

Chapter Thirty-Four

It was seven o'clock in the morning. The sleepy hoard slowly filed out of the great hall in pairs, following completion of an early Sunday morning breakfast. Mick looked up from his half eaten plate of bacon and eggs, wondering what Kerberos had in store for him as he watched the last couple exit the dining room, retrieve their lunch boxes and head for the flower table. Somethin's goin' on, he said to himself. What with their change in attitude last night when they gave me a decent place to sleep and now, not even sendin' me out to peddle the frickin' buds. He had hardly finished chewing his last morsel when two suited brutes entered the great hall followed by the black robed man. Oh shit, he thought, here comes Darth Vader an' his crew.

They stopped alongside his table. The two suited men remained on their feet while the black robed man swiftly took a seat opposite Mick's and extended his hand. "I am called Ivano," he said, with a deep, menacing voice.

Mick hesitated briefly, puzzled by Ivano's new and unexpected show of kindness and then took the offered hand. Ivano's powerful grip engulfed his fingers, refusing to let go, while slowly pulling Mick out of his chair and partially across the table until they were almost face to face. "Are you enjoying our hospitality?" he asked, with a sarcastic tone and wry smile.

Mick wavered, as the viselike grip of Ivano's hand brought back hidden memories of his involuntary trips to the rectory, where he was dragged, screaming, in anticipation of Father Ramirez's 'special punishment.' The grip tightened slightly, bringing him back into focus. "Yes," he blurted, with a pained expression.

"That pleases me but I am certain that you have not forgotten the house rules."

"What rules?" he groaned, as his right hand began to turn a dusky shade of blue.

"The rules that cement our symbiotic relationship."

"I don't get it," Mick said, while pleading with his eyes for release.

"It's simple, you do for us and we do for you."

"You want me to sell some flowers?"

Ivano grinned, his imperfect yellowing teeth looming ever larger as his lips parted. "We have other plans for you," he said, while releasing his grip.

"What might that be?" Mick asked, meekly; his heart racing like a locomotive.

"I am told that you are some what of a computer expert, is that not true?"

"Yeah, I know computers but programming, mostly."

"Well then, you will write a program for us."

"I can do that," he replied, suspicious but relieved.

"Then it is settled. These gentlemen will show you to a room with a computer and you shall begin."

"But you haven't told me what kind of program you need?"

"Patience, Michael, patience," Ivano responded, in a less menacing tone, while rising from the table and quickly departing.

Mick gazed up at the noisy clock that hung from the wall above the computer. I've been sittin' in this frickin' closet for almost three hours doin' nothin', he said to himself, it don't feel right. He rose from the hard wooden chair and pacing off the distance between the walls, remarked to himself, yeah, just as I thought, four by five, no window, no phone an' the door's locked from the outside--I'm a prisoner in a frickin' closet!

He had been asleep in the chair for one hour, when he was awakened by the sound of heavy footsteps just outside of his cubicle. He turned as the door opened and an elderly woman entered, tray in hand. Without a word, she precariously balanced the food containing tray on the edge of the computer table and departed. They're even feeding me like a prisoner, he thought, while staring at the steaming bowl of soup, small package of crackers and container of milk. Rather than risk spilling the hot liquid on himself, he carefully removed the contents, placed them on the desk and tossed the tray to the ground. It was then, that he noticed the neatly folded piece of paper that had been nestled beneath the crockery. As he lifted it, the small flap from a cardboard cereal box fell from its folds, landing between the crackers and milk carton. Ignoring the box flap, he unfolded the brief but neatly typed page and read, thinking, this is bullshit. They want me to write a frickin' illegal hacking routine, what the hell for? But, on the other hand, it might serve my own purpose. He slid the page under the computer keyboard and reached for the container of milk and in doing so, flipped the box flap onto its gray, unprinted side. What the hell is this? he said to himself, while lifting the small piece of cardboard and examining what appeared to be a handwritten message. *You're life is in danger*, it said, signed, *a friend*. A powerful wave of fear sent chills up and down his spine as he reread the note. Could this be some kind of stinkin' trick? he

wondered. Nah, why would they warn me? Shit, Ralph, where the fuck are you, I need you.

Two hours later, while taking a computer break, he re-examined the box flap, remarking to himself, man, I knew they had me when I didn't get the flower detail but what are they hiding that would make them so afraid of me? He shook his head, lifted the milk carton, draining the last of its contents, while laughing to himself and thinking, this pile of computer code won't do them much good but if I can get to their server, it'll get me in!