

Chapter Forty

Mick had just exited the bathroom when he realized that the door to the corridor was locked. Returning to the bed, the room's only seating, he silently reviewed the events of the days gone by. OK, he remarked to himself, so the bitch is a spy but what does she really know? Nothing. But, then again, what have I gotten out of all this? Except for the devil bullshit, not a whole lot. And then there's Ivano. That dude scares the shit outta me but there's somethin' about him that ain't right. Oh, an' I almost forgot, there's that frickin' Black Mass thing tomorrow night. I wonder what they're gonna do with me then? The sound of a key being introduced into a lock shattered his contemplative mood and he jerked to a standing position, facing the door.

"I trust you have dealt with all of your bodily functions?" Ivano asked, with an characteristically pleasant tone as he held the door ajar.

"Yeah," Mick replied defiantly.

"Come then, I will escort you to the work room."

Mick's anxiety began to intensify as Ivano led him away from the room that he had become accustomed to. "Uh," he said, "this ain't the way to the work room."

"How observant of you," Ivano remarked, without altering course.

"Yah know, I need what's on the computer in order to finish?"

Without responding, Ivano continued walking, finally coming to a halt before a polished black door at the end of a blind corridor. "We are here," he announced, while, with an animated smile he inserted an electronic key into the lock and opened the door.

"What is this place?" Mick asked, while sensing something eerily familiar about the room.

"Come, you will see," Ivano said, a lilt to his voice, as the door automatically locked behind them.

Cautiously, Mick entered the room, his senses on full alert at the sight of the dimly lit, blue padded walls and ceiling. The daunting combination was further heightened by the presence of a lone chair to which he was directed.

"Have a seat," Ivano said, more a command than a suggestion.

"Here?" Mick asked, nervously pointing to the blue leather chair from which dangled an assortment of metal and leather restraints.

"Do you see another?" Ivano asked, a sinister smile emerging as if he found the entire scene amusing.

Mick stood by the chair, weighing his options, then slowly eased himself into the seat.

"Does this room bring back any memories?" Ivano questioned, while gently prodding one of the padded walls.

"Not really, should it?"

"This is a very special place," he said, like a child about to describe his favorite toy, "in it, we have altered many minds."

"I don't get it," Mick responded, while thinking to himself that he is probably about to.

"Perhaps this will help," Ivano snickered, as he pressed a button hidden among the wall's padded folds. Instantly, two metallic straps rose from the armrests of Mick's chair and encircled his bare forearms, locking them in place.

"What the fuck?" Mick cried out, while hopelessly trying to extricate himself.

"Do not struggle, I intend you no harm."

"Then what the fuck's this all about?" he growled, while continuing to pull at the restraints.

"I am merely attempting to stimulate your hidden memories."

"Well, I ain't got none!"

"We shall soon see," Ivano remarked, as he turned and walked several paces to a rear corner of the room while removing a small remote control device from his cloak. Aiming it towards the rear wall, he grinned, as a subdued whirring sound appeared followed by an elevated throne-like chair that magically emerged from the confines of the padded wall.

Mick watched with a combination of fear and awe, not knowing what to expect. The chair, he marveled, had all the hallmarks of a throne and its height, several feet above his own, placed him in an obvious position of subservience.

"What do you think of my beautiful technical marvel?" Ivano queried, clearly enthralled by his creation.

"Your mother would be proud," Mick said, with syrupy sarcasm.

"I suspect she would have been," he replied, while hoisting himself aboard the chair. "Now, enough of the pleasantries, tell me the real story."

"I don't know any frickin' stories."

"Of course you do and to help you along, why don't you begin with the reason that you are here among us?"

"Why don't you ask your spy?"

"I am asking you, Michael and just in case you should chose to play games with me," Ivano remarked, while running his hands over his own push button studded armrests, "these colorful little switches can make your visit to this room quite painful, that is, if I do not like your answers."

"What the fuck do you want from me?" Mick cried, hanging his head in anticipation of the promised discomfort.

"Only the truth, so, why did you return to us?"

"C'mon, you already know the answer."

"I do?"

"The bitch told you."

"Ah yes, but I did not like her story ... tell me yours."

"I dig the food, man," Mick said defiantly, followed by his cry of pain as Ivano pushed a button, causing an electrical current to momentarily pass through the metal restraints.

"Now, I know you can do better than that," Ivano chortled, while examining his fingernails in the dim blue light.

Mick sat silently for several seconds, trying to decide what to do. What if I tell him the truth, he thought to himself, that I'm searchin' for lost years--maybe he'd buy that?

"I am waiting, or perhaps the last jolt did not convince you of what I am capable?" Ivano gleefully said, as his right hand inched towards the cluster of push buttons.

Sweat dripped from Mick's forehead but there was nothing he could do, his hands completely immobilized by the stainless steel clamps. Finally, he decided to come clean with the truth but as he opened his mouth to speak, the unexpected occurred; Ralph was back. "'Ere," he said, "yah ain't gonna like whot oi 'ave tah say, but mah boy, 'e's lookin' for some lost time."

Ivano straightened in his throne and frowned. "Excuse me," he said, "what did you say?"

"You got a problem wit' yah hearin', old sod?"

"You know, Michael, this charade does not amuse me," Ivano remarked, while reaching for one of the buttons.

"Ain't no charade an' oi ain't Michael or Mick or whatever."

"Really, then who might you be?" Ivano inquired with a lilting voice, as if talking to a child.

"Names' Ralph."

"Oh, I see and what has happened to my dear friend Michael?"

"Don't you worry none 'bout him, Ralph's 'ere now an' 'e don't take no shit."

"So, Ralph," Ivano said, while noisily clearing his throat, "tell me about this lost time."

"'ere, twas you muckers who took it, 'e's only askin' for it back."

"He doesn't recall his stay with us, is that it?"

"You got it, old sod," Ralph replied, while nonchalantly gazing about the room, avoiding eye contact.

"Well, if I tell you, Ralph, you must agree to do what I ask of you."

"That depends."

"Remember, I still have all these buttons yet to try," Ivano said, his hand hovering above the armrest.

"You can light me up like a bloody street lamp but oi ain't gonna do whot oi ain't gonna do!"

"Really," Ivano remarked, with a prankish grin, as he pushed one of the buttons, sending a electrical jolt of significantly greater magnitude than the last.

"'ere now, that was a doozy," Ralph hissed, in obvious pain, "hope it ain't the best yah got."

"Alright, enough of this nonsensical business. I don't know what you hope to gain with your phony accent but I am not impressed, so, I ask you once again, why are you here?"

"Already told you, old sod. Guess the truth ain't good enough for yah."

Ivano exhaled with an air of desperation and cracked his knuckles. "Well," he remarked, "I guess there is no harm in telling you that we erased all memories of your last stay with us."

"Whot the fuck for?"

"You are a smart boy, use your imagination. But if that does not answer your question, suffice it to say that retention of those memories would not have been beneficial to either of us."

Ralph, bracing for another dose of electrical torture, watched nervously as Ivano's right hand inched towards the pain producing buttons. To his surprise, however, the metal restraints encircling his forearms fell away with a barely audible click.

"Not so fast," Ivano said, as Ralph grabbed for the armrests, preparing to catapult himself from the chair, "I am not finished with you."

"Right," Ralph replied, dropping back into the padded seat.

"That square object in your pocket," Ivano observed, "I believe it belongs to me."

"Whot object?"

"Come now, you don't really think that we would trust you with an unmonitored computer, do you?"

Ralph glared at Ivano, chewed apprehensively on his lip and then leaned to one side and removed the disk. "'ere's the bugger," he said, while holding it in the air, "but it ain't gonna do yah any good."

"No, I suspect not. After all, why would we want to hack into our own computers?"

"Damned if oi know."

"Well," Ivano commented, while sliding from his throne, "now that we know why you so carefully, however, naively, orchestrated our recent penetration, we must find something truly useful for you to do."

"'ere, how 'bout showin' me the door?"

"My, you are an amusing if not strange young man," Ivano chuckled, "but surely you must understand our position."

"Whot position?"

"You are now part of our c-l-o-s-e family and as such, must remain under our protection."

"So, it's back to the bloody flowers?"

Ivano smiled as he opened the door and motioned for Ralph to rise from the chair. "Isn't it time," he said, "for young Michael to return?"

"'e will when oi'm bloody ready."

Ivano stopped in the doorway and with a frown, placed a fatherly hand on Ralph's shoulder. "Well, no matter. There is a special event planned for tomorrow evening that you must attend. I believe you will find it enlightening."