

RAULF a story of intrigue and courage. By Paul Audcent. Copyright 1999

I loved reading spy novels, especiously ones by Fleming and de Carre, so I thought I might try my hand at one. I wrote this when we were building are house. Whenever it rained I wrote!

A PROLOGUE

The bleached grass hissed as the wind tore over the rock-strewn hillside. Vincent watched the goats slipping on the shale as they clambered forward searching for green stems, devouring leaves and roots as they foraged toward the skeleton bushes. Their hooves clicked on the flattened rock as they sought shelter from the wind and the thorny branches. Sustenance and a place to lie for the night were what they sought. Vincent followed quietly behind, then pulled a tattered leather bag from his shoulder, pulling it open and then laying out a canvas bag stuffed with dried grass in the lee of the wind. Eyeing the dying sun, he wished Tanks was with him tonight but the dog had sprained a paw on this same hillside two days ago and had been left at the farm. He checked his charges once they had reached their chosen destination, then slipped into the bag and slept.

Something awoke him, a shriek in the wind, unease in the herd, he rose quickly to check and count them. A goat was worth a week of food, a pair of shoes, and a trip to Palermo and back for the family. Again, down from far below, a wail and a gunshot.

Images of tragedy crossed his mind and grabbing the halter of the herd leader he strode quickly down the rocky path toward the family fields far below.

He heard several vehicles thunder away, raising a brief cloud across the fields. He now ran, leaving the herd to find their own way. He cut down the steep slope, jumping and leaping through the pathway's bends and raced to the farm. Scattered about, like dolls, was his own brother, Mario, the tongue cut from his head a sickly black mess over the chest, Mario, tall and strong, unbent by bullies or bandits. He ran to the squat house calling his mother, she lay pinioned by a knife through her hand to the floor blood coursing down her chest. But she groaned and Vincent held her head in his arms. She turned over and with the other hand wrenched the knife free.

"Mario", she whispered hoarsely.

Vincent shook his head and started to weep. His Mother wrapped her weak arms around him.

"God in heaven" she cried, "Antonio...Antonio."

"Papa is not here"

"Vincent go to the stable...Go at once"

Vincent propped his Mother up against the wall and hurtled out. He fell over Tanks, his dog, brave carefree Tanks, shot and a crushed skull. He stood paralysed, breathing deeply in shock and hatred for those that had done this to Tanks. Old Cappello's gift for helping at harvest. Tanks gone, his mind reeled and he held the dog, still warm, but his mother called again to find his father, and half running half crouching he reached the barn. His father lay in a pool of blood, badly beaten but as Vincent knelt beside him he could hear a throaty guttural noise. He ran for the old blanket used for the animals when they were sick, and he covered his Father up.

"Don't move Father I will run to Cappello's for help."

"Your Mother?" the guttural voice wheezed.

"A blade to the hand and blood at her front"

"And...and Mario...and your Tanks?"

"Both..." Vincent could not bring himself to say it.

"Go then, get Cappello, a Doctor for your Mother, quickly... Vincent hear me you must

away...Vendetta...as soon as possible...to. cousins in Agrigento...you know....”

“Yes father”, said the dark eyed child and ran back to his mother.

“Father lives, I’m to go to Cappello’s for help.” he shouted in the doorway and swinging his short frame across the frame of Mario’s scooter, kicked the engine into life and rode like a demon from the yard.

A week later the funerals were held, a father, a mother and eldest son dead by vendetta. The people gossiped the why and wherefore. Mario had accused the Don’s son Dagio of theft in the tavern, an argument developed, Dagio pulled a knife, swung, and Mario twisted it from him and buried it into the others thigh.

When the priest had finished the service the Don sauntered over from the café, and greeting Cappello standing guard over Vincent, he turned and addressed the boy.

“You and your family injured my own. You, but a child will soon become a man.” The Don pushed his heavy face into Vincent’s; “You would be wise to understand our ways. An eye for an eye and this sad tale is at an end”. He slapped Vincent on the shoulder and his lips smiled. But Vincent only saw the reptilian eyes and knew his father and Cappello were right to advise him to leave.

“You killed... Tanks...all my family.”

“One day you may join them, it is finished now Vincent. Eh?” the Don glared at Cappello and walked away. Old Cappello led him away through the inquisitive crowd.

“I will look after your farm and keep it for you as will my sons, we will work it and for payment we will share the profit and send it to your Aunt. Mario’s cycle will be sold. However the Don will not risk a vendetta from you when you are grown, therefore your own life could be at risk.” He shrugged, “Soon perhaps, seek a life elsewhere until the Don is gone. Your mother’s sister is in the South, go there quickly, never mention your father’s name, and use your Aunts. Your profits will help her to keep you. Here is the knife used on your family, learn to use it skilfully and return it to its owner when you are grown.”

Alarmed and sickened Vincent pushed the old mans arm away, but Cappello persisted and the boy pocketed it with loathing.

“And Vincent use this,” Cappello tapped his head.

He reached his aunt four days later; she was pleased to receive him, his uncle less so. The following night Vincent could hear them arguing down the stairs whilst he lay in their spare room. In the morning his uncle drove him and his small bag of belongings to a factory close to the harbour. He motioned Vincent to wait in the vehicle whilst he went to the factory. An hour later his uncle beckoned him to follow him, and they entered the dark building, climbing some wooden stairs to an office area. Vincent’s uncle knocked on the solid wood door and opening it ushered Vincent in.

“Your uncle told you why you are here?” asked the black suited man sitting at the desk.

“No”

“Know Don Corio’s son Dagio?”

Vincent stiffened and shuddered.

“A request from Dagio to help track you down.” The black suit leaned forward over his desk and drew a cigar from a box. “You stole from the Don.”

“They stole from me....all my family”, Vincent shouted, anger coursing through his veins, his eyes bright with venom.

The black suit leaned back and held his cigar toward his uncle, who struck a match and lit it.

“Um, your uncle has told me something of this, so I guess we’ve been expecting you.”

Vincent quickly glanced up to his uncle but the black suit rapped the table for both to attend him.

“You see Vincent, Dagio has asked for your return if we find you alive, or...” black suit paused as he drew in the smoke, “or a piece of you, if found dead.”

Vincent blanched.

“The Corio’s are customers and I would not like to offend them at this particular time, so you can see you are an embarrassment to me if not to your aunt.” Black suit smiled, “But your uncle serves me well, and you will follow his instructions, later you may return.”

Vincent stood baffled looking directly at black suit, for a fleeting moment he thought he would be killed, and then he realised this black suit must have other plans.

Black suit rose and quickly walked around to face the boy.

“What is the most precious thing which belongs to you?”

Vincent immediately thought of Tanks name tab, he had it on a piece of twine around his neck.

“I have the blade that killed my mother.”

“Let me have it,” said the man, “That’s a item held for vengeance, not a personal one.”

“Vincent give the Don your most treasured,” cried his uncle, who stepping forward grasped the twine around his nephews neck, but the Don pushed his arm away.

“Let the boy give it away himself.”

Vincent carefully withdrew the tag from around his neck and handed it to black suit.

“This and a piece of pig will save you further trouble. The knife is final proof of your demise.”

Black suit turned to the uncle; “you bought the pig and a glass jar?”

Vincent’s uncle nodded.

“And the vinegar...it must be malt not wine Huh?”

“Yes Don Vincenzo.” Vincent’s uncle bent and kissed the black suits hand and leading his nephew to the door, bowed once.

That evening they drove to a smallholding in the hills behind the town. ‘Make it deep as you can’ his uncle had said, so Vincent dug the grave until he reached the iron like strata whilst his uncle selected and cut the piece of pig for the jar of vinegar.

As they buried it in the grave his uncle looked mournfully at the mound of fresh earth “Goodbye Vincent, you are to go by the name of Vinchenzo from now. Vincent Vinchenzo. Documents are here for you, in that name you go to Genoa by ship this night...the Don has arrangements for you in Genoa. There you will learn his ways and be safe. Do not write directly to us in Sicily. Now get under that sack in the back of the van and keep your head down boy”

“I don’t understand any of this uncle.” Vincent climbed into the van rear; “I will not use any other name than my own.”

“A death wish no doubt,” his uncle laughed, “ Do as you are told, the Corio’s are not your concern now, but you are theirs so be careful.”

“And walk away as a coward” Vincent raised the sacking.

“Do as you are told for there are other paths converging here, what thought you of our Don?”

“He spoke Italian, with a slur, not our own dialect.”

“His father, the old Don, sent him to America. You of course never knew the war days; the old Don assisted the General Patton to rid us of two scourges. I also was very young but the old ones remembered those times. In Genoa you will be cared for, and perhaps you one day may get to America.”

“What will I do there?”

“You will learn your trade as best you are able, remember you are in service to our Don now.”

CHAPTER ONE

A boy facing the horrendous and conflicting emotions lowered his head as the drizzle had turned to rain, lashing down over the Cotswolds. Raulf's face glistened as the rain mingled with his tears as he watched the caskets of his Mother and Father lowered into the English soil, side by side, they would always be now.

His Uncle laid a gentle hand on his shoulder as the boy picked up a handful of earth and sprinkled it into the grave. The other mourners then followed his lead.

His mind, still numb in shock, tried to evaluate the events of the past two weeks as if in slow motion. The wedding anniversary dinner his parents had planned for weeks, then their fatal crash, a bottle of whiskey found by the police half empty by Father's seat, but Father had never liked the stuff. The sense of abject sorrow stirred within him and the Vicar's final prayer brought him back to the funeral, the finality of it all wrenched more tears from his reddened eyes. Others around him now spoke softly to his Uncle and then to him, a handshake and a commiseration quietly intoned from friends who had known and loved his parents. As he awkwardly accepted their words his mind veered as to why his parents, why not others or these people who stood around him.

But he nodded his thanks to the billowing cape that was the vicar, and his Uncle led him out of the churchyard for the drive back to Morton Manor. As they passed through the lynch gate his Uncle nodded to a short wiry tanned man who opened the car door for them. The man had arrived at the manor shortly after his Uncle had picked Raulf up from Bristol.

No words were spoken on their way to his Uncle's home, there; Mrs. Mac would shower him with kindness and order his Uncle about as if Uncle Todd were the twelve-year-old that Raulf was. He shrugged; after all she had helped bring up both his Father and Uncle when his Grandmother had died. She had certain rights in the Turpin household and nobody questioned her authority. Morton Manor meant as much to her, as to his Grandfather. Grandpa had bought it from the proceeds of his steel rolling business when he retired to care for Grandmama all those years ago. Sadly following her to the grave two or three years later. Raulf brightened a little at the thought of staying at the family home. His Father's home.

It wasn't to be for long as he was to go to boarding school, his father's solicitors and Uncle Todd had argued long and hard about the boy's future, ultimately a decision was made to send him where his education came first. Mrs. Mac had raised a storm and Raulf remembered with some comfort her ringing Scots accent voicing distinct disapproval. His uncle won the debate. 'Best thing for you Raulf your father would have approved, he talked about giving you as good an education as possible. You'll be back for every holiday they give you and Tinker will still be around for ages so you two can fool about as normal.' Raulf was not over enthusiastic about the idea but he believed he could be an extra burden to his busy uncle so he dutifully accepted the fact. Later he told Tinker who was the son of Todd's Estate Manager, a few years older and wiser than Raulf, an expert fisherman, never used a rod but would tickle the trout then snatch them up. They had become firm friends ever since his parents had first taken him to the Manor house. Tinker had been the only one Raulf had truly opened up to and it had helped him at least accept that his parents were not coming back, at least in the physical sense. 'But you never know about the spirit', Tinker had explained the beliefs of the gypsy folk, Raulf had listened, as much as his grief would allow, but his friend's words stayed in the back of his mind and gave him comfort.

Over the weeks at Morton, Raulf recovered slowly, the nights when he was alone in his bedroom were the worst, but the days spent with Tinker roaming the estate and fields beyond the house, gave him solace which renewed him both physically and mentally. His Uncle left him to his own devices for much of the time. Occasionally he was called to the study to read some legal document whilst Todd signed them as his guardian.

When the coroner's report had been published Todd had requested his nephew to bring down the toy bear he'd been given when he was four years old. Raulf went to his room and collected his old worn out bear then entered the study.

"Sit by the fire" said Todd, "The report says very little and as we expected the police had made a case for drunk driving, basically the coroner has found your father, my twin brother, responsible for both his and your mothers accident. I believe that report to be incorrect... however I intend to leave it there for the time being, for two reasons." "Father never drank spirits you know, a half bottle of wine or a glass of beer was all I ever saw him drink." Raulf sat bolt upright in the chair his face flushed.

"Yes you and I both know that however it's your safety that concerns me more Raulf."

"Is that one of your reasons Uncle? I can look after myself, I mean I can box with the best of them" Raulf rose up defiantly.

"You are twelve years old and no doubt have the best left handed punch in the business," his uncle smiled, " but hear me out. The second reason is confidential. That means I cannot tell you."

"Confidential to whom?"

"You know I work for the Prime Minister, on his staff in a special department."

Raulf nodded, he had heard his father once say his brother was a sort of policeman, but without the uniform.

"That special department is connected to the accident, I can't say more, other than the investigation is still in progress so we lie low for the present Raulf."

"Who is that swarthy man who sometimes comes here to take you to London?"

"Why?"

"I find him spooky, he never speaks and continually looks about, yet he seems to watch your every move. Shortly after the funeral he came onto the terrace when you were locked away in this study with that London policeman. He looked at me, well stared actually, and his face was grim, a haunting look, an angry taut face, yes Uncle Todd it, sort of froze me inside, is he in the force, Dad said you were a type of policeman yourself."

"This bear needs a repair job, look one of the ears is almost off, one glass eye is loose and the back has a rip, have you been playing soccer with my birthday gift young man." Uncle Todd turned the bear over in his hands. "Its off to Mrs. Mac for a clean and oil change, I'll ask her to do it tomorrow, so we'll leave it here for the moment, you can spare your torn old Teddy?"

"Yes of course, I am twelve Uncle, anyhow I believe you are evading the question."

"OK so I tried, " Todd laughed. "You know what a Minder is?"

"A guard?"

"Close enough, well since this accident I've been allocated one, just for the time being. His name is Mr.Vincent. Yes, in a way I am a little like my brother called me but I still have a uniform, an Air Force one, and officially I've been on secondment to London for some time. You see my particular job requires a military background."

Raulf nodded though he really didn't understand too much, other than his uncle was an officer in the RAF.

"Thank you, but Mr.Vincent still gives me the spooks."

"Well Raulf not for very much longer, I hear I'm to get replacement spooky person in a month and her name is Carol, I'm sure you will like her, you'll probably meet when you come back for Easter. By the way your new school has sent me a curriculum and you are due to go there after Christmas. In the meantime please keep quite about our discussion

till all of this is sorted out.” Todd handed Raulf a large brown envelope, “Well here’s the school reading matter so you best get the gist of it, lots of sport and with the three R’s in great prominence.”

So Raulf dutifully caught the train and settled into school life, and as the months passed and his mind became pre-occupied with grades and rugby, with the occasional holiday at Morton, he grew less withdrawn and happier with his life. Carol came into their lives the following spring; she seemed less like a minder to Todd, as more of a big sister to Raulf. Tinker adored her, but Tinker was nineteen and had fallen in love, or though he told Raulf. The years swept by and Raulf was sent to university, he took commerce and majored in Accounting and Business Management. Tinker took over the Estate management from his father who had retired to live by the sea, and Tinker also took over Carol, whom he married, with Raulf acting as best man. Carol resigned her career from that mysterious department and began collecting a zoo full of animals to provide eggs and milk for them all. Raulf joined a company specialising in Company audits and investigations. At the grand old age of twenty-seven he felt he had reached the zenith of his own career when he was awarded a partnership, a large office, thirty two staff and a lot more high profile investigating. He was less able to visit Morton but he had an active social life, a flat in Kensington and had kept in touch with many of his fellow students.

It was while he was in Canada closing a particularly difficult analysis, that he had a call to return to Morton urgently, his uncle had died in a shooting accident. Raulf felt his world collapse about him; an inner wound opened up as he boarded his jet. Tinker had stressed the word accident on the phone, but Tinkers words were meant not to arouse his fears, Tinkers voice had that unmistakable timbre, of caution, of wait till you get here. And what the hell was Carol doing out there now scouting the woods with a heavy automatic clasped in her hands. At least Tinker had told him that, Tinker was scared for Carol, which was obvious by his tone.

CHAPTER TWO

Raulf looked around the assembled mourners as he and Tinker led the entourage to the burial site. He saw many faces he did not recognise and a number of the villagers that he did. After the service he thanked those who attended and invited each one to join them at Morton for some refreshment. Some declined mainly the London crowd all eager to return to their concrete fortress. Todd's Department Head said a few words of respect after the service then enveloped by his minders, returned to the blue Bentley that stood by the church porch. Raulf never caught his name because the stiff blue pin striped man gave none, for he moved quickly off across the gravel as an elderly gentleman came toward them.

He took Raulf by the arm and led him a short distance away, so they could talk more freely. "Dame good man your uncle was my boy, all hush hush you know," the old man fixed Raulf with a steady eye and a wink.

"I've just spoken to Mrs. Mac, I can't come to Morton just now, some business to attend to elsewhere, thank you for the invitation, now you have your grandfathers estate to run, I'll maybe visit you all later if I may when things have settled."

With that he turned on his heel and spoke quietly to Carol before leaving the churchyard. Raulf joined Carol and Tinker, and once again thanking those who remained then reiterated his invitation to them all to join them at Morton.

It was late that same night, the three of them had been joined by Mrs. Mac who had run herself into the ground serving sandwiches and cake and plying those that wanted it, beer and wine. Now she lay back on the settee with a tissue in one hand and a teacup in the other. She sighed and straightened up.

"Twas kind of Sir Hubert to come, and all the way from Wells."

"Yes said Raulf, "But it's not so far by car Mrs. Mac."

"I think he came by bus up to Tetbury and a taxi from there," Carol interjected.

"We should have offered him a lift then," Raulf glanced at her.

"I asked but he refused, I gathered he was going on to Cheltenham for a couple of days. Well if you will excuse me Raulf I must help Mrs. Mac with the dishes."

When they were alone, Tinker crossed poured two glasses of Entre deux Mare for them both. And sat down next to friend.

"Who found Uncle Todd Tinker and why was he out shooting?"

"Well we've had a plague of rabbits this season so he was out for several evenings before the mishap. Mrs Mac rang me from the house as he was late for his supper, so I went out to the woodland where he normally went for cover. That's where I found him, the twelve bores by his side. He was nearly spent and I held his head and said I would run for help. But strangely he gripped my arm tightly. 'That you tinker.' So I said yes loudly so here could here me clearly through his trauma. 'Didn't fire, tell Raulf.... The teddy...look.' I tried to comfort him and laid him down covering him with the jacket but he sought of sighed again and lay quite. That's when I ran back to the cottage and told Carol to ring for an ambulance, which she did whilst I ran back to your uncle."

"You said on the phone Carol then went roaming with a gun."

"When I had got back to the woodland I checked your uncle, but alas he was gone, I tried not to disturb the ground around but carefully edged into the wood and found footprints, they weren't any of ours look like army or hiking boots. It was then that I thought I saw Carol heading between the west wood and the fields. The light by this time was dim but I swear she had her camouflage jacket on and a pistol to hand. The strange thing is I've never seen her with a gun, she says she hates the things. Goodness knows where she stored it all this time we've been married."

“Did you think it an accident...or suicide?” Raulf asked quietly.

“I don’t want to alarm you Raulf, but when I was checking your uncle I noticed his skull has been fractured, I sure it had, can’t see him knocking himself out then shooting himself.

“He could have fallen first and hit a rock.”

“You know the woodland, as kids we used to jump in the piles of autumn leaves there, that ground was soft as a mattress, and the blast as far as I could see was directly at his chest. There were some pellets embedded in the ground where I was kneeling, I’m no detective but you can’t blast a shotgun directly at yourself, your arms aren’t long enough.”

“Did Carol know this?”

“I told her about the head wound and the chest wound with the pellets on the ground, the ambulance people had asked her what the injuries were so they could prepare the crew and hospital.”

“I guess that’s why she went out looking for the culprits”. Raulf shrugged, “Well its best left to who’s ever job it is, but thanks Tinker for what you did, and to Carol to.”

As Raulf showered before turning in he thought over what Tinker had told him. He shrugged, what could he do but wait, besides he now had Morton to care for and organise, Tinker could manage the place quite capably. He was loath to give up the consulting and auditing together with the travel it entailed. Anyhow, there were professionals investigating this, including his uncle’s department, they had both the responsibility and resources. As he dried himself down a sudden thought hit him, one of those unexplained feelings he had whenever he delved into a Company’s books which often led to his turning up some skulduggery. Something didn’t quite match start doing your sum lad, he said to himself. What was he thinking when that sensation took him, his uncle and..and his parents, no, more precisely his father. His uncle and father were identical twins, at least they were alike to look at by the world at large. Father had not a enemy in the world, his sales job had been firm, secure as was his friendships. He never drank spirits, always caring toward Mother, Mum once complained that Father was too protective, too cautious for her safety, worried even about her taking a train ride by herself. Drunk driving, no way, especially with Mum in the car, double indemnity. Back came more memories of the coroners report, somewhere down in the middle was the impact report. Front of vehicle full impact into tree, engine and gearbox pushed to rear seat, backend of vehicle, damaged boot and rear guard, offside rear lamp enmeshed in crumpled rear wing. It struck a boy of twelve that he was how could a front-end collision result in extensive rear damage when no other vehicle was involved. He remembered through his veil of grief, but he remembered how he had clung to that solitary fact to absolve his father where others would not. He had held closeted within his very being throughout his teens and now his twenties.

Raulf slipped into a bathrobe and headed for his room and the cupboard where he kept his old things. O the top shelf lay his old bear now wrapped in a cotton bag. He took the bear out and examined the stitching carefully. Yes, the eye and the leg both showed Mrs.Mac’s exemplary sewing but the back was hastily done, cross stitches roughly done, his uncle’s handiwork perhaps, but why? And why his uncles concern for the bear as he lay in the woods his life ebbing away? Raulf picked up his nail scissors and snipped the thread through. With his fingers he felt inside the wood straw filling and pulled it out onto the bed. There came with it a tight wad of paper, which he unrolled and spread out.

‘Dear Raulf, I have written this for you in case anything happens to me, God forbid. I need to tell you my knowledge of you dear parents death. As you know, your father and I were identical twins and hard to tell apart. I believe he was incorrectly killed in my place, together with your mother. I cannot tell you more as I am under oath through my work for the government department I work for. I wish for you to carry on with the ownership and stewardship of Morton your grandfather’s home, and much loved by your father and myself.

Further we cannot bring back those we love and what has happened cannot be retrieved, however my hope is that one day you will eventually marry, find happiness and bring more little Turpins into the estate. As you are twelve now I do not know your future but in Tinker you have a true friend, one you can trust. As for me in my world of shadows I had your Father until the crash, Hubert Pomeroy my boss, and Dick Porter who is a major serving with us. Of course Mrs. Mac who has bought us all up.

Do not dwell on my passing and if I'm well and truly alive when you discover this, if you discover it, then it would be best if we discuss the whole business together.

Finally if what I contemplate has happened, and your restless spirit needs some answers then I point you to Herbert for his advice and guidance.

Your loving Uncle Todd.'

Raulf reread the letter again and again before folding it up and placing it in his wallet. He now realised who the old gentleman was at the graveyard. Maybe Carol could help find him. Perhaps he should leave well alone, no, his uncle's final comment seemed to cover those feelings he had nursed all those years. He would find out, use his expertise if necessary, to determine, to search for the what, the why, and the who. More importantly the who.

Raulf nodded to himself, he looked across to his dressing table in the corner where the photograph of his parents lay framed in a silver square, and he climbed into bed with anger etched on his face, he slept fitfully that night.

CHAPTER THREE

It was a wet Thursday afternoon, Carol had agreed after some argument to take Raulf to see Sir Hubert, who strangely enough had wanted to see them both.

"I still don't think you should be doing this Raulf," Carol glanced at him as she negotiated the bridge spanning the M4 on their way to Somerset.

"It's something I have to do Carol, you read the note from Uncle Todd."

"Well, whatever happens I do not want Tinker bought into any of this." She stared back at him.

"Can you concentrate on the road Carol please, I don't intend for either of you to get involved as you put it. This is a Turpin affair."

"Raulf we both love you and I know Sir Hubert, even though I, um, worked for him and found him to be practical, loyal, connections at every corner. He's tricky, least that what my colleagues in the office say.

"What office?"

"Now you know I cannot talk about that, same people your Uncle Todd worked for that's all you need to know."

"Hush hush then."

"I beg you pardon."

"The old gentleman at the funeral, that was Sir Hubert wasn't it, and as he was saying goodbye to me he whispered 'hush hush' that's all."

"Yes it was and yes it is, I suppose though it wasn't my area of concern."

"What was your area of concern then?" Raulf inquired with a grin. He and Tinker had often wondered what Carol's chosen career had been, before she had been courted and won by his friend.

"None of your business my lad, and don't think Tinker hasn't try to pry secrets out of me as well. You two are worst than the Spanish inquisitors. Now shush up and let me drive in peace."

"Why do you keep a gun on the estate Carol, if you've retired?"

"Raulf!"

"Tinker saw you shortly after Uncle Todd was found by him."

Carol quickly glanced at him, she knew she couldn't lie, they had become like sister and brother in the years after her marriage, so she decided to say just a little of the truth.

"Sir Hubert."

"Sir Hubert what?"

"He suggested just before he retired, that I should carry the thing when I moved to Morton on a permanent basis."

"They suspected my parents accident was not an accident."

"He suspected it was not. He never liked coincidences said it wasn't natural. I guess he knew your Dad never drank spirits, they had met of course when he came to Morton to stay with Todd."

"Why was the case never pursued Carol?"

She looked slightly dismayed, but said nothing, and they remained silent until they reached Wells and Partridge Cottage.

Sir Hubert greeted them enthusiastically, Carol offered to help Lady Jenny with the scones instead whilst the men talked.

"Quite right Carol official secrets and all that, can't have any hush hush getting about can we, Uncle Tim would not like at all."

"Timothy Gaunt was your replacement and should be given some loyalty and respect." An indignant Carol strolled after Lady Jenny giving her host a withering glance.

Sir Hubert motioned Raulf into his study and bade him sit down. He then crossed over to

and old oak filing cabinet unlocked it and withdrew a purple file, then he locked it again. He stood for a moment gazing at Raulf, then held out his hand, at which Raulf stood up and shook it. Sir Hubert was at first taken aback.

"No lad, the note from Todd if you please."

Raulf opened his wallet and handed it over. Sir Hubert sat at his desk and read it, murmuring occasionally to himself until he had finished.

"Bad habit that but then it's a sign of the aged."

"Pardon Sir?"

"Mumbling as I read, I know you have been successful in your career so far, that interests me, I mean the work you do amongst the great Corporations. You ever been bribed to say mum?"

"Once or twice Sir" said Raulf defensively.

"And?"

"I told them every man had a price, mine was freedom from a bad conscience."

"Ha, and how much were they offering?"

"In one case two hundred thousand dollars US, in the others only marginally smaller."

"Lot of money."

"They were likely to make far more by their thieving. Which is what manipulating the books is."

"Stealing from the shareholders?"

"And from corporate bodies keen to take them over."

"So you work for those corporate bodies interested in buying out other companies?"

Raulf nodded, Sir Hubert opened his file.

"Raulf I asked these questions for a reason, I need your extemporaneous silence appertaining to these matters in this file, in your line of business there is an obvious parallel to that which was my own business. Well, the Governments actually. In our business we sign a little form to say we shall say nothing to the outer world. It's all to be kept away from the people who ultimately pay us, Mr. and Mrs. Taxpayer."

"You have my word that this conversation is confidential." Raulf said quickly.

"And totally private to we two only, not to Carol or Tinker or Mrs. Mac."

Raulf nodded his agreement.

"Your Uncle would not have spoken to you about his position?"

"Only that he was a Wing Commander in the RAF on secondment to a department in London, I seem to remember him telling me he was a type of policeman when I was young. But I never asked him again as he seemed less inclined for further explanation."

"Quite right, he did in fact work for me in a department that had its focus on various organisations outside of this country. Analysts would be a closer interpretation of our work. Lots of travel and good ears to boot, shadows whilst the opposition sought out our sister departments in the world of espionage. Ours was a world of words, gossip, innuendo's, truths and half-truths, welded together to make predictions for our political masters needs. Your parents' death in that vile crash, was a counter blow from an organisation we had been hunting. That much I am sure though Saint Timothy, beloved by our present PM, seemed not to see a connection. In short he asked the 'M' department to wrap up the investigation as having no particular significance for us. The accident was just before I retired, another coincidence perhaps."

"Carol tells me you don't like coincidences, therefore your last words signify some internal alien influence in this matter."

"Meaning young Raulf?"

"What's that expression people use, a ferret or a mole in the woodwork."

"Um, yes my boy your years in commerce have not been wasted, tell me do you have any languages?"

"French, a little German and some Russian".

"Even better."

"May I ask Sir what position you hold currently?"

"Retired to grass with a knighthood and pension."

Raulf looked away to the Filing cabinet.

"Yes Raulf well you see in my business, like yours, you are often called upon for, lets say, a little consultancy. Depends of course whose in power at the time, civil servants we might be but those above have their favourites. I hope that I have answered your questioning mind, alas there is very little any of us can do now, the Coroners finding is legally binding on us all, and Saint Timothy has put the jolly boot into any further debate."

"Thank you Sir Hubert for being so frank," Raulf rose from his chair as a knock on the door signalled the entry of Lady Jenny.

"Finished yet dear?" she asked through the door.

"Not quite but do bring in the tea dear and young Carol with it please."

Raulf looked surprised at the 'not quite'.

"What do you aim to do now?" Sir Hubert cleared his desk on one side ready for the tea tray.

"Some legal arrangements for Morton, and back to the grindstone shortly after. I'm due to fly to the States soon for another investigation. Canada's being written up by my team so I've no need to go back."

Carol entered the room with the tray of tea and a plate of cakes. Sir Hubert rose and smiled.

"Carol that Tinker fellow of yours has really domesticated you, and you really look the part."

Carol totally ignored him and sat beside Raulf.

"And may I ask what you have told our young friend here?" Sir Hubert was not at least put off by her feigned indifference.

"I told Raulf you were a very tricky customer, and I wonder whether you have been up to any sleight of hand whilst I've been in the kitchen boiling, the water I might add."

Sir Hubert laughed in sheer delight; it was then obvious to Raulf that these two had more than a mere business relationship. He had initially felt Carol was being rude and was affronted by it, then he saw in each of their eyes a glint of the tease. He looked at them both closely.

"Well Raulf don't stare so." Carol poured the tea, two sugars for Sir Hubert; he bent forward and kissed her on her cheek.

"You'll have some explaining to do to Tinker Sir Hubert," Raulf was a little taken aback by it all.

"My own niece, you see I have a perfect explanation."

Carol nodded at Raulf and smiled. Her Aunt jostled into the room with a pot of milk, which she placed on the tray, then turned to Raulf.

"Don't let these two bother you, Hubert, you had a message from Lord Jarman whilst you've been in conference with Raulf" she handed a note to her husband and walked back to the kitchen.

"Uncle Bert what are you up to?" Carol was immediately alert.

"Sit down please Carol and join Raulf and I for just a moment. By the way was Morton searched when Todd was killed?"

"The police consider it an accident Uncle."

"Tinker doesn't." and Raulf explained Tinkers observation to them both.

"Tinker must be left out of this, he is in no danger but I fear you are Raulf," This time Sir Hubert's eyes betrayed his concern as he looked severely at them both. He slapped the file in front of him. "This file is Todd's, he sent it up here a week before his death, this is what they would have been looking for. Did Saint Timothy send anyone to look?"

"No," said Carol "otherwise Mrs. Mac would have said something to me."

"Then these papers in the file are all copies, He must have spent a quite hour or so in the print room and left the originals in the registry."

"And?" Carol leaned forward in her chair.

"And I want young Raulf's help to clear this whole mess up."

"No Uncle Bert, Raulf is a civilian, he has his own business, and Morton to think about."

She turned to Raulf; "You haven't agreed have you?"

Raulf shook his head, events were shaping up fast and they both seemed to know far more than he did. Ten minutes ago he would have been prepared to leave Sir Hubert with at least some truthful facts ringing in his ears.

"I have a proposition for both you and Raulf, I can assure you that it has the authority of the most high. Instigated not by myself alone but by a certain ex officer in the Royal Air Force, an officer with no name but potentially good prospects, exceptional I would say. Served under Todd's stewardship, became friends, and I understand had remained so until his death. This personage wants the matter resolved."

"The PM, if it is he, must surely go through the proper channels." Raulf asked.

"It is not he, our personage is not political, and please let me continue. So I have as much authority as I need. I, we, cannot be touched that much has been made clear to me. When I met Raulf at the funeral I felt a discomfort about him, an aura of grief and perhaps anger. This personage feels the same; Todd's investigation is not to be. An accident so the police have been told to report. Now why would Tinker see the evidence when others did not? Who watched the ground as the ambulance men churned up the leaves as they carted poor Todd away? Even you Carol did not see what Tinker had, yet you are trained in observation. Did you go back to the area after your flurry into the woods and to the road beyond?"

"I saw tread marks on the verge, four wheeled drive, when I returned back to the woods I traced some broken branches which could have been made by a trespasser or indeed by a poacher. When I had reached the spot where Todd had died the men were already there, milling around."

"Was Todd alive?"

"They thought he could be in a torpor as they said there was a slight pulse, they wrapped him up and stretchered him up to the ambulance. I was told by the local police to move from the scene so they could examine it."

"My personage has received a copy of the relevant police report but not Tinkers, at least not until you had rung me when Tinker told you about the pellets in the ground."

"So you contacted him and told him my Tinkers story and forced an investigation by you to be authorised?" Carol face had flushed and Raulf could hear anger in the sharpness of her voice.

"No, my dear I recounted the pellets story and was commanded to discretely investigate Todd's file and subsequent death."

"What do you wish us to do?" Raulf asked.

"I want you to take a trip for me, see an old friend in a foreign country, he knows where to get some remaining pieces of the jigsaw, that will give the... "

"The who, the why, and the what" Raulf finished the sentence for they were his words as well.

"Uncle Bert, not Raulf, please for our sake, the sake of Morton." Carol cried out.

"He is entirely suitable, however I do have the right to ask Vincent to accompany him if you agree."

Carol seemed nonplussed she hesitated.

"There is danger for Raulf if you want Vincent to accompany him."

"Not so, I know how fond you are of Raulf so only the best for him. He will visit this place speak to the man, and return with the pieces locked into his brain. A courier of information, know one will know who he is and why he is there, only one single man, who is safe to my

knowledge. But you have a foreboding, doubts because we both know Raulf is not a trained courier. But he is already trained, and skilful according to his mentors. I'm sorry Raulf, but I had you checked up."

"You will send Vincent with him, and not to leave him for one moment?"

"All the way."

"And your personage, your shadow man, has the pull to ask the cousins for Vincent?"

"If need be, but I would prefer to use my own connections first, after all Vincent is my little orphan. I believe Raulf may have already met him, Raulf?"

Raulf stirred his memory cells until a sudden picture of a stern, yet sorrowful face of the little tanned man surfaced.

"Yes I remember Mr. Vincent, he was my uncle's minder at the time of my parents funeral. I thought him to be Uncle's sergeant."

Sir Hubert smiled, or perhaps he grimaced, somehow there was some relaxation from Carol, at the mention of Mr. Vincent's name.

"His Christian name is Vincent, his surname is Vinchezio."

"I will remember," said Raulf "I will do as you ask, but I must contact the office to get leave of absence."

"Carol?" Her uncle looked at her sharply.

"I agree, but you didn't bring me in here entirely to play counsel for Raulf, what have you got up that sleeve you crafty magician?"

"That's for you and I to know, and Vincent when he arrives, I'll ring you when its arranged, in the meantime tell Tinker your old uncle needs you for a week or so. Raulf, you have at least a week or so to settle affairs with the solicitor on Todd's will and the Morton Estate.

We'll fix everything up tickets, reasons for going, visa's all that sort of thing."

Carol interrupted him quickly.

"You haven't told us where he is to go Uncle Bert?"

"Well, Raulf I'd brush up my Russian if I was you."

CHAPTER FOUR

“So why all the mystery then Raulf?” Tinker asked as he and his friend lay on the riverbank. Tinker had just crossed over the bridge from the barley field that he’d been checking.

“Can’t say other than it’s to do with my parents accident.”

“Well be careful, in his way Carols uncle is as tricky as your trout, least ways that’s what she’s always said. It’s very rare for her to visit them in Wells and now she’s driven back up there again, not a week since you both went.”

“Think she’s helping the old chap out, with his filing or what not.”

“Carol asked me to move in with Mrs. Mac whilst you are away, is that all right with you?”

“Quite, she needs company Tinker, you and Carol can have Uncle Todd’s room. Mrs. Mac has hinted that she should retire, but I had hoped she would feel Morton was her home as much as ours.”

“What ever happened to that Sheila Graham at Uni you used to bring to Morton?”

Raulf smiled, “Gee that was yonks ago Tinker, I still see her occasionally in London when I’m there, she’s a stockbroker now, she’s a mine of information on some of the businesses I have to deal with, as well as being rather attractive. That my dear Tinker is all I’m going to tell you.”

Their conversation drifted on for some time, stirring memories of Morton as it was in their younger years, until the evening light began to fade, then they heard Carol’s car arriving back at the house.

“I guess you’ll be away shortly Raulf, Carol’s come straight to the house so she obviously has your marching orders from Uncle Bert.”

“Yes I suppose so, can’t say I’m thrilled at the prospect of leaving here, could have at least helped bring in the barley with you.” Raulf looked through the gathering dusk at the field beyond. Appraising what was his now, then shaking his head, he turned and followed Tinker up to the house.

Carols and Tinkers small Ford, was parked in front of the steps, behind it was a Honda Accord. As they both hurried up the wide gravel path Tinker turned to his companion.

“I tell you Raulf I have a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach about this little adventure of yours.”

“You mean your wife’s uncles venture.”

“My gut feeling is that Carol will be away as well and not filing either.”

“It’s a simple task her uncle has given me Tinker, just a quick trip out of the country and back again, a week at the most if not sooner.”

“Its not only you I’m worried about, I bet that other car behind ours is Vincent’s.”

“Wrong again Tinker,” Raulf smiled as they drew alongside the vehicle, “It belongs to Mr. Hertz according to that sticker on the screen.”

Carol was waiting for them in the lounge room, in the corner looking out the window was Tinkers gut feeling. Vincent’s features had if anything become more prune like, small and greying and wrinkled, but still those same ebony bright glinting eyes. Raulf stepped forward and shook his hand quickly.

“I think I always make you scared Mr. Raulf. I sorry I do that, but it is me.” Vincent gave a small Italian shrug as way of an apology.

“True Vincent, but then I was twelve at the funeral and cautious of the world at large.”

“Invading your grief, I understand, strangers are potential enemies even with their compassionate thoughts.”

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow, if you could place me for tonight I would be pleased, tonight you must pack a small suitcase and Carol wishes to speak with us both, but Tinker is ever at your side and it is good to see the tamer of trout again.” He stepped over to Tinker and shook hands

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