formerly served in Asia with the Peace Corps. Son of a prominent minister in a small Indiana town. A star athlete in high school and got his degree in liberal arts from one of the better land-grant colleges in the Middle West." The Man Behind the Desk glanced at a slip of paper on his desk. "He is also Scout Master of a troop at a church in Northwest Washington."

Ernie Sessena grinned. "Does he wear his halo straight or at an angle?"

"Just a little tipped. When he isn't engaged in Scouting, he likes to visit burlesque houses and night clubs with exotic dancers."

"Thank God for that. I was beginning to think you'd made him up."

"Oh, he's human enough." The Man Behind the Desk rose from his chair and gazed out of the window at the bare silhouette of trees. "He's a member of a local sports car club. Until he bought this Italian car with those pistons, he got along with a little British sports car in the three-thousand-dollar range. Why fo' the sudden affluence?"

"Maybe a rich old maiden aunt died and left him a packet?"

"Of South Vietnamese piasters?"

Sessena laughed shortly, lit a cigarette, and deliberately blew out the match. "I would say our boy made a mistake." He inhaled deeply. "This one for me?"

The Man Behind the Desk nodded. "This is just a stray thread, Ernie, but let's pull on it gently and see what happens." He nodded down the river toward the Capital. "Since this is right in the Wax Works, we're going to have to handle it at arm's length. Easy does it. I want no contact with government officials and that particularly goes for the FBI. If this is something for them, we'll let them

know in due course." The cold, grey eyes met Sessena's. "Just throw a net around Williams. Use amateurs. Let's try to fill this picture in, but let's handle it carefully until we can see where we're going. I'm scared to death of any lead in Washington. You never know where in hell you'll end up."

Sessena grunted and got up from his chair. "I'm on my way. I'll act like I'm walking on eggs."

ONE

The brassy and percussive beat of the perspiring musicians at the Red Onion worked up to the series of alternate, rhythmic pauses and crashes that signaled the climax of Rosie Dawn's dance. Her ample buttocks swung toward the noisy audience, quivering in the rays of the spot lights that cut through the smoke-filled atmosphere, as she went into a slow, voluptuous grind. They swung lower and lower in a pool of light changing from yellow to orange to red, until they were a few inches above the flushed face of a heavy set man seated at a table closely pressed against the small stage. He rolled his cigar between pendulous, moist lips and glanced self-consciously toward his four male companions. Carefully raising his stein of beer, he let the white foam touch the girl's moving bottom. She straightened with a shriek, missed the last two beats of the music, and stalked angrily off the stage to a roar of laughter from the men at the table and a spattering of applause from the rest of the audience.

Ernie Sessena, sitting alone at a table toward the back of the small room, motioned to a scantily clad waitress nearby. "How about asking Rosie to come over and have a drink with me?" The waitress shifted the gum in her mouth and looked at him without expression.

"She know you?"

A faint grin touched his swarthy features as he handed her a bill. "Just tell her I'm the last of the bigtime spenders."

A moment later, Rosie Dawn moved between the tables and slipped into the chair across from him.

She smiled tentatively. "Hi, honey, you like my dance?"

"Great, especially the ending."

She tossed her head and let him light her cigarette.

"Oh, those bastards. I guess I got to live with it. Beer is better than having some guy press a lighted cigarette against your butt anyway. Believe it or not, that happens too."

Sessena looked at her levelly.

"I knew your husband, Mike, in Vietnam."

The girl's bright, tough expression vanished, and she looked across the table as if she were seeing her companion for the first time. "You knew Mike? You were a buddy of his out there?"

"Not exactly a buddy, but I knew him."

She flicked her cigarette ash into a chipped, black ashtray and stared at it unseeingly.

"How did he get it?" she asked huskily.

"A Cong mortar got him while he was on KP duty." The girl nodded. "Isn't that a helluva thing? Mike was one of the best Marines around and they get him while he is peeling a bucket of spuds."

"Well, we can't all go out yelling 'gung ho!'"

"Yeah, I guess so. You a Marine?"

"No, I'm a CIA type." He paused. "Central Intelligence Agency."

"Oh!" She shrugged after a moment. "You better buy me a drink or the boss will toss you out and fire me."

"Okay, what'll you have? The usual colored water at whiskey prices?"

She laughed, showing slightly stained teeth. "Do I look like a girl that drinks colored water?"

"No, but you don't look like a girl that gets drunk every night hustling drinks either."

"Thanks, that's something."

The waitress brought them two drinks.

"Here's to Mike," Sessena said.

The girl nodded and sipped her drink. "My name is Molly Flannery, if you're interested. Even the kind of mother I had wouldn't call a girl Rosie Dawn."

"I'm Ernie Sessena."

The girl put out her hand and clasped his warmly across the table. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Molly, there is something you can do for me."

She smiled knowingly. "There always is."

"No, I don't mean that, though it would be a helluva lot of fun. I'm here on business."

"CIA business?"

"Yes."

"What's in it for me?"

"Nothing, not a damn thing. It's just something that I think a girl like you, who loved a fellow like Mike, might want to help out on."

Molly looked at him in surprise and then the heavily made up face crumpled as she began to cry. She took the handkerchief Sessena passed across the table and blew her nose. A tracer of black mascara rolled from the corner of one eye down her cheek. "You know I loved the crazy jerk, don't you? And he loved me. Did he ever tell you that when you knew him out there?"

"Lots of times. He was crazy about you."

She gulped and got the tremor in her voice under control. "Nobody ever figures I've got feelings. They always figure I'm a gal who's been around and plays all the angles. Mike knew that wasn't true. You know it because you knew

Mike." She downed the rest of her drink. "O.K., what is it? For him, I'll do it for free."

"There's a guy comes in here from time to time by the name of Bart Williams. Here's his picture." Sessena handed the snapshot across the table.

Molly looked at it. "Not bad. What's he done?"

"Nothing. I just want to know more about him. When he comes in, play up to him, get to know him. Tell me what you find out. Any detail might be important."

"O.K."

"Good girl. I'll drop around again in a few days."

Molly reached across the table and took his strong, hairy hand in hers. "Ernie, we're friends aren't we? Real friends, like you were with Mike?"

"Yeah, kiddo. Real friends. You don't have to put it on with me."

She squeezed his hand. "I'll play square, Ernie."

"I know, kiddo. I'll see you in two or three days."

He put a five dollar bill on the table and with a flip of his hand walked out.

As he stepped out into Fourteenth Street, a gust of wind laden with cold rain struck him. He shivered and turned up his coat collar. He stepped into the foyer of a darkened candy store to light a cigarette before walking around the corner into the parking lot to pick up his automobile. It's always a lot easier to talk about recruiting than to recruit, he thought. The name Mike Flannery was just a name to Ernie Sessena, and he had never been to Vietnam. But it didn't hurt the girl to think so, and it might even do her some good. He wondered what role she had cast him in: lover, big brother, father? He smiled wryly at his reflection in a store window. Maybe it would be Father Christmas.

CHARLIE and Darlene Davidson joined with the choir and congregation in the closing hymn of the protestant service. Charlie shifted his stance slightly in the narrow pew and stole a glance at Ernie Sessena standing on the other side of Darlene and sharing a hymnbook with her. Behind the gold rims of his glasses, Charlie's eyes twinkled. Ernie's baritone wasn't bad. He would have to recruit the old heathen first for the parish and then for the choir. The pastor had told him only last week how difficult it was to put together a good choir, and Charlie, with his reedy voice, could only sympathize. Ernie, a onetime Catholic, might be ready for a church again. After all, he had asked to attend service with them. He didn't have to accompany them to church just because he was coming home for Sunday dinner. Perhaps he was ready to answer the call.

Charlie's heart warmed and his eyes moved fondly around the modest Tudor interior of the church with its stained glass windows, its walnut pews and altar. As the perennial chairman of the annual building fund, he felt a

proprietary interest in this church, and Ernie would be a good addition to the congregation. Yes, that was a fine baritone voice.

The pastor stood in the bright sunlight greeting the parishioners as they filed out into the warmth of an Indian summer Sunday. "Dr. Garden, Charlie said proudly, "this is my friend, Ernie Sessena, who joined us today."

Dr. Garden smiled at Sessena. "Delighted to have you, Mr. Sessena. I heard that fine voice." He turned to a tall slim young man just emerging from the church. "I'd like to see you after evening service, Bart. Will you be there?"

"Yes, Dr. Garden. I'll be there." The young man nodded pleasantly at the group and walked on.

"That's our Scout Master, Mr. Williams," the pastor explained to Sessena. "A fine young man. A fine young man indeed. We just hope that he finds a wife soon among our young ladies. It's hard to keep their attention while he remains such an eligible bachelor." He threw back his head and laughed heartily.

Sessena looked after Williams with an unfathomable expression. "I'm sure he'll marry when the right girl comes along."

After a few more minutes of polite conversation with the Davidson's friends, Ernie joined Charlie and Darlene in their two-door sedan for the short ride to their home on a quiet side street near Rock Creek Park. While Darlene put the finishing touches on the dinner waiting in her automatic oven, Charlie mixed his friend a martini. "It's been a long time, Ernie. We ought to see each other more often."

Sessena accepted his drink. "I agree, Charlie. We get so damn busy with day to day problems that we haven't time for our friends any more."

"Well, I'm awfully glad you called me up last week, Ernie, and it's wonderful that you were free to come out and have dinner with us."

"How is your son, John? I didn't see him in church." Charlie beamed. "Oh, he's doing very well, Ernie."

He's in the top five per cent of his high school class. He's a good athlete, in my opinion, and one of the Eagle Scouts in our church Scout patrol."

"How old is he now?"

"Fifteen."

"I remember him as a very honorable, self-reliant little fellow. Is that still a fair description?"

"Well, at fifteen he's no longer a 'little fellow' and you'll have to allow for the fact that I am speaking as a proud father. But I think John is a very self-sufficient, well-balanced young man. I didn't have his poise and common sense when I was fifteen."

Sessena sipped his drink. "You know, Charlie, with your permission, I'd like to have a talk with John."

Charlie looked at his friend. "I have no objection, of course. You're going to see him at dinner in fifteen minutes—but you phrase the question so formally. What's on your mind?"

"I'd just like to talk with him. I think he can do something for me that could be useful."

Charlie sat down across the room and gazed at Sessena thoughtfully over the rim of his glass. "Are you still with the CIA?"

"Yes."

"Do you wish to talk with John officially?"

"Yes."

Charlie's expression sharpened. "Well, I don't know that I like that, Ernie. What interest has the CIA in a fifteen-year-old boy?"

"I think he can help me rather importantly."

"How?"

"I can't tell you."

"Well, you're damn well going to have to tell me, Ernie, or you're not going to talk to John!" Charlie's pale blue eyes flashed.

"Charlie, we've been friends for a long time, and I wouldn't ask anything of John that I wouldn't ask of my own son, if I had one. All I can tell you is that he can help me in putting together some intelligence. There's no risk

involved. It's merely that he knows someone in whom I have an interest. I just want him to observe this person and give me his impressions."

"You mean you want to hire my fifteen-year-old as a CIA agent?"

Sessena shook his head. "You say that, Charlie, as if I would be contributing to the delinquency of a minor. As it happens, I don't want to recruit him as a CIA agent. I don't plan to pay him one red cent. I merely want him to tell me something that he probably already knows, or if he doesn't know it, that he can soon find out. I can assure you that there's no risk in it for John or I wouldn't ask him to do it."

"Is it important, Ernie?"

"I don't know. In intelligence work you never know what's important or what isn't, but I need John's assistance to help put a picture together. Whether the picture will have any significance when I get it completed, I have no way of knowing at this stage."

"He's the only son I have, Ernie."

"I know that, Charlie. You've told me what a fine boy he is—he's an eagle scout—he's responsible for his years. He is now fifteen years old. In three years he'll be eighteen, and he might be asked to go abroad and fight in some stinking war for his country. You wouldn't want that and I wouldn't want that for him, but it is something that every generation of young men in this country has had to stand ready to do. I don't see any reason why you should object to your son doing something for his country three years sooner than we might normally expect him to shoulder his responsibilities, particularly if he can do it without risk to himself. In fact, it seems to me it might teach him something more about citizenship."

"I'm his father. Why can't you tell me what it is?"

"I have one rule I never break, and it isn't my rule, it's a rule that I am required to live by as well. And that is that no one in my business knows any more than he needs to know. Now I will be telling John who the person involved is. I will not be telling him why I am interested in

that person. This person may be completely innocent of any wrong doing. The information that John gives me may be irrelevant or unimportant. It may serve to indicate to us how foolish our suspicions are, but what useful purpose will it serve for you to know who this person is? I promise you, Charlie, that I shall ask John only to do the things that he normally does. He will take no action that he would not normally take. The only thing he will do is to report to me on the actions of a certain individual."

Charlie put down his drink, walked to the living room window and stared out over his small garden. "All right, Ernie," he said after a moment, "You can talk to him and you don't need to tell me what it is all about. I trust you."

"Thank you, Charlie."

Darlene Davidson walked into the living room from the kitchen and took the cocktail her husband had prepared for her.

"Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes. I think I'll sit down with you boys and catch my breath." She looked about her. "Is John back from church yet?"

Charlie shook his head. "He ought to be here any minute. He knows we're going to sit down at one o'clock on the dot, and I've spoken to him more than once about being punctual."

The two-toned door chime rang and Darlene went to the door.

"Hi Mom," John Davidson said breathlessly. "I forgot my key; sorry to bring you to the door."

"That's all right, Johnny, come on in, you're just in time for dinner. You remember your father's friend, Mr. Sessena?"

"Oh, yes sir, how do you do?" John Davidson looked at Sessena with only faint interest and shook hands. Then, with an "Excuse me, sir," he bolted up the stairs to his room. "I'll be back down in a second, Mom," he called over his shoulder.

After dinner, Charlie Davidson said, "Ernie, why don't you get John to take you up to his room and show

you his merit badges? I'll help Darlene with the dishes and then we can go for a little ride."

"Thanks, Charlie, I'd like to see the merit badges if John is willing."

"Yes, sir," John said, obviously pleased. He looked at Ernie Sessena shyly. "That is, if you're really interested, Mr. Sessena. You don't really have to bother."

"John, I was an Eagle Scout myself, believe it or not."

"Oh, were you in Scouting? Gee, isn't that something! Well, come on upstairs and I'll show you the things I have."

They climbed up a narrow carpeted stairway to the second floor of the house and down the hallway to a small, sunlit bedroom, the walls and shelves of which were filled with the memorabilia of a boy whose interests ran to sports and the outdoors.

John showed Sessena his various trophies, explaining each one with detailed enthusiasm, until Sessena interrupted him and, sitting down in a chair, motioned for John to sit down on the bed.

"John, I'm very interested in these trophies and your merit badges, but my main purpose in coming up here was to talk with you."

John looked at him uncertainly.

"I have your father's permission."

"Yes, sir."

"There is something I want you to do for me, and I'm asking you in my capacity as a member of the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States."

John's eyes widened slightly. "Yes, sir?"

"If you agree to do this for me, you're not to say one word about it to anyone, and that includes your father and mother."

John's face clouded. "But, I don't have secrets from Dad and Mom, Mr. Sessena."

"I know that, John, and, in a sense, this isn't a secret. Your mother knows nothing about it, and I hope we can keep it that way, but your father knows that I have a

task for you to perform and that I'm speaking to you about it. He also understands that I'll ask you not to tell him the details."

John Davidson looked at the floor. "Well, if I have Dad's permission. . . ." He suddenly grinned. "Do you think there really is something I can do for the CIA? Gosh!"

Sessena grinned back.

"Yes, John, there is. I've assured your father that it involves nothing that you are not already doing and that there's no risk whatsoever."

"Well, jeepers, you don't have to tell me that. I guess I'm old enough to take a little risk if it's important."

"I was certain you'd feel that way, and I said what I did to reassure your father, not you. I realize that as a young man now you know as well as I do that part of a man's life is taking risks."

"Yes, sir, I know that."

"And this is important to your country."

"Yes, sir."

"Will you give me your word as a gentleman and an Eagle Scout that you will only convey your information to me and not discuss it with anyone, including your father and mother?"

"Yes sir, if it doesn't involve them."

"It doesn't, John."

"Then I won't discuss it with anyone but you." Ernie Sessena reached across and clasped the boy's hand firmly in his own. "Thank you, son."

"Now then, I want you to observe very carefully everything that your Scout Master says or does in your presence."

John Davidson looked at Sessena with shock and disbelief. "My Scout Master? You mean Mr. Williams?"

"Yes, Mr. Williams."

"My gosh, is he a spy or something?"

Sessena permitted himself a deep, carefree laugh.

"No, of course not, we just want to learn a little more about Mr. Williams."

"You see, John, gathering intelligence is very much like solving a jigsaw puzzle. There may be a thousand pieces to put together and none of them, in themselves, are particularly important. I don't think Mr. Williams is particularly important, one way or the other. But, he is a part of a picture we are trying to assemble, and I'd like to feel that I thoroughly understand Mr. Williams and have some knowledge of his habits and attitudes."

"Well," John said doubtfully, "O.K., what do I do? Just watch him and listen to what he says?"

"Exactly. I would particularly like to know anything that comes to your attention concerning his plans for spending money or travelling."

"Yes, sir."

"Ernie, John," Darlene Davidson called from the foot of the stairs. "We're ready for our ride."

"Be right down, Mom," John called. He turned to Ernie Sessena. "I'll do what you want me to do, Mr. Sessena. How do I get in touch with you?"

"I'll get in touch with you, John."

"Can I tell my father that you spoke to me and that I agreed to do what you asked?"

"Yes, I think you should do that. All I ask is that you not tell him what I've asked you to do. Since I know your father very well, I don't think he'll ask you that question."

Together they walked down the stairs to greet Darlene Davidson who stood in the first floor hallway with her coat and hat on.

"Charlie's out in front with the car. What in the world were you two talking about? You sounded like a couple of conspirators up there."

Ernie laughed heartily. "Oh, John and I are old friends by this time—we're thick as thieves. Isn't that right, John?"

"Yes, sir."

Sessena waited on the corner near Dupont Circle until the Negro postman had parked his motorized mailcart and was preparing his deliveries in the vicinity.

"Nice day, isn't it?" he said.

The mailman looked up and smiled. "It sure is, and that helps, the mail is so heavy this time of year. I don't know where it all comes from."

"A lot of advertising, I expect."

"Must be."

"My name is Sessena, I'm with the Central Intelligence Agency. How about coming over to the drug store and letting me buy you a cup of coffee?"

The mailman's eyes widened. "Why would I want to do that, man? I've got my route to finish and it's going to take me longer than usual as it is."

"I'd like to talk with you about something. You would do me a favor if you would take fifteen minutes and have a cup of coffee with me."

"And if I won't?"

Sessena shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Then you won't."

"You think I'm involved in trouble, is that it?"
"No, of course not. But as a citizen, you could do something for me."

"Oh, so you've got me pegged as a good citizen?"
Sessena laughed. "Let's don't go off on the civil-rights syndrome, Sergeant Brown. I know all about your military service in Korea, and you'd qualify as a good citizen in anybody's book."

The mailman grinned and scratched his ear. "O.K., I could use a cup of coffee, but it'll have to be carry-out. I can't leave this mail."

"Right. Pull your cart over there to that park bench. I'll get the coffee and join you."

Brown drank his coffee standing. "You've got to remember how folks size you up," he said, smiling at Sessena. "Folks might forgive the mailman stopping on his delivery long enough to drink a cup of coffee on a cold day, but they won't forgive him if he's sitting down looking like he was enjoying himself."

"I suppose you're right. People are always anxious to

get the mail, even when there may be more bad news than good."

"I'm nearly through," Brown said. "Better tell me what's on your mind."

"You deliver to a Mr. Bart Williams, don't you?"

The mailman reflected a moment. "Yes, that name's on my route, why?"

"I'd like you to notice what you deliver to Mr. Williams. You needn't open it or hand it over to me or do anything that might interfere with the mails, but it seems to me that you could look at the return addresses on the letters and give me some idea of the kind of mail he receives."

Brown grimaced. "Man, I don't know. Why don't you contact the Post Office? They'd be glad to put a watch on his mail, and they could tell you a lot more than I can."

"This is an unofficial, low-key affair, Brown. I don't want to go to the Post Office and make the matter official."

"How do I know you're with the CIA?"

Sessena reached into his billfold, extracted a laminated card, and showed it to him.

"O.K., you're who you say you are, but I still don't know. . . ."

"Look, Sergeant Brown. You served in Korea for over two years. You were wounded and you were decorated. You've been a leader among your people ever since. Now, if you could do that for your country, why can't you do this little thing now?"

Brown grinned. "That's pretty big talk for a little thing like watching the return addresses on the mail."

"The little things count," Sessena replied. "I want to know more about this Bart Williams, and this is one of the means I have of doing it."

"You mean the guy's a spy?"

"I don't know what he is. That's what I'm trying to find out."

The mailman dropped his head and thought a mo-