

### Chapter Forty-Six

Following the garage gathering, Griff drove Ralph back to the hotel. As he exited the car, he was overcome by an unfamiliar sensation, a state of fog. It was an unsettling feeling, as if his body belonged to another but he thought it would pass as he entered the hotel and headed for the elevator. Instead, it intensified as the lift made its way to his floor. The elevator came to a stop, the door opened and as he hesitated, the ground seemed to move beneath his feet. Maybe it's an earthquake, he had thought to himself, while leaning against a wall for support; but no doors were shaking, no windows rattling. This ain't me, he reasoned, I'm Ralph, nothin' gets to me, unless ... it's that bloody fool, Mick, tryin' to get back in.

In the past, the alter's appearance had been predictable, its presence generally foreshortened by the rapid reappearance of its host, Mick. But the tables had turned and Ralph had become a dominant force, further complicating Mick's troubled existence. That night, instead of the usual battle for sleep, Ralph threw off his clothes and minutes later was out like a light, awakening only to an incessant knocking early the next morning.

"Yeah, who is it?" Mick shouted, while sitting up in bed, naked, reeling from an intense headache and realizing that Ralph had left.

"It's the desk clerk," the affected male voice replied.

"Whadda yah want?"

"You haven't paid the room charge for the past five days."

"Oh yeah? I thought I paid in advance."

"You did, but that was weeks ago and now you're behind."

Damn, he said to himself, I can't seem to remember from one day to another anymore. "OK," he shouted, "I'll take care of it."

"Not good enough, I need it now," the clerk said, while drumming his fingers on the door.

Mick reached for his jeans and rummaging through the pockets, pulled them inside out. Empty, he thought to himself, what the fuck am I gonna do? "Gimme a few minutes," he cried out, "I gotta get dressed."

"Oh really," the clerk replied, "why don't you open the door, perhaps we can come to some kind of arrangement?"

"Get the fuck outta here," Mick growled, while remarking to himself that he had to think of some way to get the guy off of his back, literally.

The relentless clerk pounded on the door, this time more energetically. "You should reconsider," he sneered, "I have a waiting list for your room."

"I told," Mick shouted, "I'll be down, now, leave me alone."

I need to get some cash, he said to himself, while dressing. I can't believe that I lost Chips' phone number but I guess I could sneak outta here and head down to the club. Man, I hope they're gettin' ready to open.

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Mick snuck out through the fire exit carrying the trumpet, his most valued possession, and barely missed the desk clerk as he made his rounds. Well, he said to himself as he trotted away from the hotel, if the fag locks me out, I won't be leavin' much behind.

It would have been a long walk to the club but his timing was right and the bus driver held the door open just long enough for him to hop on. Twenty minutes later, he stood before the boarded up entry that once led to the jazz club. It was clear that some work was in progress, as evidenced by the two hard hat workers standing outside drinking coffee and eating donuts, but it was equally clear that completion was a ways off. I wonder if

one of these guys can tell me what's goin' on, he thought to himself, as the two men seemed to ignore his presence. "Hey, which one of you guys is the boss?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" a short, unshaven man with a tool belt barked.

"I just wanna know when this place will be ready to open again," Mick said, apologetically.

"Gotta ask the foreman," the man said, "he might know."

"Where is he?"

"Ain't here right now."

"When'll he be back?"

"Don't know," the man remarked, as he reached into a box, withdrew an oozing jelly donut and turned away.

What a frickin' waste of time, Mick commented to himself, as he walked on, trying to figure out where his next dime would come from. He started to cross the street when he had a thought. The back alley, the old bouncer lives in that place, I wonder if he's still around? Retracing his steps, he made his way through a maze of discarded beer cans, milk cartons and condoms, eventually reaching the club's back door. To his surprise, the old man was there, sitting atop a rusty metal drum smoking a stogie and reading an torn copy of Downbeat magazine.

"How's it goin'?" Mick asked, trying to dodge the thick cloud of blue smoke that spewed from the man's lips.

"It's goin', man," the bouncer grunted, his gazed fixed on the open magazine.

"Any idea when the club will re-open?"

"When its done," he slurred, his face completely enveloped by the smoky haze.

"Yeah, right," Mick replied, not knowing how far to push the old man. "You live inside, don't you?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, the fire couldn't have done too much damage if you're still livin' there?"

"Don't say it too loud," he whispered, "the fire Marshall made me leave but I had to get back in, no place else to go."

"I'll keep your secret," Mick promised, as he moved a bit closer, the cigar almost spent. "So, you seen String and the guys?"

"Yeah, he was by the other day askin' the same questions."

"You got his number? I need to talk to him."

"Do I look like the fuckin' yellow pages?"

"C'mon, man, I need to eat, need to make some bread."

The old man stubbed out the remains of his cigar on the side of the drum, rolled up the magazine and slid to the ground.

"Yeah, kid, I hear yah," he said, "wait here, I'll go see what I got."

He returned ten minutes later. "This is all I got," he said, as he handed Mick a strip of brown paper, a fresh stogie dangling from his lips.

"This is String's number?" Mick asked, straining to read the man's handwriting.

"Nope, didn't have it. This one belongs to Chips."

"Hey, thanks man," Mick replied, then as an afterthought, added, "think you could lend me a quarter for the phone?"

Without hesitating, the old man reached into the pocket of his soiled trousers, withdrew a silver coin and tossed it in Mick's direction.

He left the alley to the tune of a grumbling stomach while thinking to himself, Chips hates my guts, I doubt that he'd go out of his way for me but it's worth a call. But before I do that, I need to get something to eat and the only way that's gonna happen is if I can busk some coins.

One hour later, having chosen a corner on which to play his trumpet, he pocketed the three dollars in assorted change donated by appreciative passersby, repacked his horn and went off in search of a pay phone. Well, here goes, he said to himself, as he dropped a coin into the phone and dialed.

"Whoever you are, it better be important," Chips slurred, over the telephone.

"It's Mick, man. Sorry if I woke yah but I was hopin' you might be able to hook me up with a gig until the club reopens."

"Mick? Oh yeah, the horn player from the big apple."

"Yeah, that's me."

"Nah, ain't got nothin' for yah, the town's dry."

"But what about my contract?"

"Ain't worth the paper it's printed on, kid. Anyways, can't pay you if I don't get paid."

"Shit," he hissed.

"Listen, gimme your number an' I'll call yah if somethin' comes up."

He hesitated, realizing that he couldn't return to the hotel. "I'm kinda movin' around," he said, "if yah know what I mean? How 'bout if I call yah again in a few days?"

"Yeah, that'd be OK ... just don't call me in the mornin'."

Mick hung up the phone, leaned against the wall and counted his change. Two-fifty left, he said to himself, as he glanced across the road and spotted a bakery. He crossed over, bought a dozen day old bagels and while sinking his teeth into one, began to wonder where he was going to spend the night. Well, he said to himself, I guess it's back to busking.

After wandering the streets, having consumed five bagels and a cup of coffee, he settled on a corner just outside a bank building. Leaning against a lamppost, he removed the trumpet from its case and began to play through his repertoire of blues tunes. At least twice, he was asked to "move along" by a roving police cruiser. One each occasion, he packed up and walked off only to return when they were out of sight.

It was mid-afternoon and, discouraged by the slightly more than five dollars collected, he was preparing to leave. He had just blown the last of the collected moisture out of his horn when a provocatively dressed, middle aged woman exited the bank, hesitated and then approached. "I work on the second floor and I

heard your playing," she remarked, while gesturing towards the bank, "you're good, too good for the streets."

"Thanks, are you a musician?" he asked.

"No, but I appreciate a good one."

"Anythin' you'd like me to play?"

"Whatever you choose," she cooed, while standing above him, the tops of her beige panty hose visible beneath the short miniskirt.

He chose a particular Miles Davis tune that highlighted his own expertise but as his fingers danced across the valves, his eyes remained glued to her upper thighs. He swore to himself, as she stood above him gyrating ever so slowly, that he could feel the heat pouring out from between her legs.

Suddenly, she gazed at her wristwatch, bent forward, causing her skirt to rise even further and placed a crisp bill into his instrument case. "Thank you, it was beautiful," she said, just before disappearing among the surging pedestrians.

Sighing deeply, he cleared his horn once again and reached for the money. Another big spender, he thought to himself, as he unfolded the bill but then changed his mind. Holy shit, a hundred bucks, she must be nuts or made a mistake. He snapped the case shut and stood against the lamppost, waiting to see if she would return to correct her error but the woman was nowhere in sight. Well, he mused, this'll take care of food for awhile but I sure as hell can't go back to the hotel. I wonder if I can fake Ralph good enough to beg a room from Griff?

After few blocks he found a working pay phone.

"If you be gettin' this message, I be out," the answering machine proclaimed. "Leave yah number, mon."

Shit, he said to himself, when about to hang up and then, a voice broke in.

"Who this?" Griff asked.

"Griff, it's Mic... err Ralph."

"Sorry, mon, was in the shower. What's up?"

Mick cleared his throat and mustered his best attempt at Ralph. "Oi need a place to stay," he said, "can oi use the garage?"

"What hopen to your hotel, mon?"

"Tell yah later but can oi?"

"Sure, mon, no problem."

"Thanks."

"You know how to get dere?"

"Yeah, oi'll take a bus."