

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Mick rubbed his eyes as he awakened from a restless night's sleep in the narrow, four by eight foot quarters that he had been assigned. He fished for the inexpensive wristwatch that he had removed the night before and placed under his pillow. Finding it, he aimed the face towards the trickle of light that streamed in from the slit-like transom window and frowned. Six o'clock in the morning, he remarked to himself, the flimsy cot creaking beneath his weight, I wonder how long they plan to keep me locked up? Well, at least this closet has a bathroom.

Following a quick shower, dressed in his beige khaki slacks and white T-shirt, he returned to the bed and awaited his dining room escort. Anxious and hungry, he began to pace the small room until finally trying the door, which to his surprise was

unlocked. He eased it open it a hair, careful not to make a sound, and peered into the corridor, thinking, shit, nobody in sight ... this might be my chance. He quietly closed the door as he exited and on tiptoes, walked along the doorless hallway. Less than thirty paces from where he began, his footsteps were joined by another, somewhat light pair. Stopping, standing motionless while trying to determine their direction, he was taken by surprise by a voice from behind. "Hi," Mariel said, "I was just coming to get you."

"You scared me," Mick replied, "I was jus' takin' a walk."

"I thought we could have breakfast together," she said, sweetly, as she stood before him with a cheerful smile.

"Lead the way," he responded, with a wave of his hand and a best effort bow.

"How's your program coming?" she asked, as they turned a corner, heading for the great hall dining room.

"Gettin' there."

"You don't say much, do you? Well, I guess I talk enough for the both of us," she said with a giggle.

"How come you didn't eat with the others?"

She hesitated for a moment, then said, "I slept late."

Mick didn't question her reply but as they continued to walk, he thought to himself, how did she know where I was sleepin'? Only one answer, they got her on a string--she's a rat!

The vast dining room was empty when they entered at eight-fifteen A.M.. Mariel walked directly to the cafeteria style counter, tray in hand, while Mick, unsure of how to deal with the suspected spy, kept his distance and followed from behind. They both filled their trays with whatever remained of the morning's bounty.

"Let's sit over here," Mariel called, while leaning over a table designed for ten, "it's closer than the others, for refills, I mean."

Mick surveyed the vacuous room, shook his head affirmatively and took a seat. "I don't remember the room bein' this big," he said.

"Hasn't changed since I've been here," she answered, while gesturing about with a slice of burnt toast.

"And how long has that been?"

"Almost a year and a half."

"Uh huh," he mumbled, while toying with his scrambled eggs gone stiff.

"When was it that you were here last?" she asked, a bread crumb falling from her lips.

"Before that," he said, unable to recall the exact time frame.

"Was it different then?"

"Not really."

"Why did you leave?"

"Told you, I got crazy, that's all."

"You know," she whispered, "I've heard rumors about people who wanted to leave."

"Yeah?"

"The one's that did were never heard from again--creepy, isn't it?" she said, while noisily sipping milk through a straw.

"What'd you expect them to do, send postcards?"

"When you put it that way," she giggled, "the rumors do sound kind of silly."

"So, what exactly did the rumors say?" he asked, while gnawing on a strip of bacon and gulping his coffee.

"That they just disappeared into thin air."

"Probably jus' some bullshit to keep yah here."

"Why would they do that?"

He lowered his coffee cup and glanced at her with an expression of incredulity. "How about free labor," he sneered.

"Oh yeah, guess that could be."

"Hey," he exclaimed, while pushing his tray across the table, "tell me about the Mass and the oath."

"How come you have to ask me? You were here before."

"Don't break my chops, I've already told you about how the drugs monkeyed with my head," he shouted.

"OK, OK, you don't have to get all pissy about it."

"So?"

"The Black Mass is a big deal around here and if my family ever found out that I was about to take the oath they'd kill me."

"You've got to be kiddin', your family knows you're here?"

"Nah, they disowned me a long time ago but even so, if they found out that I was about to take an oath to Satan, who knows what they'd do. Probably have the whole church descend upon us with silver crosses and holy water."

"So, what's the deal with this Satan thing?"

"The leader ..."

"The 'K' man, right?" he interrupted.

"Uh, yeah, Kerberos. Well, anyway, he's told us about the wonderful things we can accomplish under the 'great one's' guidance. Only the very best of us can take the oath ... it's a real honor."

"Cool, so whadda yah gotta do?"

"I'm not exactly sure but I think it involves a sacrifice of some kind."

"No shit--like a goat or somethin'?" Mick asked, sarcastically, while inwardly, his strict Catholic upbringing caused him to cringe at the mere thought of the Antichrist.

"You know, I don't feel comfortable talking about this. Why don't you ask Kerberos yourself?"

"Haven't seen him since I've been here an', by the way, how come you ain't out sellin' flowers?"

Mariel, speechless, glared at him, bit her lip and then redirected her gaze towards the shiny Formica table without responding.

"I can answer that for yah," Mick growled, "it's because you're a mole, here to fuck me and figure out what I'm all about, right?"

"No, it isn't like that," she said, her lips quivering.

Angry, Mick rose from the table, kicked his chair back against the counter and turned to leave.

"Wait," she shouted.

"What the fuck for?"

"You're right. Ivano asked me to get information but I haven't pushed you, have I?"

"C'mon, I ain't gonna fall for that shit."

"Won't you just listen to what I have to say?" she implored, her eyes beginning to water.

"I don't trust you," he said, as he headed for the exit, then stopped and added, "oh yeah, thanks for the blow job, bitch."

Once outside the great hall, Mick reached into his deep pants pocket and felt for a plastic floppy disk. Where the hell is that mainframe, he said to himself, c'mon Mick, try an' remember. He walked the mostly empty corridors, placing the palm of his hand on each closed door he passed, hoping to find one much colder than the others. His past experience with computers had revealed the need for a cold operating environment and

indeed, one door, separated by a distance from the others, met that condition. He scanned the hallway for passersby and possible surveillance cameras. With none visible, he carefully turned the doorknob. Suddenly, startled by the sound of a chair scraping from within, he released his grip and hurried back in the direction of his approach. Shit that was close, he remarked to himself, as a bead of sweat dripped from his brow, his sleeping quarters only steps away.

His right foot had hardly passed over the threshold to his room when a powerful, commanding voice echoed from behind. "Find what you were looking for?" it asked.

Frightened, Mick turned to find himself standing face to face with Ivano, whose livid expression threatened to cause him sphincter failure. "I was just on my way back from the dining room," Mick stuttered.

"Alone?"

"Uh, yeah."

"And your pretty little friend, where is she?"

"She wasn't finished with breakfast and I had to ..." he said, while gesturing towards the bathroom.

"I see," Ivano growled, as Mick nervously attempted to cover the now obvious square bulge that protruded from his pocket.

"And our program, it is completed?"

"Almost, just a few more hours."

"Very well, I will escort you to your work room after you have attended to your needs," Ivano said, while closing the door to Mick's sleeping quarters.

Mick entered the bathroom and locked the door while Ivano stood nearby in the corridor, staring at the blinking light on his beeper; the link to Kerberos.

Shit, shit, shit, Mick said to himself, while flushing the toilet several times for effect, the program I've been writin' is a hacker alright but not the kind he asked for. What the hell am I gonna do?