

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Another service station. Hugh filled the Alvis's tank while Rob located a public phone and made his calls. Chris and Carol sat together on the back seat, the unspoken words between them filling the available space like an invisible air bag.

"I'm sorry," Chris said at last.

"What about?" Carol said.

"Telling Uncle Aris. Not telling you I was gonna. Needing to talk to someone else."

"No problem," Carol said lightly.

"No, really. It's not that I think you don't understand or any of that. It's..."

"I'm too close?"

"Yeah," Chris said gratefully. "And he did help. Sort of."

"You have to discover your inmost nature," Carol said.

"There's only one thing I know right now about my inmost nature," Chris said, "and it's true whatever body I'm wearing." He leaned closer. "I love you, Carol Varland."

"Well," Carol said faintly, "I think that's a good start." He did have really nice eyes.

"Road food," said Shirinin's voice from behind Chris. "Oh, I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?"

Chris turned and grabbed the paper bags and cups, from which appetising smells were rising. Carol's stomach quickly exercised its veto, and she smiled at the Russian. "Thank you, Vassily," she said.

"Okay," said Rob, getting into the front passenger seat. "They'll have everything at Abergenu ready for us by the time we arrive, which will be quite late tonight. Hugh's taking a fairly long-winded route for obvious reasons."

"Too cheap to pay the toll on the M6," Shirinin commented, as Hugh resumed his seat. "The British Secret Service, always at the mercy of its accountants. I'm sorry, 007, the car has been repossessed, would you like the bicycle or the perambulator?"

"Who says Russians have no sense of humour?" Hugh said. "I'm putting the top up. It looks like rain."

He operated a control on the dash, and with a series of metallic clunks a segmented carapace emerged from the back of the car and closed over their heads. "Spoils the classic look a bit, but it keeps out most things, including bullets. I got the idea from that Batman film. You were saying, Vassily?"

"Thank God for the independently wealthy British spy," Shirinin muttered. "Drive on, bloated capitalist scum."

"I'm gonna need to stop and change soon," Chris said as the car eased into motion.

"You couldn't have said that sooner?" Rob said.

"Nowhere here private enough."

"We'll be in open country fairly soon," Hugh said. "I'll find a place."

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Father Krebs drew up outside the Club With A Nail In It with a sigh of relief. He had spent an hour going up and down the main road, navigating the roundabout at one end and the one way system at the other, looking for a side road that had eluded him time and time again. There was Dower's car, parked halfway round the square trying to look nonchalant. Presumably Dower himself was inside, breaking fingers or something. This was the obvious place; all the other buildings round the small square were either private residences or discreet offices.

The priest got out of his car and walked up to the steps of the club. Just as he was about to set foot on the bottom step, he hesitated. Would it not be better to check out the outside first?

He was just turning away when something struck the back of his head with sickening force and the world went away.

When pain brought consciousness back to Father Krebs, he found himself lying in the boot of a car, travelling at speed. From the traffic noises around him he guessed he was on a main road, possibly a motorway, though he would not put it past John Dower to take Oxford Street in the rush hour at ninety. So, the mad American had got the drop on him, as he would doubtless put it, and was taking him somewhere to...well, what? Interrogate him? Kill him? Drop him off on the

hard shoulder? He doubted even Dower knew. The American had honed his instincts to razor keenness, and had promptly abandoned conscious thought as too slow and inefficient. He reacted instantly, rather than taking time to plan. The method had its virtues. It was not Father Krebs's.

He consulted his watch. Three-twelve. In the afternoon, presumably. He had been out for less than half an hour. He did not seem to be bound or gagged, though shouting would hardly help his situation right now. He squirmed around till he was facing into the car. Most people, locked in a car boot, would concentrate on trying to open the door, a futile endeavour usually. Father Krebs reached up, forced his fingers between the parcel shelf and the back seat, and worked them along till he located the buttons that tilted the back of the seat forward. Not for the first time, he wished for long, slender, delicate hands like Cardinal Agnelli's. This hurt.

Cautiously, counting on the traffic noise to mask the sound, the priest eased the seat back off its pins and down, just enough to give him a view of the back of the driver's head. If he could just slide into the back seat and get his gun out, he could--

Father Krebs's estimation of John Dower went up a notch. The man driving was a complete stranger.

Dower had dumped him in someone else's car.

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Meanwhile, the object of Father Krebs's unwilling admiration was skulking around the back of the Club With A Nail In It. He had considered going in, but something about the place gave him the willies. It was probably full of stuck-up, toffee-nosed Brits who would look down their noses and say "What ho, a Colonial johnnie, what?" and tut at him if he tried to break their fingers. He didn't need that right now.

Anyway, the Alvis wasn't here any more. Satellite tracking had it heading westwards on the M4, probably back to Avevale. He could have just stayed put and waited. Not that John Dower had any objection to wasted effort--indeed, he scarcely had any concept of it--but time was, as ever, of the essence.

At least he had got rid of the German priest. Dower knew of the Dorus Dei, and knew them to be occasional allies in the struggle against the forces of godlessness and socialism. He also knew them to be foreigners, and hence untrustworthy. The Vatican had no business sending its own

agents out to retrieve this thing, whatever it was. Goddammit, what did they think America was for?

He returned to the pavement and advanced on the steps of the Club, and then changed his mind again. Follow the Alvis, that was the ticket. The thing was bound to be with Sacristan. The guy had all the luck. Damn Brits.

His phone rang. He looked at it, then punched to accept the call.

"Dower here. Yessir? Not as of yet, sir. I've had some local difficulties.

"If you would just let me do my job, sir--

"No sir. No, I don't believe so, sir.

"Permission to speak freely, sir.

"Because America is no longer held in respect, sir, in the international community, and the reason for that is that we've gone soft, sir. The enemies of freedom walk the streets openly laughing at us, sir. There is an urgent need for prompt, decisive and above all conclusive action on our part to bring the rest of the world to heel.

"I absolutely believe we should, sir.

"Well, that is because there has been a tragic mistake, sir, possibly as a result of subversion and fraud at the--

"No sir. No, sir, that is not my intention.

"I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States, sir.

"No sir, I would not wish for that to happen, sir.

"Sir, yes sir. (However long it fuckin' well takes.) No, sir, I was clearing my throat, sir. Yes sir. Thank you, sir. God bless America."

He hung up the phone, then returned to his car. He had some time to make up.

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Don-Jay was starting to flag. The desire to be far away (very far away) was still strong on him, but he was aware that his feet hurt and the backpack had become heavy again. He had reached a main road of some kind, had walked along it for an hour or two and then had succumbed to

temptation and hitched a lift to the nearest motorway. Now he was standing on the hard shoulder with his thumb out, but so far nobody was biting.

He knew what had happened now. Someone, the creepy guy in the cloak, had put a powerful compulsion on him. Don-Jay didn't mind that so much, since the compulsion was to do exactly what he wanted most in the world to do (and, yes, he was aware that that was because of the compulsion, but that really didn't matter) but the guy could have built in some rest stops.

Sooner or later, he was dismally aware, he would have to crawl back to Pricklow and Gefarr. He had not enough imagination to envisage himself as anything other than their hanger-on and lackey. They tolerated his querulous inefficiency and idleness, and he occupied a position no other technician with an ounce of self-respect would take. It was a perfect contract, born of necessity and sustained by mutual loathing, and just as he had no alternative, neither did they. But for now, he could not even face the thought of going back. So he stood, and waved his thumb, and was miserable.

And by and by something stopped. *Oh great. Hippies*, Don-Jay thought, just as he would have thought *Oh great, a family*, or *Oh great, two old people*, or *Oh great, Anne Hathaway*. Don-Jay was entirely egalitarian in his antipathies. Still, a ride was a ride. He slouched towards the psychedelic double-decker bus without giving it or its occupants a further thought.

"And why, Allie my love," Dracul inquired, "are we pickin' up this particular waif or as it might be stray?"

"I dunno," Allie replied irritably. "It feels..." She waved a skinny hand. "Wrong in the right way."

"That's good enough for me. Top of the mid-afternoon to you, sir," he said to Don-Jay, who had by now swung himself on to the platform, "and where is it a fine gentleman such as yourself would be after headin'?"

"Anywhere you're going is fine," Don-Jay said shortly. "Can I take this thing off?"

"You can fling it into the bushes if you like," Dracul said expansively. "This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat, or you could if we had one, but I wouldn't go callin' anyone a bastard if I were you."

Don-Jay shrugged out of the backpack, shoved it into the luggage space, and sat down with a feeling not unlike relief.

A minute later, in spite of Dracul's best efforts to engage him in conversation, he was asleep.