

## Two At Sea (a sequel to my story 'Two in the Woods')

It had been three days since they'd first met and not blown each other's heads off but in that time, Jim hadn't really had a chance to talk with Tania very much. They were constantly on guard for anyone recognizing them but so far so good. They got lucky and found a train with an empty box car to hitch a ride in out of Switzerland that got them to Milan. There, Jim bought a cheap burner cellphone and made contact with his buddy Sam who wired them some cash and from there they made their way to the port in Genoa.

To his surprise, Jim discovered Tania spoke pretty good Italian and he let her do the talking on their way through Italy. She was good traveling companion, never complaining about anything and making do with nothing. He really hoped she liked his boat and sailing.

It was early in the morning just before dawn when they went down to the docks to meet his friend. The cold air stank from dirty water and rotting fish and Jim couldn't wait to get out of here. Then he saw his buddy standing in front of a rust-bucket tanker-ship. He squeezed Tania's hand as she walked close beside him.

"Tania, this is my buddy Sam."

Tania didn't hold out her hand to Jim's friend as she was a bit wary of the big

man who wore a black seaman's coat and a black-knit cap that covered his head.

"Glad to meet you, but I'm with Jim."

Jim's friend smiled a little at that, a smile that wasn't near as nice as Jim's. "I like your style." He reached into his pockets and pulled out a small black sack and handed it to Jim. "There are two passports in here plus some other documents and some cash. I got some clothes and stuff for you on board. You're in one cabin together because the captain thinks you're a couple traveling together. I'll vouch for him because he's not one to ask too many questions. But I can't vouch for his crew so I'd keep Tania close to you, buddy."

"Will do." Jim said as he took the bag from his friend and opened it. He handed one passport folder to her and she opened it to find her Russian passport photo in a well-forged American passport. "Tania... Kirk?"

"Jim said it would be easy for you to remember."

She looked up at Jim and saw that he was struggling not to smile like she was.

Sam continued, "There's also some cash and papers in there to get you to Key West. Jim, it'll take me some time to hack your account and drain it for you so if you need more money just let me know."

"Thanks." Jim said then he began to lead her away from his friend.

She stopped and asked his friend, "Why are you helping us?"

"Because I like happy endings. And maybe someday I'll be able to tell your

story.”

“Tell,.. our... story?” Now she was both curious and very wary of his friend.

“Come on, Tania. I’ll explain what he means when we get going.” Jim tugged her hand and led her up the narrow ramp up on the board the ship. There they were met by the captain, a mountain of a man who was a fellow Russian like her and greeted her in Russian. He showed them to their cabin then left them alone.

“Jim, what did your friend mean back on the dock about telling our story?”

Jim turned away from the single round window in their tiny room. “One night after a few shots of tequila he let it slip that he’s a best-selling author. I don’t know if you’ve heard of him, Robert Adams.”

“Yes! I’ve read all his books. But...” She sat down on the two-person bunk in shock. “So what did you tell him about us exactly?”

Jim came over and sat down beside her. “I told him we’d stumbled across each other in the woods, decided not to blow each other’s heads off, then holed up in a shack for a night before deciding to desert. I also told him you took out five Russian soldiers with single head-shots.”

“So he thinks we’re lovers?”

Jim got up from the bed and went back over to the window. “I didn’t tell him that. And Tania, that decision will always be yours.”

She thought about what Jim had just said, and the way he looked at her now.

She got up from the bed and went over to him. “So if I tell you I want to be your lover...”

“Tania...”

She smiled at his hesitation. “When you’re ready, you can let me know.”

What in the hell was he supposed to say to that, Jim asked himself. Nothing, he decided as he took Tania’s hand and led her out of their room. “Come on, let’s hopefully watch our last look at one smelly damn port.”

Later they ate with the crew, three of whom were also Russian like the captain. But they treated Tania well and Jim got to talking with a couple of the other crew who were American. Then he and Tania took turns using the shower then he climbed into the bunk beside her. There wasn’t a lot of room for them and he hoped she wasn’t a restless sleeper, or that she would rub her ass against his groin and wake up to his inevitable hard-on.

In the middle of the night, he woke up after remembering that awful day in

Afghanistan, something that always happened whenever met up with Sam.

He got out of bed and went over to the portal and looked out at the calm ocean.

“Jim?”

He looked over his shoulder at Tania. “It’s alright. Go back to sleep.”

She got out of bed came over to him instead. She wore one of her t-shirts that barely came to the top of her thighs, and fit her slender yet shapely body. “Was it a bad dream?”

“Yeah. Every time I meet with Sam I remember the day I saved his life, and lost five other guys in my platoon.”

“What happened?”

Jim’s first instinct was to not answer Tania’s simple question. But she’d been in combat and had seen death so maybe she’d handle this better than the only other woman he’d ever told the story to.

“It was in Afghanistan not long after the war started there. We were badly equipped, out-maneuvered, and our intel was always lacking. Every day you went out you didn’t know if you were going to make it back alive and in one piece.”

Jim looked back outside at the calm water even as he saw the jagged hillsides of Afghanistan in his mind. “We were in a convoy on the way to another base when we stopped to check for IED’s. I saw the trip wire just before Sam would have tripped it and blown us both to pieces. I pulled him back and several other

IED's were set off remotely and then we were hit with snipers, small-arms fire, and RPG's all at once. Eventually we got air support and that got them to retreat but we lost five guys in my platoon and three more from the other platoon we were with, then two more died before they could make it to the hospital."

"Oh, Jim. I'm so sorry." Tania came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Again, his first instinct was to shut down but he couldn't resist her soft and gentle embrace, so he turned around and held her tightly against him. He rested his head on top of hers, breathing the sweet scent of her hair and savored the soft curves of her body pressed tightly against his. Most of all, he embraced her with a need he felt was greedy even though holding her was easing his pain like no one, or nothing else ever had.

Then he loosened his hold on her and she looked up at him. "Do you want to be with me?"

He answered straight from his heart, "Yes. More than anything."

"Then why do you hesitate?"

He let go of her. "I don't want you to regret this, or feel this binds you to me in

any way.”

“I know what I want.”

“Then tell me.”

“I want to be with a man who is kind to me, who respects me, protects me, and cares about me. Like I know you do.”

He stared at her for a moment then, “Well then, let me hope Sam packed some condoms for me.”

“You won’t need them.” And suddenly she felt nervous as Jim went still. The last man she’d told this to had rejected her badly. This was her test of Jim, and her own instincts about him.

“I can’t have children. When I was sixteen, they discovered tumors in my uterus. They took it and everything else. I was lucky there was no cancer but since both my parents died from cancer they were very worried for me.”

“Tania, I’m sorry.”

Jim’s soft words almost made her want to cry but she continued on. “My parents met in Pripjat, in the Ukraine. It was the city next to the Chernobyl nuclear plant. My parents were there when it exploded but they weren’t evacuated right away as they were made to stay and help take care of the workers there. They had cancer after that that kept coming back for years after. My mother was told not to have a child but she eventually got pregnant, then died six months after I was born,

and my father died two months after her.”

She turned away from Jim, afraid of how he would see her now. She felt him come up behind her, felt his hand touch her shoulder gently. She turned to face him.

“Have you ever been with a man before, after you’ve told him this?”

Tania nodded. “Just once. It didn’t go very well.”

Jim cupped her chin and tilted her head up to where she could look right up into his eyes. “Well, then, I better make this perfect for you.”

That made her smile and a huge weight lifted off her as she wound her arms around his neck and reached up for him. They shared their first kiss, soft and sweet, gentle yet inquisitive. Then she broke their kiss and stepped back from him. She pulled her shirt off, then removed her underwear. She stood before him, and saw hunger in his eyes.

“So beautiful.” He said as he quickly took off his shirt and pants.

“I’m skinny.”

“You’re perfect.” Jim said before he kissed her again. He backed her up to the bed where they laid down facing each other.

He was patient with her, slowly exploring every inch of her body, making her moan, then squirm with pleasure rising in her body. And when they came together

in each other's arms, Tania knew she would never leave him.

The next few days at sea were chilly on deck but in their cabin, Jim felt like they were in their own little world. He couldn't wait to get her on his boat somewhere warmer but the freighter wasn't so bad. The crew were very nice and friendly towards Tania and the captain even gave them a tour of the ship. One afternoon just before they got to Bermuda a school of dolphins swam alongside the ship. Tania laughed at their antics while he held her from behind. Her laughter and joy were like a balm to his soul and for the first time in his life, he felt weights beginning to lift off him that had been there for as long as he could remember.

They reached Fort Lauderdale and they got through customs and immigration with no problems. They also found the car Sam had left for them, a convertible but it wasn't a very pleasant ride. He hoped his boat was ready to go because as they listened to the news on the drive down, things were getting worse in Europe. The fighting was raging with heavy weapons and heavy casualties and to him, it was like both sides were throwing everything they had at each other and it was only going to spread and take more lives.

When they pulled into the marina in Key West he turned off the radio and parked the car. And as they walked down the dock to his boat, Jim felt himself get

a little bit nervous again. His boat wasn't too big or fancy, but it was solid and well-built. Finally, they came to it. He'd named it "Born to Run" after his favorite Bruce Springsteen album.

"That's it." He said as they came to his boat's slip.

"I love it!" Tania said, "Especially the name. That's my favorite Bruce Springsteen album!"

"Mine, too." Jim said as he gave her a kiss then helped her on board. They went through everything and saw that it was in pristine condition. Then they went back up topside and headed to the stores to get supplies. They slept on the boat that night then set sail on the morning tide. Tania was as good a sailor as she said she was, no surprise there.

They made the crossing the Bimini in two days with clear skies and smooth winds. When they got there they decided to go ashore and have lunch at the local conch bar. When they got there everyone was crowded around the bar in front of the tv. Jim felt his heart sink to the bottom of his gut as he watched the news along with Tania.

"Today, two nuclear devices were detonated over Germany." The newscaster said over footage of nuclear wastelands. "Casualty reports are still coming in but preliminary estimates put the dead at close to a million people including American

and other Allied forces along with Russian forces.”

Tania gripped his hand tightly and he looked down and saw tears streaming down her face. He pulled her close to his side and held her as they watched the rest of the news report.

“Jim,” She buried her face against his shoulder. “Can we go back to the boat now?”

He led her out of the bar and back to the boat. She sat down on the bow and he just held her as she cried. He thought of the guys he knew who were probably dead and all the civilians. He knew how affected Tania would be because of what had happened to her parents but her grief and compassion for the survivors and the dead touched him deeply and he began to cry along with her.

They didn't say much to each other and after midnight they made their way below and to their berth. They made love deep into the night, trying to chase away the horror they had fled from. The next morning Jim set up breakfast topside but Tania was quiet and barely said a word and didn't eat much either. He wished he had words to comfort her but he was feeling his own survivor's guilt.

Then his cellphone went off and he saw it was Sam. “Sam, I'm going to put

you on speaker so Tania can hear you.”

“Tania, how are you doing?” Sam asked.

“I’m okay.”

“You don’t sound okay.” Sam said through a slightly-crackling connection.

“All those people...”

“I know.” Jim said as he took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. She looked up at him and tried to smile but couldn’t.

“Things don’t look good right now.” Sam said. “Both sides are claiming ‘rogue elements’ set off both bombs and both the President and the Russian Prime Minister said once they found out what was happening they stopped more from being deployed. My sources are telling me that’s a load of shit and there’s something big going on in both Washington and Moscow. I just hope this doesn’t turn into an ‘On the Beach’ situation for the two of you.”

“Yeah, me too.” Jim said.

“On the beach?” Tania asked.

“I’ll explain it to you later.” Jim said. “How are you doing, Sam?”

“I’m okay. Why don’t you two head on down to my place on St. John? You can stay there as long as you like.”

The call ended and Jim gave Tania the grim explanation. “On the Beach was an old movie based on a book written in the fifties about a group of survivors of a

massive nuclear war who made it to Australia in a submarine. When they got there they partied on the beach but in the end, they saw the huge cloud of nuclear fallout coming toward them. They had nowhere else to go so they were all going to die eventually.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“It’s an eerie movie. I saw it when I was a kid and it put the fear of nuclear war in me pretty bad.”

She stood up and picked up her breakfast plate. “I hope that doesn’t happen.”

He got up with her and helped her clear the rest of their dishes and bring them down into the cabin below. At the sink, they set them down then Jim took Tania into his arms.

“I’m glad we got out when we did.”

She gave him a soft kiss. “Me, too.”

Three days later they motored into the private dock by Sam’s house on St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands. On the way down, they’d only heard snippets of news. No more bombs had been dropped and there was a temporary ceasefire but it wasn’t expected to hold.

Jim steered them to the dock and to his surprise Sam was waiting for them. He

caught the line Tania tossed to him and when the boat was secure, she got off and gave Sam a hug. Jim wasn't jealous though as he was glad to see Sam, too.

"You two made good time getting here." Sam said as he shook hands with Jim.

"Have you heard the news?"

"Not since yesterday." Jim replied.

"Is it bad?" Tania asked.

"Come inside." Sam led him into his large and airy house on shore and to a big living room with a news broadcast on the television. "Sit down and I'll get some coffee for us."

Jim sat down next to Tania on the big plush sofa as the newscaster started a brief recap of the news that shocked Jim and Tania into silence.

"Again, the latest update is both the President of the United States and the Russian Prime Minister have been removed from office and are in custody and will be charged with crimes against humanity for ordering the nuclear strikes. Other officials are expected to be charged in the bombings as negotiations begin in earnest for an end to the war along help for the survivors and the creation of an exclusion zone. More to come."

Sam set down a tray with a coffee pot and three coffee cups. He picked up the remote and clicked the tv off before he poured coffee for all of them. Then he sat down in a chair opposite them. Jim took a sip of his coffee, unsure of what to say

now.

“I’m surprised the Russian Prime Minister is still alive.” Tania said as she broke the silence in the room.

“Word is they want to make an example of him, and humiliate his ass, too.” Sam said before he took a sip of his coffee. “Now, I’ve got some news for both of you. You’re both now considered dead as they didn’t think you had made it out of Germany and were in hiding there. So you’re free to be Jim and Tania Kirk for the rest of your lives. Jim, I’ll have your money to you in a couple of days from your bank account. They’re not paying too much attention to potential hackers right now.”

“Thank you, Sam.” Tania said. “Can I take a shower here? I love the boat-.”

“But miss the hot water.” Jim finished for her. “I know.”

“Go ahead.” Sam said then as Tania left the house, he looked right at Jim.

“Have you told her?”

“Told her what?”

“That you love her.”

Jim sat back and sipped his coffee. He’d only told one other woman that and it hadn’t ended well. But Tania wasn’t like any other woman he’d known. Yet

something still held him back.

“She loves you, too, buddy.” Sam said.

“Then why hasn’t she said that to me?” Jim asked.

“Because when women say it first, guys usually make a run for the hills. If she says it before you do, don’t go overboard into the water.”

That last line made Jim laugh a little. “I do love her but we’ve only been together less than a month-.”

“And you’ve spent more time with each other than most people ever do in normal situations so don’t use that as a bullshit excuse.”

Jim thought about Sam’s words when he and Tania returned to the boat that evening. He told her he had something to tell her and that he wanted some privacy. They stood at the bow of the boat facing each other as the moon shined down on the water.

“Tania,”

“Jim, I want to tell you I love you.”

“Damn it,” He said with a smile. “I wanted to tell you first.”

“Is that why you brought me out here?”

“Yeah. I wanted to tell you I loved you and I always will no matter how much

time we have together, or whatever the hell happens in this crazy world.”

“Oh Jim!” She launched herself into his arms and he caught her but the boat rocked and they both went overboard. He let go of her as they both surfaced spluttering and laughing at each other. They swam over to the side of the boat and held on with one hand each.

“Sam told me not to go overboard if you told me first.”

“Well, I’m glad we did.” She said then she kissed him.

“Tania,” He cupped her face with his free hand. “I’m so glad we found each other, and that it will always be the two of us together.”

THE END