

## CHAPTER TEN

"This is bad," said Rob. "This is very very bad."

"We know that," said Carol.

"We can't carry on here." Rob was pacing frantically. "My wonderful super secret hideout, blown inside a day. Where else can we go?" He stopped. "I wish you would stop doing that, Chris, it's very distracting."

Chris morphed back into his human form and grinned. "Sorry, boss. Gotta make sure I can do it at a moment's notice, right?"

"You might want to consider that every time you use the power it might be registering on some detector somewhere."

"Oops."

"Not that that matters," Rob went on. "If one of them knows where we are, they all will. We could try leaving the country...but they've probably got all the ports covered already. Disguises. Maybe we could..." He looked down at himself. "Yeah, right. How am I going to disguise this?"

"We could paint you gold and call you a Laughing Buddha," Monica suggested.

Rob rounded on her. "If you've got nothing helpful to say, Ms Fleming—"

"I think it's the best suggestion so far," said a voice. Carol jumped, Monica shrieked, Rob turned round again so fast he almost overbalanced, and Chris morphed into the centaur.

"Sorry to be the second one to surprise you like that, ladies," said the man who had spoken, stepping into the light, "but I thought I'd better step in before Rob here started handing out the cyanide capsules."

"Paul!" Rob exploded. "What the hell are you doing here?" Belatedly, and through her shock, Carol recognised Paul Harding, one of the College tutors. What was his subject again? As Rob performed the introduction for the benefit of Chris and Monica, she realised she had never actually known.

"Watching," said Paul. "It's been most interesting...but I really think you need my help if you plan to take this any further."

"Your help?" Rob went ashen pale. "Oh no, Paul, you can't."

"What is it?" Carol demanded.

"Want me to kill him for you?" growled Chris.

"That would be most unwise," said Paul. "What Rob has not told you, ladies and gentleman, mainly because I swore him to secrecy, is that Paul Harding isn't actually my name, and that I work—on a part-time basis—for British Intelligence. And yes, I have been briefed on the artifact and directed to seize it for Her Majesty's Government if at all possible. But since that isn't possible," he went on, raising his voice slightly as Chris took two paces towards him, "I feel my main duty is to keep the said artifact from falling into the hands of anyone else."

"Did you get rid of the fat priest?" Monica asked.

"I did. You can thank me later. He is in fact quite a dangerous man if you give him time to sort himself out. His name is Heinrich Krebs, and he is a member of a secret order inside the Vatican whose remit is to find evidence of the survival of certain pagan beliefs—or even worse, evidence that might lend credence to those beliefs—and destroy it. But he's not the most dangerous enemy you have to face here."

"He knows where we are, though," Rob said.

"Not any more, at least I hope not. It'll take him a while to recover his memory of this evening, and by the time he does we'll have found you somewhere else to hide."

"I'm open to suggestions," said Rob, "since mine failed so spectacularly."

"Well, if you will have winged horses doing vertical takeoffs late at night."

"Can we trust you?" Carol said bluntly. "I mean, sorry, but after tonight I'm a bit reluctant to take anything at face value. How do we know you are who you say you are?"

"What do you want?" said Paul good-humouredly. "A badge that says I AM A SPY? I could give you a phone number to ring that would confirm everything I say, except that--"

"--then you'd have to kill me," Carol broke in. "I know the joke."

"You can trust him, Carol," said Rob slowly. "I do. Besides, he's a member of my club."

"He's a *what*?" Carol wondered for one mad moment if she had fallen through a time warp.

"Actually, that's a point," said Paul. "How about the club?"

"It's in London. Getting in could be tricky."

"Easier than getting through Heathrow in a false beard. Believe me, I've tried."

"What club is this?" Carol demanded. "I didn't think they still existed."

"Ah, well, you don't move in the circles, do you, darling," said Monica. "I dated a waiter at the Junior Greys once. Awfully nice boy. Very polite."

"This is not the usual kind of club," said Paul. "For one thing, it's not men only. I think we could keep you safe there, if we can get you there in the first place."

"But we'll have to set off right away," said Rob, yawning. "Oh, God. What time is it?" He looked at his watch. "Nearly two. I honestly don't think I'm going to be fit to drive, Paul."

"Well, don't look at me," said Chris, morphing hastily back to human. "I can't carry all of you in any—whoops." He suddenly went cross-eyed and folded at the knees. Carol rushed to catch him and was just too late.

"What happened? Chris, what happened?"

"I was half expecting this," Rob said, waving Carol away and helping Chris back to his feet.

"Using the power will be a drain on your body's energy. Was anyone watching how many times he changed? No? Oh well."

"Sorry, boss," Chris mumbled. His face was the colour of old newspaper. "Should have listened to you."

"Well, that's all right, I'll take you," said Paul. "Both your cars'll be marked by now anyway. I'll go and get mine and we'll set off straight away while no-one's watching."

"How many more people are going to end up knowing about this?" Carol demanded. "It's supposed to be a secret, you know, or had you all forgotten?"

“Well, you have to admit, as McGuffins go, compared to say a CD or a microfilm yours is a little showy,” said Paul.

“M not a McGuffin,” Chris said with as much force as he could muster.

“More of a Guffinides,” said Monica. “Sorry,” she added.

They made their way outside again, Rob and Monica supporting Chris, and Paul vanished into the shadows with uncanny suddenness.

“How does he do that?” Carol demanded, looking wildly around.

“I wish I knew,” Rob said.

“I wish I had a torch,” Carol muttered, scanning the shadows for masked henchmen.

“If there were anyone else around, he wouldn't have left us alone.”

“Rob, are you sure we can trust him? I mean, absolutely sure?” Monica adjusted Chris's arm on her shoulders. He stirred and mumbled something.

“Well, I don't think we have much choice, but even if we did I'd still say yes. He's gone against his bosses a few times when he didn't like what he was being told to do.”

“And he's still working for them?”

“Occasionally. On a part-time basis, like he said.” The purring of an engine drew nearer, and a sleek, old-fashioned car came into view, Paul at the wheel. Carol's spirits sank as she looked at it.

“Hop in,” said Paul cheerfully.

“Does this thing actually go?” Carol said.

“Bite your tongue, darling,” said Monica. “It's an Alvis Speed 25. Charlesworth body, right?”

“How do you—oh, of course. You dated a motor mechanic once.”

“Classic car restorer, please,” Monica said. “Very keen on his work.”

“You do know it'll need to do more than twenty-five on the motorway, don't you?”

“I don't think you'll have any reason to complain,” said Paul.

“Well, I’m putting laughing boy in the back,” said Monica. “I suppose you know he weighs a ton.”

“Sorry,” said Chris.

Eventually, Rob, Chris and Carol were installed in the back, and Monica sat beside Paul in front. Paul handed her a floral headscarf and a pair of sunglasses, and once she was wearing them even Carol had to admit that she looked quite un-Monica-like.

“I don’t know how you all are at sleeping in cars,” Paul said as he started the engine again, “but I’d try if I were you.”

Chris was already snoring. Carol rested her head on his shoulder and her arm across his chest, closed her eyes and tried to ignore the fact that they were in a moving vehicle. *Just as long as it keeps moving...* she thought, and that was the last she remembered before sleep sucked her down like a big black vacuum cleaner.

She woke to a stiff neck and a taste in her mouth like the bottom of someone’s rugby boot.

“Welcome back, babes,” said Chris. Rob stirred and groaned.

“Don’t call me that,” Carol croaked. “Where are we?”

“Fleet service area,” said Paul. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I need breakfast.”

Carol’s stomach seconded the motion with an audible rumble.

“We seem to have got clean away,” Paul said, as they settled themselves round a table with their trays. Chris seemed to have ordered two full breakfasts. “I think—barring surprises on the way into town—we should make the club by lunchtime.”

“That car has quite a respectable turn of speed, actually,” Monica said. She looked as irritatingly fresh as she always did in the mornings. “I was surprised.”

“White-knuckled is the phrase,” said Paul. “I’ll be inspecting the dashboard for finger gouges later.”

“How are you feeling, Chris?” Carol said.

"Hungry," Chris said with his mouth full. "And--" He swallowed. "Kind of itchy. Like I want to change."

"Well, for God's sake don't," said Monica. "At least till we're safe."

"Safe," Carol echoed. She couldn't imagine what being safe felt like.

"I'm not stupid, you know," Chris said.

"Seriously, though," said Paul, "if it becomes a real problem, let me know so I can stop. I don't want a sudden horse in my back seat. I just had the upholstery redone."

"It had better not become a real problem," Rob said darkly. He had not spoken since waking up.

"Look, I know what I'm doing, all right?" Chris said hotly.

Before Carol realised what she was doing, she had edged her seat away from him. The look he turned on her struck an acidic pang of guilt to her heart. The fact that Monica had done exactly the same on his other side was no consolation.

"You wanna leave me here and go home, is that it?" Chris said, all his anger quenched in a flash.

"I told you it was gonna be dangerous. Thought you didn't mind that."

"I don't," Carol said emphatically, causing a family of four at another table to look round curiously. "I'm not scared of you, Chris."

"You're scared of the things, though, aren't you? The centaur and the others--"

"Oh, don't be a drama queen, darling," said Monica. "We were just giving you space. You may be able to do it when you want to now, but that's not the same as having it under control."

"I'm not scared of you," Carol repeated, "not in any of your forms. I mean that, Chris."

"There are worse things to be scared of," said Rob, almost inaudibly.

"What do you mean?" said Carol.

"He means the people chasing us," said Paul. "And he's right. They can be quite frightening." He turned to Rob. "If this is getting a bit too rich for your blood, old chap, you could always go back. I expect there's a taxi service somewhere near that would get you to a train."

"I've been thinking about it," Rob said, still in a low voice. "I don't want to desert you, Carol, or any of you, but I'm not at all sure how much use I can be, if—if it comes to a fight, or..." His voice tailed off.

"If it comes to a fight, Rob dear, hardly any of us are going to be any use," said Monica. "But that's not what we need you for."

"You're the brains of the outfit," said Chris.

"You're the proof that we're not all on drugs and imagining it," Carol said.

Rob summoned up a smile from somewhere. "Suppose I'd better stay, then," he said.

"That's more like it," said Paul. "And now, if everyone's finished, I think we should get moving again. It's nearly nine o'clock, and Krebs and whoever else has traced you to Avevale will shortly be aware that we've moved out."

Chris paid the bill, and they piled into the Alvis again. Carol had to admit she was impressed with the car's turn of speed, and the seats were comfortable despite the squeeze.

At junction one Paul turned southwards, past Kempton Park racecourse. Carol lost her sense of direction almost immediately, as he threaded the Alvis through side streets and unsignposted turnings.

"Where is this club anyway, darling?" Monica asked curiously.

"Not in St. James' or Pall Mall, if that's what you were thinking," said Paul. "Its founders preferred a less high-profile location."

"It's as old as the first gentlemen's clubs, though," Rob added, "or near enough. Founded in seventeen hundred and twenty something by Sir Joshua Elt and his friends."

"Elt?" Carol perked up. "He was from round our way, wasn't he? Elt as in Eltdown?"

"That's the chap," said Hugh. "Interesting fellow. Explorer of some kind."

"Are we nearly there yet?" said Chris.

"Ten more minutes," said Paul. "Why?"

"Cause there's a car been tailing us since five minutes after we left the service place."

"Really?"

"Big silver Audi." Chris recited the number. "Tinted screen."

"Vassily Shirinin," Paul said. "Ex-KGB, now SVR. That helicopter must have spotted us when we joined the motorway. Ah, I'm glad they've sent him."

"You mean the Russians are after this thing too?" Carol wailed.

"Everyone is going to be 'after this thing,'" Paul said. "And it may not be my place to say it, but that isn't a very nice way to talk about your boyfriend."

He turned left, quite suddenly and without indicating, into a narrow side street that opened out into a square with a railinged patch of grass at the centre. Paul drove round it and parked in a handy space just in front of the building whose frontage occupied the whole of the side of the square opposite the entrance. Stone steps led up to a heavy set of double doors, beside which a small, discreet brass plate presumably bore the name of the establishment.

"Get inside, everyone," said Paul as the Audi pulled up alongside. Carol, Chris and Rob scrambled to get out; Monica was already up the steps as a thin man with receding grey hair and a scar across his forehead slid out of the Audi and levelled a gun at them.

"Nobody is to move," he said, in an unaccented, passionless voice.

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"When did you last have it serviced?" said the man, fanning away the smoke.

"Serviced?" Pricklow repeated vaguely. "Ah, I'm afraid I, um, can't help you there. We leave all those matters in the hands of our colleague here."

*As of five seconds ago, you treacherous bastard,* thought Don-Jay savagely, as the man turned to him.

"I don't have the exact date on me," he said. "Listen, can you repair it or not?"

"I'm sorry, sir," said the man, "but just looking at it I can tell it's going to have to go to a garage."

"That is quite out of the question," said Professor Gefarr icily. "It is imperative that we get to Avevale as soon as possible. Please do what you can."

“Madam, there is nothing I can do,” the man said wearily, “except arrange for a tow to the nearest garage. You can go with the vehicle or you can stay here. Either way, if you want anything done to the vehicle you will have to pay for it, and also for the tow. May I suggest,” he added, “that you might like to consider some breakdown cover. The AA or the RAC--”

“This is absurd,” Gefarr snapped.

Don-Jay left them to it and walked down the road a little way to escape the smell of burning. After a while he picked up a piece of cardboard from the verge, took a marker pen from his pocket and began to letter AVEVALE on it.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Vassily,” said Paul. “How nice to see you again.”

“Hugh Sacristan,” said the man with the gun. “I am afraid this is not a social call.”

“The gun is a bit of a giveaway.”

“I believe that your friends have something that belongs to us.”

“Us?”

“I could take him,” Chris muttered to Carol. “If I changed--”

“Don't you dare,” Carol said forcefully.

“Come on, Vassily,” said Hugh Sacristan. “What is it that these young people are supposed to have stolen?”

Shirinin hesitated. “It has been described to me as a small pyramid of stone.”

Hugh laughed. “A Russian pyramid?”

"It is a historical artifact of great value to the Russian people," Shirinin snapped. "I am ordered to recover it, or if this is not possible, to take the thief to our Consulate for questioning."

"Well, you're not going to do either, I'm afraid," said Hugh easily. He glanced round at the group huddled on the steps. "They may not have gone inside as I suggested, but you will notice they are on the steps of the Club."

"If they are wise, they will return to the pavement," said Shirinin.

"Or what? You'll shoot them?"

"I will shoot you," Shirinin said. The gun never wavered. "You are not on the steps of the Club. If, however, the thief will come forward--"

"What kind of club is this?" Carol whispered.

Hugh laughed. "Forget it, Vassily. You won't do any such thing. Come in with us and have a drink, for goodness' sake. You aren't going to get whatever it is you're after by gunning down civilians, or fellow members, and you know it."

Shirinin held the pose for a long moment—and then he slipped the safety catch on the gun and slid it into what must have been a shoulder holster, and smiled. "You cannot blame me for trying," he said.

"These aren't the old days any more, old comrade," said Hugh. "Do find somewhere else to park before you come in, though. You're blocking the Queen's highway there." He got out of the car, locked it carefully and joined the others on the steps as the Audi moved smoothly away.

"Next time I tell you to do something," he said, and Carol realised with a shock that he was angry, "you had damn well better do it. You could all have been killed."

"But--"

"Don't underestimate the danger you're in. Shirinin won't act against you as long as you're within the bounds of the Club, but as soon as you leave—and we'll have to eventually—you'll be fair game again and he will not hesitate. If he does, they'll send someone else who won't. They may do that anyway, if he doesn't get results. And most of the people who are after you won't even recognise the Club as neutral territory."

"I'm sorry," said Carol, Chris and Rob simultaneously.

"Good. Now get inside."

Rob opened the big double doors, and they trooped in. Carol had intended to read the brass plate, but by the time she remembered it they were in a large, dark vestibule and Hugh was talking to a small balding man in a uniform with brass buttons.

"Go straight ahead into the bar," said Hugh over his shoulder. "Pikestaff will bring you the book to sign in a moment."

The bar was a long room dotted with round tables and chairs, and the lighting was considerably better. Three big windows on the wall opposite the door admitted some daylight, and the rest was supplied by imitation gas mantles along the other walls. Rob saw them all to seats.

"What are you drinking?" he said. Carol opted for orange juice, Monica white wine, and Chris shook his head. Rob shrugged and went to the bar. Carol's gaze, following him, was drawn to something hanging on the central beam that spanned the room, and she got up and went towards it. It was a small glass case, of the sort that might be used to display a stuffed fish or other trophy, but inside was nothing but a wedge-shaped lump of metal about nine inches long, pitted and blackened with age, and a small card underneath that said simply "The Nail."

"Excuse me, miss," said a voice. It was the little man in the uniform, proffering a huge old book, open, with a tortoiseshell fountain pen lying along the spine. Carol took the pen and signed her name on the first blank line.

"Thank you, miss--" The little man read the name upside down. "Miss Varland. Your drink is on the table beside you."

Carol thanked him absently. He followed her gaze, which had drifted back to the Nail.

"Ah, yes," he said. "It takes everyone that way the first time."

"What sort of nail is it?" she asked.

"Ancient Roman," he said, straight-faced. "Palestinian in origin, or so we're told. If you desire anything else, miss, just ask at the bar. Lunch will be served in thirty minutes or thereabouts."

"I do recommend the food here," said Rob from a seat across the table, "though it might spoil you for motorway service stations. We can relax here for a little while."

"Actually," said Chris, "I think I need to be somewhere private. Somewhere with space?"

"Are you going to change again?" Carol said.

"That's the thing," Chris said. "I don't want to, but it's getting kind of difficult."

"I thought it took this huge mental effort," Monica said.

"It did, but then I spent all that time practising, and now it's like trying not to think of a blue rabbit. I keep seeing the symbols in my head, like."

"So that's the next hurdle," Rob said with the suspicion of a sigh. "Well, the Club has a yard out the back which is reasonably private...but anyone staying in the back rooms can look out and see whatever's going on."

"Well, they're just going to have to not look," Carol said, as the image of Chris consumed from within flashed across her mind again.

"Compared to what some of them have seen, this is very small beer," Hugh Sacristan said, sitting down next to Rob. "Right, I've spoken to Vassily, called in a couple of favours, and he'll give us an hour's head start whenever we decide to leave."

"Why?" Chris said bluntly.

Hugh frowned. "Well, for one thing, because that way he can assess the quality of our other pursuers and hopefully insert several spokes into their wheels. And, of course, for friendship's sake. People like us have always had far more in common with each other than we have with our employers."

Carol thought about that. It made sense, and was even reassuring in some obscure way. She looked across at Shirinin, standing at the bar; he smiled and toasted her with his glass.

Rob was less satisfied. "What about loyalty?"

Hugh snorted. "To whom? The Queen, God bless her? A bunch of self-seeking time-servers in Westminster and Whitehall? The ordinary people of Britain, who if they knew half of what we do would demand our immediate arrest? Or some Rupert Brooke ideal of croquet on the lawn and is there honey still for tea? Loyalty's just an excuse for doing something any sane person

would know was unconscionable. I've hidden behind it in my time. So has Vassily. And we know just what it's worth."

"So what do you do it for?" Chris persisted.

"This," Hugh said, gesturing widely. "The tiny circle of people I know, who would be seriously harmed if I failed to do my duty. My family, my home, the things that matter to me. And make no mistake, if helping you puts this Club, or Avevale, or my family, in serious jeopardy, I will without hesitation throw you to the wolves and smile while I do it." He smiled illustratively. "But I doubt that will happen."

"Caz," Chris said. "I really need--"

"Which way's the yard?" Carol demanded.

"Down the passage, door straight ahead," Rob said, glaring at Hugh.

"Come with me, babes?"

"Don't call me that." Carol took a deep breath. "All right."

She looked, almost reflexively, at Monica, but Monica's head was lolling, her eyes were closed, and her breathing indicated sound sleep. Carol tried not to feel gleeful as she followed Chris down the passage and through the door to the yard.

"Okay," Chris said, when they reached the rough centre of the cobbled square. "I need to work on staying in control in the different forms. So I need you to be here when I go centaur."

Carol swallowed. "Just--be here?"

"Well," Chris blushed, "if it looks like I'm resisting okay, you could, er, you know..."

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have Monica?" Carol could have kicked herself. *Issues? Me? Only a few...thousand...*

"God, no," Chris said, and Carol's emotions flip-flopped again.

"Go on, then," she said, and watched as Centaur Chris exploded out of human Chris. It was getting easier to watch.

"Well," he said, and she tried not to shiver too obviously, "here we are, then."

"Yes," she said.

"So far so good."

"Yes."

"Once I've got this one under control, the others should be a doddle."

"Mmh."

"I just need to not get spooked when I'm the wingy thingy--"

"Pegasus," Carol said with an effort.

"And get used to being around non-virgins when I'm the unicorn."

Carol was trying hard to think, and she thought there must be something more to the unicorn, but it was like trying to sculpt treacle. She knew she was supposed to be resisting him, keeping a cool head, but it was getting harder to remember why over the excessive volume of deliciously wanton feelings that were battering at her self-control.

"Caz?" Chris said.

"What?" The word came out in a sort of gasp.

"I don't think I can..."

"What?" It was easier than trying to understand the words. The yard was as hot and humid as a South American rain forest, her mind had turned into treacle and dribbled out of her ears, her defences were all washed away on a warm dark tide, and all she could see was him. There had been something they were trying to do, but she couldn't remember what it was. It didn't matter.

"Caz," he said, *"I want you."*

As she swayed thankfully towards him at last, there was a loud bang behind her, and suddenly Centaur Chris was replaced by Pegasus Chris and the shock practically swept her legs from under her. For a moment, she hated Rob Fayne, smiling from the doorway with a torn paper bag in his hand.

Pegasus Chris whickered uneasily and fluffed out his feathers, but stood his ground.

"Sorry I startled you," Rob said, "but some things are a bit too exciting even for this lot."

Carol, composing curses on his name in dactylic hexameters, did not respond. In a little while, she knew, she would be grateful to him, but not yet.

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Father Krebs was paying his bill at the Man At Arms, his bags on the floor at his side. He had retrieved as much as he could of his memory of the previous night, and come to the conclusion that his quarry was off and running. He would ask his chaplain to impose a suitable penance for his failure later. For now, the imperative was to get in pursuit.

He was still unclear as to who had put him down. Without thinking hard, he could list maybe a dozen active agents who had mastered that particular hold. The trouble was that he knew where each and every one of them was. Except maybe...

No. Not that one. Surely even they would not be so insane...

"What's this?" the hairy bartender said, looking at the piece of plastic in his huge hand.

"American Express," Father Krebs said.

"Maybe in America," the giant said, "or London. Not here. Cash."

Father Krebs sighed, retrieved his card and delved into his wallet for English money.

That was when he heard the car draw up outside and some extra sense sent a chill up his spine. Only one individual among the many he had encountered in his long and varied career had ever induced in him a sensation akin to fear.

"Keep the change," he said to the hairy bartender, flinging a handful of notes across the bar, and abandoning his belongings, made his way through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

The bartender, staring after him, felt something cold and metallic pushing against his jugular vein.

"Okay, buddy boy," John Dower said steadily, "let's try this just once more."

Sadly, Father Krebs was already speeding along the Eltdown road five minutes later, and so denied himself the delicious sight of the mad American being physically thrown out of the pub.

"Never come here again!" shouted the bartender, and slammed the door in his face.

Dower seethed. Surely just one tiny rocket...

But no.

He picked himself up, dusted himself down, retrieved his gun and got back into the car.

If that was the way they wanted to play it, he was game.

On the road out of town, unwittingly following in Father Krebs's wake, he passed three weary, footsore pedestrians, the youngest struggling under the weight of an overloaded rucksack, and took some meagre pleasure in driving them into the verge, but his heart wasn't in it.