

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

The morning sunlight entered Mick's room like an unwelcome guest, arousing him from the trance-like state that had followed a sleepless night. How the hell am I gonna pull this off? he said to himself, while rubbing his eyes, that dude, Griff, thinks I'm Ralph. Shit, what am I gonna do when they start askin' questions? Ralph, you prick, where the fuck are you when I need you? Ain't you supposed to be here when I'm in trouble? Well, the shit's about the hit the fan. He gazed at his hands as they shook uncontrollably, took a deep breath and reluctant to admit his errant decision to leave New York, resigned to make the call that he dreaded most.

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He walked the pavement of downtown San Francisco, stopping briefly at a fast food counter for a bagel and coffee, while building the needed confidence for his call to Vigo's office. Conscious of the time difference between the West and East coasts, he lifted his arm to check for the time and realized that he had left his watch in the hotel room. He gazed about for the clock that building's sometimes have affixed to their exterior and not finding one, stopped the first person that passed, a nattily dressed businessman. "Hey man," he said, "what time do you have?"

"Get a life, fella," the man snarled, without stopping.

"Yeah, fuck you too," he replied and continued his journey, eventually arriving back at the hotel. Deep in thought, he ignored the hotel clerk's seductive wave, took the elevator to his floor and entered his room. Sitting atop rumpled sheets, he stared at the bedside clock, remarking to himself, eleven A.M. in New York, no use waitin', and reached for the phone. "Operator," he said, "I need to call New York an' here's the number ..."

"You don't need me for that, just follow the instructions glued to the room phone," she remarked.

"There ain't nothin' on this phone, lady, 'cept some friggin' ear wax."

"Oh Alright, then hold on," she replied, with obvious irritation.

Vigo's office phone rang for a painfully long interval before an unfamiliar voice announced, "Dr. Clarence Vigo's answering service, can I help you?"

"I need to speak to the doctor."

"Are you a patient?"

"Yeah, an' it's an emergency."

"The office is closed right now but I can have the doctor on-call get back to you."

"Where's Vigo?"

"I said, the office is closed."

"Shit, shit!" he hissed, while breathing heavily, the mouthpiece moved slightly off to one side.

"Did you want to speak to his coverage?"

"Hell no, he won't know me, won't know my problem."

"If it's truly an emergency, sir, we've been instructed to direct all of the doctor's patients to the Metropolitan Hospital emergency room."

"Never mind," he answered, angrily, and hung up.

Following a desperate but fruitless attempt to locate Vigo's home telephone number, he sat staring at the floor, trying to divine his next move. And then, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a well worn piece of paper, he gazed at it thoughtfully. "She'll be pissed if I catch her in the middle of some lawyer thing," he whispered, "but I gotta find Vigo."

Melanie Sands' cell phone rang several times before a prerecorded, metallic sounding voice announced: *The subscriber you have attempted to contact has either turned off their device or has left the calling area.*

Frickin' cell phones, he thought, as he slammed down the receiver and began pacing the room. C'mon, Ralph, do I have to get the shit beat outta me before you come back? Hoping to clear his head, he took a seat in the rickety bedside chair and began adding notes to a piece of music, a year old work in progress, but inspiration failed to surface. Putting aside pencil and paper, he resolved to take a nap before trying Melanie's number once again. Within minutes, he had entered a state of deep, dreamless sleep.

"Holy shit!" he exclaimed, when turning over in bed hours later, striking his head on a corner of the night stand and awakening. Darkness had arrived and the small room was aglow from the red, neon sign attached to the roof of the nearby vacant building. He turned, gazed at the clock and thought, eighty-three, damn, I slept the whole day away. Crap, no time to call Mel now, he remarked to himself, while jumping from the bed and heading into the hallway. I need to take shower an' get to the club.

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It was Thursday night, the club was crowded and Mick was hardly at his best. He scanned the audience looking for Griff but he was nowhere to be seen. It was the last set of the evening and as he stood alongside the keyboard player, awaiting the cue for his high note ending to their final tune, he wondered, maybe this Griff thing's a mistake. He's gonna see through me in two seconds and then what? C'mon, Ralph, now's the time, gimme a clue. Why is this guy so important and what the fuck are the gates of hell?

To his surprise, the audience whistled and applauded wildly when his trumpet spit out the sweetest and highest note of his short career; it was time to pack up the horn. Earlier, he had made it clear to Chips that he had to leave right after the last tune and as he zipped closed his trumpet case, Chips causally approached his side. "Here's your hundred, man," he said, "keep them notes a comin'."

"I hear yah," Mick replied, while glancing at String, trying to determine if he had received the same payment. When String nodded in approval, he grabbed his horn, rose and headed for the alley. He expected to find Griff waiting in the same place as before but instead, found only the dark emptiness of the deserted, urine soaked narrow street. Almost relieved by the Jamaican's absence, his apprehension returned, however, when an old, faded WV pulled to the curb with Griff at the wheel.

"Hey, mon, over here," Griff shouted, while wildly waving his hands.

Reluctantly, he entered the vehicle, turned briefly to place his horn in the almost non-existent back seat and then slammed the door shut. "Thought for a minute you weren't comin'," he said.

"Yah, mon, sorry. City's a bitch for drivin'."

They drove in silence for thirty or forty minutes along various streets, some of which seemed vaguely familiar, and eventually entered a densely foliated park. The poorly lit road, that in the darkness seemed to go on for miles, was void of activity and Mick's internal alarm began to sound. "Where we goin', man?" he asked, with a tinge of concern, his hand on the door opener.

Griff shifted his head slightly towards Mick, a quizzical expression on his face that quickly turned to a smile. "What's with you, mon?" he asked, "you been this way before."

Mick pretended to scratch his head while wiping away the fear induced sweat that had begun to drip from his brow and removed his hand from the door latch. "Yeah, just kiddin'," he replied. "Who we expectin' at this meetin'?"

"Nothin's changed, mon."

Mick had no idea who or what to expect and although he tried desperately to remain cool, a state of inner panic prevailed and he said to himself, Ralph, Ralph, what have you gotten me into?

The car came to a halt in front of an old garage. Griff exited with Mick following suit. After traversing a maze of ancient automobiles, their discarded parts and pools of oil, they

made their way to the rear of the edifice. Through the partially open rusty steel door, four men and two women could be seen sitting at a makeshift table. A heated conversation appeared to be in progress, the combatants stopping only briefly to slice an irregular chunk from a large salami, washing it down with a gulp of cheap red wine. As the pair entered, the room became silent.

"Ralph, baby, I've missed you," a hippie-like brunette shrieked, as she left the table and ran to his side, offering up her puckered lips.

At that very moment, Mick felt an acute sense of emptiness in the pit of his stomach but as he attempted to respond, something strange occurred. Like a prisoner in his own body, forced to suffer the indignity and frustration of servitude, Ralph assumed control. Now, for the first time during their rocky coexistence, Mick was allowed entree into Ralph's private world but, only as an observer.

"'ello, love, give us an 'eavenly," Ralph said, as he attempted to slide his tongue down her throat, grabbing her butt for support.

Griff, who had been drinking and refilling a paper cup with the cheap wine, burst into a fit of laughter while pointing and staring at the couple. "Di mon, 'es back," he said, while momentarily choking on the liquid.

"Well, boys and girls, what matter of barney 'ave you got into in my absence?" Ralph asked, while drying his lips of the smeared saliva with the back of his hand.

"What do you mean?" the brunette asked with a frown, while still glued to his torso.

"Means trouble, love. Now, be a nice twist an' 'ave a seat."

"Since you been gone, mon, we been planin'," Griff remarked.

"Thought it twas my job," Ralph said, while leaning forward and tearing a piece of meat from the mangled salami.

Tommy, who had been nonchalantly sitting on a chair in the corner of the room, lowered his paper cup to the ground and stood. "It was your job," he said, "but you didn't keep your word."

"'ow's that?"

"You said you'd be back in two months, that was almost a year ago," Tommy sneered.

"Yeah, well, oi've 'ad issues."

"No hard feelings, mon," Griff chimed, while passing a cup of wine to Ralph, "we got business to do."

Ralph downed the entire cup in one swallow, belched and reached for another piece of meat. "'ave yah planned somethin' nice for that wick, Kerberos?" he asked.

"Yah, mon, 'es in the mix but there be bigger fish."

Ralph leaned forward to place the empty cup on the table but miscalculated and it fell to the ground. Instead of reaching for it, he simply crushed the cup with his foot while glaring at Griff. "So, tell me about it," he said.

"We been busy, mon. Kerberos be the gatekeeper but seems that the keeper has his own."

"Spare me the riddles, mate."

"Griff," Tommy said, "let me."

"OK, mon."

Tommy rose from his chair, kicked it to the side and strode about the room like a peacock, his hands clasped behind his back. "We've come a long way since the days that Kerberos forced us all to sell those fuckin' flowers," he said, as if lecturing the group. "It's taken some, but we've learned that these weren't no ordinary flowers."

"Whot was so fuckin' different 'bout them aprils?" Ralph snarled.

"They had 'em stuffed with coke, man," the brunette said with a sniff, as if to mime the use of the white powder.

"Hmm, oi thought them buds was kinda costly ... coulda put us in the bucket for that," Ralph remarked, while scratching his groin.

"That ain't all," Tommy added. "Seems the coke and the money we took in went to some Russian dudes, Mafia types."

"'ere, you sure 'bout this?"

"Yah, mon, we be sure," Griff said. "We follow some of dem new people from the Kerberos compound to the street. I even buy some of dem flowers ... coke, mon, no question."

"'ere, 'ow come oi don't remember seein' nothin'?"

"They was in little plastic bags, mon, taped to some of the stems but only a few of us had the junk."

"'ow come we was the lucky ones?"

"It looks like the junk only goes to certain streets but I don't know for sure," Tommy said, now back in his corner seat.

"Right, but 'owed you come up with the Russian Mafia?"

"Can I tell him, mon?" Griff asked, addressing Tommy.

"It was my neck, I'll do the tellin'," Tommy replied, indignantly.

"Oi don't give a frig who tells me, just tell me," Ralph shouted, impatiently.

"It was like this," Tommy began, while once again pacing the room, "I got this job with the phone company, a mess of curiosity and a big fuckin' hate for what Kerberos did to my life ..."

"Yeah, great. Wake me when you get to the real bloody story," Ralph interrupted, while stifling a yawn.

"OK, so, when one of our guys spotted the 'K' man's courier goin' in the back way to a downtown office building, we smelled a rat."

"So?"

"Yeah, well, two weeks later, the guy goes in again, all sneaky and such, an' we follow. Fuckin' security almost burned us but we got to see where he was goin'."

"Whot, you takin' actin' lessons or somethin'? Cut the suspense an' tell me where he was goin'!"

"Big fuckin' international bank, NAPCO."

"Maybe 'e was makin' a deposit, mate."

"No, man, this ain't no regular bank," Tommy said, smugly, "besides, an' here's the part I'm really proud of, I tapped into their phone lines."

"Oi see the bucket comin'," Ralph said, while rolling his eyes towards the ceiling.

"Bucket?" asked the brunette.

"Jail, m'love," Ralph replied.

"It was really no problem, man," Tommy continued, laughing, "I got a key for their box."

"'owed you get that?"

"Copied the phone company's master. I can get in any time I want and when I do, I don't leave no traces."

"Right, so what do we know?"

"There's a lot of people there that speak with funny accents but all pretty much the same. Sounds Russian to me."

"Oh, an' you're an expert now, are yah?"

"C'mon, man, you watch television, don't yah? OK, try this, one of em's called Sergei."

"Bloody Russians ... you sayin' we been 'ad by 'em?"

"Slaves, man, we were their slaves."