

Chapter Fifty-Four

Using a coworker's identity badge, one that had been carelessly left lying on a washroom sink, Tommy managed to locate the senator's home address and unlisted telephone number. Realizing that his own efforts could be traced, Ralph took the information and as he later admitted, "borrowed" a cell phone. Friday morning, after formulating a vague plan, he cautiously dialed the number.

"'ello?" he said, tentatively.

"Yes? Who is this? the senator inquired, having been awakened from a deep sleep.

"Just a bloke who's got some information yah might like."

"Who gave you this number?" the senator blurted out.

"It ain't important."

"Fine. I don't have the time nor the stomach for prank calls, so, have a nice day."

"Wait," Ralph shouted, "oi ain't no prankster."

"Alright, you have one second to convince me."

"NAPCO," Ralph replied, slow and succinctly.

"Anyone who's read the newspaper knows that name but OK, what about them?"

"They're sellin' drugs an' black market military arms."

"OK, that's nice, but I'm going to hang up now and go back to sleep."

"Wait, oi got proof!"

"Really? And where did you say you got my number from?"

"Oi didn't."

"Well, here's a tip. Lose it or I'll have the call traced and you know what comes after that," the senator remarked, flippantly.

"Oi ain't callin' to put the squeeze on yah, senator. Oi want them to get their due as much as you but for different reasons."

"OK, let's pretend for the moment that I were to believe you, what kind of proof do you have?"

"Video, voice tapes and witnesses," Ralph responded, smugly.

"And you don't want anything in exchange?"

"Just a promise that you'll get 'em."

"And once again, why should I believe you?"

"Oi can meet yah any place yah say so oi can tell my story an' show yah the proof."

"How do I know that NAPCO didn't put you up to this?"

Ralph hesitated, he didn't have a good answer, at least one that would make sense. "Look," he finally said, "if yah ain't interested, oi'll do the buggers myself."

"So, whatever your name is, do you like chocolate?"

"Huh?" Ralph asked, wondering what that had to do with anything.

"Meet me in Ghiradelli square tomorrow morning at nine A.M., I'll be standing in front of the candy outlet."

"'Ow will oi know yah? Oi don't know what yah look like?"

"Nor I you. So, I'll be holding a very large, wrapped chocolate bar in my left hand."

"OK, oi think I got that."

"One more thing. My armed bodyguards will be watching carefully, from a distance, for any funny business ... understood?"

"Yeah, oi got that."

"So, what shall I call you?"

"Ralph, 'an oi ain't planin' nothin' sneaky."

Saturday morning, a few minutes shy of nine, Griff eased the old VW to the curb. Ralph anxiously scrunched the brown paper

bag containing his proof, exited the vehicle and watched as the car disappeared in the direction of Fisherman's Wharf. He looked from side to side and cautiously approached the steps leading to the square. Having never been there before, it took several minutes for him to find the chocolatier. With the bag held close to his body, like a wino protecting his only bottle of hooch, he leaned against the wall and waited. Suddenly, from seemingly out of nowhere, a voice resonated from behind.

"Is it too early for chocolate?" the senator asked, as he quietly exited from the near empty store.

"Who wants to know?" Ralph asked, mildly startled.

"Are you Ralph?" the senator asked.

He surveyed the nattily dressed man, looking him up and down, while catching a glimpse of the chocolate bar. "Yeah, oi'm Ralph," he replied.

"Let's take a walk," the senator suggested, as he unwrapped one end of the bar, broke off a piece and headed for the street, adding, "start talking."

By the time Ralph had finished disclosing all he knew about the cult, Kerberos and the NAPCO connection, they had walked quite a distance and found themselves among the many tourist shops. The senator stopped in front of a store with a *Going Out of Business* sign. Balling up the candy wrapper, having somehow consumed an entire pound of dark chocolate, he tossed it into a curbside bin. "We are here," he announced, still chewing the last brown morsel.

"'Ere?" Ralph inquired, clearly confused.

"Your tape, I thought we might try out one of the store's video machines."

"Yeah," Ralph agreed, "great idea."

It took several minutes of banter for the senator to convince the foreign tongued proprietor to locate a machine capable of playing the small, apparently ancient tape that Tommy had used. With the promise of a purchase, reluctantly, he connected the device to a flat screen TV and left to attend to others customers. The two men huddled before the screen, concealing it from unwanted eyes, and watched as the marked crates came into view. After several minutes had gone by, the senator lifted the remote and pressed the pause button. "How do I know that you didn't stage this whole thing?" he asked.

"Oi guess yah don't," Ralph admitted, "but oi got somethin' else to show yah."

"What might that be?"

Ralph moved closer to the senator, gazed about to assure himself of relative privacy and then pointed to a bulge in his oversized pocket. "Oi took me a souvenir from one of them crates," he whispered.

"What kind of souvenir?" the senator inquired, while staring at Ralph's bulging blue jeans.

He gazed about once again, inserted two fingers into the pocket and partially withdrew a hand grenade. "Know whot this is?" he asked.

"Sure do," the senator replied, "you could be arrested for carrying that around. Is it live?"

"How would oi know?"

"And you claim to have taken it from the compound?"

"There was wooden boxes full of 'em, along with the missiles, rifles an' other stuff."

"Still, you could have set the whole thing up ... that little pineapple in your pocket could easily be an inactive artifact, a paperweight."

"Yah want me to 'ave a go at it?" Ralph asked, his fingers still grasping the grenade.

The senator stared at him, an expression of disbelief on his face, and shook his head. "No," he chuckled, "I don't think that will be necessary."

"So, whot 'appens now?"

"Here's the problem, Ralph. Even if I accept the items in your video as a reality, there's no way of directly tying their ownership to NAPCO."

"But yah got me and an' my boys as witnesses an'," he added, while reaching into the crumpled paper bag and withdrawing a micro cassette tape, "oi got this."

"What's that?"

"Recorded telephone conversations between Kerberos an' some guy at NAPCO, calls hisself Dimitri. They was talkin' about this stuff."

"Hmm," the senator remarked with a frown, the tape now in his hand, "it might not be court admissible but it would work for me."

"Yah wanna 'ear it?" Ralph asked, excitedly, while gazing about for a playback machine.

"I'll take your word for it and listen to it later."

"Yah gonna go after 'em?" Ralph asked with a subtle yet threatening tone.

"I'll need a few days to put it all together and then we'll talk. How can I reach you?"

"Yah can't but oi got yah numbers."

"You still haven't told me how you got them?" the senator said, as he removed the video tape from the machine and slipped it into his coat pocket.

"The phone company," Ralph replied with a wink.

"Is there no privacy anymore?" the senator chortled, as the two men headed for the street, parted and walked off in opposite directions.