

Chapter Sixty

Working pay phones, as in many other metropolitan areas, were at a premium in San Francisco. With this in mind, Mick had decided to stay nearby and stationed himself at the counter of a local coffee shop. He had an hour to kill before calling Melanie back, so, he reached into his pocket, removed the loose change that he had taken from his bedmate's purse and counted. A dollar eighty, he said to himself, that should be enough. He ordered a cup of coffee and a scoop of tuna fish, his mind a whirl of confusion. I really fucked up this time, he lamented to himself, lost my trumpet, my job an' to make matters worse, that frickin' Kerberos is still on the loose. An' Griff, what the fuck did he think he was doin'? Well, it ain't right, I gotta do somethin'.

"Will there be anything else?" the young waitress asked as she delivered his order.

"No ... wait."

"Yes?"

"Do you have a phone in this place?"

"There's a pay phone across the street," she said, pointing.

"No, I mean here, inside?"

"Why do you ask?" she inquired, her fingers dancing across the counter as she spoke.

"I need to make an important call," he replied, with a toothy grin.

"We have a phone but it's not for customers."

"But it's really important."

"Is it like, an emergency?" she asked, looking from side to side.

"Sort of," he replied, while tasting the tuna.

"What's your name?" she asked, coyly.

"Mick."

"You're cute, Mick," she declared, coming closer.

"So are you," he replied, trying to smile while chewing, "what's your name?"

"Stacey."

"Its got a nice sound to it."

"You live around here?"

"Not far."

"Got a girlfriend?"

"Nope."

"So, if I let you use the phone, what will you do for me?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take me to a movie."

"That's all?"

"Well, that depends."

"OK, deal," he said, while holding his cup out for a refill.

"It's in the office but it's a cordless and I can bring it out to you."

"You know, my call is kinda private."

"You said you didn't have a girlfriend," she snapped.

"It ain't a lie, I gotta make a business call."

"Oh, then you can take the portable into the men's room."

She disappeared, returning several minutes later with the phone. Mick gulped down the remainder of his coffee and slid off the bar stool. "Where's the bathroom?" he asked.

"Back there," she gestured, "and to the right."

"Cool, be back in a few."

Lowering the seat on a commode, he locked the stall door and sat down. He had written down the number for the Haight-Ashberry apartment just in case he had to call and was glad that he had done so. It rang quite a few times before a voice responded.

"Hello?" said a female.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"You made the call, you should know."

"Don't get cute with me," he bellowed, "it's Ralph."

"You don't sound like Ralph," the black haired girl declared.

"C'mon babe, we been down this road before, don't bust my chops."

"What do you want, Ralph?"

At that very moment, he heard a click as if another extension was in use but decided to go on with his conversation.

"Oi need to speak to Tommy."

"Now, that's sounds more like the Ralph I know," she said.

"Whot about Tommy?"

"He's in the loo, as you call it."

"Tell 'im to pull up his pants an' come to the phone, it's important."

While he waited, the clicking noise returned leading him to conclude that the waitress had been eavesdropping.

"Ralph?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah, we gotta talk."

"About what?"

"About the plan that fell apart."

"I don't get it."

"Didn't you see the paper, the Raymond thing?"

"So what?"

"He's dead, you idiot, so there ain't a chance in hell of 'im bringin' down the 'K man'.

"But it looks like the Russians are gonna get fried, ain't that enough?"

"No, not after oi seen Kerberos kill that girl."

"So, you want to start this thing all over again?"

"We have to."

"You know, Ralph, you sound kinda funny to me ..."

"Don't you go bustin' my balls, oi'm tryin' to better myself."

"OK, OK don't get angry. So, do you have a new plan?"

"No."

"Then what do you want us to do?"

"The us, Tommy, is just you, me and the scar faced kid. Griff's in the cooler."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

"I thought the two of you was friends?"

"We didn't always see eye to eye."

"Don't you care about him at all?"

"Yeah, but what do you want me to do, be his character witness?"

"No, I guess we're better off stayin' away, otherwise, they might start lookin' at us."

"Yeah. So, you haven't told me what you want to do?"

"It's that Kerberos fucker, we gotta get 'im."

"I won't argue with that, so, when you figure out how, call me back. Right now, I got some unfinished business to attend to."

He hung up and returned to his counter seat, having already decided not to mention the assumed eavesdropping. The girl had her elbows on the counter, waiting, when he returned to his seat in the empty coffee shop. "That was a long call, Mick," she seethed.

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that," he replied as he placed the phone in her open palm.

She glared at him for several seconds and then turned her back. "That wasn't a business call, was it?" she declared.

Mick drained the last of his now cold coffee, looked down at the check that she had strategically placed under his cup and dumped a hand full of change onto the counter. "This should cover it," he said, several coins threatening to roll to the floor.

"What about our deal?" she shouted.

"I don't know, Stacey, you strike me as the jealous type," he said, while gliding from the stool.

"You tricked me, didn't you?"

"OK, gimme your number an' I'll call you."

"Forget it," she shrieked, while heading back towards the office.

"Works for me," he cried out, shoving the door open with his shoulder and exiting to the street. Once outside, he turned briefly and gazing back through the plate glass window, remarked to himself, what a nut case, no wonder the place was empty. Preoccupied with devising a plan of action against Kerberos, he

had almost forgotten about Melanie but it all came back when he passed the pay phone. Realizing that he may have been a bit hasty in requesting an immediate departure, he dialed the operator and requested a collect call.

"You're a few minutes early," Melanie declared, after accepting the charge.

"Sorry, I don't have a watch."

"The lines have been busy, I haven't been able to get through yet."

"Well, somethin' came up anyway an' I need a few more days."

"OK, that'll give me more time to make arrangements but how will I be able to contact you?"

"What if I call you, like, day after tomorrow?"

"But if I arrange a flight for the following day will you be ready?"

"Yeah."

"OK, I'll expect your call."

As he hung up the telephone, something caught his attention. A young boy chased after a radio controlled model car as it zigzagged among the pedestrians avoiding destruction. Hmm, he remarked to himself, that gives me an idea. He turned, dropped a quarter into the telephone and dialed. "Put Tommy on the phone," he said.

"Who's this?" the scar faced boy asked.

"It's Mick, what are you doin' there?"

"Who the hell is Mick?"

Shit, he said to himself, realizing the mistake had made.

"Just jerkin' yah chain, it's Ralph, man."

"Yeah, what do yah want?"

"Just put Tommy on the horn, would yah?"

"OK, just a minute."

"Ralph, where the hell are you?" Tommy chuckled.

"What's goin' over there?" Mick asked.

"Havin' a little party," he slurred.

"Sounds like more than a little. Are the girls there?"

"Yeah, but they ain't walkin' too straight if you know what I mean?"

"So you're gettin' laid, bloody good."

"You don't care about your girl?"

"Oi don't give a bloody shit," Mick lied, while inwardly feeling violated. "Listen, get yourself sober, oi'm comin' over to talk."

"When?"

"Right now, oi got a plan."

It was a short walk from the bus stop to the Haight-Ashberry flat and sprinting made it even shorter. The girls were nowhere to be seen when he entered the living room, the unmistakable fragrance of hashish and sexual fervor permeating the air. Tommy was lying on the bare floor clad in jockey shorts and a T-shirt,

blowing smoke rings into the air. "So what's your plan?" he slurred.

"Where's the other guy?" Mick inquired, postponing his response.

"Probably doin' a threesome."

"What?" he blurted.

"You said you didn't care."

"Oi'm goin' in there," Mick hissed, as he turned toward the bedrooms.

"I was just kiddin'," Tommy guffawed, "it was just me an' Billy."

Mick glared at him, confused. "Whadda yah mean by that?" he scoffed.

"C'mon, man, you knew that me an' Billy had a thing for each other."

"Fuck no, oi didn't even know his name was Billy. So, the girls weren't here for the party?"

"No, they had to do a double at the restaurant."

"An' Billy?"

"Takin' a shower."

Shit, he said to himself, I must be losin' it, I had no idea that they were gay. Well, what the fuck, I need their help.

"So, you said you have a plan?" Tommy asked, now sitting with his back against a wall.

"Yeah, oi do but it means goin' back in there."

"No way, I ain't goin' back to that place ever again."

"It's the only way to get a piece of them both."

"What do you mean, both?" Tommy asked, while mindlessly scratching his crotch.

With his recently acquired knowledge, Mick found the spectacle disturbing but he looked away. "Kerberos an' the Russians," he replied.

"OK, I ain't sayin' I'll do it but lemme hear what you have in mind."

"First, we'll need a laptop with one of them wireless cards an' a spring loaded device with a mechanical relay and radio receiver ..."

"Hold it right there," Tommy exclaimed, "aside from you not sounding like Ralph, you're beginning to scare me with all this information."

"Why is that?"

"Ralph never struck me as the kind of guy that would understand all that shit."

"Well, do oi look any different?" Mick asked, as he did a pirouette.

"No," Tommy replied, "but ..."

"Listen," he interrupted, "today oi learned somethin' new 'bout you so it's only fair that you figure out somethin' new 'bout me."

"Well, OK, but what's all that stuff for?"

"Fireworks!"

"Huh?"

"Assumin' that the senator never got to spill the beans about the missiles an' shit, my guess is that they're still in the basement."

"Are you crazy? You'll kill everybody within fifty miles, including us, if we're the ones settin' off your fireworks."

"That's what the laptop's for. We'll trigger it over the internet."

"And what are you gonna use to start the party?" Tommy inquired, with renewed interest.

"These," he replied, reaching into his pockets and withdrawing a hand grenade from each.

"Almost forgot about those but how do you figure to set them off remotely?"

"That's why we need a radio controlled mechanical relay."

"I get it," he shouted, "like a computer controlled mouse trap."

"Close enough."

"But if you do this at night, the compound will be full of innocent people," Tommy complained, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"That's why we're gonna blow it after they leave to sell their frickin' flowers."

"But what about the rest of the neighborhood?"

"It's a frickin' forest, Tommy, an' besides, ever hear of collateral damage?"

Tommy remained silent, picking at his toenails and shaking his head. "Shit, I said I would never go back there but this might work," he agreed.

"We still need the stuff," Ralph insisted.

"The phone company has plenty of laptops an' relays an' I can easily rig them with miniature radio receivers but the mechanical thingy is your problem."

"The Army surplus store has the stuff but oi need some money."

"How much?" he asked, with a knowing expression.

"Thirty bucks aught tah do it an', oh! We'll need a driver."

"Billy can do it, he's got a car."

"You sure he's jus' takin' a shower--all this time?"

"Yeah, he's got a thing about his hair; got to be perfect."

"So, any chance of gettin' your part by tomorrow morning?"

"Maybe, but how soon do you wanna do this?"

"Sunday."

"Are you serious? We'll need time to test the system an' make sure it works."

"It'll work, one way or the other it'll work."

It was late Saturday evening when Mick returned to the flat. He had been out all day searching for the parts necessary for the

triggering device, trading a small bag of marijuana for the assistance of a machinist for the final assembly. The house was dark and quiet when he entered, save for a subtle glow emanating from one of the back bedrooms. He carefully lowered the mechanism to the floor and tiptoed down the corridor. Leaning against the wall, the door ajar, he peeked through the opening. The two buddies were asleep, side by side, on the bed. Humph, he asked himself, do I really want to see what's under those covers? And the answer? No, I don't. With his back still to the wall, he reached across and knocked as hard as he could.

"Who's there?" Tommy cried out.

"Get the hell up, we got work to do," Mick shouted.

"Is that you, Ralph?"

"Well it ain't the tooth fairy," he replied, realizing that he may have inadvertently insulted the pair.

"OK, be right there."

"I'll be waitin' in the livin' room."

The two men sauntered into the room and took a seat on the floor, the room being devoid of chairs.

"Is your end finished?" Mick asked, thinking to himself, shit, I did it again.

Glancing at each other, the two friends burst out laughing. "You might say that," Billy declared between guffaws.

"It ain't whot oi meant and you know it," Mick sneered, trying to cover up for his blooper.

"Yeah, my end's done too," Tommy chuckled, "I mean the computer an' stuff."

"Then we're ready," Mick declared, showcasing his mechanical wizardry.

"You do that all by yourself?" Tommy asked, in amazement, turning the device around to view it from all aspects.

"Oi 'ad some help from a machinist but don't worry, he ain't got a clue what it's for."

"I really think we should make sure that the whole system works before we risk our lives installing it," Tommy pleaded.

"Alright, then let's do it right now."

"You want to blow this place up?" he asked incredulously.

"No, you bloody fool, we don't need an explosive to test it."

At three o'clock in the morning, Billy nudged his ancient Cadillac onto a soft shoulder across from the compound. The equipment, save for the grenades in Mick's pocket, was loaded into two backpacks; Tommy carrying one, Mick the other. Little had changed since their last incursion with one exception; Mick had insisted upon using the tunnel entrance and as suspected, a second coded entry panel blinked on the tunnel side of the door.

"Uh, we got a problem, Ralph," Tommy whispered, while gesturing upwards, towards a ceiling mounted camera aimed at the door.

"It can't see us, we're behind it."

"But we gotta get in front of it to open the door, Ralph."

"Yah got your stuff, fix it."

"I can't reach up there."

"Oh alright, yah can stand on my shoulder."

"It's gonna take a few. I got to connect my digital recorder to the camera and take a photo of the door. Then I've got to feed it back into the camera so that's all they'll see on their monitor and ..."

"Would yah shut the fuck up and get it done already!"

It took less time than anticipated to complete the process and when done, Tommy concentrated his efforts on the alarm system while Mick held a flashlight.

"Whot's takin' yah so long?" Mick whispered.

"I've never seen anything like this," Tommy replied, sweat dripping down his cheeks.

"Well hurry it up, we ain't got all night," Mick said, nervously gazing about.

"I'm doin' the best I can but this thing's amazing. Every time I try to capture the code it mutates to another combination of numbers and letters."

"You tellin' me we came all this way for nothin'?"

"Wait a minute, I think I got somethin' ... yeah, here we go," he whispered, as a series of lights all turned green and the electronic lock clicked open.

They stood in the doorway, scanning the dark room for anything suggestive of a surveillance device. "I don't see nothin'," Mick said.

"If they went to the trouble of installing that coded lock, you can be sure there are hidden cameras, maybe even heat signature sensors."

"So, what do we do?"

"It's your party, you decide."

"Well, we ain't got nothin' to lose, let's do it over there," Mick said, pointing to a waist level crate labeled *High Explosives*.

Tommy connected the laptop with its two six hour batteries, one internal and one external, to the relay wired trigger. When he had finished, Mick removed the safety pins from his two grenades, one at a time, and gingerly inserted each one into the trigger housing. The device was designed with a high tension spring that prevented the explosive's release lever from deploying. The relay, an integral part of the entire mechanism, was controlled by a small radio receiver that, with the appropriate signal, would cause a solenoid to fire and release the spring's tension. At the flat, the system's dry run worked like a charm but there was still one unknown; the grenades, would they explode?

"Are we ready?" Tommy asked, as Mick stood staring at his contraption.

"Yeah, we done it all."

"Let's get outta here."

"Will the alarm reset itself?"

"I think so," Tommy replied, as he closed the door, then added, "yeah, it did."

"How can yah tell?" Mick whispered.

"All the lights are green."

"Hey, 'ow come it didn't go off when we opened the door from the inside?"

"This system assumes that if you're already inside you belong there."

"OK, back to the woods," Mick ordered, as he headed down the tunnel.

"Wait," Tommy hissed.

"Whot's wrong?"

"Shouldn't we put the camera back the way it was?"

"Whot for? When this stuff blows it'll turn everythin' tah dust."

"But what if they find our bomb before we set it off?"

"Don't matter none. They'll blow it just tryin' tah disarm it."

"You sure?"

"Dead sure, now move yer ass, let's get outta here."

Billy was waiting several yards down the road from where he had dropped them, lights off with the engine quietly purring. As soon as they were safely inside, he released the parking brake and coasted a distance before punching the accelerator, the final sequence of their stealthy incursion.