

### Chapter Thirty-Two

Unable to sleep, Mick arose early Saturday morning and walked to a small downtown coffee shop. While slowly savoring a Spanish omelette, as he watched and waited, he mused, I hope I haven't picked the wrong street. Three cups of coffee and two bagels later, about ready for a change of venue, he caught his first glimpse. A young pair, male and female, dressed alike in khaki slacks and white sweatshirts, exited from the back of a nondescript van. Each one hugged a large bunch of red roses in one arm and a lunch box in the other, as they walked off in opposite directions to peddle their blossoms.

"Hey, you stay here much longer and the boss is gonna charge you rent," a gum chewing waitress said.

Mick tried to ignore her while keeping his eyes glued to the departing couple but she kept on repeated herself. "What's the big deal," he cried, "the joint's empty?"

"Not for long, buddy," she said, the chewing gum cracking as she spoke, "the lunch crowd should be here soon, we need the table."

"Yeah, OK, I'm goin'," he said, without moving.

"Now, fella," she ordered.

"Thanks for the hospitality," he said, while tossing two quarters onto the table and leaving to join the throng of pedestrians.

With the exception of a detour to a local consignment shop, where he purchased and donned an outfit similar to the peddler's, there was little else to do other than wait. The remainder of the afternoon was endured by examining the window wares of neighboring shops and hiding in their doorways. Shit, he said to himself, as the sun began its trip towards the horizon, I don't even know if these are the right flower dudes but what have I got to lose? Uh oh, here comes that frickin' manager again.

"Hey, how many times do I have to tell you, no loitering?" the angry gadget shop manager shouted.

"I ain't hurtin' nothin'," Mick replied.

"You're blocking the display," the manager cried.

"C'mon, man, your sign says goin' out of business."

"So?"

"So, nobody's gonna buy this old shit anyway."

"Get out of here, now, before I call the cops," the manager shouted, while reaching towards a counter and grasping a portable phone.

"Hold your horses, I'm goin'," Mick groaned, as an old brown van came to a stop at the curb, its rear doors quickly opening from within. Leaning against a lamppost, he watched as the earlier flower bearing couple approached the van from different directions. Seizing the opportunity, he ran towards them, huffing and puffing as if out of breath. "Can I catch a ride back with you guys?" he wheezed.

"Who are you?" the male peddler inquired.

"I'm Mick, I mean Michael, man."

"You don't look familiar."

"I'm new, man."

"Then why aren't you at your pickup point?"

"I sold all my flowers and went to look for a bathroom ... I got lost," he said, sheepishly.

"Lost?"

"Yeah, can't remember where I got dropped off. So, you got room for me?" he asked, while nodding towards the van.

"I guess," the male replied, with a shrug. "If you're part of the family, it'd be OK."

As the trio stood at the curb, staring at each other, a head poked its way out of the driver's window. "Get in already," the driver called, "I can't sit here all day."

With the van doors sealed tight, Mick sat in silence on the bench seat, shaking inwardly and thinking, this has to be one of my dumber decisions. The young couple, on the other hand, sat side by side, whispering, as the van weaved in and out of the rush hour traffic. Hoping to avoid a conversation and questions that he could not answer, Mick pretended to nod off.

"Excuse me," the young man said.

"Yeah?" he murmured, while feigning a yawn.

"Where's your lunch box?"

Realizing that he had neglected to consider the box as an item of importance, he scratched his head and looked about the floor. "Damn," he said, "I must have left it in the bathroom."

"Oh wow, you're gonna catch hell for that. But you've got the money, right?"

Mick lowered his head and shook it from side to side in an attempt to portray sadness. "No," he said.

"No? What happened to it?"

"It was in the lunch box."

The young man leaned towards his female companion and as he whispered something in her ear, they both reached into their pockets and withdrew equal amounts of crumpled bills. "Here," he said, while reaching across to Mick, "take this."

"Are you kidding? Now you're gonna be short and whadda yah gonna say when they find out?" Mick asked, astonished by their generosity.

"Don't know," he said with a shrug, "but a little less is better than none at all."

"Hey, I owe you both," Mick responded, as he pocketed the cash, feeling ashamed and wondering how he could ever repay them.

The van traveled for more than an hour before entering a densely landscaped area and stopping at a heavy wrought iron gate. The driver extended his arm out of the open window, slid a plastic access card through the stanchion mounted reader and slowly entered what could only be described as a large, stone walled fortress. Mick peered out of the dark tinted glass of the van's rear doors and as the gate, topped with razor wire, closed behind them, began to experience a sense of rising fear and anxiety. This may not be as easy as I thought, he said to himself, while returning a smile to his new found friends. Before he had time to contemplate his next move, the rear doors flew open, his two companions exited and with some reluctance, he followed them onto the gravel covered driveway. Just ahead, stood two heavily carved twelve foot wooden doors that opened as they approached. As Mick passed through, he was met by a blast of warm air and a line of young and middle aged men and women. A quick glance towards the head of the line made it clear that they were waiting to disburse their earnings before being allowed entrance into the dining room. Peering to one side, he carefully scrutinized the sharp featured old woman who sat before a green lacquered desk at the head of the line. Shit, he thought, while

catching a glimpse of her computer screen, she's got pictures of everybody. What the fuck am I gonna do?

The line moved quickly, with each person heading down a long corridor after depositing their cash with the old woman and sliding their lunch boxes into a numbered compartment on a wheeled cart. As Mick reached the front of the line and extended his cash filled hand, the woman turned to the monitor and frowned, while wagging her index finger.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Without responding, she nodded towards two burly young men who had been standing guard off to one side. Instantly, strong hands gripped his forearms and with his feet off of the ground, dragged him to a nearby cold, damp room. The door slammed behind them as he was thrown face first against a wall. "What's your fuckin' problem, man?" he screamed.

"Shut up," the taller of the two ordered, as Mick felt a pair of rough hands searching through his pockets. Suddenly, he was spun around and pushed into a hard wooden chair positioned in the middle of the small, empty room. A door opened and closed from behind. "Stay where you are," an accented voice said, as Mick shifted for a view of the new arrival.

Despite the room's cold air, sweat dripped uncontrollably from Mick's brow and began to form a pattern of stains on his beige slacks. This ain't what I had planned, he thought himself, while trying to calm his nerves and obvious tremors. Unable to sit still, as had been demanded, he glanced to one side and

noticed the reflection of the sole remaining sentry. Maybe I can take him, he said to himself. But just then, the door opened and all hope was gone. A dark shadowy figure approached and stood before him, blocking the sliver of light that emanated from the room's only window. This is one scary dude, he thought, while staring at the tall, dark robed figure. Coal black eyes glared back at him as he made a mental note of the creatures vaguely familiar, grotesquely scarred features. "What's the problem?" Mick asked, meekly.

The robed man slowly paced before him, silent, save for the sound of his hip worn dagger as he rhythmically moved it in and out of its bejeweled sheath.

"Who are you?" Mick asked, now trying to appear indignant.

"I might ask the same of you," the robed man scowled, as he stood steadfast in front of the chair.

"I'm Michael."

"Very well, Michael, what is the purpose of your trespass?"

"What do you mean, man, I ain't no trespasser."

"Let us dispense with the nonsense, we know who you are, Michael," the man said, as he continued to toy with his dagger.

"Yeah, so?"

"Why have you returned?"

Not having planned for such a question, Mick scratched his head, stalling for time. "I ain't got no place else to go," he finally said.

"So, you return to us--we, who had treated you like family and whom you ran from like the plague?"

"I guess I was confused back then."

"And why should I believe you?"

"Because it's true, man."

"We shall see about that," the robed man replied, as he pushed the dagger decisively into its sheath and left the room.

\*\*\*

Kerberos was seated at his desk when Ivano entered. The sound of his subordinate's heavy footsteps did little to interrupt his meal of Dolma, a favorite Turkish dish. As he gorged himself, Ivano remained by the door, standing at attention. Finally, having swallowed the last morsel, Kerberos reached for a linen napkin, cleansed his greasy lips and gestured towards a nearby chair. "So, my friend, you have spoken to the intruder?" he asked, while pouring copious amounts of sugar into a small coffee cup and stirring.

"Yes, I have."

"And?" Kerberos insisted, while raising the cup to his lips, rejecting the concoction and finally, adding more sugar.

"He wishes to return to the family."

"Do you believe his request to be genuine?" Kerberos asked, while testing the mixture once again and smiling, as if satisfied with his ministrations.

"I am suspicious about his motives, I do not trust him," Ivano replied, as he shifted in the narrow chair.

Kerberos, despite his unimposing physical stature, instilled fear in those whose eyes fell upon him. The craggy facial features, deep voice and beady eyes had caused more than one disobedient to cower at his feet. From behind the mother of pearl inlaid desk, he preened his mephistophelean beard, adjusted his gilt encrusted robe and pointed a crooked index finger at Ivano. "If he has an ulterior motive," he remarked, "we shall find it. Allow his entry into the great hall, give him a reasonable place to sleep but make certain that he does not leave the premises."

"Will this not create a bad example for the others?"

"They will not know of our plans."

"But they will see that he is not earning his keep."

Kerberos turned to his computer monitor and tapped a few keys while fixating on the screen. "Hmm," he commented, "Michael's dossier shows that he has considerable computer skills. Find something for him to do but make certain that he does not gain access to any of our sensitive records."

"I do not think that wise ..."

Ivano stopped mid-sentence when Kerberos abruptly rose from his chair and slammed his fist upon the desk. "You will obey without question," he commanded with a maniacal shriek, his eyes appearing to penetrate like so many daggers, "now, leave me!"