
FRANK AINSLIE'S

THE THIRD SECRET

An unforgettable journey into the unknown



THE THIRD SECRET

All Rights Reserved © 2000 by Frank Ainslie

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the author.

Published in electronic book format by Bookbooters.com

For information and sales:

Bookbooters.com
6 Alan Drive
Weatogue, CT 06089
U.S.A.

www.bookbooters.com

**THIS NOVEL IS DEDICATED TO AN
IRISH COLLEEN THAT I WILL ALWAYS
LOVE**

*"Goodnight, Ma
It's time to dream
I'll see you in the morning
when the sun comes up"*

MARGARET MARY AINSLIE
Born Dublin, Eire 1905 - Died Brisbane, Australia 1995

WARNING

Are you willing to risk all to learn THE THIRD SECRET? Be warned that if you are, you will be embarking on a dangerous course. Only if you dare greatly should you proceed for you will travel beyond the boundaries imposed on you by your senses into a dimension where illusion and reality are one, a world beyond ours. The places you will pass through are certainly not for the faint of heart, those timid souls that have no wish to progress beyond the commonplace.

Should you decide to make this journey, somewhere along the way you will begin to ask yourself what is imaginary and what is not? What can and cannot be? In the final analysis it is for you alone to decide. At the end of this odyssey, you need remember only one thing! Life itself is a mystery and therefore:

“ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE UNDER HEAVEN!”

PROLOGUE

“Moments in Time”

PORTUGAL
13th October, 1917

THE CROWD WAS restless. The rain, which had been falling steadily all morning, had finally stopped, leaving nearly three inches of water on the ground where the people stood. The two boys, however, although soaking wet, were oblivious to the elements. “What’s happening? What’s happening?” one of them implored insistently,

His friend responded patiently, “Nothing yet, Sancho! Don’t worry! I’ll let you know when something does!”

Sancho was appeased for the moment but he was finding it difficult to control his excitement. If only he had eyes to see for himself, he thought. Still, he had Manuel and that was something.

Sancho was blind. He had been that way for five of his twelve years. “What price a slate from the church roof dislodging and falling at the very moment he should be walking beneath,” someone had commented at the time. “Fate can be so unkind,” someone else had remarked. Sancho had been in a coma for seven days before he finally regained consciousness. However, his eyes refused to wake. “Blind, I’m afraid!” the doctor had remarked to his mother. “He may get his sight back! It’s hard to say for sure in such cases.”

That was all of five years ago and Sancho had long since learned to cope with a world in which he could no longer see.

Sancho and his mother, Maria Couceiro, a widow, survived mainly on the charity of others. She washed and mended clothes and any other servile work that the villagers could afford to give her. Maria's husband, a tall handsome lad, had died ten years before of typhus and both Sancho and she were quite alone now. That is, except for Manuel Braga, a neighbour's son. Manuel and Sancho were inseparable friends and Maria Couceiro was so grateful for that. Sancho with his black curly hair and cherubic face and Manuel with his straight dark brown hair and finely honed features were closer than brothers. Manuel, the older of the two by just three weeks, was also the taller and slight of build whilst Sancho was stocky and robust. Maria Couceiro had come to look on Manuel as her second son because he spent so much time in her home. Many an evening they all sat together discussing different things, and Manuel often ate there and stayed over night. Manuel's mother never objected. "One less mouth to feed!" she would remark to her husband. Her husband always responded with a nod, for he was a man of few words and had long since learned not to argue with his wife. She was right enough though, he had to admit on reflection. With seven children and a wife, "one less mouth to feed" was a powerful argument.

Now, at this moment in time, Sancho and Manuel were standing together amidst a vast crowd of people that were impatient. Folk had come from all around to witness something extraordinary and they were full of expectation. They wanted something to happen, something miraculous, something not of this world, and yet there was an undercurrent of fear present also. That innate fear that humans have of anything that is supernatural. Sancho himself felt both elated and apprehensive, elated that something wonderful might happen, but

apprehensive that something terrifying could also occur. Those around him who had come to witness a miracle also shared his ambivalence.

The story itself was a strange one. Yet the three shepherd children telling it were totally convinced that they had really witnessed a visitation on May 13th of that year. Sancho's thoughts turned to the children concerned, Lucia dos Santos and her cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, the children of Fatima as they were now known. They claimed that the visitation was from a woman that identified herself as the Lady of the Rosary. According to the three children, the Lady instructed them to return on the thirteenth day of each following month to the same spot. She also said that she had an important message for all mankind. This would be revealed to the children on the 13th of October when the visitations would end. At that time God would work a great miracle proving her authenticity.

Of course, at first, everyone had laughed at the childrens' foolishness, but no one was laughing now, some five months later. People had flocked from around the country to gather together in the depression at Cova da Iria, near the hamlet where the children lived. More than 70,000 people had come to witness the miracle that the Lady had promised the children would occur this very day. Sancho, like the rest, now waited expectantly for the miracle to take place.

"What's happening now?"

Manuel answered softly, "Nothing yet! The three children are standing waiting. That's all!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Sancho disappointingly and he lapsed into silence. It wasn't long before Manuel's voice whispered. "Lucia is walking forward on her own!" The excitement in his voice rising as he spoke.

“Yes, yes!” Sancho questioned feverishly.

A long pause occurred before Manuel continued his narrative, “She’s kneeling down! She seems...She seems to be praying...” Manuel was more than two hundred yards away from Lucia and could only guess from the way the girl held her hands together in front of her that this was, in fact, what she was doing. The distance itself was too great for any words she may be saying to carry.

“What’s she doing now?”

“Just kneeling on the ground praying, but I cannot see any Lady with her.”

The doubt in Manuel’s voice was apparent to Sancho and Manuel was not alone in this. Misgivings were soon being echoed by some sections of the crowd. Sancho with an acute sense of hearing borne of his years in the dark caught some of the remarks. “I told you nothing would happen!” one sceptic said. They’re fakes!” someone else growled cynically. “I told you so!” a triumphal doubter somewhere else in the throng exclaimed contemptuously. Sancho’s faith began to falter. What if the children were making it all up? What if there were no Lady - no miracle.

“Look at the sun!” someone suddenly yelled out. Others took up the call. “Look at the sun!”

Manuel cast his eyes skyward and saw that the sun had broken through the cloud cover. He gasped in amazement at the yellow orb, which was rotating wildly. It appeared to be shooting off coloured rays and its rim was like a rainbow. It suddenly stopped spinning and went on a merry dance in and out of the clouds stopping to spin every now and again on its erratic journey through the sky. Finally it stopped altogether

and began to pulsate. It was only then that Manuel became conscious of the persistent voice in his ear.

What's happening? What's happening with the sun?" Sancho demanded to know as he pulled at Manuel's sleeve, something he had done so often before. Manuel, however, was tongue tied for the moment.

"What's happening, Manuel?" Sancho kept repeating earnestly.

"The sun!" Manuel managed to stammer out at last. "The sun was spinning!" then he could speak no more.

"Spinning!" Sancho said excitedly. "What do you mean, the sun was spinning?"

Manuel now became completely panic stricken as the sun began to hurtle towards the place where they stood, becoming hotter and brighter as it did so. Like others around him, he threw himself to the ground and huddled there afraid. Sancho being blind could not see the danger and therefore stood his ground. His face was turned up to the sky where he knew the sun to be and wondered what had disturbed Manuel so. What did Manuel mean when he said the sun was spinning? He became aware of the heat on his face and the screams that echoed around him. It was then that Sancho became truly afraid. He too went to earth and curled up there in a ball.

Manuel at last looked up and saw that the sun had returned to its normal position. Now that the threat was past Manuel felt ashamed that he had completely forgotten about his blind friend in the interest of self-preservation. Yet, the sun had been spinning towards them, or so it seemed, and Manuel thought his end had come. Now the sun was high again in the sky as if nothing had happened. Had he imagined it all but then many others in the crowd had seen the same thing. It was then

that a strong wind began to howl through the depression. Funny though, he recalled later, the trees did not bend. The wind blew itself away as quickly as it started and all was quite again. Looking around he saw that the ground, wet a short while before, was now baked mud. He also noted with amazement that his clothes had completely dried out

Pulling himself to his feet, Manuel saw Sancho lying on the ground with his face buried in his hands.

“Are you all right? Sancho?”

“My face is burning! My face is burning!” Sancho sobbed back with the tears flowing down his face. But even before Manuel could console him, the pain was no more and Sancho took his hands from his face.

Manuel asked him again, “Are you all right Sancho? What is wrong?” Then Manuel drew back in astonishment as he looked into Sancho’s eyes and saw acknowledgement there. Sancho could see him!

“I can see!” Sancho whispered. Then he yelled in exhortation as he realised the enormity of what had happened. “I can see! He hollered over and over again. Those people that were around him from the village and knew of Maria Couceiro’s blind son shouted out, “A miracle! A miracle!” and the word spread quickly. A multitude started to surround Sancho but he no longer heard them. His heart was singing and his love of God overwhelming. He rose to his knees and started to recite the Lord’s Prayer and others joined in. Presently the three girls that had been the focus of the crowd’s attention earlier joined them. “I can see!” Sancho excitedly exclaimed to Lucia dos Santos when he rose again. “God has given me back my eyes!”

Lucia's big brown eyes met his moist gaze as she responded, "God has given me something also!"

"What's that?" Sancho asked awed by the moment and the gratitude that was in his heart.

"Three messages for all man kind" she replied softly.

"What are they?" Sancho asked eagerly.

She looked at the boy before her and smiled knowingly.

"You will know two of them soon enough!" she said.

"The third is a secret!"

She paused for a moment and then added, with horror in her eyes, "When it is revealed, mankind will surely tremble!"

MUNICH, GERMANY

19th SEPTEMBER, 1931

HE LOOKED AT her standing in the centre of the room wearing just her bra and panties and wondered how he could placate this twenty-three year old virago. She was certainly attractive enough with her dark brown hair and pleasant face, and a firm body well suited for his purposes. This once gentle, warm, affectionate girl, however, had slowly but surely turned into a shrew. Her vivacious and self-possessed nature, which had first attracted him, was now just a memory. Perhaps that was the reason another woman had recently caught his fancy. Whatever, his niece was becoming more and more of a problem. Martin was right! He would have to end this relationship once and for all. For now though, he needed to pacify her if he were to get some peace.

She, for her part, was determined to make her position plain. Her eyes were defiant as they played over the naked man

standing a few feet away. She would have been the first to admit that her uncle was not an imposing figure. He was of average height and, aside from the bluest of eyes and a short, rather comical moustache, he would never stand out in a crowd. In the sexual department he was nothing to shout about either. However, she, Geli Raubal, was quite besotted with him. For sheer magnetism, no one, she felt, could match him. That's why she had become his devoted plaything, until now, that is! But that would end if he did not listen to her.

She tried again, the anger evident as she screamed at him, "How come you can be seen out with her and not with me?"

"Leibling" he murmured demurely. "Come over here! Let us talk about this together."

But she was quite beside herself with anger and refused to concede. "Why should I!" she stormed. "You only want me for one thing!" She paused only briefly wondering whether she dare say it but her anger overrode her prudence. "What if I were to tell my mother what you've been doing to me? What then?"

"Leibling, Leibling!" he repeated trying to soothe her whilst his own uneasiness bubbled to the surface. What if his sister did find out what he had been up to with her daughter? She could make it difficult for him in many ways at this very important period of his life. The German people were debauched by nature, but they demanded of their political leaders, at the very least, a facade of respectability. It could be the end of his political aspirations if he were involved in a scandal at this particular time. He decided that he would have to mollify her or there could be serious repercussions.

"Look, you know that if I could be seen in public with you, I would, but you are my niece after all and people talk!"

“Oh, What would they say exactly? There he goes! Did you know he’s fucking his niece?”

The man’s anger was now barely under control as he turned around and took his clothes from the chair where they had been neatly placed an hour before. She was wasting his time. He was very fond of her in his own way, but she was becoming a nuisance and a dangerous nuisance at that. It had been a foolish affair to begin with. Now it must end.

With his back turned to her, she played her trump card. “Anyway, you’ll have to marry me now! I’ve had your baby!”

For a moment her words failed to register. When they did, he choked “What!” dropping his clothes with the shock.

“I’ve had your baby!” she repeated.

“Don’t be so foolish!” he replied smiling now at her little joke as he bent down and picked up his clothes.

“So you don’t believe me!” she retorted. “Where do you think I’ve been these last few months?”

He looked concerned as he straightened up “Where?”

“Having your baby, of course!”

All his plans, all his dreams seemed to be dissolving into nothing as her words whirled around in his brain. How could this be? How would this look? An incestuous relationship between him and his niece. This would have to be concealed. She must understand that, he concluded. But she wasn’t in any mood to listen.

“If you don’t marry me now, I’ll expose you for what you are!”

“Are you trying to blackmail me?” he asked tensely.

“Call it what you will! I want what is due to me!”

Despite his past feelings for her, she had to be silenced now. After all it was he that was important, not her. His jacket

was still stretched over the back of the chair and he quickly reached into the inside pocket where the small pistol lay. Before she had time to comprehend what was happening, he had raised it and fired from eight feet away straight into her chest. A surprised look came over her face as the realisation sank into her brain that her uncle had shot her. But he loved her, didn't he? Then the ground seemed to reach up and her face bounced off the linoleum floor. She felt nothing however because she was already dead. There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs outside the apartment and Emil Maurice, his chauffeur burst in.

"What happened?" Emil cried out. "Are you hurt?"

The sight of his employer standing there stark naked with a smoking gun in his hand did not seem to faze Emil at all. His gaze focused at once on the girl lying in a pool of blood on the floor.

"She shot herself!" the man exhorted. "She shot herself!"

Who was he to say differently, Emil decided as he gazed at her semi-clad body. Anyway, one way or the other, no one in Germany would dare accuse his employer of shooting the girl. Emil suggested, rather boldly, he thought later, "You should dress, Sir! The police will be here shortly!"

"The police! Have you called the police?"

"No, sir, but someone is bound to have heard the shot and the police should be called!" Maurice hesitated, "Shouldn't they?" he asked somewhat less certain of himself now.

"Yes, but I need to make a phone call first. With that the man went across to a side desk where a telephone lay. He rang someone and spoke for a minute or so, then hung up.

"That's settled then! Don't worry about the police! The matter is being taken care of!"

“Right! Sir!” Emil said. “But shouldn’t we remove her from your flat, sir?”

“No!” The other man replied impatiently, “Everything is in hand! I want you to go back to the office now!”

“What about you, sir?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll walk back!”

“Walk back, sir?” Emil repeated shocked at the suggestion and almost protested but thought better of it. “Very good sir!” he acknowledged and left.

The man then hurriedly dressed himself and followed. Making his way back to his office on foot, he thought over the events that had transpired only minutes before. It was odd but he felt strangely elated by her death. By killing her, he had pried loose the hold she had over him. The spell she had cast was no more and neither was she. Somehow, the very thought that he had snuffed out her life as easily as stamping on a bug excited him. It recalled to his mind his past experiences in the Great War when his bullets had found their mark on the enemy. That sense of power that killing bestows stimulated his warped mind and he revelled in it. Did murderers feel this same exaltation when they took a life? Is that what made them kill, he wondered.

Then he began to think about what she had said. A child but was that possible? Martin Bormann would be the man he would entrust to establish this. Martin could be relied on completely as he had been in the past. If a child did exist, then, and only then, would its fate be decided. As for his recently deceased niece, he would, of course, feign remorse over her death. After all she was family and it was expected of him.

Caught up in his thoughts, he made his way through side alleys and along thoroughfares that were filling with people on

their way to work. It was a sunny morning and people were about their business. Two young men however gave the man a second glance as he passed them. "That's Adolf Hitler, I tell you!" the dark haired man said.

His fair-haired companion retorted, "Sure it is! And what would Hitler be doing out walking, and on his own at that. Besides, Hitler's bigger than that, isn't he?"

"I saw him speak at a rally last year. He did look a tall man."

"You see! There you go! Besides, that man was grinning like a fool. I can't see Hitler walking around at this time in the morning behaving in that way."

The other man laughed and the matter was quickly forgotten as Klaus started to jog ahead. Turning he called back, "Com'on, Hans! I'll race you to the bus stop."

DACHAU, GERMANY

6th SEPTEMBER, 1944

STEINER INSTINCTIVELY RECOILED away as blood and brain tissue erupted from the young woman's head. His sharp reflexes enabled him to evade most of the gore, but his reactions were not quite quick enough to avoid some brain matter that flecked his face and jacket. The droplets that landed on his lips caused the bile to well in him as he tasted the bitch and smelt her essence in his nostrils. A deathly pallor came over his face as he fought hard to control his revulsion.

The woman, who moments before had been standing with her back turned to and below him, had spun with the impact of the bullet as she crumpled to the clay bottom of the freshly dug

trench. Blood spraying from the woman's head washed down her nakedness as she lay there, and the rain, falling in a fine drizzle, diffused the red rivers that were flowing over her cooling cadaver. Her stained, lifeless body would soon meld with the other corpses already lying in the mass grave, and those would be victims that were about to join them. Fifty or so men and women, old and young, had originally clustered together in the line of death. Now, only ten were left.

"Are you all right, sir?" the Schutzstaffel Hauptsturmfuehrer next to him asked as the commandant wiped his face and jacket with a handkerchief.

"Yah!" he replied tersely striving to control his emotions. The filthy little Jewess could not even die decently, his pernicious mind concluded. She must have had a soft skull, he thought, for her head to explode that way. Cursing himself for his carelessness, he raised his pistol once more and took careful aim at the next person in line, a man. As the pistol recoiled in his hand, he noted with satisfaction the man's skull exploding forward as the bullet smashed through the thin bone above the nape. That was more like it. He shot two more to satisfy himself that his technique was not flawed and then left it to the Hauptsturmfuehrer to finish the job.

The Hauptsturmfuehrer watched the commandant stride purposefully away and felt relief at his departure. Commandant Steiner, the Hauptsturmuehrer had decided long ago, was an extremely unpleasant man to be around, and it wasn't altogether to do with his rank and the power such brought. Nor had it to do with the commandant's alacrity when it came to disposing of Jews for they were only vermin anyway. No, it was something more. The commandant's eyes seemed to pierce one's soul and the Hauptsturmfuehrer found him unnerving.

Steiner, oblivious of his subordinate's aversion to him, walked out of the compound set aside for exterminations and strode along the rain soaked road to his office set in the block house positioned at the far end of the camp. Caged behind high wire fences on either side of the road, striped clad inmates stared blankly out at the handsome young Waffen-SS commandant as he strode past, his arrogant swagger marking him as an elite member of the master race. An inch under six feet, he had closely cropped fair hair, a high cheek boned face, and a lithe athletic body. He was the embodiment of the archetypal German; the quintessential Aryan superman that Hitler had envisaged would inhabit his thousand years Reich.

Steiner, for his part, gave the emaciated, ragged, dirty internees only a perfunctory glance as nothing more was warranted for such lowlife, this was his kingdom where he alone ruled. Their fate was his to mete out when it suited him to do so. No one questioned his right. Indeed, no one in the camp could! By his very nature, he was impervious to the human suffering evident in the inmates' faces. To him they merely represented a disease that had to be eradicated in the name of the Third Reich. Besides, Adolf Hitler himself had deprived all Jews of German citizenship in 1935 under the Reichsbürgergesetz (Law of the Reich Citizen) Act. They were now merely subjects of the state so who were they to complain. They weren't all Judea in his camp, of course, but the vast majority were. To Steiner they represented a disposal problem, no more than that. For him, the "final solution" only had one drawback - it could not be accomplished quickly enough. There were quotas to meet and he could not afford to fall behind for the sake of his career. However, this never-ending problem for

once did not occupy his thoughts as he walked along the damp road. He had other things on his mind.

To run a death camp was not what Sturmbannfuehrer Wolfgang Steiner had visualized in 1936 when he joined the Schutz taffel (Protective Echelon) or SS as it was known. When he was transferred to the Totenkopfverbaende (Death's-Head Battalion) of the Waffen-SS who were responsible for administering concentration camps, he was not pleased. However, he soon found that running a concentration camp did have certain advantages. Apart from ensuring him a continuation of life (the Russian Front, he had found, was not to be recommended), it had proved most lucrative. The gold extracted from teeth after they had been ripped from the mouths of corpses, or inmates while they were still alive, the sale of personal effects, the bribes the internees would gullibly offer to relieve their individual suffering had all enabled him to enhance his income. Of course, some profits had to be sent to the Deutsches Bank as part of the Nazi program, but Steiner had managed to divert sufficient to suit his own purposes. He had been prudent enough to convert his Deutsche marks into gold however. He knew that paper money issued by the Nazis would be useless when the Third Reich fell, as he knew it surely would. The Allies had already obtained a firm foothold in Europe and were inexorably advancing on Germany from the west whilst the Russians were gobbling up territory in the east. Steiner was not prepared to wait for the inevitable and had made his plans accordingly.

Entering his office, he threw himself into his leather office chair and plucked the telephone from its perch on his desk. Impatiently, he waited until a flustered operator answered. "Doctor Wanke!" Steiner growled, annoyed at the operator's

slow response. Perhaps a stint of crematorium duty might give the man quicker reflexes. Doctor Wanke's hesitant voice on the other end of the line concentrated Steiner's attention.

"Herr Doctor, the matter we discussed in my office last week. I believe it's time to proceed," Steiner said.

"As you wish, sir! the man at the other end acknowledged. "When exactly?"

"Make the arrangements for Friday evening at ten o'clock. See to it that only you are in attendance. Should anyone else learn of this, you know the consequences, Doctor."

"Until Friday then, sir," the doctor replied.

"Good! Friday it is then," Steiner said and replaced the receiver.

Doctor Wanke hung up at the other end and pondered for a while. Although he had been waiting for the call, when it came, he was full of apprehension. The threat Steiner had made was real enough. He knew full well the consequences if he divulged Friday's arrangements. Steiner's brutality had been witnessed by him on many occasions. Not that it bothered him as long as Steiner's wrath was aimed at someone other than he. Then again he had no reason to cross Steiner who was paying him well enough to keep his mouth closed. Mind you, blackmail had briefly crossed his mind but he had dismissed that thought as soon as it entered his head. Steiner was not the sort of man one blackmailed if one wanted to continue living.

Steiner, for his part, sat staring out his office window for a moment before getting up and walking over to the wall mirror. He removed his black peaked hat with its death skull cap badge and silver tassel and tossed it on his desk. Sleeking his fair hair back with his hands he looked at his reflection. Staring back at him was the youngest Sturmbannfuhrer in the

Nazi regime. In fact he was twenty-two years old this very day. Satisfied with what he saw, he returned to his chair. Once again he picked up the telephone and called his subaltern.

“Have the priest, Tsana, brought to my office immediately!”

The officer at the other end acknowledged his order and Steiner replaced the receiver and leaned back in his chair. Putting his feet up on the corner of his desk, he lit a cigarette, and thoughtfully pulled on it while he gazed through the large window facing him. The window itself faced away from the camp and through it Steiner could see a rainbow that had arched itself over the Bavarian countryside. Its tranquil presence did not in any way diminish the starkness of Dachau concentration camp with its network of wire, its bland brick buildings, and smoking crematoriums. The camp itself had been the first Nazi concentration camp in Germany. Established on March 10, 1933, just five weeks or so after Adolf Hitler became chancellor, it lay on the outskirts of the town of Dachau, about 12 miles (16 kilometres) north of Munich. The camp had soon become the model and training centre for all other SS-organized camps, being supplemented by about 150 branches scattered throughout southern Germany and Austria, all of which collectively were called Dachau.

To be commandant of such a camp was considered a great honour but Steiner was unmindful of this now as he gazed out at the panorama before him. His eyes barely registered the view for he was deep in thought. It wouldn't be long now before he left this death camp. Where to next, he wondered. What would a post war world be like without the Nazis? For an opportunist like him, it should still hold infinite possibilities, he supposed. That thought of change and new adventures

excited him. However, he would regret leaving the life he had enjoyed under the aegis of Adolf Hitler. He knew, though, that it was time to move on and soon.

Swinging his legs off the desk, he swung around in his chair and his eyes lit upon the portrait of his moustachioed benefactor staring out at him from the frame on the wall opposite. What of you, mien Fuehrer, he pondered. You were so certain of our destiny. Where did it all go wrong? In *Mien Kampf* did you not state that fighting a war on two fronts was fatal? Your grand design, “Operation Barbarossa”, the conquest of Russia had faltered and then withered in the ice of the Russian Steppes. Charles XII of Sweden had failed to conquer Russia in the 18th century, Napoleon in the 19th century, yet you knew better, didn’t you, he silently chided. You promised to secure additional Lebensraum (“living space”) for the German people, who you contended deserved more as members of a superior race. What a fool you really are! Only a madman could seriously believe that anyone would want to live in a barren place like Russia other than low-life peasants. The cold there alone could freeze a man in minutes.

Steiner knew full well what a Russian winter could do for he had won his “Knight Cross” at the siege of Leningrad in the winter of forty-three. Thank God he had only been stationed there for 70 of the 872 days that the siege lasted. He would find it hard, if not impossible, to feel really warm again. His recall to Berlin in January - nine months ago - had been his saviour. A decoration, a promotion, and a subsequent posting to command Dachau Concentration Camp had rapidly followed

Steiner fingered the medal around his neck and recalled how he won the decoration although he was unsure why such an act was deemed worthy of such a fuss. After all it had been

simple enough to herd the men, women, and children, eighty-three in all, into the small Russian wooden church and set fire to it. Perhaps Hitler thought that the Reich needed more heroes to encourage the rest of the population to soldier on. Whatever, it gave Steiner a certain status that was useful in his line of work.

Hitler and he had just two things in common now, the colour of their eyes, blue, and their religion, Catholic. Like many in pre-war Germany, Steiner had thought that Hitler was God Almighty but now he no longer had any illusions about the Fuehrer. Steiner had seen and heard too much since his return to idolize the man any more. Hitler's star had indeed waned, Steiner had long decided, whilst his, he hoped, was still in its ascendancy.

So you are not infallible after all, he thought mockingly as he studied the portrait of Hitler for a while longer. Finally, he swung around once more to peer out the window at the countryside beyond. Time now, he thought, to find another cause profitable to Wolfgang Steiner. The weather was clearing for the first time in days. That was good. The roads would be easier to travel. A knock on his door caused him to swing around again in his chair. "Enter!" he commanded and watched as two soldiers strode in dragging a third man between them.

"The priest, Tsana, Herr Oberst!" one of them said as the two men saluted

Steiner gestured with his hand to the chair before him and the guards bundled the half conscious man into it.

"Who ordered this?" he said, his voice edged with anger.

"Sergeant Mann, Sir!"

"I see! Tell Sergeant Mann to report to my office immediately!"

“Yes, sir!” the senior of the two guards acknowledged as they departed. Both soldiers knew what Steiner’s order meant. Sergeant Mann was in for it and no mistake!

“So, priest! What shall we do with you?” Steiner asked of the man slumped in the chair before him.

Father Tsana stirred when he heard Steiner’s voice. By now, he did not really care any longer what they did with him as long as the beatings would stop. Both he and another interned priest had been cleaning the latrines; a slow task as they only had their hands with which to carry the excrement away. This was the Nazi’s way of trying to degrade them although it rarely worked. His older companion, Father Hartman, a man in his sixties, had eventually collapsed and the guards had then tried unsuccessfully to kick the old man back into a conscious state. Giving up in frustration, they then decided to amuse themselves. “Here, eat shit, you bastard!” the sergeant had said. He and the others stuffed faeces down the old man’s throat and nose until he inevitably suffocated. Tsana had tried to intervene but they beat him into submission. They would gladly have killed him as well but they had orders to keep him alive. That didn’t mean that he couldn’t be beaten however, the Sergeant had commented.

Now, his jaw broken, his teeth smashed, his body bruised from the poundings, Tsana no longer cared what happened to him. His faith in God could never be destroyed by such acts. However, his faith in his religion had long ago been shattered, possibly forever. Pope Pius XII’s silence when it came to the Nazis had at first surprised him, and then appalled him, and then finally it had disgusted him. The Pope certainly knew what was going on in Poland and throughout occupied Europe. Yet, Pope Pius XII seemed more interested in the threat of the

communist influence on Catholicism rather than the Nazi scourge on mankind in general, and the Jews in particular. Father Tsana had seen first hand the brutal atrocities of the Germans and if ever such a race merited condemnation, they did. Rome, however, remained mute and unfeeling. Whatever the reasons, there was surely no defence for such inertia. Lost in his despair, Steiner's voice took a while to penetrate the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him.

“Well, priest! Nothing to say?”

“What do you want me to say?” he whispered, his teeth and torn jawbone causing him agony as he spoke.

Looking at him, Steiner was reminded that he and Tsana bore a remarkable likeness in appearance. They were both almost six feet in height and slim in appearance. The priest however had dark hair whilst he was blond. Steiner also had a longer nose and blue eyes whilst the priest's eyes were brown. Other than that, they could have been brothers. What a thought, Steiner surmised.

Steiner flicked open the file before him. He was already aware that the priest had been incarcerated in this camp since 1942, well before Steiner had taken over. The priest had been one of many imprisoned as a result of the German Nacht-und-Nebel-Erlass (“Night and Fog Decree”). Hitler in his ultimate wisdom had on 7th December, 1941 issued this decree as a secret order under which “persons endangering German security” in the German-occupied territories of western Europe were to be arrested and either shot or spirited away under cover of “night and fog”. In other words, behind closed doors so that such wouldn't upset those of the German race that still had a conscience. The German people at the time were informed that the decree had been issued in response to the increased

activities of the Resistance in France. Personally, Steiner didn't care what the reasons were. He had been busy fighting a war when 7,000 or so were caught up in the net and placed in concentration camps. Tsana had just been one of many. It wasn't clear from the information before Steiner what the priest was accused of but it really did not matter. There didn't have to be a reason for rounding up priests, Steiner decided.

"You were born in Cracau on 13th June, 1918. Is that correct?" As he asked the question, he noted that the priest was only three months older than he.

"Correct!" Father Tsana whispered through swollen lips.

"Incidentally, whilst on the subject of birthdays, did you know that today is my birthday?"

Tsana peered at him through puffed eyes. "You mean you actually had a mother?"

Steiner laughed at the priest's sarcasm. "That's right, priest! Just like you. I'm also a Catholic just like you! What do you think of that?"

Tsana sucked in his breath and ran his tongue gently along the stumps of his broken teeth before answering, "If you believe in God, can't you show some mercy to the poor unfortunates that are prisoners in this camp?"

Steiner responded again laughingly, "The meek shall inherit the earth. Is that it, Father?" He paused for a moment and then added contemptuously, "I think not, Father! I think not!"

Tsana wondered why Steiner even bothered to go through these formalities. He knew of no reason why the commandant should have an interest in him. Steiner had no one to answer to but his God, Heinrich Himmler. Therefore, the question of

whether he, Father Tsana, were guilty of anything, or what his punishment should be, were not an issue.

Tsana listened and grudgingly answered Steiner's questions until the commandant had satisfied himself that the information contained in the file was correct. Steiner then closed it and leaned back in his chair surveying the priest. "Well, priest! Is there a heaven, do you think?"

"Not for you, Steiner!" the priest said defiantly. "Not for you!"

Steiner responded again with a laugh. The priest's lack of respect did not annoy him in the least. Rather it amused him and he smilingly responded, "You priests are all the same. Full of your own piety! Still, I admire courage, no matter who it is! He sat looking at Tsana for a moment longer and then bellowed, Guards!" The men waiting outside appeared immediately.

"Take him away!"

"Back to the compound, Herr Oberst?" one asked.

"No! Get him cleaned up and have Doctor Wanke look at him!"

The two guards were taken aback by this show of compassion from Steiner. As they supported the priest one of them said, "Sergeant Mann's outside, sir!"

Steiner's eyes glinted as he responded, "Good! Send him in!"

The two soldiers led Tsana away and Sergeant Mann appeared.

"You wanted to see me sir!"

Inwardly, the sergeant was fearful! He knew Steiner's wrath could be lethal. It had been foolish to rough up the priest when Steiner had given orders to leave Tsana alone. Unfortunately, the sergeant's base nature had got the better of

him. Now he was about to pay for his indiscretion. Steiner's words when they came caught him completely off balance

"Be in my office on Friday at Midnight! I have a job for you!"

"Certainly, sir!" Sergeant Mann replied as the relief flooded over him.

CORK, EIRE
6th SEPTEMBER, 1946

PATRICK GROGAN HAD developed quickly, his large tall frame making him look much older than his sixteen years. Being an only child, his parents doted on him, a situation that Patrick exploited to the full. In his parents' eyes he could do no wrong. What if he did get into a little trouble now and then? "Boys will be boys!" his mother would consistently and constantly say. His father saw only his own reflection in Patrick. So what if he was a little wild at times! His parents had no inkling that Patrick was anything other than a normal headstrong boy growing up in a loving home. Patrick, however, was far from normal. For one, he enjoyed inflicting pain and, whilst at school, had found young girls in particular an easy target. There had never been anything too overt in his actions. His bullying of smaller boys was tolerated providing it didn't get out of hand. After all, teachers had enough to worry about without standing sentinel over their charges in the playground. However, without exception, they all drew the line at perversion. Patrick's occasional forays inside the knickers of some of his female classmates in primary school and his tendency to try to fondle girls in senior school were cause for concern.

Finally, in his fifteenth year, two months before he was due to leave school, it had all come to a head. A girl, Lucy Reardon, who was just thirteen at the time, had claimed that Patrick sodomised her in the school toilets. “He went up my bottom, Miss!” she blurted out tearfully to Miss Moffat, a teacher approaching retirement who had never felt a man inside her and never wanted too. “Goodness gracious, child! What are you saying?”

Certainly, Lucy’s anus upon examination by the local doctor was found to be somewhat lacerated, but surely not that! “What would the administrators say? What would the Church say? What would the community say?” Such an act in Eire was unthinkable. Sex between a man and a woman was bad enough, Miss Moffat thought, but buggery! Never! The head master, a single man of some forty-five years and a closet homosexual, was equally horrified. Not at the physical act itself for he was well versed in this avenue of approach from the rear, which had brought him much pleasure in the past. His alarm was solely for the reputation of the school. He finally persuaded Lucy that she should say no more about the matter if she didn’t want to bring disgrace on herself and her family. Patrick escaped scot-free other than being expelled, but he saw that as an added bonus. There had only been two months of schooling left anyway, and he had never been the most scholarly of individuals.

Had Patrick Grogan been repentant of his act with Lucy? Not at all! Being unconscionable, the issue did not arise. He had tried a female from one end, and now he intended to try one from the other, the right end this time. After all, Mother Nature had been wise enough to provide a receptacle there far more accommodating for the substantial size of his penis than the tightness of little Lucy’s arse which had proved somewhat

painful to penetrate. The pain he had caused Lucy when he stretched and tore her did not enter his head. Then again, if it had, he would only have found pleasure in reflecting on it, such was the nature of the young man.

Patrick already had his victim firmly in his sights. His next-door neighbour was one Mary Finegan, a spinster who lived alone in her terraced house in this fair city of Cork situated on the River Lee in the Republic of Ireland. She was a flat-chested woman with legs that were thin like matchsticks, shapeless and unappealing, and a narrow face with a thin mouth and teeth that were slightly gapped. Hers was the sort of neglect that comes from low self-esteem forged by years of indifference by others, and her own expectations of life. The brown hair that had been her only pride and joy as a young girl was now streaked with grey as her fifty years began to take their toll. Fate had been unkind enough already to Mary. However, when it decided to give her Patrick Grogan as a neighbour, it proved to be the cruellest blow of all. Mary Finegan held no allure whatsoever for any self-respecting man. However, to someone as perverted as Patrick, it was an entirely different matter. The fact that she was exceedingly plain, if not downright ugly, did not deter him in the least. In fact it only intensified his desire to have her.

Now, standing before her open bedroom window, he felt that he had planned well. Because it was high summer in Ireland and the heat had not abated as day faded into night, she had left the window open to obtain the cool breeze that blew in from the north. The opportunity was too good to ignore. Certainly, his task would be that much easier because she lived alone.

He stood at the window for some time listening to her snoring. Through the open window the moonlight picked Mary

out clearly as she lay in bed. She had kicked the bed covers off and was lying with just a sheet under her. The flimsy nightdress she wore had ridden up revealing thin straight legs, which didn't reach normal proportions until well above the knees. Her thighs were slightly apart exposing her white cotton knickers that were so loose in the legs that her clumps of course, thick, dark pubic hair could be clearly seen. The sight caused his throbbing penis to swell even further as it sought for release. Lying there she was vulnerable, helpless, middle aged and ugly. It was a pitiful combination that was spread before him but to his twisted mind it was a feast to relish.

Easing himself silently over the window ledge, he made his way softly across the floor. Reaching the bed, he stood for a few seconds contemplating the meal he was about to devour, before grabbing her nightdress and jerking it over her head. She awoke with a start confused and afraid as she felt herself suffocating. But it was only a momentary awareness because he soon put her back to sleep again with a short, sharp punch to the side of the head. He then lifted and carried her body from the room over his shoulder, down the hall and into the front parlour. Finding what he was looking for, the dining table, he tossed the white embroidered tablecloth away with his free hand, and threw her on it. Quickly, he stripped her of the nightdress and knickers and tossed them away also. Then his breathing became heavier with excitement as he examined the jungle of pubic hair, the tangled thick mass, that covered most of her lower stomach and ran un-bridled down her inner legs like ivy down a wall. Her breasts were small but firm and he fondled them before sucking on the nipples. Now his penis was starting to drip in eager anticipation of its forthcoming journey into her unexplored regions. It took all his will power not to

enter her there and then. Hurriedly, he tore a strip from her discarded nightdress and bound it tightly around her eyes so she couldn't see his face. Further strips he used to secure each of her arms to table legs.

The sexual tension in his body increased as he discarded his clothes and felt her naked flesh next to his, bony, cold and hard to the touch. Barely able to control himself now, he inserted a finger into the dense bush between her legs. Her vagina was dry like a desiccated coconut and his probing finger was firmly resisted. Placing her legs, one on each of his shoulders, he rubbed his engorged wet penis up and down her dry cleft until he was able to ease its wet bulbous tip between her inner lips. Bracing his feet on the floor ready to launch himself into her defenceless passageway, he slapped her awake.

She came to and felt at once the large, throbbing, eager member stretching the entrance to her vagina. He felt the tightening of her leg muscles as she tried to pull away, and her frenzied threshing movements beneath his, and he knew that he could wait no longer. Placing his hands under and around her buttocks, he found satisfactory purchase, and then he thrust with all his strength between the distended tight inner lips that enfolded the head of his organ. For a brief instant, the thick hymen resisted the battering ram being used to force an entry before splitting asunder, whereupon the thick shaft plunged in bloody triumph to its full and considerable length. She arched from the pain of his violent entry, but the hand he had clamped firmly over her mouth muffled her screams. Their bellies touched and their pubic hairs embraced as he lingered savouring the moment. When her blood began leaking out, confirmation enough that no man had been inside her before, he gave vent to his base instincts. Plunging and withdrawing rapidly like a

jackhammer, he lubricated her sullied bloody canal with semen seepage as he pounded away. Whilst he plumbed her depths, all the while, he emitted growls of pleasure as he took her to him again and again.

At first she tried desperately to break free as he violated her with every thrust. However, there was no escape from her tormentor and the unending pain of his violent attack. She felt torn apart as he pummelled her body mercilessly, and it wasn't long before her brain shut down completely and all resistance ceased.

The room resounded over and over to the slapping of skin as their bellies bounced off each other with every savage thrust until he could no longer prolong his climax and he came in a series of deep penetrations. The broadside as he ejaculated deep within her bombarded her bruised cervix with egg seeking semen that immediately sought out their quarry.

Exhausted for now, he lay on top of her for a while, their wet bodies meshed together as one. Such an orgasm had been beyond his wildest dreams and he felt exhilarated as never before. Slowly, he then disengaged pulling his disgorged organ from between her bloody thighs. She didn't move being mercifully unaware of what was happening around her, the power of reason lost forever.

It was thirsty work, he found, and he went in search of some refreshment. Finding a bottle of milk, he sauntered back with it, then gulped it down as he stood before her, looking at her nakedness. His organ became erect again as he took her in with his eyes, and he parted her legs, entering her with a renewed vigour. Despite the bruising her body did to his penis, he entered her again and again as the night wore on.

From the moment he had first ejaculated, there had been action aplenty within her belly as countless semen began their lemming like death march through fallopian tubes designed for just such a purpose. Millions more followed as he took her over and over. Mary Finegan was not quite menopausal so the spermatozoa marched with a spring in their step and joy in their hearts. All but two of them would fail in their frenetic quest for life. The pair that eventually negotiated their way to safety impregnated her and immediately began work on the tapestry of life.

As the first light of morning stole through the windows, Patrick too stole home. It didn't take him long to reach the sanctuary of his own bedroom where he quickly discarded his clothes in a pile on the floor and climbed into bed. Soon, the morning sun began filtering through the lace curtains, basking the room with light. With his head buried under the sheets to shut out the brightness he recalled the night's events. It had been physically taxing but highly enjoyable, and he was utterly satiated. Images flittered through his mind and they were all of her. No thoughts of remorse but rather satisfaction at a job well done.

If, this very morning, Patrick had been asked to explain why he had raped Mary Finegan of all people, last night, he would not have been able to give a rational explanation. Perhaps, it had been the thought of her helplessness or the certainty that her maidenhead had still been intact that had fuelled his passion. Whatever, he had wanted her, and, as far as he was concerned, that was enough.

Patrick eventually fell asleep as fatigue overtook him. It was late morning before he awoke again to the clanging of a bell as a vehicle approached and drew up outside. Jumping out

of bed, he went over to the window and saw that it was an ambulance. Secure behind the curtains, he watched, waiting for something to happen. He didn't have to wait long. Presently, two ambulance men emerged from the house next door carrying Mary Finegan on a stretcher. Loading her into the ambulance, they were about to close the doors when a police car arrived and three policemen got out, one in uniform and two in plain clothes. Just for a brief moment, Patrick Grogan began to panic and then he relaxed again. After all there was no proof that the intruder next door had been he. She had not seen his face so there was nothing to suggest that he had raped her. If he didn't panic, he would almost certainly be safe. The men in the street below talked earnestly for a while although Patrick couldn't hear what was being said. Then the policemen entered Mary's house and the ambulance departed.

Returning to his bed, Patrick was soon asleep again. He would not have slept so soundly if he had known what the future had in store for him. For one his confidence was misplaced. The milk bottle he drank from and other articles in the house handled by him provided the police with clear enough fingerprints. Whether they would have finally matched them with Patrick's is another thing but he didn't wait around to find out. When the police started to question Mary's neighbours as a matter of routine, he took off. Using what little money he had saved, he headed north to the border and crossed over into Northern Ireland.

The identity of Mary's assailant was never established so Patrick escaped punishment yet again for his sins. It was only a fleeting triumph though because fate had already found him guilty and passed judgement. The manner of his death the following year would be more painful and protracted than

anything Mary Finegan or anyone else could have imagined or hoped for.

Mary's fate was equally bleak. When she was eventually released from hospital, her brother, Liam, a single man, who lived in Armagh, Northern Ireland, took her in. However, she was never the same again and died the following year giving birth to Patrick's bastards. "Perhaps it was for the best!" Liam remarked to the undertaker. "Her mind had gone, you see!" The destiny of the twin boys Mary left behind was already sealed, not by Liam's subsequent actions, but by forces beyond imagination.

ARMARGH, NORTHERN IRELAND

14th November, 1947

SNOW CAME EARLY that year. The Irish valley was content to snuggle beneath its white quilt, its slumber disturbed only by the cawing crows as they ripped into the body that had been casually strung on a part of the wire fence that surrounded the old Abbey. Soon their frenzied activity would disappear from sight for darkness was falling although it was only three in the afternoon. Someone had prepared their meal for them by considerably gutting the body like one would a fish, festooning its entrails around its neck. The bacchanalian feast provided by the contents of the belly thoughtfully wrapped in stomach membrane, washed down by gastric and intestinal juices had proved irresistible to the bird life that flocked in from Lough Leigh's south shore. The crows following in their wake were now picking over the remains of the carrion meat.

The man trudging along the road that led to the Abbey passed within a hundred feet of the cadaver without being aware of it. Liam Finegan had other things on his mind and his eyes were firmly focussed ahead on the structure that stood out forbidding and silent against the darkening sky. He started to rasp as the incline to the Abbey's front porch steepened, his icy breath giving him the appearance of an ice-dragon. Stopping for a moment to quieten his breathing, he listened. Satisfied that nothing was stirring from within, he quickly covered the remaining few yards to the large oak door and hastily deposited the bundle he had been carrying on the doorstep. Instinctively, he went to press the doorbell and paused, his finger hovering. Looking behind him, he could see his footprints clearly visible in the snow for all to see. Not yet! he thought. Mary Finnegan's brother made his way back down the path to the main road where he had parked his car and drove away in search of a telephone.

Now who could that be? she thought as the telephone beside her shrilled. Mrs. Cleary had been a housekeeper at St. Brendan's Abbey for as long as anyone could remember. Her sixty-eight years had done nothing to diminish her vigour or her temper, which seemed to become shorter as the years rolled on. The Abbey's books lay before her and she was attempting to balance them, a job she found particularly odious. She could do without this interruption.

"Yes!" she snapped into the receiver.

"Is that St. Brendan's Abbey?"

"It is!" she replied, her Irish brogue emphasizing the fact. "What can I do for you?"

"You'll find something I have left for you on the doorstep!"

Before she could reply the phone went dead in her ear. “Damn!” she exclaimed aloud as she pushed her chair back and made her way to the front door. “What kind of a delivery service is that?” she muttered as she flung the door open. That was the moment when the banshee announced himself to her with an anguished cry and she stepped back in astonishment. The infant lying before her on the doorstep was in need of sustenance and demanded her attention in the only way it knew how.

Meanwhile, some miles away, Liam Finegan was now checking on the other child that lay on the backseat of his car. He too, like his brother, was hungry and was crying for his milk. “Soon! Little man! Soon!” Liam whispered soothingly as he pulled the blanket tighter around the baby. “Nothing as grand as an Abbey for you, I’m afraid!” he informed the uncomprehending infant. “But who knows? Perhaps you’ll be happier in an orphanage anyway?”

He started the car and drove away being careful to drive slowly for fear of skidding on the frozen surface.

The finding of the infant on the doorstep was one of two memorable events in the life of St. Brendan’s Abbey that month. The second was the finding of the body on the fence. The pathologist performing the post-mortem surmised that the young man had still been alive when the birds had started to peck and rip away at his viscera. The trauma the boy suffered when he had been hung up on the fence and disembowelled was not the thing that killed him though. No, the thing that killed him, the pathologist concluded, was having his heart ripped out. The coroner at the inquest in consideration of the man’s family omitted that snippet of information. It also saved him the tricky problem of explaining why the boy’s heart could not be found.

Only his parents mourned Patrick's passing. "When he ran away from home, I never thought he would end up this way!" Mrs. Grogan sobbed to anyone that would listen. Patrick's father could only comment disbelievingly over and over, "What in God's name was he doing in Northern Ireland?"

Lucy Reardon attended the funeral of the boy who buggered her. The shame she had felt ever since the day he had cornered her in the toilets seemed to lift from her shoulders as she knelt in the church. Her silent affirmation was fervent enough. "Please God! Let him roast in Hell forever!"

WALES, UNITED KINGDOM
22nd November, 1963

THUNDER REVERBERATED LOUDLY in the night sky as if trying to issue a warning to the people in the room, while the gusting wind drove the rain against the bay windows in wavering force. The storm outside was masked to those within the darkened room by heavy fabric curtains swung across to shut out any external light. The fire, burning furiously in the grate, crackled intermittently as the flames overcame resistance from the rich Welsh coal. Being the only source of light within, it cast swirling shapes on the walls and silhouetted the occupants sitting in the gloom.

Settled in an armchair by the fire, Elizabeth Lewis felt snug, warm, and comfortable. She also felt bored and, not for the first time, a trifle foolish. From past experience, she knew that little was likely to happen to disturb this soporific atmosphere other than some amateur theatrics when the mood took someone. The weather at least was playing its part, she

decided, by providing a perfect backdrop for this sorry excuse for a séance. In her eyes, only a full-blown manifestation would really make the evening a success. However, she would settle for any kind of supernatural happening to break the monotony of sitting in the dark. At that particular moment, she could not decide whether it was preferable to be frightened to death or die of tedium. She didn't really believe that contact could be made with the afterlife, and only attended these meetings to keep her husband company.

Dear old Bob, how predictable he was to her. Once he became interested in anything, he involved himself wholeheartedly. Now his current craze was spiritualism. Had it only been six weeks ago that he had asked her if she would go with him to these séances. She remembered what she said at the time. "Oh, Bob, it's a lot of mumbo jumbo! How can you believe in such things?" but he had remained persistent.

"Look, love, if nothing else, it will at least give us an opportunity to meet a few people around here. You're the one that's always saying you miss your friends in London. Besides, it may be interesting. Anyway, what about those dreams of yours? Maybe someone on the other side is trying to get in touch with you." He smiled at her as he spoke for he knew that she thought he was being somewhat puerile.

"Bob, you haven't told anyone about those dreams? People are going to think I'm a bit of a loon or something!"

"Nonsense, Frank was very interested in them. Besides, he's probably a warlock himself so why worry." He threw the last statement in for good measure to bolster the impression he was trying to convey, that of mock curiosity rather than abiding interest,

Elizabeth knew from past experience that if she let him have his head, his interest in spiritualism would eventually peter out as it had with his other many pursuits. As for her dreams, she could picture Bob in the 'Brown Bear', one of three drinking holes in the Welsh village where they lived, telling all and sundry about them. At the best of times, he was inclined to embroider his stories and with a few drinks to sustain the narrative, her dreams would take on apocalyptic significance. If her dreams were premonitory, surely they would be accurate in content she had reminded Bob many times in the past when the subject cropped up, but he chose to ignore this minor detail.

Her dreams were disturbing, she had to admit, but she took some comfort from the fact that they were so imprecise. Take for instance the passing of her grandfather who had died a week after she had foreseen it in a dream. In the dream, she had seen him drown in a boating accident. In reality, he had drowned after falling asleep in his bath following a too liberal nightcap of rum.

Another dream she often brought to mind was the one involving both Bob and her in which their car with them in it had exploded in a ball of flames. Sure enough, days after that dream occurred, another vehicle ran into the back of their car, but neither she nor Bob had been injured and fire had not occurred. There were other dreams too that could be loosely tied into the events of her life, but they were vague and inconclusive. They all had a common theme though - death.

Since her dreams had started in childhood, she put them down to some sort of trauma that may have occurred then, but she could not recall what it was, if, indeed, that was the reason. So far, despite Bob's suggestion, she had resisted seeing a psychiatrist. Perhaps she was afraid of what she might discover.

Whatever, for now, she would put up with the dreams. Besides, the two dreams that had persistently dogged her throughout her life had not reoccurred for more than a year now. Those dreams were so weird, in fact, that it took her some time after their marriage before she could bring herself to tell her husband about them. Finally, when she had told him, he predictably tried to read some significance into them.

Both dreams were very similar except for the horsemen in them. They would start the same way with her walking through a barren valley. Ahead in the distance, she would see a horseman galloping towards her. The rider was a man clad in ancient golden armour, with his head bare, and long flaxen golden ringlets reaching to his shoulders. He would then rein up before her on his pure white horse. In one of the dreams, his face was youthful and handsome with eyes of deepest blue that were truly beautiful and a countenance that was completely benign. She always had the distinct feeling that she knew this man. Looking down at her, he would smile before rearing up on his horse and pivoting around. A puff of wind would lift the white tunic about his legs, and she would see something emblazoned on the skin of his upper right thigh. When she woke up, she could never recall, try as she might, what it was she saw there although she felt that it was of some significance.

In the other dream, the horseman that reined his horse up before her had a face of pure malevolence. His eyes were blood red like balls of fire, and small snakes adorned his head like the snaky locks of Medusa. His face was a sea of maggots that flayed his skin before her eyes until just a skull remained. Elizabeth always awoke screaming and afraid.

The fact that the dreams had now ceased didn't stop Bob from mentioning it to Frank Morgan, the publican of the

“Brown Bear”. Bob, for once, had found a ready listener. Frank’s wife, Wynn, was a spiritualist and held séances, or circles as she euphemistically called them, at their home on Friday evenings. Inevitably, Frank invited Bob to come along to one of these séances to see for himself. Elizabeth, despite her misgivings, eventually decided to go along with him conceding that he was at least right about getting out and meeting people. It had been almost eleven months since Bob had taken up his appointment as a lecturer of English at Cardiff University. At the time they had willingly deserted their small flat in South-East London for the rustic life of Wales. However, she was finding it difficult to settle, missing her friends in London and the part-time job in a shipping office that had filled her days. Here in this Welsh village, ten miles from Cardiff, she was just a housewife tied to the home and finding it increasingly tedious. Bob had his work at the University and his cronies in the ‘The Brown Bear’, where he whittled away some of his spare time, With his infectious nature and gregarious bent, parochial Wales held little fear for him. She on the other hand had always been a little introverted and found it hard to make new friends easily, shying away from meeting strangers if she could. Realizing that she would have to make an effort, she had agreed to accompany Bob on his latest venture. After all, what had she to lose?

The meetings, séances, circles, whatever one chose to call them, proved to be pleasant affairs. The people that attended although motley in nature were a friendly bunch and as ordinary as could be Other than Bob, there were no professional people there, just local farmers, housewives, shop-keepers and the like. Perhaps necromancy held more fascination for those with mundane pursuits, Elizabeth surmised. She, herself, had been surprised at the number of people in the village interested in

Wyn's sessions. The meetings sometimes attracted twenty or more at a time.

Through these meetings, she and Bob had been able to mingle freely with the village community so the exercise had proved worthwhile. However, to Bob's disappointment and, she had to admit, to her own for she was just as curious as most, the séances themselves were a real let down. She had envisioned a séance as being one where a little old lady, the medium, sits at a table on which a requisite crystal ball is placed. Spirits would be evoked by the medium while the true believers sat around the table holding hands. Wynn, Frank's wife, who was the incumbent medium, was neither old nor stereotypical. She must have been in her late thirties and dressed in a stylish way. Her manner was pleasant, down to earth and gave no hint of her supernatural leanings. However, she did have that knack, like most obsessive individuals, of taking herself too seriously. Over a period of time, this had begun to irk Elizabeth who had seen no tangible proof to date that Wynn had any psychic ability whatsoever.

Wynn always opened the séance with a short prayer, usually the Lord's Prayer. Bob, by now a self taught authority on the subject, had explained to Elizabeth that the prayer was to ward off forces from the dark side; those denizens of the underworld who presumably sat around all day conjuring up ways of breaking through the ether. Elizabeth couldn't help but give an involuntary laugh when Bob had first begun to explain the meaning of the prayer to her for he had been so intense. Sheepishly, he had added, "You might laugh my girl but if Old Nick drops in on you because you didn't say your prayers, don't blame me!" Gaining momentum, he went on, "The linking of the hands whilst the prayer is said is done to complete the

circle. The unbroken circle constitutes a ring of fire through which Satan and his cohorts cannot penetrate. Apparently, however, it doesn't prevent intrepid spirits with good intentions from parachuting in for a visit."

"You don't really believe that rubbish, do you?" she chided. "The last ring of fire I experienced was after eating that Indian curry on your birthday! Remember?" He laughed as she went on, "Anyway, I'm not so worried about anyone parachuting in from above! I'm more concerned with those that might come up through the floor!"

Bob laughed again. "Well it should be interesting. You've got to admit that," he jested as he turned once more to the book he had been reading. A book about the occult, what else!

She had been happy enough to leave the finer points of spiritualism to him for she had little interest or belief in it herself. Reflecting back now on her experiences of these séances to date, they were completely different to her preconceived notions. Once the opening prayer had been said, instead of sitting around a table as she had imagined, they all sat in various parts of the room where seating presented itself. The light would be extinguished and they would be left to meditate and wait patiently. How patient could one be though? During the first few meetings, she had sat in eager anticipation. After all, her curiosity was as acute as most. She soon learned, however, that rather than being treated to a paranormal extravaganza, she and the rest were subjected instead to, what appeared to be, rather indifferent acting performances by various individuals within the room as they were supposedly taken over by their spirit guides.

It hadn't taken Elizabeth long to decide that people with hyperactive imaginations and a desire for attention richly

attended these gatherings. Further, all the so-called spirit guides seemed to be Red Indian chiefs. Too many chiefs and not enough Indians, she concluded. Once, she questioned Wynn as to why these spirit guides were all Red Indians and chiefs at that. In hushed, reverent tones, Wynn had informed her that Red Indian leaders in the past had tended to be very spiritual in nature which gave them the credentials to return from the other side and communicate with the living. General Custer and a few others might disagree with you, Elizabeth had thought at the time, but considered it prudent not to present this argument to Wynn.

Ensconced now on this stormy evening, in one of the Morgans' comfortable armchairs, Elizabeth became drowsy. The tempest outside was starting to abate and the steady light tapping of rain on the windowpanes rather than the harsher sounds that had proceeded were, with a hypnotic cunning, lulling her to sleep. Warmth from the fire also participated in the conspiracy. Eyes closed, her head began to drop towards her lap until she fell slightly forward and woke with a start. It would never do to be found asleep, she thought. Wynn would never forgive her.

She tried to remain alert by focusing her mind on something. The light from the fire played on the outline of various objects on the low coffee table in the centre of the room. They were not clearly defined in the dimness but she knew them to be a crucifix, a Bible and a trumpet. Not a conventional trumpet for producing musical notes but rather a cone of thin metal, a foot or so long and some eight inches at the front and one inch at the rear; its shape being very similar to that of an ice cream cone. The theory was, she had been informed, that visitors from the other side would herald their

arrival by levitating the trumpet through which, if the sceptics could be convinced, ectoplasm would be emitted to form some form of manifestation. Ectoplasm was, it had been explained, a whitish vapour of smoky like appearance that blossomed into an observable apparition. Sometimes, when the séances had been concluded, a fervent believer or two would examine the trumpet assiduously for traces of such ectoplasm, an exercise that never ceased to amuse her. No one to her knowledge had ever seen the trumpet levitate. Nor, for that matter, had anyone found even a vestige of ectoplasm despite the fact that these séances had been a regular occurrence over many years. However, this did not seem to dampen the group's enthusiasm. They might do better to connect the trumpet to a wireless. At least that would provide some entertainment, Elizabeth mused. What a shock though if a disembodied entity did pop out of the trumpet one evening! She gazed long and hard at the shape of the trumpet in the semi-darkness. Its outline did seem to have a whitish haze around the edges and she strained her eyes in concentration. My God! Now they've got me at it! A real live ghost would be something to behold though or should that be a real dead ghost? she pondered. Whatever, she was out of there if one did appear.

Turning her attention to the other objects, the crucifix and Bible, her thoughts meandered on. What would mum think if she could see her now? No doubt, being a staunch Catholic, mum would tell her that she was on the path to perdition. Maybe she was! Although Elizabeth was not a practicing Catholic, she had some qualms about involving herself in what her mother would have described as evil doings. She felt uneasy dabbling in matters that were probably best left alone, but her curiosity and Bob's persistence had outweighed her reluctance. Anyway, nothing had happened so far that could even mildly be

construed as nefarious. Even so, she knew the Church would see it differently. If old Father Frost from her local parish in London were a fly on the wall, he would probably arrange for her excommunication. On the other hand, she hadn't been to church for so long, she had probably been excommunicated anyway.

"Good evening! How are you all this evening?" the grandiloquent voice boomed out through the murk. It was more an entrance than a question begging reply.

Oh no, Elizabeth inwardly exclaimed as everyone dutifully answered, "Well, thank you!" She knew from past experience that it was Frank Morgan. Frank, who, no doubt, found it hard to be upstaged by his pseudo-medium wife, had invited Red Cloud to the party. Peering through the darkness, Elizabeth made out the portly shape of Frank sitting bolt upright in his chair, inhaling and exhaling great gulps of air reminiscent of a goldfish. For some reason, he always seemed to require a considerable amount of oxygen for his performance. He was good though because his Welsh accent could only be detected when Red Cloud became angry; something he was prone to be quite often. What seemed to raise Red Cloud's ire the most were questions posed by the group regarding the afterlife. For one that had presumably been dead a long time, Red Cloud seemed to know very little about the other side, and would become agitated when pressed, often departing in a great wheezing of air like a balloon suddenly deflated. Funny thing though, strain as she might, she could never see Red Cloud, only Frank sitting at attention. Frank in one of his off-duty-from-Red-Cloud moments had informed her that regrettably, she did not have the gift, hence, her inability to see Red Cloud.

No one else seemed to be able to see Red Cloud either but that didn't seem to faze Frank.

As Red Cloud opened the show, the rain renewed its fury, pounding on the windows as if it too were objecting to Red Cloud's harangue. Red Cloud, not to be outdone, increase his volume to stentorian proportions so that he could be heard above the protests outside. Despite the cacophony of noise topped by Red Cloud's strident monologue, Elizabeth's eyes began to close once more and the movement of her head as it sank to her chest failed this time to forewarn her. She began to doze.

....His armour was Greco-Roman and she could see his golden ornate breastplate gleaming in the sun. Mounted on a white horse, he held a bow in one hand and the bridle in the other. The horse stood motionless in tune with its rider as she made her approach through the valley. Drawing close, she could see that his skin was the colour of ivory and his eyes were brilliant blue. His shoulder length blond hair adorned his handsome face and he wore a wreath of laurel leaves on his head She recognised him at once and was not afraid. He called her by name and said....

She awoke with a start. Red Cloud had departed and the room was quite once more. The rain had ceased as if approving of Red Cloud's evaporation, and the final hissing of the coal as it burned low in the grate was the only audible sound to be heard. The dream had seemed so real, so vivid. Unlike before when her dreams of him were hazy, this time she could remember every detail. The wonderful thing he had said had uplifted her even though she knew it was not possible. Whatever technical terms the doctors had used when explaining it, it all boiled down to one thing - she was barren. She had

learned to live with the fact and accept her condition for what it was. However, it had been the one blight on her marriage for she had so wanted children. Now the warrior in her dream had told her she would have a son! Although it had only been a dream, for once it had left her happy rather than apprehensive.

Someone in the room started to moan and Elizabeth turned her head to see who it was. It turned out to be a Spanish woman named Maria who had invited her spirit guide to the party. This in itself was unusual. Maria, unlike some of the others in the room, was painfully shy and did not freely promote herself. In fact, she had always been a silent participant during the séances themselves, until now. Yet, of all those in the room, Maria was the only one who did seem to have some real psychic ability. She had demonstrated this to Elizabeth weeks before when Elizabeth had quite by chance shown her a necklace of sentimental value that her grandmother had given her. Upon handling the necklace, Maria had been disturbingly accurate in her account of who had given it to Elizabeth, why it was given, and who had worn it before. At first Elizabeth suspected that Bob had conspired with Maria, as he was the only one other than she who had prior knowledge of the necklace's history. However, Bob swore that he had said nothing so, if this were so, Maria could certainly lay claim to having extra-sensory perception. Bob had been quick to point out that the term for this was precognition, the ability to form impressions from the vibrations given off by objects. Whatever it was called, Elizabeth had been impressed. Therefore, Elizabeth now waited in eager anticipation for Maria to do or say something of interest.

Maria was breathing deeply now and it wouldn't be long, if past performances from other members were any guide,

before Maria's alleged spirit guide would speak. However, when the words eventually came, they were a man's. Elizabeth felt her skin crawling and the hairs rising on her neck like a cat that had been cornered by a dog. The man was speaking to her and the voice was that of the warrior in her dream.

"Fear not, Elizabeth, for I am with you. Your son will be branded with the Word of Yahweh. When he joins with Michael, the guardian of Israel, together they will judge and smite the wicked in the name of righteousness"

Elizabeth, who had been leaning forward intently, suddenly found her head swimming. The last she remembered was a sense of falling into a black void as she slumped forward on to the floor.

"Are, you all right, Mrs. Lewis? Can you hear me?"

To Elizabeth it seemed as though Wynn was speaking a long way off. She could hardly hear Wynn's words and for a while was unable to comprehend them. Slowly she came to and found Bob and Wynn leaning over her.

"What happened?" she heard someone in the room ask. Someone else answered, "She appears to have fainted." The lights had been turned on and the group were all peering at her anxiously.

"Are you all right, my dear?" Wynn repeated in a motherly way, as she thrust forward a tumbler of water.

"Yes! I'm okay, thank you," she replied embarrassingly "I don't know what came over me!" Then she remembered and she trembled.

"Better get her home," Frank Morgan suggested to Bob.

Bob studied her ashen face. He had never known her to faint before and he was concerned. "Come on love, time to go," he said to Elizabeth as they helped her up.

On the drive home, he could see that she had not yet fully recovered. Maybe these meetings were getting too much for her. Perhaps it was time to give them a rest. He had begun to find them somewhat boring anyway although he thought Elizabeth enjoyed them. It would be no great hardship for him to give them up. Besides, if someone like Marie could go completely overboard, who's to say where such nonsense could lead. He knew she was a Bible nut but this time, she had gone too far. Word of Yahweh indeed! Whatever next?

He glanced at his wife as he parked the car in the garage. Masking his concern, with raw humour, he murmured, "A check up for you my girl. Can't have you collapsing on people's carpets!"

Still preoccupied with her, he made a pot of tea and turned on the radio to hear the news. Sipping their tea, they were about to discuss the evening's events when Elizabeth motioned to Bob to listen. The newsreader was talking about a shooting in Texas. They stared incredulously at one another. President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas only hours before; just about the time they had arrived at the Morgans'. It was Friday, the 22nd of November 1963, a date that would live in the collective memory of millions around the world. For Elizabeth though, it had another significance. It was the night she was told she would bear a child. Some weeks later, her local doctor confirmed the impossible and was quite amused when she then declared categorically that it would be a boy.

"My dear, there's no real way one can be sure!" he said patronizingly.

She smiled knowingly as she replied, "I am sure, Doctor! I am sure!"

THE FALKLAND ISLANDS, SOUTH ATLANTIC
12th June, 1982

THE SOUND OF the tracer passing overhead jerked him back to consciousness. Opening his eyes, he found them full of stars as he lay on his back gazing into eternity. The sodden earth and the slashing sleet carried on a numbing wind had saturated his battledress, yet Carlos Rega was oblivious to the icy rawness around him. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead from the agony of his injuries. Damaged nerves in his lower limbs were sending painful signals to his brain that something was terribly wrong. Fighting the pain that wracked him, he tried to sit up but could not. Apprehensively, he moved his hands slowly down his thighs until the realization struck him. His left leg below the knee had been blown off; the protruding bone and torn sinew marking the point of departure. Somehow, his bloody stump felt oddly unreal to the touch. Daring to explore further, he thankfully found that his other leg, his right leg, was still intact. However, there was a large hole in the calf of it into which he easily slid his fingers.

What had happened, he asked himself? Then he remembered the brilliant flash of white light and the earth heaving up into his face. It must have been an anti-personnel mine but whose? The British had neither time or reason to lay mines because they were the attackers, not the defenders. He must have strayed into one of his own minefields, he concluded. Alone now, waiting to die, he cursed himself for being a fool, and he cursed the sergeant that had pointed him in this direction to start with. Had the man not known that the area was mined? Probably not, Carlos reasoned, judging by the confusion that he

himself had observed since his arrival that afternoon. His watch was still working although its glass face was badly cracked. Glancing at it, he saw that it was just past twenty-three hundred hours. He wondered what Eva would be doing in Buenos Aires at this very moment. Probably she would be in bed for she rarely stayed up late. Was she thinking of him, probably, he decided. He knew then that he didn't want to die in this desolate, rocky, barren, treeless land, which only sheep could appreciate. Now that he had seen the place, he couldn't comprehend why the military junta had launched the invasion in the first place. He recalled the excitement in Buenos Aires the day General Leopoldo Galtieri, the Junta President, announced that Argentina had taken the islands back from the British. "After all," the people concluded, "hadn't they rightfully belonged to Argentina anyway?"

Carlos was only a young man of twenty-three, and yet he had not been quite as enthused as most others of his generation at Galtieri's rhetoric. Having spent three years in England studying electronics, he had come to know and like the English. He had even learned to speak fluently in their tongue. The British race, he knew from his interest in military history, were a proud people who had fought in some of the most significant wars the world had known. The British Army was a formidable one, made up of professional soldiers, whilst Argentina had mostly sent conscripts to hold these islands. In addition, the British were powerful foes if they felt a matter of principle was at stake as in this case. Carlos had been certain they would try to retake the islands, and his fears were now a fact. British troops had already landed in San Carlos sound and were rapidly advancing towards Port Stanley. Thousands of frightened

young men, including men of his unit, were out there somewhere in the darkness waiting to confront them.

As a lieutenant, newly arrived at that, his place was with his men. What had possessed higher command then to send him forward alone to reconnoitre the terrain, the theory being to use his knowledge of electronics to establish what type of electronic equipment the British were using. It didn't make any sense really. Even if the British had obligingly left some electronic equipment lying around for him to observe, the information he brought back would be useless because they had no counter-measures anyway. It was like finding out how big a hammer someone was going to use on your head. Would it really help to know whether the hammer was a big one or a small one if you had no helmet anyway? And they call themselves "army intelligence" he thought contemptuously. Now, here he was lying out here waiting to die because fools were in command.

The icy rain had stopped and so thankfully had the pain in his legs. He gazed at the multitude of stars that dotted the night sky and was no longer afraid. Slowly but surely, he knew that he was slipping away and his thoughts turned to Eva again. How would she react when she heard the news? He remembered the disquiet he had seen in her eyes when Galtieri had first spoken to the nation. Darling Eva would have been his wife in just three more months. Now, they would never marry. Tears filled his eyes at his loss. She was too beautiful to be alone for long, of course. Eventually, someone else would take his place. Such was the nature and order of things. Would that man love her as much as he did? How could he not?

The sound of someone squelching towards him over the sodden grass broke through his thoughts. Without thinking, he instinctively shouted a warning, "Mine field!" and the shadowy

figure approaching him immediately stopped and ducked down. Seconds passed and then the dark spectre began inching towards him but on all fours now. With a sinking heart, he then saw that the man was a British soldier, young, big, and powerfully built. The soldier's face was blackened for night action and he was travelling light. No pack, just a lightweight high-velocity automatic rifle slung over his back and a menacing looking knife clenched between his teeth. Trying to defend himself against this man in his present state would be pointless, Carlos knew, even if he had the time to draw out the holstered pistol on his belt, which he didn't. He was dying anyway so it might as well be quickly done. Better a speedy death than the lingering one that only moments before had been his lot.

The man reached him and Carlos closed his eyes waiting for the thrust that would finish him. It never came. "Do you speak any English?" the man whispered. The voice had a friendly reassuring ring to it.

Carlos opened his eyes and looked into the other man's eyes before replying, "Yes, I lived in England for three years!"

"Good! Well, my friend, we've got to get out of here. Your chaps have a machine gun nest somewhere over there," he said pointing off to the left. His smile was that of a mischievous boy rather than a killer as he continued, "and I've been out here looking for it! I've also been out here looking for you!" He grinned again. "I followed your foot prints." A shudder went through Carlos as he realized that if he hadn't stepped on the mine, this young man would have probably killed him anyway. Carlos was a line soldier, not a commando as this man obviously was, and would be no match at close quarters.

The man spoke again, "I heard the explosion some ten minutes ago and thought I'd follow through to see what the

noise was all about.” He was still smiling as he said it, and Carlos realized incredulously that his companion was treating this war as one big game. Not in a fearful way but rather as some sort of adventure. He knew there were such men but he had never met one before. He had only read about them. Fearless men that did extraordinary deeds either being killed in the process or winning themselves medals or both. Carlos also knew then that this youth would not kill him. To kill a man in battle is one thing, to kill a man in cold blood when that man is defenceless is something else. Few men can do it without any qualms. Some will do it if they have to and suffer remorse for the rest of their lives, and some men will not do so under any circumstances. Carlos had no illusions that in battle the British soldier before him would not have hesitated. However, there was something in this boy’s eyes. An obvious love of human kind that didn’t quite equate with his present occupation. The soldier’s words as he sheathed his knife confirmed Carlos’ assessment of him.

“Your legs are in a bad way, I’ll see what I can do!” With that the soldier reached inside one of the pouches on his webbing and pulled out a small sealed plastic bag containing a hypodermic needle and a phial. “Morphine!” he explained as he went to work.

The man seemed to know his stuff, Carlos surmised as the soldier attended to his injuries. Carlos flinched occasionally as both legs were injected and various dressings applied. As the British soldier’s gentle, competent hands went about their work, Eva’s face swam before him, and Carlos felt suddenly optimistic, almost euphoric. Finally, after three or so minutes, the young soldier appeared satisfied.

“Much pain?”

“It’s not too bad!” Carlos answered trying to be brave as most young men do when in the company of other men.

“That should do you until I get you back to our lines.”

Carlos became uneasy then. “No! Leave me here so my comrades can find me in the morning. You’ll never make it out otherwise!”

“In a few hours from now at most, we are going to shell this place to pieces. Besides, your chaps are shooting at anything that moves out here at the moment. They seem to be a trifle nervous!” Once more, that mischievous grin was back. “If you want to stay alive, you’d best come with me!”

“But how are you going to get out of here. This is a mine field, you know!”

“Well, actually, I didn’t until now!” the other man replied. “Was that what you yelled out? I thought you were yelling for your mother!” He smiled at the other man and he then said, “Whatever, I owe you one! It could have been me lying here.” Then he winked at Carlos and the warmth of that gesture and the confidence the man exuded made Carlos’ spirits soar.

“Don’t worry about our getting out!” the British soldier continued. “I’ll go back using the same route I took to get in. Fortunately, the wet ground will assist us. I was following your footsteps coming in so I’ll use the same foot marks going out again.” He paused for further consideration. “It’ll be tricky though, so you’ll have to keep perfectly still while I’m carrying you. If I fall with you on my back, we might both be taking a trip we haven’t planned on!” There was that grin again. “Oh, and one other thing, no noise! That machine gun is still out there and your men will be shooting at both of us if we make ourselves heard.”

Carlos nodded in agreement and marvelled that he was now beginning to believe that he might survive. The other man's self-belief was that infectious. The soldier adjusted the rifle slung across his back, and then he reached down and placed his hands under Carlos' shoulders. "I'm going to pick you up now," he whispered. "Brace yourself and try to keep quite!"

Carlos felt himself being lifted easily and was amazed at the young man's strength as he found himself draped across the other's broad shoulders. Slowly, silently, the soldier, burdened by the weight of Carlos, began to retrace his steps. A few minutes passed and then the night sky was suddenly lit by tracer fire. Somewhere, a firefight was taking place. Until then they had been lucky because the blackness had swallowed them up, but now they were clearly exposed against the horizon. Both waited motionless and frozen for the sudden shock of gunfire that must descend on them but nothing happened. Then the night was still and dark again.

Carlos quietly exclaimed in relief, "Je.. Sus!" The man carrying him added quietly, "Amen to that!" They waited there for a few more seconds and then the soldier trudged slowly on. More minutes passed and Carlos could only marvel at the young man's toughness and physical fitness. Loss of blood and fatigue set in before long, however, and Carlos gradually slipped into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, Carlos found himself lying on a stretcher in a small field station, basically, a large tent, with three other stretcher cases, all British soldiers, for company. A medical orderly arrived at Carlos' side and examined his dressings. A good humoured dark little man in his middle twenties, when he found that Carlos spoke English, he said,

“Don’t worry! We’ll get you to a hospital as soon as possible. This is only a transit point where we assess and provisionally treat the wounded.” He then grinned as he said, “We kill them later in our field hospitals.”

Two humourous and kindly men in one night, Carlos thought and both were his enemy. Further, both his foes seemed to share something else in common, a confidence that the final victory would be theirs. If Carlos had doubted it before, he did not doubt it now. The man was speaking to him again. “Someone did a fine job patching you up!”

Then Carlos remembered and replied, “The soldier that brought me in? Where is he?”

“You mean Lieutenant Lewis? He couldn’t stay! Our soldiers are rather busy at the moment!”

“I didn’t have the opportunity to thank him,” Carlos whispered.

“He said he’d get in touch with you when the battle’s over. To see how you are, that this! He also told me to take special care of you because you have a date with Eva!”

“Eva?” Carlos repeated and then remembered.

“The Lieutenant said you kept repeating her name over and over while you were unconscious.”

Carlos suddenly felt overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude, the tears flowing freely down his face.

“Rest!” the orderly said sympathetically and gave Carlos’ arm a slight squeeze before he made his way to the next stretcher case.

Carlos, utterly exhausted by his ordeal, soon fell asleep and dreamed of his beautiful Eva. He was back in Argentina and she was in his arms. There was a third person with them, his newly found friend that had given him back his life.

* * * * *

Chapter 1

COUNTY ARMARGH, NORTHERN ISLAND **13th October, 1994**

SHAUN STARED INTO the glass he was holding and idly shook it causing the few remaining drops of Guinness to froth with the motion. Time was passing and he was becoming impatient. For once none of his friends had appeared and he had only himself for company. Not even a stranger to break the monotony, he reflected. Not that Shaun really expect to see strangers for the pub was tucked well away from the beaten track; its clientele mostly local farmers and field hands. For them and Shaun, the pub was an oasis in the Irish countryside, a watering hole where they could escape from their wives and the dull monotony of country living. This October evening, however, no one other than he had sought refuge within. Even conversation with Tom, the rotund, middle-aged, red-faced barman, had dried up. Loquacious by nature, Tom was strangely quite this evening, seemingly absorbed in the newspaper he was reading. Then again, it was one of those evenings that promoted silence. A depressive atmosphere seemed to pervade the air with nothing to dispel it.

Sitting within the cosy dilapidation of the century old building with its heavy wooden beamed ceiling and panelled walls, Shaun sighed inwardly and gulped down the remnants of the liquid in his glass. He toyed briefly with the notion of ordering another but decided against it. Maureen would already have his meal on a low flame and besides it was getting late. He decided that no one would appear now so he had best be home.

Sliding from the bar stool, he made for the door, pulling up the collar of his old tweed jacket as he did so in anticipation of the chilly ride ahead.

“Night Tom!”

“Night Shaun!” came Tom’s perfunctory reply as he lifted his eyes fleetingly from his newspaper to acknowledge the short, squat man’s departure.

Outside, Shaun felt the night air clutch him in its raw arms, a stark contrast to the warm interior he had just left. It seemed to be unusually cold for this time of year. Giving an involuntary shiver he tugged up the collar of his jacket even more. “God! It’s freezing tonight!” he muttered to himself as he recovered the bicycle he had deserted an hour before. Switching on the bicycle’s headlamp, he mounted and pushed off down the narrow winding lane, the lamp’s beam reaching out and capturing and then releasing the jugged ragged asphalt as he rode along. Soon the damp of the seat began to reach through his trousers and the piercing wind made him snuggle deeper within the confines of his coat to keep warm.

It would be stew tonight he knew as he pedalled briskly home. Maureen was entirely predictable when it came to cooking. With her, the bill of fare for the week was always rigid. Today being Thursday, lamb stew would be on the menu. How welcome it would be on an evening such as this. In fact her no frills wholesome cooking was always well received by Shaun as evidenced by his ample waistline. Phlegmatic by nature, Shaun’s life was a contented one. When he could escape from the small petrol station he owned in the village of Carrickcross, he would be found either with his wife and daughter or with the locals in “The Harp of Erin”, the pub he had just left. Mostly in the latter for like most Irishman he

enjoyed a drink in the company of men. It was the Irish way in those parts and had never been questioned, certainly not by the women of the land. After all, what did women have to complain about, the men would ask. "As long as they had good men to provide for them, what more could they wish for!" As for women's liberation, that was a non-event. The word "liberation" in this country was solely reserved for the "cause". The cause being the liberation of Ireland from the English, not the liberation of women from men. Paddy, for his part, had no desire to change the *status quo* of his humdrum life, but then again, fate is capricious.

Head down, lost in thoughts of the meal that would be waiting for him at home, he did not notice the glow in the night sky until he had breasted the hill. Then his heart started thumping as he saw that something was burning fiercely off to the right a half mile or so away. British soldiers patrolled these lanes sometimes and he thought for a moment that the IRA might have ambushed one of their armoured cars, a not unheard of occurrence in these parts. Free wheeling down the hill towards the blaze, he eventually came to the burning object, a small tree that was flaming frenziedly. The brakes of his bicycle combined with the slide of his feet to halt his progress and he dismounted. Standing there before the fire, he tried to speculate as to what had caused it. The heat provided a welcome relief from the cold and he lingered there longer than he should have. The sparks shooting forth into the sky as the tree burned furiously held a strange fascination. He knew the Irish Republican Army had better things to do than set fire to trees so he dismissed the situation as being a dangerous one. Some children, no doubt, having a lark, he decided. Whatever, it was none of his concern. Time to get off home for that stew but he

dawdled for a moment longer to soak up more heat for the journey ahead.

Chapter 2

THE DRIVER OF the armoured car kept the engine noise to a minimum as it made its approach. The crew's adrenaline had started to pump from the time the night sky ahead had lit up; its cause hidden to them by the hill they were ascending. No other patrols were out so whatever it was, it was not one of their own in trouble. The vehicle's advance needed to be stealthy because the lives of those within might depend on it. Attacks were a constant threat in this hostile land as many of the natives were unfriendly.

"Just a tree on fire, sir!" the driver exclaimed as they came over the brow of the hill.

The British Army captain beside him peered through the narrow slit that served as a window and caught sight of the man standing before the flames.

"Stop!" the Captain quietly ordered tapping the driver on the shoulder, "I'll take a look!"

Corporal Cox applied the foot brake, easing the gear into neutral in the fluid motion of a man well practiced in the art. Now that they could see the reason for the fire, the crew relaxed and the captain sensing this said quietly but authoritatively, "Keep alert, lads! This could be an ambush!" before he hoisted himself through the hatch. The four men remaining within had no need to be reminded for they were experienced campaigners in this kind of war and knew that it killed you when you least expected it.

Through the slit, the men watched their officer advance cautiously down the lane in front of them with his sub-machine gun unslung and at the ready. "Seems quite enough," someone said, but no one answered. They were too intent on the scene

outside. The armoured vehicle had come to a halt a hundred yards or so from the fire, so it took some moments for the captain to reach the man fronting the flames with his back to him. When he had got close enough, the captain spoke with some authority, "Get your hands up and turn around!"

Taken completely unawares, Shaun let go of his bicycle with the shock. It clattered noisily down on the road as he quickly raised his hands. When he turned around, he found himself face to face with a tall British soldier in battle fatigues. The insignias on his shoulders indicated that he was an officer of some kind but Shaun was not up on those things.

A typical Irishman, the captain thought. Ruddy in complexion with red hair to match and broadly built. This one was shorter than most though, barely reaching his chin. "Keep your hands where I can see them!" he cautioned. Knees flexed slightly, with the weapon he carried pointing at Shaun's chest, the captain glanced around until he was satisfied that it was safe. Holding his gun now with one hand, he quickly searched Shaun with the other. "What's your name? Why are you here?" the Captain asked forcefully.

"Shaun Cronin. I live just down the road," Shaun replied hurriedly. He had recovered his composure now and eyed the tall soldier in front of him, noting the man's strong handsome face and intelligent eyes that were hardened and watchful. The soldier motioned him to lower his arms as he inquired, "Did you do this?" "Now, why would I want to do such a thing," Shaun answered in a voice laced with sarcasm. Then he saw the look in the other's eyes and decided that the officer was not a man to trifle with. So he added, "It was burning when I got here."

The captain was used to receiving sarcastic answers to his questions from the locals in these parts. The Irish were better

than most at being sarcastic when they put their minds to it. Few of them had any love of British soldiers, and, if he were honest with himself, he didn't blame them. It was their country after all and the captain had often asked himself what he was doing here. He was a soldier, not a policeman, and he certainly did not want to be any part of an occupation force. But he had a duty to perform and he was a soldier in her Majesty's army. Deep down he held a sneaking admiration for the Irish - the ones that were not trying to kill him, that is. He could understand the Irish cause and the people's resentment although he was totally opposed to their methods for achieving their ends. In similar circumstances he would probably feel as they did. However, he also knew that he couldn't afford to be too objective in his line of work. He had his duty to perform no matter how onerous. Because the warring factions throughout the country were not given to advertising and never wore uniforms, all Irishmen abroad at night were under suspicion as was the man before him now. This was an undeclared war, deadly in execution, indiscriminate in casualties, and very lethal at times.

"I'm sorry but we will have to take you in for questioning," the captain stated turning as he said this to wave the armoured car forward,

"Bloody typical," Shaun muttered low under his breath as the soldier turned back towards him.

The Captain stepped forward to take Shaun by the arm and then stopped as he thought he heard something. The captain saw the other man looking at him in a puzzled way as he stood there listening. There it was again, the sound of horse's hooves; the noise a horse makes when it is in full stride. The captain brought his gun to bear as he waited for the horse to

appear around the bend of the lane, the hedgerows on either side hiding the approaching animal.

Shaun heard nothing but when he saw the officer bring up his weapon and point it down the lane behind Shaun he became alarmed. Shaun spun quickly around, bending low as he did so in expectation but the lane behind him was deserted and peaceful. Mystified, Shaun turned back towards the soldier and saw a strange look on the man's face. The look could only be described as one of amazement.

Corporal Cox had seen the captain wave him on and he was now slowly advancing the armoured car forward. "Watch it, lads!" he said to the others in the vehicle as he saw his captain raise his rifle and point it down the lane. "Something's going on!" Those were his last words in this life.

Chapter 3

A FLASH OF light lit the night sky outside the windows of the Cronins' house a half mile away as the sound of the detonation thumped the air. Boooooommmmmmm. The shock waves then hit causing the floor to shake, the walls to tremble and the windows to rattle in their frames.

"Holy Mother of God! What was that?" Maureen exclaimed as she leapt from her chair by the fire and ran to the window. Sinead, her daughter, who had been ironing in the kitchen, was close behind. In the distance, a mile or so away, they could see flames although it was too far away to make out what had caused the conflagration.

The noise like a clap of thunder that had so startled Maureen and Sinead Cronin was the sound of the explosion as a mine, laid only hours before in the lane, detonated. Its angry outburst, a protest to the weight of the armoured car that had rolled over it. The blast rebounded through the hills like a heavy artillery barrage and a giant fireball illuminated the night as it shot up. The soldiers within and the vehicle disintegrated in unison. Lives were eradicated in milliseconds; brains destroyed before any feelings could be registered by the vehicle's occupants.

Hedgerows bordering the lane were scythed away in the explosion, the more durable of the trees remaining brutally lacerated and shredded while the weaker ones were uprooted and discarded. Trees and shrubbery alike were indiscriminately denuded and raped by the tempest as it deployed debris in a wide spread. Whilst the men inside the vehicle were blown to pieces, the men that had been standing in the lane were luckier. Their bodies remained intact, being merely lifted with the blast

and carried through the air before being discarded indiscriminately like rubbish on a tip.

Shaun landed unconscious in the remains of a hedge, which cushioned his fall. The captain was not so fortunate however. Just before being swept away in the shock wave, a sliver of metal on its upward trajectory had penetrated his right cheek, traversed behind his eyes, and had exited above his left ear. Deposited unceremoniously at the bottom of a bank at the side of the lane, the soldier landed half in and half out of a drainage ditch, his lower body and legs submerged in water. Pieces of vehicle and its occupants rained down merrily around him. The engine block, landing on top of the bank beneath which the captain's body lay, teetered for a few seconds on the brink and then toppled down to the bottom. It came to rest on the captain's right thigh where it sizzled with a prolonged hiss as the water from the ditch cooled it, the red-hot metal searing deep into the captain's flesh.

A short distance away, where the Cronins lived, the sound of the explosion had sent people scuttling from their houses and they were now gathered in the lane, Maureen and Sinead among them. Being isolated and living in close proximity, the people were all close-knit. The community itself consisted of only seven families living in a row of terraced houses half a mile from the village of Carrickcross. Most of them had seen a small fire burning in the same spot sometime before the explosion. In normal circumstances, some of them would have gone to investigate out of curiosity but these were not normal times. Only five months before, a man from Castlewell, a village on the other side of the valley, had been killed when caught in cross fire between British soldiers and the "Provos". They all

considered themselves to be good Christians, but they weren't about to throw themselves to the lions.

"I hope dah's all right", Sinead whispered to her mother as they stood among their neighbors.

"He'll be all right!" Maureen replied without any real conviction. "He'll still be at the pub, no doubt." She tried to hide her reservations but Sinead could see that she was concerned too.

"That's a mine!" Ray Kenny, one of their neighbours, declared. "Some poor bastard's copped it!"

Down the lane where the explosion occurred, the poor bastard in question could see his own body lying below him in the ditch. "Death, where is thy sting?" the captain reflected. He had always imagined death as finite, an end of things. Yet, although his body was of no further use, he still felt alive and aware. He was starting to rise now, leaving the place where he had died. As he did so, he thought momentarily of the rider he had seen in the lane just before the end. An ancient warrior on a white horse but was that possible. Anyway, it was no longer important now. The carnage in the lane below began to diminish as he soared higher and higher. The darkness gave away to light as a multitude of colours appeared before him in a kaleidoscope of dancing swirling images. A wonderful feeling of peace came over him. He knew then as all who die do that this was not the end but merely the beginning.

Chapter 4

SHAUN OPENED HIS eyes but it took him a while to move. Painfully, he extracted himself from the remains of the hedge and looked around at the carnage. The armoured car was in its death throes, its frame burning like a well-fuelled furnace. There was a sickly sweet smell in the air which he deduced with a shudder was burning flesh. He had never been in the presence of death before. Now, lying around him were pieces of what, until a short time before, had been living breathing human beings just like him. Now they were unrecognisable as such.

Shaun began to search the area for signs of life but all he found were remains with few distinguishing features, a hand here, a leg there, once a charred head. Some raw flesh was also on display like meat in a butcher's shop window except that much of this was already precooked. Finally, he sank down at the edge of the lane and vomited violently. That was when he saw the captain's body lying in the ditch. Climbing down, Shaun pulled the body on its back and shook the man for signs of life. At first Shaun thought the man was dead until he opened his eyes for a moment and stared into his, then he closed them again. Shaun had escaped injury due mainly to the fact that the captain had been between him and the vehicle. However, while Shaun was relatively unscathed, the man in the ditch was a mass of injuries. Shaun felt he had to do something. He had no hatred for the English although he felt with a passion that they had no right to be in Ireland. Being a compassionate man by nature, all he saw now was another human being in need. Irish, English or whatever, it would have made no difference. He tried to lift and drag the big man up from the ditch but the soldier was just too heavy. He would have to go for help

The group of people gathered outside the Cronins' house had stood there for some time being uncertain what they should do. Collectively, they had been trying to decide the best course of action for more than half an hour. In the end, the issue was settled for them when Shaun came limping into view. Until he had started making his way down the lane, Shaun hadn't realized that he had been injured. Heavy bruising to one leg on landing and a deep gash in the other had made his journey home decidedly uncomfortable. Maureen on seeing him ran forward to greet him with concern in her eyes. She was not one to demonstrate her emotions but for once she hugged him gently. Sinead was not so inhibited, hugging her father forcibly. "Steady girl!" he protested as his bruised ribs made their presence felt. "Are you hurt, dah?" Sinead asked as he drew back. "Are you all right Shaun?" Maureen then inquired.

Shaun, although feeling somewhat embarrassed by such a show of emotions from his wife and daughter in front of his neighbours, felt a warm glow at their demonstration of affection. He responded quickly, "No, I'm all right but there's a soldier back there in a bad way. I need some help with him"

"Leave him there! Let him rot!" a charitable soul among them retorted.

"English or not, he's still a man!" Shaun responded angrily. "Now, who's going to help me?"

"Aye, I'll go," Ray Kenny said. "We can use my car."

"No! Best not," Shaun replied. "It might not be safe if the Brits find us on the road in a car." Then he added, "They may think we're responsible! We'll walk!"

"Right, Shaun! Good thinking," Ray Kenny agreed.

"Let someone else go, Shaun!" Maureen said. "You've been hurt. There are plenty of men here."

“No! I’d better show them where the soldier is. They may have trouble finding him otherwise.”

Maureen wasn’t convinced but she knew Shaun well enough to know that once he had made his mind up, he wouldn’t budge. As the two men set off down the lane two others quickly joined them. Maureen and Sinead watched them disappear around the bend, then the girl sprang into action.

“Come on!” Sinead urged. “We’ll get ready for them!” She was a nurse in Belfast and therefore well versed in emergencies. Her days and nights in a Belfast hospital were full of them as she dealt with the many victims of sectarian bigotry that this part of the world constantly threw up.

The two women went back into the house and Sinead retrieved her first aid box from a cupboard under the stairs. The kitchen would be the best place to put an injured man they both decided and they prepared accordingly.

It was almost thirty minutes before the men arrived back with the wounded soldier. At Sinead’s bidding, they carried the big man into the Cronins’ kitchen where they placed him on the wooden table that had been stripped by Sinead for this purpose. She quickly felt for a pulse. None! Reaching inside the remnants of his torn battle dress, she felt for a heartbeat. None!

“He’s dead , dah!” she whispered as she turned to her father.

“Never mind dear, you did your best,” Maureen said to Shaun as she took his arm. “Let’s go into the front room and leave him in peace.” A silent throng pressed forward into the kitchen to see the dead man for themselves but Shaun and Maureen soon ushered them out again.

“Come on, love!” Shaun said as he waited for Sinead at the door. “There’s nothing you can do for him now!”

“I know, dah! I’ll be along in a minute!”

The young woman stood looking down at the lifeless soldier when her father had gone. Then she went to the kitchen sink and poured some water from one of the taps into a dish that had been lying on the draining board. Returning with the dish and a small sponge she had found in one of the kitchen drawers, she proceeded to wash the blood off his face. He was cold to the touch but even in death he was magnificent, she thought. Lacerated as his face had been by the wound in his cheek, he still had a profound physical effect on her. She could see that he had been remarkably handsome in life with thick blond hair now matted with his blood. She had seen death many times before and always found it disturbing, but never more so than now. Somehow, for her, his death seemed very personal. The tears welled up in her eyes as she looked down at him. The sheer size of his muscular frame seemed somehow incongruous in the absence of any life force. What kind of man had he been? Had he been married? Did he have a wife and children that would mourn him? What had his name been? How old was he? All these questions buzzed around in her head as she wondered about him. This vital man that had been living just a little while before and now was no more. Suddenly, she had a thought. Searching through the uniform beneath the torn battledress, she found a wallet in one of the torn pockets. So that was his name, she thought as she came across the identification card inside. She read his name aloud. “Lechaim Francis Lewis” She then added softly to herself. “You had a grand name to be sure”. He also had a photograph inside his wallet of a middle-aged woman. His mother perhaps? He didn’t have a photograph of anyone else, which Sinead thought strange. No wedding ring on

his finger so perhaps he wasn't married. Yet, surely such a man as he would have a young woman somewhere that loved him.

"Com'on, Sinead!" the voice from the doorway insisted. Her mother had returned to the kitchen because she wanted to find out what was keeping her daughter from joining the others in the other room.

"Okay mum!" Sinead replied and replaced his wallet with its contents back into the pocket of his uniform. Before leaving however, she took one more look at the man lying on the table. His eyes were partly opened and the blood from his wounds had suffused them so they looked like balls of red flames. The gash in his cheek could not debase the handsome face that she would always remember. Even in death he bewitched and captivated her. Finally, she switched off the light and quietly closed the door behind her

The Cronins' front room had already filled with people eager to discuss the night's events. Sinead joined in but her mind was elsewhere as she pictured him in the kitchen, lifeless and alone. She had seen people die often in her line of work. Why did his death have such a pronounced effect on her? She fought back the tears that threatened to flow, and she tried to divert her thoughts by seeking out her father who still looked a little shaken.

"It's a shame about him then," he said indicating with a nod of his head in the direction of the kitchen.

"You did your best, dah! I'm proud of you!" she whispered.

Shaun blustered. "Anyone would have done the same in the circumstances!"

She kissed him on the cheek affectionately and replied, "In this bloody country. I think not!"

He was startled by the vehemence in her voice and the word “bloody” she had used. He had never heard her swear before and it threw him off balance. Whilst he was still contemplating what she had said, she went on, “Listen, dah, the ambulance should be here shortly. Mum phoned for one for him!” she said indicating with her hand to the kitchen. “You should really go with them and get checked over!”

“Not a bit of it. my girl!” he insisted. “I’m staying here with you two. Besides, I’m hungry. I could do with something to eat!”

Good old dah, she thought. No matter what the crisis, he’s always thinking of his stomach.

“Okay dah! I’ll warm up your dinner as soon as they’ve taken him away.” She knew it was pointless pressing a man that had never seen the inside of a hospital in his life and didn’t intend to.

The babble of conversation within the room was suddenly interrupted by a crash from the kitchen. The tension, which had eased considerably, now returned as they all stared at the kitchen door, which was slowly opening. Transfixed, they could only stare incredulously at the soldier that appeared in the doorway moments later. Lingered there briefly, he supported himself shakily against the doorframe, before pitching forward to the floor.

No one moved with the exception of Pauline Murphy, a young girl of sixteen with a predilection for fainting spells. This time she had something to faint about and she promptly did. Sinead was the first person in the room to react. Darting forward to the soldier’s side she shouted out, “Quickly mum! The brandy!”

The prone body of Pauline Murphy, which had landed next to the soldier's, was promptly transferred to the lounge sofa, then everyone gathered around the man that had come back to life.

"But I thought you said that he was dead?" Maureen asked, her voice trembling, her pulse racing rapidly as she tried to deal in her own mind with his miraculous resurrection.

"Mum! Please! The brandy!" Sinead pleaded but it was Shaun who reacted, "I know where it is. I'll get it."

On his return, Shaun bent down and lifted the soldier's head while Sinead placed the bottle to his lips. Suddenly, his eyes opened and met hers, and she found herself drowning in limpid pools of blue.

Chapter 5

LECHAIM WAS WALKING along a rugged mountain road, its surface strewn with small stones and boulders. The road wound through a valley set in a lunar like landscape, bare of vegetation, austere and forbidding. Ahead, where the road forked, his friend astride his horse was waiting for him. The men were constant companions and Lechaim was eager to join him. He raised his hand to acknowledge his friend and the rider waved back. A jewelled coronet adorned the man's long, flaxen, shoulder length hair, and he was clad in a white tunic and cape; his upper body protected by a golden breastplate that glistened in the sun. A sword sheathed in its scabbard hung at his side. The pure white stallion beneath him snorted and moved impatiently but its rider stilled it with legs that were well practiced in the art. Both horse and master then waited passively until he could join them.

Intent on the man ahead, Lechaim stumbled and sprawled on his knees. When he had regained his feet again, both man and horse were gone. Arriving at the spot where they had been only moments before, Lechaim searched for proof of their existence. The hoof prints that the animal should have left were nowhere to be seen. Puzzled, he searched the landscape for a sign of them, and then a cold chill settled over him as he realized the significance of where he stood. He was at a junction in the road - a choice between life and death. With absolute certainty, he knew that if he made the wrong choice, he would perish. His decision made he started down one of the roads. Presently, the stillness was broken by the sound of hoof beats and he saw a rider approach. The rider reined his horse

before him, and Lechaim looked into a face of horror. The horseman had no face, just a skull full of worms.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh”

“Captain Lewis! Captain Lewis! Wake up!” she softly entreated shaking him gently.

He awoke with a start, the perspiration evident on his face.

“Same dream again?” she inquired in a whisper.

“Yes, the same dream!”

Lying back on the pillow, he watched her straighten the sheets. The dream was his constant consort. Night after night, in his sleeping hours, his courage and resolve were being tested on that road – the road of life or death. Somehow, although it was only a dream, it seemed very real, very relevant, and very significant, but he couldn’t explain for the life of him why it should be so.

As she pulled his head forward to rearrange his pillows, she noted that his face was almost healed. The scar on his cheek would soon fade and he had been too good looking anyway. Besides, the blemish added a rakish touch, she thought. Sister Flynn was just one of his many admirers within the hospital. He was a patient that never complained, which made a change, and he was naturally good-humoured. Although she, herself, had “racked up” more than a half century in years, he made her feel like a young girl again and those eyes!

“Stay a while, Sister,” he quietly pleaded as she turned off the bed light.

“All right, but not long mind you!”

She knew he would ask her to stay - he always did. It was almost as though he were afraid to be alone in the dark but

his army record belied such a notion. Anyway, she didn't mind. Age had not curtailed her physical desires, and she enjoyed their intimate conversations in the dark. He was on his own in a private room, so they had no audience for their nocturnal whisperings. Looking down at him now, she was reminded that tomorrow he would be discharged and their nightly assignations would come to an end. She would certainly miss him but, alas, she knew, he would soon forget her. In that she was correct. Sister Flynn held no physical attraction for him, rather a motherly one. Not being able to remember his real mother, he wondered whether she and Sister Flynn had been alike. His aunt Joan had taken on the responsibilities of being a mother to him when he was very young and, in truth, he now regarded her as his real mother. There were chunks of his life before he had been injured that were either vague or forgotten. What had the doctors in this Belfast hospital called it, partial amnesia?

Sitting patiently by his side, she waited for him to speak. She could see that he seemed to be making up his mind about something.

Finally, he spoke, "Can you tell me where Carrickcross is, Sister?"

"Yes, it's some fifteen or twenty miles from here. Why do you ask?"

"I would like to pay a visit to the people that helped me that night."

"The daughter had been in to see you on a number of occasions!"

"Daughter! I don't remember her being here!"

"Of course you don't. You were recovering from a very serious head wound, remember!" As she giped him, she recalled the young, red headed beauty that had inquired after him. Sister

Flynn had watched the girl as she had sat by his bed then, and had noted the concern in her eyes. She suspected that something besides compassion lurked within the bosom of that young girl. Sister Flynn had been young once, herself, and remembered how it was to be in love. The look in the girl's eyes brought it all back. Sister Flynn too had that look once when she was a student nurse thirty years before. The sweet ambivalence of it all - that wild roller coaster ride between ecstasy and despair. For her it had ended badly but she did not regret such love, only the losing of it. Despite the pain of her own experience, she envied people that were in love. Being a true romantic, she believed that one only came alive when one was in love. It was the substance of life, the very essence of one's being. A world without love or lovers was a sad place indeed, she had long ago decided. She added reprovingly, "She's a young Irish colleen so you be nice to her."

"You know I've only got eyes for you" he teased giving her a little squeeze on the thigh.

"Get away with you, you cheeky thing" she chuckled. "And who's to say I'd be interested in you anyway!" They engaged for a while in pleasant conversation sprinkled with more light banter until she eventually decided that he had taxed himself enough. "Now, you get some sleep, or we won't be letting you out tomorrow!"

He echoed her "goodnight" as she softly departed leaving him alone again with his thoughts. Lying there in the dark, he knew that he wouldn't go back to sleep now that a new day was already dawning. A few more hours and he would be leaving this room that had served as his home for the past six weeks. What lay ahead then, he wondered. Convalescence and then what? Would he be allowed to return to the army? How much

brain damage had occurred? How would he be affected? Would his physical injuries heal completely? These and a multitude of other thoughts bombarded his mind as the light of day crept slowly and inexorably into the room.

Chapter 6

DOCTOR LYNCH WAS a patient and understanding man; attributes that stood him in good stead in his particular profession. The woman before him, however, was testing his patience to the limit.

“But Doctor, I know something’s wrong!” she exclaimed to the portly, short, middle-aged, balding man that sat eyeing her from behind his desk.

Doctor Lynch removed his glasses and began to clean the lenses with his handkerchief. She had been a good looking woman in her youth, the doctor thought and still was for that matter although he judged her to be in her late fifties or early sixties. Her grey hair and regular features beset with grey intelligent eyes were the quintessence of the archetypal maternal woman. At this particular moment, her maternal instincts were very much to the fore.

“Please understand Mrs. Davies that Captain Lewis has been seriously injured!” Doctor Lynch said as he returned his glasses to their precarious perch at the end of his nose. “It may be some time before he completely recovers.” He paused for a second or so but seeing the doubt still on her face, he went on, “You can’t expect him to be exactly as he was before. He has suffered severe brain trauma. However, he seems to have recovered well from his physical injuries but only time will tell.”

“I do understand that, Doctor, but his eyes! Why have they changed colour? I tell you, Doctor, there is something very strange about him!”

He studied her for a moment wondering what he could say to reassure her. He had no real answers, of course. It is quite understandable that those closest to a severely wounded

patient are the most distressed. This woman, however, was behaving somewhat irrationally. Why, she had even claimed upon first visiting the wounded soldier that it wasn't him at all. Of course, at the time his head had been bandaged and she could only see his eyes. Now she had become fixated by the notion that it was only his eyes that were different. "Not his eyes at all!" she had muttered on more than one occasion when meeting with Doctor Lynch. "They were brown, not blue!" she insisted. How could that be? Of course, it couldn't be as Doctor Lynch had cause to remind her on more than one occasion. Certainly, the army records forwarded to him showed that Captain Lewis' eyes had been brown before his injuries. The doctor assumed, however, that the records were incorrect. A person's eyes do not change colour in adulthood. No! she was imagining things! Thank God, the army doctors would be taking over Captain Lewis' case from here on in. At least then, Doctor Lynch consoled himself, Mrs. Davies would be out of his hair.

"You will have to give Captain Lewis time, Mrs. Davies. The main thing is that he's made a good recovery, and we have no reason to keep him here any longer." He went to reach into his desk drawer for a cigarette and then remembered that he had given them up. "He needs to convalesce, of course, but that shouldn't be for too long." She remained silent, so he thought it best to try a diversion. "I understand that you have been looking after Captain Lewis since his parents died?"

How impersonal those words sounded, she thought. ...you have been looking after Captain Lewis since his parents died...

Elizabeth, her sister, and her sister's husband, Robert Lewis, had been living in Wales when their car had veered off the road and hit a tree. At the time, their son had what could

only be termed a remarkable escape. The force of the impact had propelled the child's portable crib, which had been lying unsecured on the back seat, through the windscreen and it had come to land some distance away. The subsequent fire that devoured the car and its occupants so thoroughly could not reach the child who remained out of harm's way.

For a moment or two, Doctor Lynch thought she hadn't heard him, and was about to repeat himself when she replied "Yes, my sister and her husband died in a car crash when he was a baby and my husband and I brought him up. That is, until he joined the Army." She paused and then said, "You see I couldn't have children and the little mite was all alone in the world!

"Your husband?"

"He died some years ago!"

"I see!" the doctor said sympathetically. "Well, no doubt you'll be pleased to have Captain Lewis home for a while?"

"Yes," she responded but her thoughts were elsewhere once again. She had been staying in Belfast for some five weeks now so she could be near Lechaim. That afternoon she was due to catch a flight back to England. Lechaim would return in her car to England by the same route she had used to enter Northern Ireland; namely, the Belfast-Liverpool ferry. She had decided some days ago that it would be better for her to fly back and let Lechaim have the use of the car. He would certainly find good use for it. There were some Army matters he had to attend to in Northern Ireland before returning home to England. Besides, he had mentioned that he wanted to visit the family that helped him the night he had been injured. Personally, she wasn't too sure this was wise. After all, this was Ireland and these were troubled times, but Lechaim had been

insistent. Frankly, she would be glad when he did return home, more at ease, perhaps. It would be another five weeks before he had to report back officially to his Belfast commander so she would have plenty of time with him. After all, apart from the strangeness of his eyes, it was her Lechaim. She was grateful to God that the only love left to her had come safely through. Nothing had really changed between them but then how could it. He was like a son to her and they had become even closer since her husband died. Yes, it would be good to have him home again.

Doctor Lynch brought an end to the conversation by rising from his chair. “Well, Mrs. Davies, I hope it all works out for you and Captain Lewis. I’m sure he’ll be right as rain in due course. If there’s any more I can do, please let me know!”

He felt relieved as he closed the door behind her. These confrontations were always trying and somewhat wearisome. Returning to his chair behind the large oak desk, he sat down and contemplated whether he should or he shouldn’t. His resolve crumbled and he reached inside the desk drawer to retrieve the packet of cigarettes that had been taunting him all day. Lighting one he inhaled the noxious fumes deep into his lungs and then blew the smoke slowly out again. A sigh of satisfaction escaped his lips as he dragged happily away at the receding tobacco. Glancing through the pile of files on his desk, he extracted the one containing Lechaim Lewis’ case notes and flitted through it. The doctor was already familiar with the soldier’s medical notes so his eyes roved over the data in a cursory way. The burn on the man’s right thigh was certainly a bit of a novelty, he thought. Part of the serial number from the engine block of the armoured car had been neatly branded into the flesh of the captain’s thigh. The burn itself could be fixed

with plastic surgery so the doctor did not concern himself too much with it. The head wound was an interesting one. A piece of metal had gone straight through the skull and brain exiting on the other side. It was quite remarkable that Captain Lewis should have survived such an injury. Even the blood loss had been minimal. Fortunately, the Captain had been in peak condition physically which had assisted in his survival. Brain damage was another problem altogether though. What long-term effects could result from a head wound of that kind, it was difficult to say. He closed the file and placed it on top of the pile. Ash from his dying cigarette dropped onto the desk and he blew it away in his customary fashion before reaching for the telephone. Sister Flynn's melodic voice echoed down the receiver at him.

“Ward ‘C’. Sister Flynn speaking!”

“Please remind Captain Lewis of his appointment with me at eleven, Sister”

“Certainly, Doctor! I’ll do that!”

Chapter 7

LECHAIM WAS DRESSED in a pair of black slacks, a grey tweed jacket, a red polo-necked jumper and black shoes. His aunt had brought the clothes in for him earlier that morning just before her visit to Doctor Lynch's office. Now, she had rejoined Lechaim in the hospital cafeteria.

"Well, what did the doctor say? Am I going to live?" he joked.

"He says you need care and attention! You should be taking it easy!" She was still annoyed that Doctor Lynch could not see Lechaim and her together. Then Lechaim could have seen her off at the airport. His words broke in.

"I've been doing that for six weeks now! I need some exercise!"

"So you're still determined to visit the Cronins then?" Despite her misgivings regarding the visit, Lechaim had not been deterred.

"Yes, I must!"

"You don't know these people. They could be in league with the IRA or something."

He laughed and exclaimed, "I hardly think so. If they had wanted to do me harm, they had plenty of opportunity that night. Beside, I owe them my life. I must go back and thank them."

"Yes, you're right, of course! But please be careful!"

Taking her hand in his he gave it a little squeeze as he replied, "Don't worry! Six weeks in this place is a lifetime. I don't intend to be coming back. At the first sign of trouble, I'll run like hell."

She had never known Lechaim to run from anything in his life and that was her real worry. These last few weeks had been a real strain for her. Now that her husband had passed away, Lechaim was the centre of her world. To lose him would give her nothing to live for. Not that she ever saw much of him anyway for he was always off somewhere. The Army was a demanding mistress and Lechaim was very much her servant. Still, just knowing that he was alive and well somewhere and would return to her from time to time was enough. Introverted by nature, she was not one given to displays of affection, and nor, for that matter, was he. Yet, there had always been a close bond between them. Because his natural mother had been killed when he was very young, he had no memory of her, so she had no rival for Lechaim's affection. Until now, that is, for she was about to let her dead sister back into his life. She knew that it was the right thing to do. In fact the only thing to do!

The face of her sister swam before her as she took the envelope from her bag and placed it on the table between them.

"Lechaim, I have something to tell you. It concerns your mother, your real mother, that is!"

He eyed the envelope with some curiosity as he enquired, "My mother?"

"Yes, your mother, Elizabeth!"

She hesitated as she tried to decide how to tell him. "My sister use to have premonitions or so she claimed. She became convinced that she would die before you grew up so she asked me to give you this if she did!"

She pushed the envelope towards him. "It's a letter from your mother! She asked me to give it to you only if and when a certain thing happened!"

He took the envelope from her and examined it.

“And what thing is that? he asked”

Again she hesitated unsure of herself. She gave a low laugh to hide her embarrassment. “Well, it’s somewhat peculiar but you have told me about the dreams you’ve been having and it relates to them.”

Now his curiosity was really aroused and he questioned her further, “How so?”

“You mentioned that in your dreams there are two horsemen. Both are dressed as ancient warriors! Your mother, Elizabeth, use to have the same dreams!”

“But that’s impossible!” he uttered disbelievingly and picked up the envelope, but when he started to open it she stopped him by placing her hand on his.

“No! Open it when I’m gone! Do you mind?”

“Of course not” he reassured her and replaced the half-opened envelope on the table. For the next few minutes he tried to solicit further information from her but she would only repeat that he needed to read his mother’s letter first. Finally, she exclaimed, as she glanced at the clock on the cafeteria wall, “Is that the time? I’ll have to go!”

He gave her a hug and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “I’ll see you soon, ma!” She liked him calling her “ma”. It was an Americanism but it had a soft warm sound to it. She looked into those eyes that had disturbed her so and it seemed for just a moment that someone else was looking back. They were such beautiful eyes though. Whatever the reason for the change in their colour, her boy had come back to her - that was all that mattered now.

Then she was gone and he gulped down the remainder of his coffee. Glancing at his watch he saw that he still had twenty minutes before his appointment with Doctor Lynch, time

enough to read the letter from his long dead mother. The envelope seemed to beckon him and he plucked it from the table and turned it over in his hands, noting how clean it looked despite its age. The white envelope was simply addressed, "For My Son, Lechaim." With mounting curiosity, he opened the envelope and drew out its contents; five sheets of blue folded notepaper and a photograph. The man and woman in the photograph he recognised at once. He had seen them often enough in photo albums at home. His parents were standing before a thatched cottage somewhere in the Welsh countryside. He knew this because his mother had written on the back of the photograph, "Bob and me, Wales, 1963." His parents looked so happy together and, just for a fleeting moment, he felt the pangs of loss that had been his all those years ago. What had they been like, he wondered. Lechaim knew that his father had been a lecturer in English at Cardiff University whilst his mother had been content just to be a housewife. Looking at the black and white image, he suspected that they had shared a good life together. His mother's neat hand, he found, was easy to read.

14th January, 1966

My Dearest Son,

If you are reading this, it will mean two things. (1) that I am dead and (2) that you have had the same dream.

Your father and I always wanted a child but a number of doctors told me that it was not possible. Despite this, we had you! What I am

going to tell you now will seem very strange - bizarre in fact. I can only tell you the way it happened and let you be the judge. What you make of it is for you to decide.

Your birth was foretold to me in a dream. In the dream, an ancient warrior riding a white horse told me that I would have a son. My son would be branded with the word of Yahweh. When he joins with Michael, the guardian of Israel, together they will judge and smite the wicked in the name of righteousness.

Crazy as it seems, I believe that this dream has some significance, and meaning that I cannot fully comprehend. I believe you have a destiny and that destiny is somehow linked to this dream and the man in it. Therefore, you need to be told that the life you have been given may have a higher purpose.

The fact that you are reading this letter means that I never lived to see you become a man, never had the opportunity to know you - thoughts I find hard to bear. It will also mean that the warrior in my dream is already known to you. Your time has therefore come.

On the other hand, if the dream is just that, a dream, and I live to see you grow, then you will never see this letter or know of my fears for you. Yet, the dream has reoccurred many times, and I have the strangest feeling that I will not live much longer. Therefore, I am

leaving you this letter just in case! Know one thing, my son. Your father and I love you very much ...

She then went on to write about herself and his father but her words were barely registering. His mind was in turmoil. His mother all those years ago had been dreaming about the warrior - the rider he saw in his own dreams. How could this be? What did it mean? It didn't make sense! Yet, it could not be denied. And what did the warrior's words mean? Who was Michael? What did the guardian of Israel mean? Your son would be branded with the word of Yahweh? Wasn't Yahweh an archaic term for God? He would judge and smite the wicked in righteousness?

To say the least, the whole thing was fanciful. Perhaps, the term "fantastic" would be more apt, he thought. Yet, there was no denying that his mother and he had shared the same dreams to some degree, at least. Coincidence perhaps or was it something else again

He placed the letter and photograph back inside the envelope and stuffed it into the inside pocket of his jacket. Fear pressed in on him, not fear of the physical world of which he was a part, but fear rather of a world he was not familiar with - the world of the unknown. The hands of the wall clock reminded him that it was time to keep his appointment with Doctor Lynch. Troubled, he made his way slowly to the doctor's office.

Chapter 8

SITTING AT HIS desk, Doctor Lynch held the x-ray of Lechaim's skull up to the light and pointed with his finger to reinforce his words, "Yes, Captain Lewis, you're a lucky man! Switching his gaze to the man sitting before him, he noticed that the captain was barely listening. Curious! One would have thought that the nature and extent of the head injuries would have been of some interest to the man. After all, it was his head they were discussing.

Rising from his chair, the doctor walked out from behind the desk and examined the scar on Lechaim's cheek. He then parted the hair above Lechaim's left ear and noted that the exit wound had healed completely. The surgical scarring on the cranium from the operation was also healing nicely and was now covered over by the man's growth of blond hair that was slowly but surely growing back. Nevertheless, he still had the appearance of a shorn sheep. However, little external evidence remained of the soldier's head injuries now. The lacerations to the rest of his body had long since disappeared. As for the mystery of the eyes! The doctor didn't give the man's aunt's claim that such had changed colour much credence. Eyes just don't change colour, do they?

"We may be able to fix up any scarring later with some cosmetic surgery," he murmured. "How are you feeling now? Any headaches at all?"

"No, Doctor, I feel fine! I have some gaps in my memory though! I still can't remember a thing about the night I was injured. Will I be able to remember in time?"

The Doctor hesitated for a moment before responding. "In time, possibly! The brain's a delicate object and somewhat

complex. We really still know very little about the way it functions and the effect trauma has on it. With injuries such as yours, partial amnesia is not uncommon. You may find that there will be occasions in the future where segments of time become distorted or are lost all together. You may even suffer from hallucinations. When such occurs, if indeed it does, try not to be too alarmed. In due course, your brain will compensate and a state of normality will be reached. It will help when you come into contact with places and people you have known in the past. Such will reinforce images of your past and assist in your recovery.” Doctor Lynch paused to reflect. “Time and patience are the important elements.”

The doctor considered for a moment before going on, “One thing you need to be aware of. There may be occasions when you have blackouts. In your case, it’s only a remote possibility as you have shown no signs of such to date. However, if you do experience these blackouts, then you may need additional treatment. Medication and the like.”

“Will I need to report back to you if this happens?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. The Army will be taking care of you from now on. No doubt you’ll be given a full examination and a clean bill of health prior to your returning to duty. For now, rest is the key! I understand that you do not have to report back for some time? “

“The 14th of January to be exact, another seven or eight weeks!”

“Good! Well, I’ve no doubt the Army will take good care of you then” he said as he returned to his chair.. He thumbed through the manila folder before him. “That burn on your thigh, I wouldn’t worry about. A skin graft should take care of it!”

His words, “the burn on your thigh” echoed in Lechaim’s brain. Until that moment he had not made the connection but he suddenly remembered his mother’s letter and the message the warrior gave her, “branded with the Word of Yahweh”. But then the markings on his leg could hardly be described as the Word of Yahweh because they were meaningless so he dismissed the thought as unworthy of further consideration. The whole thing was starting to get to him.

“Thank you, Doctor”, he retorted. “but I’ve had enough of hospitals for the time being. I’m grateful to you for all you’ve done for me, but you will understand if I ‘m not too anxious to see the inside of another hospital for some time.”

“I appreciate your feelings, Captain. Sometimes I would like to escape myself” he joked looking as he spoke at the mountain of folders on his desk.

The Doctor envied the captain his youth and vitality. Over the years, the demanding nature of a doctor’s calling coupled with his own particular proclivity for good living had drained any vitality out of him, and, at fifty-eight, he felt old and drained.

“What plans do you have? Your aunt informs me that you will be staying with her for a while.”

“Yes, but I intend to see the Cronins first. In fact, I’m going there after I leave here.”

“Ah, yes, the Cronins! They were the people that helped you that night, weren’t they?” The question was purely rhetorical. Before Lechaim could answer, Doctor Lynch stood up and held out his hand. “Well Captain, there’s nothing more I can do for you at the moment. Look after yourself and the best of luck.”

Lechaim shook hands with him, “Thank you, Doctor, for everything. Please thank the nurses as well. They’ve been very kind, especially Sister Flynn.”

“I’ll be sure to tell them you said so!”

As Lechaim reached the door, Doctor Lynch added, “A word of warning! These are dangerous times here in Ireland as I’ve no need to remind you. Armagh is a hazardous place to be if you are a soldier in the English Army, especially, if you are on your own. Therefore, Captain, I suggest that if you must go to see the Cronins be on your guard!”

“You can rest assured that I’ll be careful, Doctor”

The door closed and the doctor walked over to the window. Watching the big man stroll away across the quadrangle, Doctor Lynch sensed that he was watching a very special human being. It wasn’t just the statue of the man who stood six foot three with a physique to match. No, there was something about his demeanour and carriage that left a marked impression. He was everything a soldier should be and more. He was a man born to command.

He returned to his desk and eyed the paper he needed to wade through. Reaching for the packet of cigarettes in the top drawer of his desk, he was relieved to find that he had one left. Just one more and then he would definitely give them up – after all, tomorrow was always a good time to quit!

Chapter 9

SHAUN REPLACED THE receiver. “Hey! Shin’AYD! Lazarus is coming to visit us today!” he bellowed up the stairs.

No reply came from Sinead’s bedroom so he tried again. “Come on my girl, time to get up!” he shouted

Maureen came up behind him and tapped him lightly on the shoulder, “Leave her be, Shaun, she needs her sleep! She was working a late shift last night” Then she thought to ask, “Who did you say was coming?”

By now they had both made their way back into the kitchen.

“Lazarus! Her dead soldier boy!” Shaun replied grinning as he sat himself down at the breakfast table.

“Stop your teasing, Shaun. So she made a mistake! She’s only human after all!”

“Some mistake,” Shaun laughed, “She being a nurse and all. God help her patients, that’s all I can say!”

Sinead who had been awakened by the telephone’s insistent ringing some minutes before now appeared at the door. Her tousled flaming red shoulder length hair and lack of make-up did not detract in any way from her beauty. Pretending that she hadn’t heard his last remark she inquired, coyly, “Who did you say was coming?”

“You know, Sinead,” he said smirkingly. “Lazarus! That soldier boy of yours! The one that came back from the dead!”

She came over to the table and held her fist under his chin and screwed up her face. “Dah, I’m warning you!” she threatened good-humouredly as they pushed one another fondly.

For weeks now, he had kidded her about her mistake. How could a trained nurse pronounce a man dead when he was still alive? The ribbing had been continual but she had taken it in good part. The truth of the matter was that she was overjoyed that the soldier was alive. It had been a queer thing though. She could have sworn all the vital signs were absent, a pulse, a heartbeat, lack of body heat. For some while afterwards, her confidence as a nurse had been shaken to the core. Still, he was alive and that was all that really mattered.

“When’s he coming?” she casually asked endeavouring to appear unconcerned.

“Around four!”

“Why’s he coming?” Maureen interposed.

“Apparently, he wants to thank us all for helping him. I told him it wasn’t necessary but he insisted on coming over to thank us personally.”

Maureen looked anxiously at Shaun. It was one thing to help a wounded English soldier, quite another in these parts to actually entertain one in the house. It was a Catholic household and although they did not agree with the methods of the IRA, they could sympathize with its cause. They certainly didn’t want to appear to be fraternizing with an Englishman and a soldier at that.

“Don’t worry” Shaun said reassuringly, seeing the consternation in her eyes. “We’ll get rid of him as soon as we can. Best not mention his visit to anyone though. With a bit of luck, no one will be any the wiser.” He paused for reflection.

“I told him to wear his civvies. I hope he has the good sense to pay heed!”

“What do you want for breakfast, Sinead?” Maureen asked her daughter.

“More like lunch you mean!” Shaun joked.

Sinead wasn't listening, her thoughts preoccupied with the soldier with the wonderful eyes.

“Sinead! Wake up girl! Your mother's talking to you! What do you want for breakfast?” Shaun asked repeating his wife's question.

“Oh, eggs and bacon please mum!” she responded. Life felt good this particular morning, and she was ravenous.

Chapter 10

THE WINDSCREEN WIPERS fought valiantly against the driving rain as the car sped through the lush green countryside. The fan heater, its hot air pungent and comforting, provided the interior with a cosy sanctuary from the elements outside. Lechaim drove automatically, oblivious to the short sharp shower beyond the windscreen as his mind sought answers. What did the letter mean and what were its implications? Was it just a coincidence, his dream being the same as his mother's? Could such coincidences occur? Should he heed what his mother had written or disregard it? It was all so unreal, so fantastic, so unbelievable.

It took less than an hour for him to arrive at the entrance to the lane down which he had been carried weeks before. However, when he did arrive, lost in thought, he almost missed it. The battered wooden road sign being strangled by thickets off to the right didn't help. Only the lettering 'TARTH' remained on it but it was enough to tell him that he had located Clontarth Lane where the Cronins lived.

Turning down the lane, he quickly spotted a row of terraced houses off to the left. Then he saw it, the number "five" displayed crookedly on one of the pebbledash facades. Pulling up before the double storied home, he sat surveying it for some seconds before he switched off the engine and got out. As he walked towards the house, he observed a movement at the curtains of an upstairs window. Strolling up the path to the heavy front door, he knew someone was watching him from above. The buzzer was loud and shrill as it echoed in the hallway beyond. Waiting there, he looked around and noted his surrounds. The falling rain had eased to a persistent drizzle, and

the lane and its island of homes seemed, all at once, drab and bleak.

Sinead had seen him coming from her bedroom window. In fact, she had been waiting there for some time to witness his arrival. She studied him closely as he got out of the car and walked up the path to the front door. The sound of the buzzer stirred her into action and she skipped down the stairs in eager anticipation.

“Sinead, for goodness sake!” Maureen gently admonished as she and Sinead nearly collided in the hallway. Sinead gave a nervous little laugh as she apologised, “Sorry, mum!”

“Well, answer the door then!” Maureen said.

“No, you do it mum!” and before her mother could protest, Sinead had disappeared into the kitchen.

“Well, I never!” Maureen declared and started down the passage. “What’s coming over the girl!”

Just as Lechaim had begun to wonder whether this had been such a good idea, he heard movement behind the solid timber. The door swung open and a middle aged, attractive, plumpish woman with dark hair streaked with minute strands of grey, held in a bun at the back, appeared in the doorway.

“Mrs. Cronin?” he inquired.

She didn’t answer his question immediately but stood looking at him for a time.

“Captain Lewis?” she asked uncertainly. This handsome young man with his closely cropped head of blond hair now confronting her looked so different from the one that had been carried into her kitchen that night. His height, however, gave him away.

“Yes, I’m Captain Lewis” he replied. I phoned earlier.”

“Please come in, Captain. My husband is expecting you” she said warmly, and showed him through the narrow hallway to the back of the house.

The house was much larger than its outside appearance had led him to believe. The bedrooms being above, the ground floor consisted of a large front room, a parlour at the rear, and a kitchen adjoining the parlour in which, judging from the smell, something quite delicious was cooking. It was the kitchen into which he was now ushered, where he found a ruddy, short, red headed man, stocky in build waiting to greet him with hand outstretched.

“Welcome, Captain, Shaun Cronin!”

Lechaim gripped Shaun’s hand and tried to recall the man but could not. “Mr. Cronin. I’m very pleased to meet you at long last. “All of you!” he declared turning his eyes to the girl and her mother. As his eyes met the girls, he found himself bewitched by her. Her features were finely chiselled in soft delicate skin and her hair was a flaming Irish red like her father’s but softer in texture, with green eyes, sensual, and inviting.

“Hello”, she said shyly in a voice, lilting, delightful, melodious, and very Emerald Isle.

“Shaun! Call me Shaun,” he heard Shaun say. “This is my daughter, Sinead, and this,” he announced gesturing to the woman that had greeted Lechaim at the door, “is Maureen, my wife!” Shaun then waved him over to the kitchen table that had been set for a meal. “Have you eaten Captain?” he inquired.

Lechaim immediately sensed the warmth in this family as he answered. “No, I haven’t. I was going to grab something to eat when I leave here.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Maureen interjected. “We’re just about to eat . You’re very welcome to eat with us, Captain - nothing fancy mind!”

Shaun smiled to himself when he heard her words. She had been fussing all afternoon to make the place tidy and prepare a meal for their visitor.

“That’s very kind of you, Mrs. Cronin,” he said.

“Maureen!” she insisted.

“Okay, Maureen! My name’s Le CHIME!”

“That’s a most peculiar name!” she replied. “Where does it come from?”

He thought for a moment before responding. “I have no idea!” and he was being totally honest when he said it. In truth he had never really given much thought to his name before, but he did seem to have a rather unique name now that she mentioned it.

“Sit down! Sit down, Lechaim!” Shaun urged and Lechaim duly sat down on the chair that Shaun had pulled out for him at the table.

“I really do want to thank you all for helping me that night!” he said when he was seated. His eyes met the girl’s once more as he spoke and they lingered there until she glanced away self-consciously.

Shaun felt a trifle embarrassed by the captain’s words. They had only done what any Christian family would have done. Still, it was nice of him to say it. Looking at the soldier, who, thank God, was not in uniform, Shaun found it hard to believe that it was the same man they had carried in that night. There was something altogether different about him now. Masking his embarrassment, Shaun replied, “We were glad to help. How are you feeling now?”

“They tell me I am well enough. Everything appears to be healing although I still look a little grotesque,” he joked as he ran his fingers along the welt on his cheek and rubbed a hand over his cropped head.

Hardly that, Sinead thought as she stared at this blond Adonis with the bluest and most beautiful eyes she had ever seen. The wound to his cheek was just a scar now and it did not distract in any way from his good looks.

“I can’t remember anything about that night, I’m afraid!” Then, turning to Sinead, he asked, “Were you here that night?”

It was Shaun that laughingly responded, “It was Sinead that pronounced you dead. It gave us quite a turn when you came back to life, I can tell you!”

Sinead reddened under his gaze. “Dah!” she exclaimed throwing her father daggers with her eyes. Hastily, she sought to change the subject. “When do you expect to return to duty, Captain?” She did not feel comfortable enough yet to call him Lechaim.

“Lechaim!” he reminded her. “In about seven or eight weeks, all being well. I’m returning to England to stay with my mother. I’ll spend Christmas there and then,” he paused for moment, “and then back to the grindstone.” He had deliberately avoided any mention of his returning to duty as he suspected that anything to do with the British Army was abhorrent to them.

Maureen liked the man very much, she decided as she listened to him talking. He had obviously been well educated but didn’t appear awkward or affected in their company. Fussing over her cooking on the stove, she was struck by the power the man seemed to emanate. His very presence made her pulse rate jump. Sinead’s interest in the man had been obvious

enough and Maureen was a little envious. She, for her part, had never experienced the depths of passion that a lucky few are fortunate to know. Shaun and she had met when she was eighteen and before she really knew much about life. Ignorance led to pregnancy, which led to marriage. In Ireland it was a national trait. Sinead had been conceived in a field one warm August evening. Shaun's haste and ignorance of a woman's anatomy had not aroused any ardour in her; his efforts at lovemaking clumsy as they coupled on the grassy bank. His entry had been painful for her, and his hasty climax came as a welcome rather than a passionate relief from his laborious efforts. Over the years, she had grown to love Shaun in her own way, but he had never sexually satisfied her. Like most women in her circumstances, she sometimes longed for the sexual fulfilment a worldly man could give. Not that Shaun was an unkind man in any way. It was just that he had been brought up with the notion that women in marriage were there to simply give pleasure to their husbands. It would never occur to him that she, being a woman, also needed sexual release. However, she never thought to broach the subject with him. It was the Irish way and she accepted it. However, when a man like Lechaim came along, she was reminded of what she had missed.

Now, as she looked at him, she knew that if she were young again. Lechaim would be the man for her. His natural charm, manner and looks were truly magnetic. She also understood what Sinead meant now about the man's eyes. They were truly beautiful! Maureen could not but help notice how Sinead and the captain looked at each other. Whilst Maureen might begrudge, in some small way, Sinead's youth, she loved her daughter very much. It had always been her fondest hope that Sinead would find in a man the passion she had not. The

man that had just come into their home would make a perfect son-in-law, Maureen decided and she intended to pursue the possibilities for all they were worth. But was he available and was he Catholic?

She could see that the two men were engaged in easy conversation. Leaving her cooking for a moment, Maureen walked across to the table and stood behind Shaun who was sitting opposite Lechaim at the table. Placing her hands on Shaun's shoulders, she listened to the men for a while until an opportunity presented itself. "Are you married Lechaim?" she then asked.

Sinead found herself blushing again, this time at her mother's boldness. He paused for two or three seconds and then looked up at her. "No, I am not, Maureen! In the circumstances, it's probably just as well."

"Oh! how so?" Shaun asked.

"Unfortunately, it seems that the injury has resulted in some brain damage. It could take a while before all is well again. I wouldn't want to burden a woman with my troubles."

"How little you know about women, Lechaim?" Maureen exclaimed. "We're at our best when our men folk are in trouble!" As she spoke, she gave Shaun's neck an affectionate squeeze. "Isn't that so, Shaun?"

Sinead's feelings for the man that made her heart race were suddenly maternal and she wanted to hold him in her arms. Yet, his obvious strength suggested that he was more than capable of overcoming any adversity that life had to throw up, such was his assuredness and self-confidence. Her mother's next question broke in on her thoughts.

"And what religion are you, Lechaim?"

Sinead who was now helping her mother prepare the table was mortified. What was her mother thinking. She would spoil everything.

Lechaim was somewhat taken aback by the question, but he gave her the answer he knew she wanted to hear.

“I’m Catholic, Maureen!” He felt it prudent to omit that the last time he had been inside a church was when he had been baptised nearly thirty years ago.

Maureen, seemingly satisfied, returned to her stove, content to let the others make conversation while she listened. Stirring the vegetables, she felt Sinead, who was standing beside her, give her a nudge. Maureen turned and winked at her and Sinead coloured once again. That girl’s in love, Maureen thought and who could blame her.

Before long the table was becoming crowded with home made jams, huge slices of oven baked bread, a rum cake and other delights as both Maureen and Sinead laboured. The aroma of the freshly baked bread and the smell of the roast wafted in the air, reminding Lechaim of how hungry he was. The main course, when it arrived on the table was simple but wholesome. A mountain of roast lamb, circled by roast potatoes, peas and dumplings.

“You get that inside you, Lechaim” Shaun insisted as Maureen laid a generous plate of the meat and vegetables before him. “

“Thank you!” he replied to Shaun and smiled his thanks to Maureen as she fussed around him. “It looks delicious!”

As they ate the talk continued unabated. Lechaim felt very much at home with these people who until a short while before had been strangers. Maybe, even his enemy. They, too responded to Lechaim in kind, and Shaun’s earlier ploy to “get

rid of the man as soon as possible” did not even cross their minds. Therefore, what was to have been a brief visit lasted well into the evening. Finally, when Lechaim suggested that he should be leaving, Shaun would have none of it.

“Nonsense, Lechaim. You must stay the night! It’s dangerous driving around here after dark.”

“I can vouch for that!” Lechaim agreed and they all laughed.

It was a kind offer and Lechaim was pleased to accept. It was late, there was danger on the roads, but most of all he wanted to be with Sinead for as long as possible. Lechaim had known the instant he saw her that this young woman would play a very important role in his life from then on. Love at first sight is illogical, he had reasoned, but then love is illogical anyway. In Lechaim’s case, desire did not predominate his thinking despite Sinead’s beauty. It was something more ethereal than that. Something so ineffable that he could not put it into words, even if he had wanted to. He was caught up in a tide of emotions that only a person that has known love can truly appreciate or understand. The sensual is a by-product rather than the driving force that governs such, the other person’s needs being more important than your own.

The evening was spent sitting around an open fire in the parlour drinking from a bottomless teapot. Sinead had positioned herself beside Lechaim on the sofa with a photo album perched on her knees. Maureen was busy knitting while Shaun was puffing away on his pipe. As she flicked the pages, Sinead was conscious of Lechaim’s body against hers. The physical tension between them cried for release, and she found it difficult to concentrate on the photographs before her; ones she knew so well. “This is my Uncle Michael” she said pointing

to one of the colour photographs showing a priest standing before St. Peters in Rome.”

The name, Michael, jolted Lechaim’s memory, “..when he joins with Michael, the guardian of Israel..”

Shaun chimed in, “My brother is the star in this family. He is a monsignor and holds a high position in the Vatican. Something to do with finance or the like.” His brother, Monsignor Michael Cronin, had tried to explain the workings of the Vatican’s finances to Shaun but it had not really sunk in.

“He’s coming to Ireland shortly, isn’t he dah?” Sinead added.

Lechaim wasn’t listening however. Even while the words, “.. when he joins with Michael, the guardian of Israel..” were sending out alarm bells, his eyes caught the markings at the bottom of her Uncle’s photograph. Some letters and numbers in very small faded print resulting, no doubt, from a double-exposure when the photograph was being developed were making his blood run cold. In normal circumstances, he would hardly have given the markings any heed and nor would anyone else looking at the print. These markings, however, were different.

“Are you all right?” Sinead asked anxiously noticing that Lechaim’s face had drained of colour.

“Yes, just a little tired!” he lied as he tried to mask his concern.

“Of course you are!” Maureen declared. “Come on,” she said to everyone, “time for bed! It’s been a long day for all of us!”

Sinead made a bed up for him on the sofa in the room the others were now vacating and they said their “goodnights”. When they had gone, Lechaim switched the light off and settled

down on the sofa as best he could, for the sofa was a little small for his large frame. As he lay there, the markings he had seen at the bottom of the photograph were swirling around in his head. They consisted of the letters “YWHM” then the numbers “6724 78 374.” It was easy enough for him to recall the letters and numbers because he already knew them by heart. They were the same as those branded on his right thigh. It suddenly seemed that his life was turning into a nightmare. Was this really happening? Everything that had happened so far seemed such an improbable coincidence. The contents of the letter were once more foremost on his mind. For some hours he turned restlessly, unable to sleep until he finally succumbed.

.... The rider reined his horse before him, and Lechaim looked into his friend's eyes. They appeared to him like orbs of fire mounted in a face of alabaster. A gentle puff of wind billowed the mounted man's cape; its hem of golden friezes dancing in the ebb and flow of the gentle breeze, exposing the rider's thigh. The letters “YWHM” were emblazoned there and the numbers “6724 78 374” stood out clearly on the ivory skin....

He awoke with a start to find her bending over him. The nightie she wore beneath the dressing gown had fallen away to reveal her taut breasts; the nipples of which had hardened in the cold night air. At any other time, the sight would have aroused him, however, his thoughts were too full to dwell on the pleasures that her body offered

“You were having a bad dream!” she said. Conscious of where his eyes had lingered, she straightened up and tightened the belt of her robe precluding any further visual forays on his part. Not that his interest displeased her, quite the contrary as evidenced by the moistness of the vestibule between her legs.

He hid a smile as he noted her show of virtue. Not like some of the girls he had known, he thought. He found her modesty rather appealing, in fact.

“Did I wake your parents?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she replied as she listened for any movement in the house.

“Sorry about that. Just a dream I keep having. It doesn’t seem to go away.”

“It’s probably something to do with that head wound of yours!”

“So the doctors tell me.” He was tempted to tell her about the bizarre happenings in his life, but he was still unsure of her. She might be too young or naive to handle such matters. Besides, she might think that he was crazy. He wouldn’t blame her. No, he would establish a relationship with her first and then, if he still felt the need later, he would tell her. They soon found themselves deep in conversation about the mundane things of life; things that people talk about when they are in love. Morning was edging through the windows when she went to leave.

“I would like to see you again, Sinead.”

“And I you!”

Her kiss when their lips met was inexperienced, and it aroused in him a shock of desire because it was laced with such innocence. Somehow, her naivety stirred his carnal instincts threatening to nullify his more nobler intentions. His love for her, however, gave him the strength to resist and be patient.

She too felt an unbearable need to submit to her desires totally as the warmth of his lips coursed through hers. The sexual tension between them was palpable as they held each other tightly. Finally, but reluctantly, she pulled away.

“I had better go before my parents get up. Give me your address in England and I’ll write to you!”

His life, which until a few hours before had been so confused, had suddenly taken on a new meaning and purpose. He was now in love with all the intensity and passion that such implies. A future, full of promise, beckoned and his earlier fears, subjugated by emotions too powerful to ignore or rebuff, retreated into the deep recesses of his subconscious where they would lie dormant until they were reawakened

Chapter 11

JOAN DAVIES COULD not recall when she had spent a happier Christmas. Not only had Lechaim been at home to celebrate it with her, but Carlos and Eva Rega, and their two children, were there as well. Their boys, Eduardo and Jose, who were eight and six years old respectively, had won Joan's heart and so had their parents. The Regas lived up to everything Lechaim had previously said about them. Eva was a delight and obviously adored Lechaim. As Eva put it when they arrived on the doorstep, "Lechaim is our dearest friend! Don't you worry about us. We'll all manage fine!" and they did despite the fact that the house was rather small. How pleasant their stay had been and she would certainly miss them when they left. The Regas somehow gave the house that lived-in feel that she had missed since her husband had passed away and Lechaim's army career had taken him from her. Soon, she realized, the house would be empty again but she tried to put such thoughts to the back of her mind.

Eva, who had been standing at the window watching the two men walk away down to the sea front, turned and spoke in that pleasant modulated voice of hers with a distinct accent that marked her as a foreigner.

"When does Lechaim have to be back in Ireland?"

Joan, who never ceased to be amazed at Carlos and Eva's fluent command of English, a second language to them, replied with a grimace on her face. "In two weeks!"

Eva thought for a moment, "It's very odd about his eyes! What do the doctors say?"

"Nothing much. I don't think his doctor in Ireland quite believed me when I mentioned that his eyes had changed colour.

Thank goodness, you agree with me. I thought I was going mad there for a while!"

"Both Carlos and I noticed it at once. He had brown eyes before, from what I remember! They are so blue now!" She pondered the problem for some seconds and then spoke again. "I've never seen anyone with eyes quite that blue before. Still, they are such beautiful eyes. They seem to give him an entirely different look somehow. Don't you think?"

"Oh, I agree!" Joan conceded. "I tried to explain that to his doctor, but he would have none of it." She gave a short low laugh. "Sometimes, when I'm speaking to him, it's almost as if there is someone else behind the eyes looking back! It's very strange."

"Oh, it's Lechaim, all right!" Eva exclaimed. "He's still as wonderful as ever and the children love him."

I love him too if the truth be known, Eva thought, but did not say, as she turned back to look out the window once again. She now loved three men, Carlos, her father, and Lechaim. It wasn't a physical thing although Lechaim was the sort of man that would appeal to most women. No, it was more an affinity, a bond of friendship and mutual respect that had been born out of gratitude and had then evolved into a deep affection. Certainly, Lechaim was the big, strong, handsome, wonderful man that had saved her husband's life on Islas Malvinas years before, but to her and Carlos he was much more than that. She had met Lechaim for the first time at her wedding in Argentina and had got to know him in the years since. When Lechaim's mother had first phoned them in Manila three months' ago with the news that Lechaim had been critically injured, both she and Carlos were crushed. It was only at Joan's insistence that they had not immediately flown to Ireland to be at his bedside.

“There’s nothing you can do. When’s he out of danger, I’ll let you know!” his mother had said. Then, when Lechaim was on the road to recovery, Carlos had fallen ill with some strain of tropical disease, which had delayed their trip even further. In the end though it had worked out quite well because they had all now been able to spend Christmas together.

Apart from the cold, which Eva found unremitting after the tropics, the holiday had been most enjoyable. Lechaim was well again, they had spent much of their time touring around southern England with Lechaim and his mother by car, and their friendship with their dear friend, and now his mother, was ever closer. Tomorrow, they would be returning to the Philippines and Saltdean and the English winter would be just a memory. The climate apart, Eva would be sorry to leave these halcyon days behind although their own home in the sun was a far from unpleasant place to return to. Joan’s voice intruded on her thoughts.

“I expect you’ll be glad to return home!”

Eva turned to face her again. “Oh no! I’ve loved it here! And it was so good to see Lechaim again! Then she added, not wishing to offend, “and, of course, to meet you at long last!”

“We’ve loved having you here. I know that Lechaim has enjoyed your stay immensely. I haven’t seen him this happy for a long time!”

Eva gave a low laugh. “I think that Carlos and I cannot take all the credit. He never seems to stop talking about this girl, Sinead!”

“Hmm! Sinead,” Joan answered uncertainly. I haven’t met her myself. Apparently, she’s the daughter of the man that helped Lechaim the night he was injured.”

“Really! The way Lechaim speaks of her, it sounds serious?”

“Lechaim’s always been reluctant to tie himself down. He was engaged some three years ago but nothing came of it. But, this time, it might be different.”

“You think so?” Eva asked.

“Yes! I’ve never seen Lechaim this way before about a woman and he’s only met her once!”

“Only once?”

“Yes, when he went to visit her family just before returning to England. Now she writes to him almost every day and you’ve heard them on the phone so you can judge for yourself.”

“I’m glad,” Eva said. “He’s a wonderful man and he’ll make a wonderful husband. Carlos and I would like to see him settle down.”

“Settle down!” Joan exclaimed. “That’ll be the day when he settles down! Still, the Cronins sound like a nice family from what Lechaim has told me. She seems rather young though.”

“How old is she?” .

“Twenty-one!”

“Well, I was younger when Carlos and I got married!”

“Really,” Joan said. “Well I guess it can work out if people love one another!”

Before Eva could respond, her two boys came bounding into the room.

“Look mummy, look!” Eduardo exclaimed excitedly holding up a plastic model aeroplane in one of his small hands.

Mine! mine!” Jose shouted trying to grab it off his brother.

Eva was angry. "Have you been into Uncle's Lechaim's room again?" she demanded and the two boys looked sheepishly at one another. "He did! He did!" little Jose confessed pointing at Eduardo who was looking guiltily away.

"It's all right!" Joan responded. "It's just one of Lechaim's toys that he played with as a child. I keep them in a chest in his room."

Eva directed herself still at her sons. "I've told you a hundred times. Do not touch other people's things! Now, haven't I?"

"Joan placed her hand on Eva's arm. "Don't worry. Lechaim has no further use for those sorts of things. I'm sure Lechaim wouldn't mind the boys helping themselves."

The two rascals eyed each other gleefully. They had already seen the wonders that abounded inside the big wooden box.

"Well, if it's okay with Lechaim," Eva said. Turning to the two culprits, she decreed, "You make certain you ask Uncle Lechaim nicely whether you can have two toys! No more, mind you!"

"Only two?" Eduardo questioned.

"Yes, I've told you before about being greedy, haven't I?"

Happy in their own mind, the two of them charged out of the room and back up the stairs to seize the most appealing toys they could find.

"Walk, don't run!" Eva shouted after them. Then turning to Joan, she protested. "They can be little devils at times!"

How lucky she was to have such a pair of devils, Joan thought. She remembered back to the time when her husband was alive and Lechaim was just a boy. The times they had then,

the three of them, content to exist in their small house by the sea. , Joan knew only too well that the sands of time move with the wind and nothing remains as it was. She could only hope that Eva and her family would be as happy as Ted and she were way back then. Somehow, she suspected that the Regas would be for their love was evident for all to see.

Some half-mile away, Lechaim and Carlos were ambling along the sea front. The promenade on which they were sauntering fronted steep cliffs that the pair had descended a short while before by way of a flight of concrete steps. Winter storms constantly battered the chalk cliffs that skirted this stretch of coast but the sea only rolled angrily today, although it occasionally became petulant, making its presence felt by hammering against the sea wall. When this occurred, both men would laughingly run to avoid the fountain of spray that shot into the air.

They were wrapped up well against the biting wind. Carlos wore a pair of beige slacks, a dark green shirt, a brown pullover, a heavy overcoat of blue which clashed considerably with his other garments, a red scarf wound tightly around his neck and heavy duty shoes. A cloth cap was pulled down over his head giving him a rather incongruous appearance.

“Carlos, my friend. What do you look like?” Lechaim said, grinning at him as they strolled along.

Carlos flashed a smile back. “I don’t know about you but I’m bloody cold! At this particular moment, I don’t care what I look like!”

For his part Lechaim was not exactly a fashion statement either. Like Carlos, he was dressed for comfort, not show, having on an expensive brown sheepskin jacket, a pair of blue jeans, brown hiker boots and a red polar neck jumper.

The two men walked side by side with their hands thrust deep into their pockets, the smaller man walking with a pronounced limp.

Carlos, was not by any stretch of the imagination a good-looking man with his long nose, stout face, slightly protruding ears and swarthy complexion. His artificial leg, which was the cause of his limp, did nothing to enhance his physical attributes but he had the one commodity that was vital in human kind - a kind heart. Since that night in the Falklands, he and Lechaim had formed a close friendship based on mutual respect and kinship of soul. Lechaim towered above his friend by nearly eight inches and was also five years younger. Good living had filled out Carlos' waistline and his dark curly hair was beginning to thin on top making him look older than his thirty-five years. None of this mattered to either men, however, as they soaked up each other's company.

The colours were so different here from those in the tropics, Carlos thought as he tried to keep up with his friend. In the Philippines, where he now lived and worked, colours took on a brilliant hue, but here in this grey place there always seemed to be a dull edge to everything, an imperceptible patina as it were. Mind you, it would help if the sun made an appearance now and again to brighten things up, he concluded. He was about to make a joke about the English weather when his companion spoke.

"Well! What do you think about those dreams I've been having and my mother's letter?"

Carlos was at a loss as to how to answer his friend.

"It all sounds very peculiar to me!" he finally replied. Carlos' mind went back to their previous conversation the night before when Lechaim had first broached the subject. He had no

reason to doubt Lechaim's sincerity, but the mystical implications were something else again. Both he and Eva were devout Catholics, so they had been conditioned to treat anything that was paranormal with both caution and trepidation.

"These dreams of yours! You say there're tied in somehow with your real mother and the dreams she use to have?"

"You read her letter! What do you make of it?"

"To be honest, I don't know what to make of it. You haven't had the dream since you returned to England?"

"No, not for some four weeks now!" In fact Lechaim had not had the dream since the night he had spent at the Cronins'.

Carlos wanted to say something to reassure his friend but what? As he sought for the words to put his friend's mind at rest, Lechaim continued, "There's one other thing!

"Oh! What's that?" Carlos inquired curiously.

"Until now I've had no memory of that night in the Malvinas when we were in that mine field." He always called the Falklands 'the Malvinas' in deference to Carlos' nationality. "It was only when you arrived that I remembered, and I mean everything about that night!"

"Well, one thing's for certain. I'll never forget that night!" Carlos remarked.

Lechaim hesitated before he committed himself and then plunged in, "Someone else was out there!"

"Someone else?" Carlos was not certain whether he had heard him correctly. "Did you say someone else?"

"Yes, someone else!"

The men stopped and sat down on a wooden bench that had presented itself on the promenade. Carlos lit a cigarette and

pulled deeply on it. Finally, he asked, “Who did you see out there?”

“You remember that it was quite misty that night?”

“Vaguely!” Carlos said.

“A short while before I found you, I saw someone ahead of me, fifty feet or so away, in the mist, then he disappeared.

“What do you mean, disappeared?”

“Just that! One minute, he was there, the next he was gone!”

“A soldier, you mean?” Carlos inquired. “If he was one of ours, you probably scared the shit out of him! You’re enough to scare anyone on a dark night, believe me!” Lechaim laughed as his friend went on, “Anyway, what’s the big mystery? There must have been quite a few soldiers scattered around that hill?”

“Soldiers! Yes!” Lechaim remarked, “but he was no soldier!”

Carlos was now quite intrigued. “Who was he then?”

“As I said, it was misty so I couldn’t be sure.”

“Sure of what?”

Lechaim paused and laughed self-consciously. “No, forget it! You will really think I’m crazy if I tell you what I think I saw!”

“No, tell me!” Carlos insisted impatiently, his curiosity really aroused now. “If you tell me, you saw someone out there, I’ll believe you. You know that!”

“Yes, but it’s really a question of who I saw that you may find hard to believe!”

“Oh! And who did you see?” Carlos inquired.

“I think I saw the warrior I have been dreaming about!”

Carlos couldn’t control himself and he burst out laughing.

“Sorry! Sorry!” he spluttered. “ I shouldn’t be laughing but I can’t help it.” Carlos’ mood was infectious and Lechaim at once saw the humour in it. He began to laugh himself more in relief than anything else.

“I know, I know!” Lechaim gasped when they were all laughed out. “It’s the hole in the head! It gives me an excuse to rave now and again, right!”

Carlos then realized that Lechaim had not been pulling his leg. “You really think you saw the man in your dream, this so called warrior?” Carlos said, searching his friend’s face and finding only sincerity there.

“Frankly, my friend, I’m not sure of anything any more!”

Lechaim didn’t really have to think hard about the events of that night. His memory now of the incident was as clear as if it had just happened.

“One thing is for sure though! If he hadn’t have been there, I would never have found you!”

“How so?”

“You see, he was standing there pointing! When I looked again, he was gone. I walked in the direction he indicated and there you were!”

“But you’ve always maintained that you followed my footprints that night.”

“Yes, I’m sorry about that but if I had told you the truth, would you have believed me?”

“Perhaps not!” Carlos agreed as he considered what Lechaim had told him. Then he had a thought, “Well, thank God you did find me! Otherwise, I wouldn’t be around now and that’s a fact.” Carlos contemplated this fact for a second or two and then exclaimed, “I wonder if it was my guardian angel?”

Lechaim looked at Carlos to see whether he was joking but this time it was Carlos who was deadly serious. Carlos did not believe in ancient warriors appearing at will, but angels were another thing. Being a Catholic, he could believe in those.

Carlos suddenly tapped himself on the head with his hand as an explanation presented itself. “But, don’t you get it?” he said. “It’s that head wound of yours! Didn’t that doctor in Ireland tell you that you might hallucinate? That’s what it is, a delusion”

Lechaim pondered Carlos’ words. Could it be that simple he wondered? Once again he recalled that night, the mist, the cold, the stark landscape and the warrior that had appeared and then disappeared in the mist. Could something that seemed so real just be a product of his imagination? Then again, why not?

“You’re probably right! Lechaim responded after deliberating for a while.

“Lechaim, my dear friend. Even your head’s not hard enough to bounce pieces of metal off. Don’t expect too much of yourself.”

“Carlos! You old so and so! I think you’ve hit the nail on the head!” Lechaim exclaimed, giving his friend an affectionate slap on the back.

“Watch it, you big ox!” Carlos retorted shaping up to his friend in mock fashion. In reality the smaller man would have stood no chance in a real contest, as he would have been the first to admit.

“We’d better get back!” Lechaim said as he looked at his watch. “No need to worry Eva with this, otherwise she’ll think I’ve lost it!”

“Don’t worry about her! She’s quite convinced you never found it!” Carlos chuckled.

Lechaim gave him a friendly shove as they started back and said threateningly, “Watch it or you’ll get nothing to eat!”

Carlos decided to change the subject altogether by making mention of the one topic that he knew his friend would find irresistible.

“Sinead! This girl you’ve met! Can you really be that sure after just one meeting?”

Lechaim stopped walking and his friend did likewise. Facing him, Lechaim said earnestly, “I can’t believe it myself! Yet, I can’t get her out of my mind! I go to bed thinking about her and I get up thinking about her! I’m constantly looking at my watch wondering what’s she’s doing at that particular moment!” Lechaim saw understanding in Carlos’ face. “It’s not a sexual thing, you understand. Not like the others! No! With Sinead, it’s something else entirely!”

“Sound like you’re in love?!” Carlos said, the smile playing about his lips, as he looked up at his friend.

“Hmm! It does, doesn’t it,” Lechaim said, although it was more to himself than his companion that he acknowledged the fact.

Carlos knew exactly what Lechaim meant for he had felt that way about Eva years before and still did for that matter. At long last it appeared that his friend had found love, and not before time Eva would remark later. They were always debating when Lechaim would settle down and get married and now, at long last, that day appeared to be dawning.

“Want a beer before we go back?” Lechaim asked suddenly as he started walking again.

“Sounds good to me!” Carlos responded as he tagged along beside him.

“Hey, that’s snow falling!” Lechaim remarked as the two men made their way towards a pub in Saltdean.

“What a country! What a country! Carlos exclaimed.

“Beats the bloody Malvinas though, hey?”

Carlos shivered as he remembered the biting cold of that winter campaign. “Just! he answered. “Just!”

When they finally returned home that afternoon, the two of them went to Lechaim’s study. Rummaging through his desk drawers Lechaim found the photograph that had caused him so much consternation in Ireland. Before leaving the Cronin’s house after his overnight stay with them, he had asked Sinead if he could borrow it. Although she had been somewhat perplexed by his request, she knew that there had to be a good reason for him wanting the photograph, so she was happy enough to turn it over to him without pressing him too hard for an explanation.

Studying the print now, he laughed in sheer relief for he realised that Carlos had been right after all. His mind had been playing tricks on him because there were no superimposed numbers to be seen anywhere on it. He handed it to Carlos for confirmation.

From his conversation with Lechaim earlier that afternoon, Carlos knew that the priest in the photograph was Monsignor Michael Cronin, who had been snapped as he stood before St. Peters in Rome. The photograph was not a good one. The Monsignor’s face was out of focus although the face of his companion standing directly behind him was clear enough. Judging from the other man’s garb, Carlos guessed that he was a bishop or cardinal.

“So, where are these numbers you were talking about?” Carlos asked as his eyes scoured the print for them.

Lechaim laughed once more as he replied. “Where indeed, my friend! Where indeed!”

Chapter 12

THE COLONEL EYES brushed over the details in the file, *“Captain Lechaim, Francis, Lewis - born 20th May, 1964 in Cardiff, Wales. Son of Robert and Elizabeth Lewis now deceased. Adopted by Elizabeth’s sister, Joan Davies. Husband, Edward Davies, now deceased. Grammar School education. Entered the British Army as a cadet. At the age of just eighteen, won the Military Cross in the Falklands War when a sub-lieutenant.”*

Then the Colonel’s eyes came to rest on the comments regarding the soldier’s one misdemeanour.

“Lieutenant Lewis on the night of June 12, 1982 disobeyed direct orders by rescuing an Argentinean soldier from a mine field. The unofficial orders of the day were quite specific, ‘Take no prisoners.’ A severe reprimand had been considered by his battalion commander but the lieutenant’s actions the following night on Mount Harriet were considered sufficient grounds for no further action.”

Colonel Ryan, a professional soldier himself for many years, was full of admiration as he then read of the man’s citation and award for bravery.

“For his actions on the night of June 13, 1982 on the slopes of Mount Harriet, during the Falkland Islands Conflict, Lieutenant Lechaim F. Lewis was awarded the Military Cross. Lieutenant Lewis single-handedly neutralized two machine gun posts, which were pinning down his platoon. Lieutenant Lewis, who, the night before, had rescued an enemy soldier from a mine field at great personal risk to himself, then led his men on a charge up the slopes of the west ridge under sustained fire from enemy forces that were well dug-in.

Lieutenant Lewis' exemplary conduct and leadership under fire during this engagement were pivotal in the subsequent surrender by Argentinean infantry who were holding the upper ground."

Yes, Captain Lewis with his background and record was just the man he was looking for, the Colonel decided.

The man sitting facing him on the other side of the desk shifted his feet impatiently to remind the Colonel that he was not alone.

"Well, Doctor Webster, what's the verdict?"

"Quite frankly, Colonel, the man's extremely lucky not to be a vegetable. As for his eyes changing colour, that's a new one! I've never come across such a case before." The doctor was in his element now. "Some memory loss, of course, is quite common in these cases! After all, the brain's a complex thing and apt to go wrong when subjected to trauma."

The Colonel could see that the neurologist was about to elaborate on his pet subject and he leaned back in his chair impatiently.

"In Captain Lewis's case, a sizable portion of his brain was damaged causing a massive trauma. Any retrograde and posttraumatic amnesia Captain Lewis suffered..."

"Doctor Webster! Is Captain Lewis ready to return to duty or isn't he?" the Colonel snapped impatiently. "You've had him for three months now!"

The doctor, the Colonel knew was liable to give long technical lectures if he were at all encouraged. The Colonel for one did not have the time or patience to indulge him.

The balding young intellectual noted the bulldog like expression on the Colonel's face, which had caused many a young soldier's pulse to race when that expression had been

directed at them. The doctor, however, was made of sterner stuff.

"It's true that Captain Lewis has recovered physically. However, we don't know the long-term effects of his injury. He may go for years and suddenly have a relapse." He crossed his legs as he went on, "These cases are impossible to predict. However, I can see no reason why he cannot return to light duties with immediate effect. I feel that a little more time is warranted before Captain Lewis can return to normal duties again though."

"I see! Well, thank you, Doctor. Please let me have your full report in due course! That will be all."

"But.."

"That will be all, doctor."

The doctor was in a surly mood when he shut the door behind him, giving vent to his feelings. "Stupid prat!" he muttered. "Old farts! We're being led by old farts!" He said it loud enough to bolster his flagging ego but not audible enough to the man within. His temerity did not extend that far.

It was then that he became aware of Lechaim who was sitting outside the Colonel's office waiting to go in. The doctor sought at once to hide his embarrassment.

"Captain Lewis! There you are and how are you today!"

"I'm very well, Doctor!" Lechaim responded. He had heard the doctor's mutterings and had wondered what the Colonel had done to upset him.

"That's good! Very good! Well, I must be getting along! Time waits for no man and all that!" With that the doctor made a hasty departure and Lechaim was left to wonder at the arrogance of youth. The Colonel was a fine soldier, Lechaim had long ago decided, even if the doctor did not agree. He then

began to wonder what the Colonel wanted to see him about. Not for long though because the door opened and the Colonel appeared.

“Come right in, Captain Lewis!”

“Thank you, sir!” Lechaim said getting to his feet and walking through.

“Please sit down, Captain,” the Colonel insisted as he returned to his chair behind a desk devoid of any paperwork. The Colonel was a stickler for neatness and his office advertised the fact.

“A cigarette perhaps, the Colonel inquired offering one from the packet he took out of his jacket pocket.

“No, thank you sir, I don’t smoke!”

“Ah, yes, that’s right! You don’t smoke, do you! A wise man to be sure!”

Colonel Ryan lit one himself and leaned back in his chair. He was eighteen years older than Lechaim, but still lean and handsome. In no man’s language other than the doctor’s could he be described as an old fart. It was true that his once jet-black hair was now almost completely grey, but he was Sandhurst trained, and the ultimate professional. Certainly, he was well respected by all that served with him, bar one. But then the Colonel had little time for “tinpot” soldiers as he called them and he had placed the good doctor in that category some time ago.

Smiling, the Colonel asked, “How do you feel about returning to duty, Captain?”

“Fine, sir!”

The Colonel sat looking at him for a moment before inquiring, “I believe that you are on friendly terms with a family called the Cronins?”

The question was so unexpected that Lechaim could only reply, "I'm sorry sir?"

"A family called the Cronins. Shaun, Maureen and their daughter!"

God, they must be on the list!" Lechaim thought as he waited for the Colonel to continue.

"Don't worry! They're not in any trouble!"

"I'm relieved to hear that sir! Lechaim exclaimed. "Yes, I know the Cronins!" he acknowledged wondering what was behind the Colonel's question.

"I understand that you are..." the Colonel hesitated for the right expression, "...seeing Shaun Cronin's daughter?" Before Lechaim could confirm or deny this fact, the Colonel dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "No matter! The point is, Captain, that Shaun Cronin is the brother of an important man in the Vatican; namely, Monsignor Michael Cronin. Were you aware of that?"

The name, Michael Cronin, echoed in his ears as he responded, "Yes sir! I am!" Indeed, how could he forget. Lechaim had given much thought to Sinead's uncle of late. For one, his name was Michael. The name in itself was significant for in his mother's letter she had written, " ... My son would receive the word of Yahweh when he met Michael..." Could Sinead's uncle be the one referred to in her dream? The fact that he had been imagining things with regard to the photograph of Michael Cronin did not dismiss his dreams or his late mother's letter. Lechaim's adrenaline was pumping as the Colonel continued.

"The Monsignor is paying a visit to his brother next week which leads me to my reason for asking you to see me," he said stubbing out his half finished cigarette. "The Monsignor's life

may be in danger. Someone tried to blow up his car recently in Rome. Fortunately, the bomb didn't go off but they may try again."

"Good God!" Lechaim said. "But the Cronins never mentioned anything to me!"

"That's because they don't know anything about it! The Monsignor doesn't want to worry his family just yet"

I see, sir! Any clues as to who may be behind it?"

"None at this stage! Monsignor Cronin is an official of the Vatican Bank and it might be some radical group trying to make a point." The Colonel paused to consider before he continued. "Or it might be something to do with his Irish connection. Who knows these days! Whatever, we can't let anything happen to him while he's in Ireland." He paused again to allow Lechaim to absorb the information. "At least that's the British Government's view, and I have, now been asked to provide protection for him. This country is a powder keg, as you well know, and one spark will set it off. If anything happens to the monsignor while he's over here!" He spread his hands and exclaimed, "Well, I needn't tell you what that might mean!" He quickly added, "We'll provide a backup team, but we need someone with the monsignor at all times. Frankly, Captain, you seem to be the ideal man for the job."

"Why me, sir?" Lechaim asked although he had already guessed the answer.

"For one, you are a friend of the family, so to speak. That means that your presence will be less suspicious than assigning a stranger to protect the monsignor. You also have the necessary training and, last but not least, you are available. Our medical people have recommended light duties for you at this time so wining and dining with the Monsignor should be just the

ticket for you!” The Colonel grinned as he added, “Half your luck, Captain!” Then he asked more in jest than anything else, “You still remember your SAS training, I trust?”

Lechaim, remembered full well his tour with the Special Air Services and smiled as he replied, “Yes, sir. I think so.”

“Just thought I’d ask” Colonel Ryan said looking at him. The tall, muscular soldier before him would inspire confidence in anyone. “As I have already said, the fact that you are a family friend will not make your being seen constantly with the monsignor so obvious. The main thing is not to be too obtrusive as far as he is concerned. I’ve been told that he’s a private sort of man and does not like a great deal of fuss.”

“Suits me, sir.”

“The Monsignor will arrive in Belfast tomorrow week. I want you to meet him and stay with him until he leaves Ireland again.”

“How long is he here for sir?”

“About two weeks from what I understand. I’ll let you have his flight details in a couple of days.” The Colonel leaned back in his chair, “Well, that’s the assignment. What do you think?”

Lechaim did not relish the job he had just been given but he kept his feelings to himself. Time spent away from Sinead was time lost, and, besides, Church dignitaries were the last people he wished to associate with at this time or any other. But, more than anything else, he sensed that the monsignor’s life and his were on some preordained collision course. In fact, if anything, Lechaim had been anxious to avoid the man and now he was being thrown together with him. Whatever, he knew that the die was cast and he now had no choice in the matter. It would be impossible to explain his reluctance to the

Colonel, and he, therefore, had to feign some enthusiasm, so he answered him in a positive manner.

“I’ll be glad to look after the monsignor, sir.”

“Well, thank you, Captain. That’s what I thought. That, I think is all for now. I’ll see you later in the week, and we’ll discuss your duties as far as the monsignor is concerned in more detail. I’ll also introduce you to the backup team that will be supporting you, a special SAS force that we’ve drafted in.”

“SAS! Well, there won’t be much for me to do in that case, sir!”

“That’s right! Just keep the monsignor happy and liase between the backup team and him. Piece of cake, really!” The Colonel then concluded the meeting by rising and holding his hand out. It was a gesture he was noted for and it endeared him to his subordinates. “Well, good luck, Captain, and keep out of trouble!”

Lechaim took the hand offered and shook it. “Thank you, sir!”

In truth, though, Lechaim felt far from thankful. Events were overtaking him once again and he felt himself being led into a very uncertain future.

Fine soldier, the Colonel decided as Lechaim closed the door behind him.

Chapter 13

IT HAD BEEN Shaun's idea to call in at the 'Harp of Erin' to toast a farewell to Michael and wish him "bon voyage" now that his holiday was almost at an end. After tonight, Paddy and his family would only be seeing his brother one more time, that being at the airport just before the Monsignor flew out. Between now and then, Michael would be staying at Saint Brendan's Abbey and so would Lechaim for that matter although the Cronins were unaware of this.

For Lechaim's part, he had to admit that the Monsignor's company had been pleasant enough, these past few weeks. Shaun's brother had proven to be an amiable man as indeed was Shaun. Both brothers were in their late forties but there the similarities between the two of them ended. Michael Cronin was slim, about six feet in height, fair haired, and highly intelligent, whereas Shaun was short, stocky, red headed like his daughter, pragmatic and earthy. They were clearly very close though and Lechaim could see that Michael enjoyed the warmth Shaun's family afforded. Therefore, although the Monsignor had a number of Church matters to attend to during his stay in Ireland, he still managed plenty of time for his brother and his brother's family, which enabled Lechaim to see much of Sinead.

For Lechaim the Cronin's world was one in which he had found contentment, happiness, and peace of mind. The pending departure of the Monsignor would herald in once again a life of routine and order with only the Army and Sinead to fill Lechaim's days and nights. As for the dreams that had dominated his thinking for so long, they had not reoccurred and slowly but surely they were fading from his mind. The "Michael" mentioned in his mother's dreams, Lechaim had now

concluded, had nothing to do with Monsignor Michael Cronin, the name itself merely being a coincidence. In fact the dreams were becoming more and more improbable as time went by. Once the Monsignor finally departed, it would put to rest, once and for all, any lingering doubts that Lechaim might have, and return his life to some degree of normality.

Life, however, has a way of throwing up problems when one least expects it as Lechaim was about to find out. Trouble started that night when Lechaim reached across the bar in Paddy's "watering hole", the Harp of Erin, to collect the round of drinks he had ordered. A large man to one side of him turned and snarled, "If you brev down my neck one more time, you forker, I'm going to forking kill yah!"

Lechaim was quite startled by the other man's belligerence. Not the threat itself but the unexpectancy of it. For a brief moment, Lechaim felt his temper rising but kept it under control. The man that glared at him was two inches taller than Lechaim in height which made him a very big man indeed and he was built like a "MACK" truck too boot. His arms were tattooed extensively and his dark brown hair was cut close to his scalp, which enhanced his pugilistic demeanour. In his particular case Lechaim knew that looks were not deceiving. The man was tough, confident in himself that with his physique he could intimidate anyone. He wasn't wrong!

Lechaim let the threat slide over him and smiled at the man. "Sorry!" he muttered. "My fault!" One thing though that he couldn't overlook was the man's filthy mouth.

"I would appreciate it, my friend, if you could watch your language, there's a good fellow! After all, there are women present!" With that Lechaim collected up the drinks and took them over to the Cronins who were sitting talking among

themselves. Shamus Dooley was left in his wake with his mouth open, too amazed to act. The man had dared to reprimand him!

The others, the Cronins and the Monsignor had been close enough to the bar to hear the threat that Shamus Dooley made to Lechaim.

“Stay away from him,” Shaun advised. “He’s a mean bugger!” As he said it, Shaun glanced over at Shamus who, he noted, was deep in conversation with his companion, a smaller man of medium height who seemed to be giving him some advice.

“That he is!” Maureen confirmed.

Sinead knew all about Shamus Dooley who was only a year older than she. At school he had been the playground bully, taking great delight in hurting anything that got in his way. He had now advanced to become the community bully that everyone detested and avoided. Even the older men were frightened of him for he was strong and completely unpredictable. Shamus had once blinded a man in one eye in a fist fight, and he had been very fortunate at the time to avoid prison. “Youth must have its day!” his foolish mother had muttered to anyone that would listen. The only one that paid heed was the judge that bound him over on good behaviour. It was the growing consensus among those that knew Shamus, however, that it wouldn’t be long before he ran foul of the law again. Certainly, they would all breathe easier without Shamus Dooley around.

Lechaim had dismissed the man from his mind and was talking to Sinead when the man’s voice cut across them. “So weer not gut enuth for yah now, Sinead Cronin? Is tat it? Yu’ve found yurself an Engless soldur boy tah keep yah warm!”

Shamus, who had been standing behind Lechaim when he spoke, then moved around the table and leaned over it glaring into Lechaim's eyes, the spittle from his mouth flecking Lechaim's face as he added, "An wat do yah hav to say, yah Engless cunt?"

The blow that landed between his eyes lifted Shamus up and back. His arms and legs flailed the air as if he were trying to swim backwards before gravity caught him and he landed spread-eagled on the floor. Lechaim had used the nub of bone at the palm of his right hand, as he had been taught, rather than his fist so as to avoid finger damage. The timing and execution were perfect in execution and demonstrated his prowess in the skills of hand-to-hand combat. "That's the way, sir!" his taciturn Scottish martial arts instructor in the army would say over and over again. "That's the way!"

Shamus Dooley hadn't seen the blow coming and nor did many of those around him. Now, as he lay like a stunned mullet on the floor, it took him a few seconds to comprehend the unthinkable. Someone had actually knocked him down. It had never happened before and it took a little while before his head cleared sufficiently to digest the fact. He gave a growl like a wounded bear as he slowly regained his feet but he instinctively held back. Rage was mixed with another feeling quite alien to him, that of apprehension, and he stood looking at Lechaim trying to gauge the distance and his chances. Those who had been previously sitting or standing around, including the Cronins, had scattered.

"I'm gonna kill yah for tat!" Shamus snarled as he tried to work up the courage to make his rush.

Lechaim was at once regretful. The man before him was uncouth but he shouldn't have hit him. After all he was trained

in self-defence and the man facing him was just a street fighter. Lechaim had no doubt that the man could be lethal in his own environment against opponents unschooled in martial arts, but the man was no match for anyone trained to kill as Lechaim was.

“I’m sorry, my friend!” Lechaim said. “But you should really should watch your language. After all, there are women present as I mentioned before.”

The tension in the bar broke as the onlookers began to laugh. Shamus Dooley couldn’t believe it. They were laughing at him. Rage overcame any fear he might have had and he charged at Lechaim like a savage bull. Lechaim was ready for him. He could have killed the man in the first pass but it wasn’t warranted. Instead, Lechaim flung the man with a sweeping hip throw to the floor and came down with a knee into the man’s solar plexus.

The fight was over even before it had really begun and a collective cheer rose from those present. The village bully had at last been bested, and Sinead’s boyfriend had been the one to do it. He was all right, they decided. Englishman or no Englishman. Shamus, clutching at his stomach, and still gasping for air was willingly carried out by two burly bystanders and dumped unceremoniously on the gravel outside. Men that had never spoken to Lechaim before now slapped him on the back and drinks came from all directions.

“About bloody time someone sorted that bastard out!” seemed to be the popular theme for the rest of that night.

When Lechaim finally drove them home, he could sense their unease. The truth of the matter was that the others were a little awed of a man who, until all of an hour ago, was just a big lovable giant. Now he was much more in their eyes, and

they had not yet adjusted to the other side of Lechaim's persona. Even Sinead was subdued and Lechaim tried to think of some way of easing the tension. A show of violence, he knew from past experience, had that effect on ordinary people, and he began reproaching himself for the incident.

Monsignor Michael was also deep in thought. He could see now why the authorities had assigned the big man to protect him. The demonstration in the pub of Lechaim's prowess in unarmed combat brought home to the Monsignor that Lechaim could be a very dangerous man indeed, if provoked, as indeed he had been earlier. He could also sense that his brother's family was feeling uneasy. Therefore, he decided to break the silence.

"Did you see that big ox go down? You should've been a fighter, my boy! You should have been a fighter!"

Michael's obvious approval of Lechaim's actions was the very tonic they needed and they all relaxed. "Even Maureen reluctantly admitted, "He did have it coming!"

It was way past eleven before Lechaim and Monsignor Michael made their leave. They re-enacted the part they played every time they went home together, which wasn't often because the Monsignor normally stayed at his brother's overnight.

"I'll give you a lift back, Father!"

"Thankyou, my boy. Thankyou! Very kind of you!"

You'll see me off at the airport?" the monsignor asked his brother as he climbed into the car alongside Lechaim.

"We will that!" Shaun said and he and the two women waved to them from their front gate as Lechaim pulled away and they remained there until the car disappeared down the lane.

Back at the pub, behind closed doors for it was after hours, a group had congregated and the fight was the topic on everyone's lips.

"Did you ever see such a thing? Shamus will think twice before he picks on anyone again!" Peter Grogan said with glee.

Tom, the barman, remarked, "That man's no ordinary soldier. He's SAS! You mark my words!"

Peter's eyes widened at Tom's remarks. "SAS! You don't say!"

"Yes! They're mean bastards, and no mistake. If you ask me, Shamus was lucky the man didn't kill him!" Those standing around him nodded sagely.

"One thing's for certain. Shamus won't be picking on Sinead's boyfriend again in a hurry!" one of their number remarked.

"That's for sure!" the rest chorused.

Frank Hennessy, the man that had been standing with Shamus at the bar earlier, had been listening intently to all this. The night had not started out well. By rights the Englishman should have been no match for Shamus. The provocation had been intentional, of course, but that was the only part of the plan that had worked. No matter, Frank decided, the English soldier was just another factor that they would have to deal with later. As for Shamus, the job ahead required professionals not fools so it was best that he be eliminated from the operation. In fact, the man decided, it would be best if Shamus were eliminated altogether. His mind made up, he left the pub with purpose in his step.

Chapter 14

THE WEAPON LAY dormant in its glass case, its master long forgotten except for the placard at the foot of the case. Lechaim looked down to read what was written there.

“The ‘BROADSWORD’ is a broad-bladed weapon used for cutting rather than stabbing. It is also known as the ‘BACKSWORD’. This particular broadsword belonged to Sir Anthony Saint Leger also spelled Sentleger (b. 1496 -- d. 1559, Ulcombe, Kent, England). Sir Anthony Saint Leger was the English lord deputy of Ireland from 1540 to 1546 and from 1553 to 1556. Considered by many historians to be the most able 16th-century English viceroy of Ireland, he maintained peace throughout the country by upholding the feudal privileges of the powerful native chieftains.”

“It’s a wicked looking weapon isn’t it!” the monsignor standing by his side declared.

“A weapon is only as wicked as the person using it, monsignor.”

“That’s true I suppose.” the monsignor agreed. “It would take a powerful man such as you to fight with such a weapon, I would think.”

Lechaim fended off the compliment. “Even a powerful man would soon tire using such a weapon.”

The monsignor opened the case, which was not locked and gestured to Lechaim. “Test the weight. I’d be interested in hearing what you think of it as a weapon.”

Lechaim was surprised by the monsignor’s offer. Surely, this was a museum piece. Would it be right to handle it. However, he too was curious and did what the priest suggested. Lifting the heavy double-edged sword by its long handle, which

was interwoven with fine strands of wire, he found that it balanced well in his hands.

"I was right! It would soon tire anyone fighting with it!" As he spoke, Lechaim ran his fingers along the edges of the blade which was slightly pitted in places but still very serviceable. "These days we have far more efficient ways of killing people!" With that, he gently replaced it back in the case and the monsignor closed the lid.

Lechaim, his curiosity aroused, then asked, "What's such a weapon doing here in the abbey!"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not certain!" the monsignor answered. "I believe it was a gift from the man's estate."

Lechaim glanced at his watch. "Excuse me monsignor!" he said reaching for the walkie-talkie attached to his belt.

"Alpha one - do you copy?"

"Yes, I copy Beta leader!" an articulated voice echoed down the receiver

"Nelson - do you copy?"

A short pause and then a guttural voice answered.

"Yes, I copy Victory leader!"

This went on until Lechaim had made contact with every member of the back-up team. There were eight men in all on the grounds and inside the building that night. Lechaim needed to check with every one of them every half hour for security reasons. Each man in the group had been assigned an individual code word response and Lechaim's own designated code name differed for each man. This was a precaution in case any member of the team became compromised.

The monsignor smiled at Lechaim when he had finished. "It does seem a trifle melodramatic."

“It’s better to be safe than sorry!” Lechaim said as he smiled back. The priest had a point though. There had been no incidents of any kind during the monsignor’s visit to Ireland and this type of security was beginning to look like overkill.

“A nightcap perhaps?” the Monsignor enquired.

“Yes, but just a coffee thanks!”

Both men returned to the two armchairs they had left minutes before, and the Monsignor summoned the priest assigned to tender to his needs by way of a cord hanging close by which was connected to a bell in another part of the abbey. Father Dominique soon ambled in.

“A coffee for Captain Lewis and a whiskey and dry for me, if you please, Father!”

“Certainly!” the portly bald headed rather ancient priest replied and disappeared almost as quickly as he had arrived.

The men settled down in their chairs situated next to an electric heater set within the confines of what had long ago been a fireplace. The heater was failing miserably to provide sufficient heat for the large room they were in, the ghost of the coal fire rendered obsolete by progress silently mocking its paltry efforts. The room itself contained tapestries, which adorned its oak panelled walls, where they hung along with thick framed heavily varnished paintings of indiscriminate age depicting dead dignitaries. The high beamed ceiling had two ornate chandeliers hanging down but they were dormant; just two table lamps now lighting the room’s interior.

The monsignor sat eyeing Lechaim and then uttered in that humorous way of his, “Well, it’s our last night together. I hope I haven’t been too much trouble?”

Lechaim had come to know Shaun’s brother well and liked the man enormously. “No, not at all, Monsignor,” he

replied. However, much as he enjoyed Michael's company, Lechaim was secretly relieved that his assignment would finish tomorrow, and he would then have more time with Sinead.

"I can't tell you how pleased I am that you and Sinead are thinking of getting married. I've never seen her so happy and Paddy and Maureen speak highly of you." Seeing the surprise in Lechaim's eyes, he held his hand up, "I know, it's suppose to be a secret for now, but Sinead could never keep a secret from her uncle!" Smiling at Lechaim, he continued, "Don't worry, my lips are sealed."

"Thank you, Monsignor. She's a wonderful girl. I consider myself a lucky man."

"She is that!" the monsignor acknowledged. With a twinkle in his eye, the monsignor held Lechaim's gaze for a moment before adding, "I think, my son, that Sinead is also a lucky woman."

Embarrassed, Lechaim could only mutter, "Thank you, Monsignor," and quickly added, "We were hoping that you'll be able to return for the wedding?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, my boy. We Irish know how to throw a wedding. Just you wait and see! Bye the bye, when do you plan to get married?"

"Well, I have to get Shaun's permission first, of course, but we thought in about six months or so."

"Listen, if Shaun doesn't give you his blessing, I'll give her away myself" the monsignor said jovially.

Looking at the monsignor now, Lechaim was struck by the difference between the two brothers. They were both very likable individuals but complete opposites in every other way. Lechaim voiced his thoughts aloud, "I wouldn't have picked you and Shaun for brothers!"

“That’s probably because we’re not really brothers in the strict sense! Shaun’s parents adopted me when I was a child. Still, I couldn’t have asked for a better brother than Shaun. God smiled kindly on me.”

Lechaim was taken by surprise. No one had mentioned to him that Michael was not Shaun’s real brother but then why should they. After all it had nothing really to do with him.

“And your natural parents. Did you ever find out who they were?”

“That’s a little hard to do! You see I was left on the steps of this Abbey when I was a baby! No one knows where I came from! Shaun’s parents, the people that brought me up, are dead now, but I always looked on them as my own parents. I had a happy childhood and couldn’t have wished for more so I’m content.”

The Monsignor thought hard for a moment and then added, “You know, when they found me on the doorstep, apparently, they also found a body close by!”

“A body?” Lechaim repeated intrigued by the monsignor’s words.

“Yes! A young man’s body! It was apparently strung up on a fence! Rather gruesome really! You see the heart had been torn out!”

“Did anyone find out who he was?”

“Apparently a lad from Cork. His name was...” He searched his memory for the name. “Patrick Grogan, that was it! What he was doing in these parts or who killed him has always remained a mystery!”

Lechaim was intrigued by the story but before he could question the Monsignor further, the priest changed the subject.

“And what of you? ‘Lechaim’ seems a strange name for a Christian! You’re a Catholic, I believe, and yet you have a Jewish name?”

“Jewish!” Lechaim echoed. “I always assumed it was a Gaelic name.”

“I think you’ll find that it is Jewish. Some form of drinking toast if my memory serves me correctly!” The monsignor rose from the armchair in which he had been comfortably ensconced and went over to the large bookcase fronting one of the richly panelled walls where he stood for several seconds searching for a dictionary. “Ah, yes, here we are,” he muttered as he plucked a “Collins English Dictionary” from one of the rows of the many books before him and flicked through its pages. “Lechaim, Lechaim”, he murmured to himself as his eyes searched hungrily. “Yes, here it is!” he exclaimed and brought the dictionary over to Lechaim.

Lechaim saw where his finger pointed and read the notation:

“....Lechaim, Lehaim, or L’chaim (Judaism. interj.)

1. a drinking toast.

2. a small drink with which to toast something or someone.[from Hebrew, literally: to life]....”

“A strange name to give a child and a Catholic at that,” the monsignor said as he glanced over Lechaim’s shoulder at the description in the dictionary. “Do you have Jewish blood somewhere in the family?”

“Not as far as I’m aware!”

“Anyway, it’s very apt,” the monsignor said. “There will be plenty of ‘lechaims’ at your wedding, and, I hope, many Lechaims to add to the family tree in the future.”

The monsignor's obvious inference that Sinead and Lechaim would have many children was almost sensual to Lechaim in its connotation and sent a warm glow through him. The thought of Sinead swollen with child increased his longing to possess her. They had not yet coupled sexually because she was old fashioned in her outlook and believed that marriage was the appropriate time for such an act. However, he loved her the more for it. They were both eager to explore each other physically and waited for that day in eager anticipation.

Closing the dictionary, Lechaim got up and returned it himself to its place in the bookcase. When he returned to his chair, he decided to broach a matter that had been on his mind of late. "Can I ask you what will probably appear to be a rather strange question?"

"Go ahead!" the Monsignor said leaning forward with interest.

"Do the letters 'Y', 'H', 'W', 'H' mean anything to you?" He felt idiotic asking such a question but he had to be sure.

The Monsignor looked at him intently. "Hmm. Why do you ask?"

"Oh! just something I've seen somewhere. I'm sorry, it was a foolish question," he said quickly to hide his embarrassment. "Forget it!"

"Not at all. The letters 'Y', 'H', 'W', 'H' are very significant. These four letters make up the Hebrew name for God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. They are, in fact, a reference to the Holy Tetragrammaton. There are some other variations such as 'Y', 'H', 'V', 'H'.,"

The monsignor considered the matter further, before continuing, "The Jews regarded God's name as too holy to be uttered in its true form so they referred to God as 'Yahweh'

inserting the vowels ‘a’ and ‘e’ between the sacred letters.” He thought for a moment before adding, “The name Jehovah is another variation on this theme. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, very much so!” Then Lechaim thought to ask, “And the numbers: six, seven, two, four, seven, eight, three, seven, four! Do they mean anything to you?”

The monsignor considered further before answering. “No! Should they?” Then he appended his reply. “Cardinal Tsana in Rome would be the man to consult on the meaning of numbers. He has made a study of numerology in relation to the occult. A strange occupation for a Cardinal, you might conclude. In fact I think so as well. However, his eminence contends that if, to use his words, you’re armed with the knowledge that Satan’s followers possess, then the Church is better equipped to overcome the evildoers. It’s a controversial viewpoint at odds with some of his colleagues, myself included. However, his eminence would certainly be your man.” He could see the interest on Lechaim’s face. “If you like, I’ll ask him when I return to Rome?”

Before Lechaim could reply, his walkie-talkie crackled back into life briefly and then went dead. Something was wrong. “Alpha one! Do you copy?” No answer. “Alpha one! Do you copy? Come in Alpha one!”

“Anything the matter?” the monsignor inquired.

“I shouldn’t think so! Probably the man’s in the toilet.” But, deep down, even as he was saying it, Lechaim had his doubts. Members of the SAS are trained to have bladder and bowel control. It can be a prerequisite to staying alive. Lechaim tried to reach the other seven men but all were mute. Could it be, the walkie-talkie itself was out of action. A short sharp

burst of gunfire echoed through the building and Lechaim had his answer. Lechaim observed the fear registering in the monsignor's eyes seconds before the lights went out. The place was under attack and Lechaim had no sidearm.

It had been the monsignor, himself, that had insisted that his personal escort, namely Lechaim, be unarmed. "It is not seemly," he had suggested, "for a monsignor of the Church to be seen with an armed escort. Besides, shouldn't the plain clothes men assigned provide any protection I need?" On reflection it was a valid point. Lechaim's role had, therefore, been relegated to one of co-ordinating the security efforts and solving any minor problems that arose. "In fact your presence now is more a public relations one. You know - soothing the monsignor's feathers so to speak," Colonel Ryan had explained to Lechaim at the time, "After all, the SAS team members are experts in this sort of thing and it is practically impossible to penetrate their type of operation", the Colonel had then amplified.

And the 'Titanic' was thought to be "unsinkable", Lechaim thought grimly as the Army's lack of foresight came home to haunt him.

"What's happening?" the monsignor asked calmly although he didn't feel calm.

Lechaim couldn't see the monsignor's face now, but the man's voice was steady enough. The man has courage, Lechaim decided - he would need it now.

"Get in the corner and stay on the floor!" The command was short and sharp with no niceties attached and the monsignor obeyed instantly.

Lechaim only had seconds to act so his mind was working overtime. Without a weapon he felt helpless and then he

remembered. Ripping his shoes off, he ran softly and silently over the expensively carpeted floor to the glass case where the medieval sword lay. Opening it he reached in and grasped the sword by its hilt. The sword, which some time before felt heavy and awkward in his hands, now had no weight at all. Holding it up before him, he could only wonder at the feeling of strength that was surging through his body. Could it be from pure adrenaline alone? The danger outside seemed suddenly irrelevant as a feeling of euphoria took over his being. He found himself in a dream like state where everything was shadowy and unreal; a sensation of floating in a disembodied etheric atmosphere separated from the real world.

The monsignor crouched down in one corner of the room and confronted his fear. He tried to focus on a prayer but his intellect refused to obey. The blackness around him offered little protection from the forces that were about to rain down on the room. More than a minute passed, and still no one came. Just when it seemed the danger was over, the monsignor caught the sound of people running along the corridor outside. Seconds later the doors shattered and splintered apart as machine gun bullets tore into it.

The monsignor hugged the floor and waited for the end to come. The remains of the door were kicked in and a flashlight played around the room and then settled on him.

“Here he is!” Frank Hennessy shouted excitedly in his strong Irish brogue, as he played the beam of light over the crouching priest. Four men rapidly appeared by Frank’s side. Michael bunched his body and averted his face as he prepared for death. Something swished the air close by and Frank screamed and let go of his flashlight which clattered to the ground as the pain shot through his severed wrist. Something

swished again and Frank's scream was cut off . Something landed on the monsignor's side and bounced away across the carpet. A fountain of warm liquid, with a distinctive smell saturated his clothes and a pungent smell pervaded his nostrils. The monsignor realized with horror that it was the smell of blood.

“What the hell!” he heard someone else in the darkness exclaim. Then the air was rent with the almost inhuman screams of the intruders as something descended on them. Bullets tore the room to pieces as the men vainly shot into the darkness to ward off their annihilation but it was no use. More men piled into the room firing as they came but they too met the same end. The sounds of bone splintering and the dull thud as flesh was sliced apart would live with the monsignor forever. The terrified shouts and pleadings of the men were to no avail as they were all cut to pieces. It was all over in a matter of minutes, then silence reigned and nothing stirred.

The monsignor waited and waited with his eyes tightly shut and his head pressed up against the wall. The overpowering smell that permeated the air was nauseating and he felt sick. Eventually, he dared to open his eyes and he turned slowly around. The discarded flashlight was still working and its powerful beam picked out the floor quite clearly in front of where it lay. A large hairy coconut like object was caught in the light; the same object that had hit the monsignor in the ribs an eternity before. From the blood stained face, Frank Hennessy's glassy vacant eyes peered out accusingly at him. The monsignor reeled away in terror as he realized that it was a man's decapitated head.

Trembling, he regained his feet, scooped the flashlight from the floor and shone it around what had become a chamber

of horrors. Body parts littering the floor were intermingled with internal organs, intestines, and all the other paraphernalia that once made up the nine men that had died there. The frightened man then became conscious that he was not alone. Standing in the centre of the room there was a man, more spectre than human, covered in blood, a uniform hanging in tatters about him. In one hand he held aloft as if in salute the sword, which had been used in so a deadly a fashion,. Its blade was replete with human tissue and gore, its steel stained red by the men it had recently slaughtered. However, it was the eyes of the man who held the weapon that transfixed the monsignor. They were red like balls of fire and there was only death to be seen in them.

The figure lowered the sword and moved towards him, the rags about the legs doing nothing to conceal the markings on the man's thigh as he approached. The monsignor felt his head spinning and a black curtain descended over his eyes shutting the spectre out as he slumped to the floor unconscious.

Chapter 15

HIS THREE SUBORDINATES sitting before the colonel in his office at Special Air Services' headquarters in Bradbury Lines, Hereford, England, waited for his temper to ease. Three hours had elapsed since the attack on the Abbey but no one thought about going to bed although it was past three in the morning.

"Again, I repeat, gentlemen - how the hell did it happen?" the colonel asked as he waved the provisional report - a thick bundle comprising telexes, facsimile transmissions, and transcripts of telephone conversations before them. "We had a trained team of eight men in place and they were all 'taken out'; a euphemism he always used when referring to casualties. "One man, just one man stopped this from being a fucking disaster!"

The men listened in silence because, they reasoned, he had every right to be upset. Eight of their best men had been eliminated in a single night by an opposing force of similar number - it was unheard of.

The colonel laid the bundle of telexes back on the table, leaned back in his chair and surveyed his fellow officers. Colonel James R. Coburn, DSO was forty-eight years old. He had fought in many engagements overseas including the Falklands campaign in 1982. A fighting soldier, his men had sometimes considered him too brave for his own good as well as theirs. Being tall, some six feet in height, his youthful looks belied his age. A head of thick dark brown hair atop a fresh, high cheek boned face, regular features and lightly tanned skin promoted that image.

The colonel knew that the men sitting before him were highly competent individuals. He also knew that these men were

just as capable as he was of appreciating the situation but he had to give a show - they expected it.

Giving emphasis to his last remark, the colonel exclaimed, "Captain Lewis does not even belong to the SAS!"

The three men before him were Major John Carter, and Captains Robert Cullen and Anthony Wright. "He was trained by us though!" Anthony Wright said. "Surely, that's something!"

Tony Wright was of medium height, slight of build, sandy haired and had a bland face devoid of any distinctive or stimulating characteristics; a blessing where undercover work was required. A man with a big nose, large ears, or something distinguishable was easy to identify. Mister "average man", as Tony was, made it far more difficult to peg him.

"Yes, three years ago, Tony! We trained him three years ago but we didn't teach him to use a fucking sword!"

The men before him laughed nervously. The colonel was friendly enough as a rule and always used their first names when addressing them in private for he was not big on "bullshit" and neither were most officers in the regiment. However, today their commander was not in a friendly mood.

The colonel waited for a response but got none so he went on, "The reputation of the Regiment has been severely damaged as a result of this fiasco. We must now find a way to repair it!"

The Special Air Services or SAS as they are known is an elite force, probably the best in the world at what they do, and they know it. They do not operate by anyone else's rules, they make their own. Now, eight of their number had been bested and their pride was hurt.

“How is Lechaim Lewis, Jim?” the major, John Carter, asked. No one but John ever addressed the colonel as Jim but the major was an exception. Five years younger than his colonel, the major was six foot two inches tall, lean in build, and, like his colonel, had been involved in numerous operations around the world. The two men were close friends, evidenced by the fact that the colonel had been John’s best man when he married three years before. As the two men looked at each other, they both remembered the tall, blond, powerful soldier that have served with them for two years.

“I had a long telephone conversation with Colonel Ryan in Belfast just twenty minutes ago. He tells me that Lechaim is unhurt. A bloody miracle, he said. Apparently, the room that Lechaim fought in was riddled to pieces by bullets.”

“How both men survived is a miracle!” Captain Robert Cullen interjected. “One man with a sword protecting a priest against nine fully armed well trained terrorists. The newspapers are going to have a field day.” Robert Cullen was ever the taciturn one. Therefore, when he did speak, it was always with good reason. A short man of stocky build with balding ginger hair, which made him look older than his twenty-eight years, he was not a man to be underestimated with a service record that few could match. Even he though was impressed by Lechaim’s actions at the abbey earlier.

“Christ that’s all we need! the Colonel replied. “You’re right though, Bob, the newspapers are certainly going to run with this! The question is how are we going to play it?”

Whilst the men were considering this among themselves, the telephone rang on the Colonel’s desk. Seizing it he snapped at the person on the other end, “I thought I told you I wasn’t to be disturbed!” Then he calmed as the caller explained.

“Oh, right! Put him on!” The waiting colonel lifted his eyes to his colleagues, “Prime minister!” he muttered and they looked at each other knowingly. A blowtorch was pointing their way and they were about to get burned.

“Ah, yes, Prime Minister. Colonel Coburn here...”

The colonel spent about ten minutes on the telephone and when he eventually replaced the receiver he looked relieved. Smiling, he said, “As you can guess, gentlemen, the prime minister is not a happy man. However, the PM thinks that the situation can be salvaged if we are prepared to follow his suggestion.”

They stared back at him quizzically. “What suggestion would that be, Jim?” Major John Carter asked.

“The PM has suggested that no mention be made of our involvement in this operation. In fact the SAS were never there as far as the attack on the abbey is concerned. Then, the people responsible, be they IRA or whoever, will not be able to make capital out of it.”

“We don’t normally advertise our presence anyway!” Tony Wright offered. “Personally, I think it’s a good idea!” The others nodded. “And Lechaim Lewis! His presence can hardly be covered up!” Bob Cullen said.

“Quite so, Bob!” the colonel replied. “The prime minister doesn’t want to do that anyway. In fact, he wants Lechaim’s actions to be pushed for all they’re worth. You know - English army captain defends a priest of the church against a dastardly, unprovoked, act of naked aggression by the IRA - something like that.” They all smiled together at the prime minister’s deviousness. “The PM is going to ask the Army to award the highest decoration possible!” the Colonel added.

“You mean the Victoria Cross?” Bob Cullen asked. “But surely that can only be awarded to a member of the British armed forces for bravery in the face of the enemy in wartime?”

“The prime minister is aware of the restrictions governing the VC but will push for it to be conferred anyway! Apparently, there have been precedents in this regard! Anyway, gentlemen, the point is that we may be off the hook.!”

“And the men that died, our boys?” Major John Carter asked bitterly. “What do we tell their next of kin?”

“What we usually tell them, John! That they died on active service!” the colonel answered his friend. “We all know the score when we join the regiment - they took their chances and lost!” The colonel often wondered why John Carter had joined the SAS in view of his strong principles and compassionate heart. In this line of work it paid to forget sentiment and concentrate only on the task in hand. It wasn’t so much, “who dares wins” but rather “win at any cost”. Still, his friend was a great soldier and had never let the regiment down yet. The colonel was certain his friend never would.

“Anyway, gentlemen - let’s get back to the matter in hand. What went wrong? Does anyone have any ideas?” the colonel inquired.

“It appears from what you’ve told us already, colonel, that the operation was compromised,” Tony Wright suggested. “Have we any indications yet as to how the terrorists knew our procedures and methods of operations!” and then he threw in, “and do we know who the terrorists were and what was their purpose?”

“We have no idea at this time about anything. Brigade in Belfast are dragging their feet as usual. I think we must assume for the present that it is the work of the IRA. However, there

are so many splinter groups operating in Northern Ireland that anything is possible!"

Captain Tony Wright spoke again. "And you believe that this monsignor," he searched his memory for a second, "this monsignor Michael Cronin was the focus of the attack."

The colonel paused to consider. "It seems very unlikely. After all why mount such an elaborate operation to kill a priest. No, my gut feeling tells me that the terrorists, whoever they were, knew that an SAS operation was going down and wanted to make a point. To embarrass the SAS if you like."

"They certainly succeeded in doing that!" Bob Cullen chipped in laconically.

"How many casualties in all?" Major Carter asked .

"Too many!" the colonel replied. "Apart from the eight we lost, four priests were also killed- that's twelve in all."

"Twenty-one if you count the terrorists" the precise Tony Wright proffered.

"Twenty-one men including the terrorists!" the colonel confirmed. "A fucking blood bath"

Bob Cullen said thoughtfully, "The attack was extremely well co-ordinated and their intelligence regarding our method of deployment in this operation first rate. It just doesn't seem like an IRA operation to me."

"What are you saying, Bob?" the colonel queried.

"I'm not sure, colonel, but there's something very peculiar about the way the attack was carried out!" The colonel raised his eyebrows as Bob continued. "Why, for instance, carry out such an attack with the minimum of noise. Remember our men were taken out with silencers. Then make such a commotion towards the end. They left the housekeeper alive."

Why? Not something professionals would do unless they wanted us to think that amateurs were involved.

“The IRA, you mean!” Major John Carter joked and the other men laughed.

“You have a point, Bob!” the colonel said as he responded to the issues Bob Cullen had raised. “It does seem odd now that you mention it!”

They were still pondering the conundrum when Tony Wright suddenly exclaimed, “And Lechaim Lewis killed all the terrorists with a sword!” The captain was already aware that such was so but he was still incredulous.

“With a sword,! With a sword!” the colonel confirmed and he looked at all three of them with a smile, “And if I don’t get some answers very soon, I’m going to be killing some of you with mine.”

The men responded with a laugh, the tension in the room dispelled now that the colonel had relaxed. The phone call from the PM had accounted for the change in their commander’s demeanour, they concluded. The colonel was off the hook, so to speak, and basically, so were they. There were still some questions to be answered but it was only a matter of time - it always was.

Chapter 16

THE FRONT DOOR buzzer sounded downstairs, its persistent “squawk” “squawk” awaking the sleeping household. “All right! All right!” Shaun shouted as he clattered down the stairs. “I’m coming! I’m coming!” In a temper he threw open the door intending to give the person who had disturbed his sleep a piece of his mind.

His neighbour, Ray Kenny, a farm worker and an early riser, stood there, an excited look on his face.

“Good God, Ray! Do you know what time it is?”

The man, about the same age as Shaun and similar in appearance, ignored Shaun’s antagonism for his mind was on other things. “Your brother, Shaun. Your brother’s on the news!”

“What is it, Shaun?” Maureen asked as she arrived at Shaun’s side.

Ignoring her Shaun continued his conversation with Ray Kenny. “Michael! What do you mean, he’s on the news?”

The IRA attacked Saint Brendan’s Abbey last night. Many dead, they said!”

Shaun paled visibly at Ray Kenny’s words and could only stare dumbfounded. Sinead was coming down the stairs in her dressing gown when the words carried to her and she was at once apprehensive.

“Lechaim!” Sinead exclaimed and Maureen turned and saw her daughter standing there.

“Lechaim! He drove Uncle Michael back to the Abbey last night!” Sinead said, an edge of hysteria in her voice.

Shaun had recovered from the shock and he now turned and went down the hallway to his daughter. “Steady, girl. He’ll

be all right, knowing Lechaim” but his words didn’t sound convincing. Tears were starting to flow down Sinead’s face and her father pulled her to him. Holding her there, he tried to comfort her, “Steady, lass. Don’t jump to any conclusions!”

“Put the news on!” Ray Kenny suggested as he followed the others into the parlour where a small plastic cream coloured radio stood on a chest of drawers. Quickly Shaun switched it on and they caught part of what the announcer was saying,

“.....the courage of a British Army officer who was with the monsignor at the time.” Sinead’s face blanched and her knuckles whitened as she gripped the side of the doorframe against which she stood. “The officer, who has yet to be identified, fought off the terrorists but not before they had killed a number of priests. We hope to have more details as they come to hand....”

“Switch the television on!” Ray Kenny suggested as the newscaster then carried on with other news.

Maureen ran over to the television and switched it on as Shaun killed the radio.

As Monsignor Michael Cronin’s image appeared on the screen, Shaun beseeched Maureen to turn up the volume but she was already doing so.

“..... and that’s all I can tell you for the moment.” The reporters tried to persist but the monsignor held up his hand “I’m sorry gentlemen and ladies. I have been informed that what occurred here tonight, for the time being, at least, is not to be discussed. Let me just say that but for the gallantry of an officer in the British Army, I would surely be dead now.” Flash bulbs were exploding in his face and he looked completely drained and exhausted.

Reporters tried to break in with more questions but he insisted. “No, I can’t say any more at this moment” They pressed closer around him, demanding, but to no avail.

The Cronins and Ray Kenny sat glued to the screen watching Michael as he warded off the hungry reporters. In the background, ambulances and police cars could be seen parked in desultory order. The television interview they were watching had obviously taken place sometime last night. St. Brendan’s Abbey could be seen in the background lit up in a mantle of arc lights and they watched as Michael disappeared towards it. The television program they were watching then switched to a news announcer in the studio, a woman, who stated, “Whilst the details are not yet clear, it is known that at least nine men took part in the attack and according to sources, all nine were subsequently killed. It has yet to be officially confirmed, but it is believed that the British Army officer involved fought the armed intruders using only a sword.” The woman newscaster then paused and turned to a man sitting beside her as the television camera panned out to reveal her companion - a priest.

“Father Murphy! This act of bravery by an officer in the British Army on behalf of an Irish priest can only do good for Anglo-Irish relationships and help the cause of peace? Can it not?”

“Most certainly, Miss Brennan” the Father replied. “With the peace talks due to take place in Derry next week between Sinn Fein and the British Government, this single act alone could be the catalyst for reaching a lasting peace in Ireland.” He went to continue but the woman held up a hand to him as she put the other to her ear. “Yes, okay!” she confirmed in a low voice as further news flowed in through her earpiece. “Sorry, Father Murphy” she said apologetically. “Could I just hold you

there for a moment?" then she turned back to the camera and continued. "We are now taking you to a press conference at Ulster House where General Sir William Beatty is about to issue a press statement on behalf of the British Army."

The picture then changed again and General Beatty appeared on the screen in full uniform complete with medal ribbons. He was standing on a podium fronted by several microphones in a room crowded with people, most of who were feeding frenzied reporters fighting for a place in the front.

"Ladies and Gentlemen", the General began. "As you are now aware, an armed incursion took place at approximately twenty-three hundred hours last night at St. Brendan's Abbey in Armagh."

The General deliberately paused for a moment to make his words more dramatic but his listeners were already enthralled. "The reason for the attack is still unclear. There were nine men in the attacking party and they carried a variety of weapons from semi-automatics to hand held light machine guns." The General could see that he had a captive audience." The organization responsible for this attack has yet to be identified, but the IRA has already categorically denied any involvement. The Army and the police will, of course, make every effort to determined who is behind the events of last night."

The sharks were becoming impatient for more. What of the British officer who had fought these men off, and what had really taken place during the attack. These were the details they wanted to hear.

The General, of course, knew this. The information he was now giving the media had been scripted so that the tension could be deliberately built up. After all, the media were fond of

bolstering their stocks by such means. Now, a golden opportunity had presented itself for the British Government, courtesy of a British Army officer, to enhance its image and the general intended to play it for all it was worth. He continued, with a proud edge to his voice, “An officer in the British Army single-handedly repelled the attack using only a broadsword. A broadsword, I might add, that once belonged to Sir Anthony Saint Leger, English lord deputy of Ireland in the sixteenth century.”

“Broadsword!” more than one exclaimed in wonderment while someone else muttered, “Anthony who? Never heard of him!”

The General’s eloquent voice carried on the speakers to those at the back as he continued, “Yes, one man, ladies and gentlemen, using just a sword slew nine men that were well organized and heavily armed, a remarkable feat of courage that will be long remembered. The officer in question, who has emerged unscathed, is one, Captain Lechaim Francis Lewis, MC of the South-Wales Borderers Regiment. Captain Lewis has only recently returned to duty following injuries received when an armoured car he was in hit a land mine some twelve months ago.”

He paused again for effect before continuing, “Monsignor Michael Cronin, a Vatican priest was staying at St. Brendan’s Abbey prior to his return to Italy. Captain Lewis and the monsignor’s niece, a Miss Sinead Cronin, are engaged to be married, and the captain and the monsignor had met last night to discuss these forthcoming nuptials. Hence the reason for Captain Lewis being present at the Abbey when the attack took place.” The General knew this to be untrue, but the cover story

for Lechaim's presence in the abbey that night suited their purpose.

"He's talking about you!" Maureen said to Sinead and then exclaimed, "married?" but Shaun shushed her to silence as the General continued.

"The South Wales Borderers Regiment, to which Captain Lewis belongs, as some of you may be aware, is renowned for its heroic defence of Roakes Drift in South Africa in 1879 during the Zulu Wars. During that action eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded for gallantry. The only time, I might add, that this number of Victoria Crosses has been awarded in the British Army for a single engagement." His chest puffed up with pride as he concluded, "Captain Lewis' actions at the abbey last night against overwhelming odds were in the finest traditions of the famous Regiment to which he belongs."

He finished by saying, "That's all I have to say for now. Thank you!" and stepped off the podium before the mob realized what was happening. Then he made his way very slowly out of the room through a sea of pleading faces.

"Sorry! sorry! that's all for now" the General kept repeating as they pursued him relentlessly."

Sinead who had been tearful moments before was now beaming as she exclaimed, "He's all right, dah! Lechaim's alive! He's all right!"

"I told you so!" Shaun replied marvelling at this turn of affairs. Then he remembered. "What's this about your getting married?" but she could no longer hear him. Lechaim was alive and was returning to her.

It didn't take long for the media to track down Sinead and her family that morning. The press corp was on the scent as soon as the name of Lechaim's fiancée was mentioned. For the

Cronins what followed seemed unreal. Shaun, Maureen and especially Sinead had become celebrities in their own right. One by one they were interviewed by not only the Irish press but the world press as well for the story had made world headlines. The Americans who had been trying in their own way to broker peace talks in Ireland played up the story as did the press of most Catholic countries. The English contingent of pressmen was, of course, maniacal in their efforts to promote the story. After all, one of their countrymen was the star performer.

The press had much information to devour that day. Not only were they fed by the Cronins, but the neighbours that were gathered outside were willing participants as well. Details of the night when Lechaim's armoured car had been blown up and what followed were devoured as Shaun's neighbours proved they were not shy in coming forward. Didn't they all say, after all, that the Captain was a fine man! God bless him! Sinead was the lucky girl indeed to be marrying such a man! The acclamation that pored out in a flood of adoration that day seemed to be almost quisling like to members of Sinn Fein. Still, the general sentiment in Ireland was a positive one. An English soldier had become a hero overnight by saving an Irish priest and anyone identified with him found instant fame. Sinead became the envy of every eligible girl in Ireland. She was the Irish colleen that would soon be marrying the brave English captain. "Sure enough. wouldn't it be the wedding of the year" Irish folk were heard to say to one another more than once in the days ahead.

The Cronins, being human, basked in the limelight. Their initial anxiety when the news first broke had turned to relief and pride. Relief that both Michael and Lechaim were safe and pride that Sinead was the girlfriend of a national hero. Even some of

their neighbours who over the years had been less than friendly dropped by to shake Shaun by the hand. As the day wore on, however, Sinead began to wonder why Lechaim had not been in contact with her. Finally, in the early evening, he phoned her.

“Sorry, darling! I’ve been tied up with my superiors all day.”

“Dear, are you all right?” she asked tenderly.”

“I’m all right sweetheart. A little tired, that’s all.”

She hesitated for a moment before replying, “We’re all very grateful to you, darling, for saving Uncle Michael’s life. You were very brave!”

He remained silent at the other end of the line for a long time, and she wondered what he was thinking. At last, he said, “I killed a number of men, Sinead. That’s something I have to live with. There’s nothing glorious or noble about killing anyone. However, I had no choice in the matter. It was kill or be killed.”

“Of course, darling. You really didn’t have a choice. But still, few men could....would have done what you did. We’re all very proud of you.” She paused and then asked, “When will we be seeing you?”

“Tomorrow morning, darling. I’ll drive down tomorrow morning.”

“I’d better warn you, sweetheart, the press are here.”

“Oh God! I might have known.”

True to its nature, the media circus was in full swing when he arrived at the Cronins’ house the following day. The headlines in the newspapers that morning had ranged from the fanciful, “SAINT GEORGE SLAYS IRA DRAGON”, to the more sedate, “ENGLISH ARMY CAPTAIN SAVES A MONSIGNOR OF ROME”. Immediately, Lechaim was

smothered in adulation by all that he encountered until he felt like screaming out, “for God’s sake give it a rest!” Even Sinead and the Cronins were effusive in their affection to the point where, late in the evening of the same day, he could take no more.

“Where?” Sinead asked, when he broached the subject with her.

“Anywhere, just as long as we can get away from these reporters for a few days!”

“The problem, Lechain” Maureen said, “is that you’re famous now. Your face is known to practically everybody in Ireland. Where can you go where you won’t be instantly recognized?”

Sinead’s uncle, the monsignor, who had postponed his return to Rome for two weeks, and had joined them earlier that evening came up with the answer. “The West of Ireland,” he interjected “would be the place! The inhabitants are less aware of the outside world than most.”

They all turned to listen to Shaun’s brother who had been introspective and withdrawn until now. The recent experience he had undergone was edged into his face but he seemed all right otherwise. The truth was that Michael had no recollection whatsoever of the attack on the abbey. Selective amnesia, the doctor had said after he had been examined. It was probably just as well, Michael concluded, for he had no wish to remember the horrors of that night. From the time the lights had gone out to the point when he had woken up on the ground outside the abbey, his memory loss was total. It was as though the lights had gone out in his mind also “Obviously, the memory of what occurred was so traumatic that your mind has shut it out!” the doctor that examined him had suggested. “You should

seriously consider counselling!" But Michael had been adamant that he was okay. Besides, he didn't believe in all this modern rubbish. In his day the best therapy was downing as much Guinness as possible at his local. "Counselling indeed!" he had scoffed to his brother when they had first spoken on the telephone following Michael's ordeal. Michael had now pushed the experience to the back of his mind and was busying himself with his niece's happiness.

Having paused to reflect, Michael continued, "As a young priest, on a retreat, I spent some time in a place called Dingle Bay on the west coast. It's a secluded fishing hamlet - a beautiful spot with a wild and rugged coastline. Just the place for honeymooners who want to get away from it all"

"Honeymooners!" Lechaim and Sinead exclaimed together.

"Why not?" Michael replied. "Look you two. If you wait until December, your wedding will be turned into a media affair. Why not get married in secret at St. Brendan's Abbey at the end of the month. That's two weeks' away. I'll conduct the service myself before I return to Rome. Then, in December, you can get married again just to keep your family and the press happy."

Maureen, her eyes shining, took her daughter's hand and squeezed it, nodding her assent. Shaun clapped his brother on the back, exclaiming, "It's a great idea!"

Lechaim and Sinead looked at one another. "Well?" Lechaim asked looking at Sinead.

"Yes, darling,! Let's do it!"

Maureen came over to Lechaim and gave him a kiss and a hug. Shaun joined her and the men shook hands. It was a strong grip and the two men stood there for some seconds looking into one another's faces.

“Look after her, son!” Shaun said and Lechaim could feel behind the words the warmth of the man’s affection.

“I’ll do that, Shaun!” he replied.

“Well, Shaun! don’t just stand there!” Michael exclaimed. “Do you have any drinks in the house to toast the happiness of your daughter and your future son-in-law?”

Shaun’s heart swelled as it dawned on him that his daughter was getting married to a man that was now famous in his own right. “You’re right, Michael!” he agreed and the two brothers departed into the kitchen to fetch the Guinness. Maureen followed leaving the young couple alone. When her mother too had gone, Sinead came over to Lechaim and slid her arm around him.

“Happy darling?” he asked as he looked down at her. She responded by kissing him passionately. “The happiest woman in the world, my dearest love!” she replied.

Chapter 17

SINEAD'S NIPPLES GREW taut and erect as Lechaim's promiscuous tongue sucked and teased them. Then he slowly slid his lips down over her stomach to the mons veneris and that secret place below. She held her breath as he buried his head between her legs and foraged there. Her initial shock at his audacity quickly turned to pleasure as his tongue parted the inflamed moist inner lips of her vestibule. The walls of the vagina were already secreting furiously in anticipation of the delights to come, and the swollen sentinel at its entrance, hood discarded, stood brazenly waiting to meet the intruder. She groaned uncontrollably as his tongue titillated the ripe cherry stone already bloated with its own self-importance. Wantonly, she pulled his head even further into her soft underbelly and fought back the climax that was overwhelming her.

The trembling limbs beneath his gave warning of her approaching storm, prompting him to lift his head from her sweet spot to assuage her heat. Their mouths met eagerly and their hands caressed one another as their bodies sought release from their sexual tension. Goose bumps arose on her skin as his organ nuzzled itself slowly and gently into the wet undergrowth that concealed her passage.

Reaching down between her legs with her hand, she touched the object of her delight that was now poised for its final assault; its size and feel increasing the fervour within her. Quickly, she positioned its broad head between the folds of her labia minora where it was clasped greedily in a clammy embrace.

At her growing insistence, he slowly and tenderly eased himself into her until the hair on their bellies touched. There had

been a momentary pain as her hymen tore but it was soon forgotten as her nerve ends responded to his movements. Deep long thrusts, leisurely of pace, caused her to omit low murmurings of gratification. Her cries of rapture became more and more audible as he increased his tempo and she started to cry out.

“Am I hurting you, darling?” Lechaim asked huskily, pausing briefly to check with her.

“No!” Sinead gasped. “It’s wonderful, darling! It’s wonderful!” and her fingers tightened on his buttocks urging him on. Her bucking body rose once more to his as he began his ride anew.

“Oh, darling! darling!” she moaned in complete abandonment; the muscles of her canal clutching frantically at his driving tumescent member. “Faster, faster, darling!” she demanded and he started to pump even more vigorously. The legs she had clasped behind his back, constricted as she met his unrelenting thrusts with hers. They were like a reciprocating engine out of control as they pulled and pushed violently.

Sinead tried to wait for him but she couldn’t. “I’m coming! I’m coming!” she exclaimed frantically in his ear. His patience rewarded, he now responded in kind, ejaculating a barrage of sperm that sprayed itself enthusiastically deep within her. For a brief moment in time, she was held spellbound on a tidal wave of pleasure that she had never known before. The orgasmic ecstasy within made her body writhe as a series of spasms racked her. She sought to ensnare the magical beast as it played its sweet song within her brain, but it was ephemeral by nature and quickly dissipated.

They lay for some time locked together before he finally uncoupled. As he withdrew the fine membranes of her ripped

channel clung stubbornly to his contracting shaft and he had to ease it out slowly. Then, satiated and spent, they cuddled one another as the sweat from their exertions cooled their exhausted trunks. They were now complete as only two lovers can be in perfect harmony of body and mind. Still locked together whispering endearments, they drifted into sleep.

Some hours later she woke and lay watching as the coming dawn intruded. The room began to take shape, and she propped herself on one elbow staring at him as he slept on, the love evident in her eyes. They had been married for a day, and almost one night, yet she still could not quite believe that he finally belonged to her. At that moment, she would not have changed places with anyone else on earth.

Their plans to marry in secrecy had gone without a hitch thanks to a conspiracy between her uncle, the monsignor, and the clergy of St. Brendan's Abbey. Only the Cronins and Lechaim's mother were present at this, their first wedding. At the end of the year, when all the fuss had died down, they would have another wedding and all would be invited then - her friends and his, Lechaim had promised her that. Like all women, Sinead wanted a wedding to remember and their second promised to be all of that. The Press, she knew, would be invading the Church *en masse* then. The occasion and the fanfare that would follow would be memorable indeed. However, that was for later. The only thing that really mattered to her now was that she was Lechaim's wife at long last. No one could ever take that away from her.

Watching him, she found it hard to equate this gentle man with the person that had killed nine men a few weeks' ago at the abbey. Certain sections of the media were already becoming frustrated at Lechaim's refusal to be interviewed and were

making up their own stories about that night. Their secret marriage would certainly have the Press more offside than ever when they found out. The Press, she thought ruefully. What wouldn't they do to get a story! One London tabloid had even come up with an article entitled, "DEATH AND HORROR AT THE ABBEY" claiming that some of the policemen on hand that night were so shocked by what they saw that they were given sick-leave. According to the article, one policeman had stated that, "some bodies were literally cut to pieces and their hearts had been torn out!" She knew such stories were a complete fabrication for she knew her husband to be a lovable giant. Yet, she could not forget the violent way Lechaim had dealt with Shamus Dooley in the pub, and he had killed nine men, albeit in self-defence. Conversely, in her eyes, Lechaim was a humane man by nature. His gentleness had never been more evident than just hours before when they had made love for the first time. The two sides of his nature didn't balance somehow.

She reached out and stroked his bare arm softly with her finger as he lay sleeping alongside her and recollected how it had been when they had made love for the first time. Now, as she turned over onto her back and rested her head against the pillow, she marvelled at the passion he had stirred in her. The months of waiting and the expectation of that moment had not prepared her for the sheer pleasure of the act itself. The experience had been a complete gratification of all her senses mentally and physically reaching into every fibre of her femininity. Recalling the bliss of it all, she reached down and placed her fingers along the outer lips of her vagina stretching them as she did so. They were a little tender from the battering they had received, but were more than willing to take up the

fight once more. This was only the beginning, she thought. How many times would those soft folds capture and release him in the years to come. She began to feel the desire well up in her again, and she shamelessly reached over beneath the sheets and began to explore the wonders of his penis with her fingers.

Her exploration woke him as it was meant to, and he smiled as he looked into her beautiful green eyes that were now dilated with sexual ferment. She leaned over him and parted his lips with her fingers. Lustfully, she plunged her tongue between those parted lips - the deep tongued kiss no longer that of the young, inexperienced virgin that had existed only hours before. Their hungry bodies met stimulating their desire for more. Earlier, she had been his ready pupil, now she had graduated. He guided her head with his hands as she ran the side of her face down his torso seeking out the object that had already provided her with so much gratification. It stood waiting, tall and erect, ready to do its duty. Running her tongue over its corona and down the neck, she heard his grunts of approval as she proceeded to titillate it, and then felt his body stiffen as she took it into her mouth. In doing so she had even astounded herself because to her such an act would have been unimaginable in her former world of sexual conformity. The awakening he had performed on her female psyche had been all consuming, eradicating the restrictions her Catholic upbringing had imposed. Above all else she wanted to pleasure the man she loved in every way. To her great surprise, she found that servicing him in this fashion also gave her enormous enjoyment.

The action of her mouth and tongue soon made him rock as his body solicited release. At last he erupted inside her mouth and the rich semen washed down her throat like nectar

from the Gods. The realization that she had drunk the very essence of him filled her with joy.

His hands sought her clitoris again and he felt her respond. Soon, she too rose to that peak that he had just descended from. Her toes bunched and curled as multiple orgasms shook her and sent her soaring to dizzy heights of unreality.

Finally, they were done - their senses cloyed from prolonged bouts of lovemaking. In each other's arms they rested content - the euphoria of sexual release washing over them. Holding her now in his arms, he couldn't help but wonder at her performance. Whilst he had gone down on her, he had never expected that she would do the same for him. It was more than he had dared hope for. His wife, it had turned out, was, beneath her quite demeanour, a woman of great passion and their life together promised to be a rich and rewarding one.

With legs entwined they lay floating in an ethereal world that only lovers can truly experience. Nothing else really mattered as long as they were together.

Chapter 18

RITA CLEARY WAS about to elaborate on her favourite subject, herself, when she spotted the couple entering the dining room.

“Poor dear!” Rita exclaimed to her friend, Jane Formosa as the two elderly ladies watched the young woman guiding the man towards a table. “They arrived last night! Honeymooners, would you believe!”

“But, he’s blind?” Jane Formosa exclaimed.

“Since when did that stop any man!” Rita said as she remembered how her late husband had demanded his rights every night without fail. “Name of Doherty! Mister and Mrs. Doherty!”

“A pity! About his being blind, I mean! She’s certainly taken a lot on her shoulders!” Jane Formosa commented sympathetically. She stared for a little longer and then remarked, “Reminds me a little of Maureen O’Hara!” That prompted another thought in her head. “By the way, the ‘QUITE MAN’ is on television on Wednesday night. Do you want to watch it?”

But Rita was still concentrating on the couple that were talking earnestly together. There was something oddly familiar about them.

“The ‘QUITE MAN’ - it’s on TV Wednesday!” Jane repeated aware that her friend was drifting again.

“Is it? The one with John Wayne in it, you mean?” Rita replied without taking her eyes off the couple.

“Yes, that’s it!”

“The man with her!” Rita exclaimed. “Doesn’t he look like that English Captain that killed all those men in Northern Ireland recently?”

Jane screwed up her eyes and concentrated hard. “It’s difficult to say, him wearing dark glasses and all. I think he looks more like John Wayne!”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” Rita exclaimed. Is that film all you can think about?”

Her friend, Jane, somewhat offended, but trying hard not to show it, asked peevishly, “Well, have you finished or do you want to order something else?”

“No! That’ll do. Don’t want to get too fat!”

At our age, Jane thought, what does it matter but felt it unwise to voice her opinion. Rita, after all, was a little sensitive about her weight. They paid the bill on the way out and gave the couple at the table a final glance. “I still think he looks like John Wayne!” Jane said defiantly as they walked out of the hotel and down the road.

“Well, that leaves only us!” Sinead declared as the two old ladies departed.

Lechaim peered at her through the dark shades over his eyes. “Are these really necessary, sweetheart?”

“Look, my darling, if you wander around without them, someone is certain to recognize you and you don’t want that do you?”

“But pretending to be blind, Sinead! It doesn’t seem right somehow.”

“Nonsense, darling! It’s a perfect disguise. Whoever gives a blind person more than a passing look?”

She was right, of course, and he knew it. Besides, they would be spending most of their time in their room anyway so

his impersonation hardly mattered. "Well, seeing as I'm blind, my pet, you'd better order!"

She gave him a little kick under the table and he smiled at her temerity. She had grown into a woman since yesterday and it only fuelled his love for her.

He muttered, "You wait till I get you upstairs!"

"Oh yeh!" she said. "I'm not scared of you!" and held one of her small hands clenched under his chin. The "tough guy" look she adopted as she wrinkled her face made him laugh out loud and the obese middle-aged waitress hovering on the other side of the room gave them a long look.

"Careful!" Sinead said. "She's coming over!" With that she picked up the menu and scanned it, and then she too began to laugh. With an effort, she stifled her mirth and said to the waitress who was now standing waiting, "Roast beef and vegetables please! Same for you, darling?" He nodded his assent and the waitress disappeared but not before giving Sinead a disapproving look.

"What's so funny?" Lechaim asked.

"Look at this, darling!" she responded passing over the menu, but not before she saw that no one was looking. After all, he was supposed to be blind.

Taking it from her, he could see nothing strange.

"At the bottom in small print!" she said.

Then he laughed as well. Printed there was 'SHANNON'S HOTEL' - Honeymooners welcome! Satisfaction guaranteed."

"Trust the Irish!" he responded. "I couldn't have put it better myself."

She reached out for his hand and they looked into each other's eyes. Their life together offered so much promise, and

neither of them could remember being so happy. Was life meant to be this good, she wondered? One of her father's favourite expressions was, "Well someone will come along to muck it up, you can be sure of that!" She dismissed such pessimism before it had a chance to take hold. After all, what could intrude on their happiness now?

"Well, Mrs. Doherty. What shall we do after lunch?"

"Mrs. Doherty?" she queried and then she remembered that their deception had extended to their names. "Mrs. Lewis!" she corrected. "I'm Mrs. Lewis and I don't intend you to forget!"

He laughed. "Oh, God. What have I done!"

"It's what you're going to do that I'm more interested in!"

"It might look a bit off in the middle of the day here on the table!"

"I don't know. It's looks strong enough to me!" she said wickedly.

"But am I?"

"Excuses! excuses!" she replied. "You're hopeless Mister Lewis!"

His voice softened, "Yes! I'm hopelessly in love with you, Mrs. Lewis!"

Chapter 19

...THE WARRIOR'S WHITE cape billowed in the wind and the sword at his side bounced off his thigh as he approached at the gallop. Lechaim heralded his friend's arrival with a welcoming wave, noting that he was riding bare backed as he always did. The white steed pulled up before him snorting and resisting, the hot breath brushing Lechaim's face. He gazed up at the man he knew so well but even as he did so, a metamorphosis began to take place and that familiar face took on the features of someone else - his own. Lechaim was still trying to comprehend the meaning of this when the rider wheeled his horse around and Lechaim saw the markings on his thigh. Then Lechaim understood - he and the rider were one and the same. The horse wheeled back and the rider's face began to change its form once again. The eyes became fiery red, the eyes sunken sockets, the skin crawling with maggots, and on his head a crown of small serpents took shape like those of Medusa's. The rider's eyes widened and his mouth stretched wide in a hideous grin, exposing black, decayed teeth. Lechaim recoiled in horror at this abomination that had only moments before been his friend...

The spots of rain that caused him to wake were cold on his face. The sea, which had been calm and placid when Lechaim had fallen asleep, had become untidy and a menacing swell was running. Panic seized him when he found her gone and he leapt from the towel spread under him and ran down the long wide sandy beach to the water's edge. Surely, he thought, she wouldn't be swimming in that sea. There were no swimmers in the water however. He then scanned the beach on both sides with his eyes in the hope that he could see her but she was

nowhere to be seen. The beach was deserted except for a woman with a dog some way off. He ran towards her and the woman seeing the big man descending on her took fright and began to run away but he steadied her by shouting. "Don't be alarmed. I'm looking for my wife. Have you seen her?" Then he added. "A woman with red-hair and a white bathing costume!"

The small Dalmatian puppy skipping around her feet yelped for attention as she answered, "I'm sorry! I've seen no one!"

If his mind had not been elsewhere, he would have admired the young woman's beauty but he could only see the face of his wife.

"Thank you!" he acknowledged and ran back down the beach. As he ran he started to call her name but only the seagulls skimming overhead answered with swoops and screeches. The land, onto which the sea now broke with ominous insistence, was wild in composition and this stretch of beach they had chosen, matched it in desolation. In fact they had picked it for its isolation to protect their anonymity.

He reached the hire car they had been using all week and looked to see whether her clothes were still there. They lay neatly piled on the back seat untouched. Where could she be, he asked himself reproachfully. He cursed himself for falling asleep but he was also angry with her. Sinead should have known better than to wander off alone. This rugged coastline with its rips was dangerous at the best of times and she was not a strong swimmer as she would be the first to admit. Surely, she wouldn't be foolish enough to go swimming alone without waking him. Then he dismissed the idea. Apart from the discouraging sea, it had grown cold so he thought it highly unlikely that his wife would choose to be so silly.

Comforted by his conclusions, he ran along the beach again calling her name. At one end rocks interrupted the continuity of the seashore as they butted out against the foaming water. It was a forlorn hope but he clambered over this slimed, craggy, seaweed decorated salient in the hope that he would find some trace of her. There it was - a blue object lying in a shallow rock pool. It was one of hers, all right. Plucking the blue beach shoe from its watery grave, he considered its implication. Then he made his decision.

Although he couldn't see any sign of her in the water and the sea looked menacing, he stripped off his tea shirt and jeans, beneath which he was wearing his swimming trunks, and dived in, striking strongly against the rising waves. The strong sea tried to drag him down but he plunged and rose with it, the strain beginning to tire even his powerful body. Yet, the pain of his exertions was dulled by the dread that flowed through him. How long he swam calling her name, he could not recall, but even he finally succumbed to the cold water and crashing rollers. Dragging himself up onto the beach exhausted, he lay there with the wet sand in his face and felt helpless. The faint chance that she had wandered off somewhere and got lost still provided a ray of hope. It was still possible but somehow his heart told him otherwise.

Down the beach a mile away a dappled bundle lay tossed up on the sand. Its sad doleful eyes would never again fill with joy when it heard its name being called. Those accusing orbs were closed now and forever as the sea and the sand read the last rites and gave the Dalmatian puppy a decent burial.

Chapter 20

COLONEL RYAN OPENED the small red box on his desk and stared at the red-ribboned medal within which depicted a lion on a crown with its understated inscription, "For Valour". With great care he extracted it from the box and turned it over. On the reverse side it had the date of the act for which the decoration had been bestowed. So too the name, rank, and regiment of the recipient. He handled it lovingly knowing he, himself, would never be the winner of such. It was every soldier's dream, of course, to possess one although most recipients never survived to enjoy their fame. He knew the history of the medal well. Cast in bronze (the original metal used being from Russian guns captured in the Crimean War), it was the highest decoration for valour in the British armed forces, awarded only for extreme bravery in the face of the enemy. Queen Victoria had instituted it in 1856 at the request of her consort, Prince Albert; the first Crosses having been awarded during the Crimean War. The Colonel was also aware that only one thousand, three hundred and forty-eight Victoria Crosses had ever been awarded since the honour was instituted and this was now the one thousand, three hundred and forty-ninth, and the man he was about to confront was the recipient.

The powers that be had argued long and hard before making their decision. They were aware that they were breaking with tradition, yet a precedent had been set in 1858. Then, new statutes had allowed the Victoria Cross to be conferred to members of the armed services for gallantry when not in the presence of the enemy in war. Captain Lechaim Francis Lewis had thus been awarded the Victoria Cross, a medal of such prestige that it took pride of place over all other orders and

medals in Britain. From now on, Captain Lewis would be entitled to add the letters “VC” after his name.

There would be an official ceremony at Buckingham Palace, of course, where the Queen would present him with the medal but Colonel Ryan had been designated the task of informing Captain Lewis personally. He was also allowed to show the captain the medal he was about to be bestowed with.

The knock on his office door brought the Colonel back from his trip through history. He placed the medal back in its case and called out. “Come in!”

Captain Lewis entered and saluted. “No Captain, from now on it is I that should salute you first! Please sit down!”

As Lechaim sat down, the Colonel could not help but notice the physical deterioration that had taken place in the soldier before him. No longer the officer the Colonel knew two months ago, the captain was now gaunt from loss of weight and he had shadows under his eyes. It was almost as though he were wasting away, the Colonel thought. Of course, the death of his wife would account for it. His grief filled eyes and the disinterest in his face bore evidence of that.

“Captain Lewis! It is my great honour to inform you that you have been awarded the Victoria Cross!” He then paused to observe the other man’s response but he had not bargained for what came next.

“Why, sir?”

The Colonel was taken aback by the man’s question and it took him some seconds to recover. “Why!” he echoed. “For your actions at the abbey, of course! What you did was more than worthy of such an award.”

The other man remained silent for a while and then he said, "I think you should know, sir, I am resigning from the Army."

Again the Colonel found himself repeating the other man, "resigning!" He sat back in his chair and surveyed Lechaim before saying kindly, "Lechaim, I know you suffered a great loss, what with the death of your wife and all, but why resign? Your future in the army is assured. Don't you realize that you are now the British Army's most famous living soldier?"

Not even the slightest interest registered in the other man's eyes as he replied, "I have no wish to be that, sir!"

"I can understand your grief, Captain, but your resignation won't bring your wife back. You have a wonderful career ahead of you in the Army. Why throw it all away?"

Anger touched the other man's eyes briefly and then it was gone.

The Colonel was at a loss as to what to say next. More than three months had elapsed since Captain Lewis had fought at the abbey, nearly two months since his wife's death. His feat at the abbey that night had been repeatedly discussed in the media to the point where it was now old news. Unfortunately, his gallant act had done little to help any peace talks taking place which had now reached an inevitable stalemate as had the many proceeding them. Other stories filled the headlines now, and Captain Lewis' story, including the tragic death of his wife, was slowly fading in people's memories. Captain Lewis' attitude hadn't assisted his cause with his stubborn refusal to be interviewed by the press. The award of the Victoria Cross would now impose fresh demands on him as far as the Press and public were concerned, the Colonel knew. Surely he must realize that, he thought as he stared at the man before him. He

finally said, “Why not take a holiday instead of resigning and return to the Army when you’re ready?”

Lechaim did not answer so he went on, “You know, Captain, you’ll never be able to escape from yourself no matter where you go! Here in the Army, at least, you could expect to live as normal a life as is possible in the circumstances. Besides, you’re a soldier. What else is there for you?”

Lechaim considered the Colonel’s words before he responded.

“I’m not sure sir. I only know I must find my future somewhere else. I don’t believe it lies here in Ireland or in the Army!”

“You will be staying for the investiture?”

“Investiture?”

“Yes! Friday, the sixteenth of August, to be exact, Buckingham Palace at ten in the morning!” Colonel Ryan replied, “although that’s unofficial for now. You’ll be officially notified by mail, in the next few days. The time and date of the investiture will be confirmed at the same time! Incidentally, the Queen herself will be presenting you with the medal!”

Christ! Would he never escape his fame he thought as he found himself replying, “It’s an honour I don’t deserve, sir, but I will be pleased to accept it on behalf of the regiment.”

“Very good! Well, that’s it then! I believe that will be all for now.” The Colonel then rose to his feet and walked around the desk as Lechaim rose to his feet.

“If you should change your mind about resigning,” the Colonel said as he placed his hand on Lechaim’s shoulder in a fatherly way, “please let me know at once. Personally, I believe you are making a mistake but it’s your decision, no one else’s.”

He thought for a moment longer and then asked, “What do you intend to do when you leave the Army?”

“To begin with, I’m going to the Philippines to visit some friends and then I’m not sure! Play it by ear, I guess!”

The Colonel looked doubtful. “How do you intend to get out there? To the Philippines, that is?”

“I hadn’t thought about it really?”

“You realize what will happen if you fly out on a regular airline. The press will hound you all the way.” The Colonel, himself, had been the target of a few reporters of late who wanted to learn more about the Captain and saw the Colonel as a likely source. On that score they were mistaken. However, they had pursued him to the point where he now had his calls monitored. The press, therefore, were not exactly the Colonel’s “flavour of the month” at this point in time.

Whilst Captain Lewis was considering the Colonel’s words, Colonel Ryan expounded further, “If you like, I’ll see what I can do for you. I have a contact in the US Air Force. They have regular flights to Manila! I may be able to get you on one of their flights!”

“That’s most kind, sir. I would certainly appreciate that!”

The Colonel walked Lechaim to the door and both men shook hands. Lechaim could not help but remember the last time he had shaken hands with the Colonel and the resulting mayhem that followed.

When Captain Lewis had gone, Colonel Ryan returned slowly to his desk and sat staring out the window. Great Scott! He had forgotten to show the man his medal and thought for a moment about calling him back. However, he knew it would be pointless. The captain’s disposition suggested that he would not appreciate the recall to view a medal that he seemed to have

no interest in. “A great pity! “ the Colonel murmured, “A great pity!”

Chapter 21

THE GRAVEYARD WAS officially closed for the evening but in view of who he was, the old couple that owned the cottage nearby and were the keepers of the graveyard let Lechaim in while Shaun and Maureen waited outside. They both knew that he wanted some time with her alone and they were all cried out anyway.

Sinead's grave was easy to find for the heavy marble was bedecked with tokens of bereavement from all over Ireland, although the elements were taking their toll on them. The wreaths and bouquets of flowers were tributes of a country that had been in mourning. What had to many of Ireland's people been regarded as a love story had ended in the most tragic of circumstances. One of their Irish colleens had been taken by the sea leaving behind a celebrated husband to mourn her passing.

It had been seven weeks now since Sinead had been buried but this was the first time he had been to her grave. The Cronins, her parents, had at least, understood why although no one else did. His grief had been so evident to them and the media had been no help, constantly badgering him to the point where he had snapped just days before her funeral. Then, just for a brief instant, there had been murderous intent in Lechaim's eyes as he had seized one reporter by the lapels of his jacket. Almost immediately he thought he heard Sinead's lilting voice in his ear. "Darling! Please don't!" The pain of her and her gentleness cut through him then like a knife and he had thrown the man aside.

If he had gone to her funeral, he knew it would be turned into even more of a media circus and he couldn't bear that. Sinead's memory was just too sacred to him. So, instead, he

had disappeared for a while, driving aimlessly through Ireland, lost in mind and body. Returning to the Army on his return, a week or so ago now, he had avoided visiting her grave. It was as if by doing so, he would validate her death. But now he knew he had to say good-bye.

Standing there looking down at the marble slab that covered her, he read the inscription he had requested be inscribed there.

*To my dearest wife, Sinead,
The sweetest soul of all,
Goodnight, darling,
Sweet dreams,
I'll see you in the morning
when the sun comes up*
CAPTAIN LECHAIM FRANCIS LEWIS, MC

I suppose they'll place a VC in front of the MC now, he found himself thinking bitterly as he looked at his name beneath the inscription. What price glory when you lose the only person you have truly loved. He would trade a thousand VC's for one glimpse of that wonderful smile of hers. When she had been alive, he had held the world in his arms. Now, he knew only darkness and despair.

Tears began flowing down his face and he uttered a prayer, something he hadn't done in a long time. "Look after my dear wife, Lord. If it be thy wish, please grant that one day we will meet again in Paradise."

He stood there for some time with his head bowed and then he bent down and laid his hand on her tombstone. "Good-bye, darling!" he whispered. "Sleep well!" The he got up, and

ended by saying, "I love you...I always will" With that he turned and walked away without looking back.

Lechaim had "crossed his Rubicon" and never intended to come back to Ireland again, a land that had given him Sinead and then so cruelly taken her away. The Emerald Isle was indeed a beautiful mistress but she could be so vindictive. He knew he would never stop loving them both, his wife and her country, but he needed to bury the past or lose his sanity. What better place than on the other side of the world in new surroundings and away from any reminder of what he had lost.

Less than two weeks later, he said his good-byes to Shaun and Maureen in their home. She hugged him and then Shaun, quite unlike him, to be sure, Maureen thought later, embraced his son-in-law as well. The two men had become firm friends and the death of his daughter, and the departure of his new found friend pressed heavily on him. Saying good-bye now, both men hurt. Lechaim had become like the son that Shaun never had, and Shaun like the father that Lechaim couldn't remember. Maureen loved him also. Not only had he been Sinead's husband but also Maureen's dear friend as well. Now, to lose both Sinead and Lechaim in just a few weeks was more than she could bear, but she hid her true feelings by putting on a brave face.

"Mind you write now!" Maureen shouted through the car window as he was about to pull away. They were not alone. Most of the residents in the lane crowded around the vehicle waving their good-byes. A lump came to Lechaim's throat and he felt the salt in his eyes. These were good people, he thought. How wonderful it would all have been if only Sinead were alive today.

“Mind you write now!” Maureen repeated and he became aware of her again. He smiled back at them both as they stood by the side of the car. “And mind you come on that holiday to England!” he said. “As soon as I return from the Philippines.”

“We will! That’s a promise!” Shaun said and meant it.

The car lurched away and Lechaim could see in his rear view mirror the crowd in the lane waving after him. He held up one hand in acknowledgment but did not look back.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen him do that since Sinead died.” Maureen said.

As they started back inside, Shaun asked, “What?”

“Smile!” Maureen answered.

Chapter 22

COLONEL RYAN HAD been as good as his word, finding Lechaim a place on an American Air force transport plane flying out of a base in England. Although bound for Sydney, Australia it was scheduled to refuel in Manila, which suited Lechaim's purposes. Almost four weeks had elapsed since he had said good-bye to Ireland. After a short stay with his mother in Brighton, during which time he attended the investiture at Buckingham Palace, he was finally on his way. His official discharge from the Army had not yet come through, however, the authorities could ill afford to place obstacles in the way of a man that was now part of Army folklore, so he had been granted "special leave" which, in reality, was "indefinite leave".

The Victoria Cross invested by the Queen at the Palace eight days before had been packed safely away in one of his bags. It would remain there secluded from the world as indeed he, himself, hoped to be during his stay in the Philippines. Hence the reason for the moustache he had grown and the change of hair colour and style. Before, his hair had been combed back from his forehead but now he had a parting down the left side. His former shock of blond hair - it had grown back quickly after his head injury nearly a year before - was now a dark brown. Clear glass spectacles lent added substance to the change. The obvious shrinkage in his physique in the last three months had also assisted in the transformation and it would take a close examination to identify him as Lechaim Francis Lewis, VC. Lechaim hoped that with this change in appearance his arrival in Manila would pass unnoticed. In his naivety he remained blissfully unaware that the sacred cow in the Orient is money - any secret can be bought for a price.

More than twelve hours had passed since he had said good-bye to his mother and boarded the plane. Despite the fact that it had been many hours in the air, he still could not sleep. It certainly wasn't due to a lack of consideration by anyone on board. The crew of the C-130H cargo transport on which he was travelling could not have been more helpful. They knew well enough who he was and were treating him like royalty for his fame preceded him. The aircraft's captain had immediately insisted when he came aboard, "You take my berth, Captain! It will give you a little privacy". Despite Lechaim's protests, the skipper would brook no refusal. Installed in the pilot's somewhat Spartan quarters, Lechaim lay on the cot set up there listening to the endless noisy drone of the engines roaring around him. Normally, despite the racket, he would have slept, but his mind was in such turmoil that his brain refused to rest. As usual his dead wife filled his thoughts. Whilst he could accept that Sinead was dead and had been for some months now, he literally felt her slipping away with every mile that passed. No longer alive, it was as though in death she were waiting there in her grave for him and he was abandoning her. He could not let go of that thought and a deep depression was setting in.

Torturing himself even more, he once again pulled the photograph from his wallet. It was a photograph of the pair of them standing on the beach on the second day of their honeymoon; the beach from which just four days on she left never to return alive. The scene in the mortuary flashed into his mind. The way her damp red hair clung to her face as she lay there on the trolley with just a sheet covering her. How the white skin had been torn in parts where she had been dashed against rocks. How that sweet face had been bruised and

contorted. How... No! It would do no good to let any more memories of her in death flood in and he made an effort to concentrate instead on memories of her when she had been alive. He smiled as he remembered how the young woman walking towards them on the beach that day had reacted when Lechaim jogged after her. At first she had appeared startled and started to run away. However, when she realized that Lechaim's intentions were strictly honourable, she was glad enough to take a photograph of Sinead and him together using Lechaim's camera. It hadn't taken the young woman long to recognize the famous couple, and she had then asked if she might be allowed to take a photograph of them with her own camera. "One for my husband! He'll never believe me otherwise!" As Lechaim pictured that excited woman in his mind, it suddenly struck him that it was also the same woman he had seen on the beach the day Sinead had died. But then she had a puppy dog with her. A strange coincidence, he thought, considering how long that stretch of beach had been. On that fatal day, he and Sinead had been a mile or so up the beach from where they had been before. However, on reflection, it seemed likely that the young woman lived near the beach somewhere, so, in all probability, she was always strolling along it. Perhaps not such a coincidence after all.

Lechaim smiled as he reminisced. My, how he and Sinead had laughed together at the time. "You should have seen her face!" Sinead said, "when you ran towards her! By the way she pelted down the beach, she must have thought you were a rapist" Tears welled in his eyes as he recalled his retort. "There's only one person that's going to get raped here!" and he remembered then the playful way he had chased her over the sand. The pain behind his eyes was building up again, and he

put the photograph back in his wallet. As he did so, he came across the other photograph lying there and he pulled it out. It was the one of Monsignor Michael standing before St. Peters. Studying it, he was reminded that his dreams these last months since Sinead's death left no room for the warrior that had dominated them before. There had only been space in his thoughts awake and asleep for Sinead alone. He studied it for sometime. The photograph was a poor one because Michael's face was out of focus although the face of his companion standing with him was clear enough. From the man's dress, Lechaim guessed that the Mosignor's colleague was a dignitary of the Church as well. It was funny how he was always drawn back to this photograph despite the fact that the markings had been a figment of his imagination. He had quite forgotten that he had stowed it away in the back of his wallet. It seemed of little use now and he went to rip it up but something held him back. It was after all another link to his late wife and he placed it back in his wallet instead.

"You awake?" a voice from the other side of the curtain at the entrance to his quarters asked.

"Yes! Come in!"

It was the pilot, an American Air force captain, that entered. Short in statue with a slight paunch and short curly black hair, he looked more Mexican than an archetypal American. In fact he was from Montana. The mandatory sunglasses and cigar were evident enough though.

"Captain, we should be in Manila in two more hours." As he spoke Lechaim's attention became fixated on the unlit cigar between his teeth, which seemed to fill the man's swarthy face. The brilliant white teeth that held it were friendly enough though. "Look! I've been told to keep your arrival a secret.

You know! You were never here!” and he winked at Lechaim conspiratorially. “Don’t worry about a thing! I’ll slip some pesos to the natives and we’ll have you through Customs and out in the paddock in no time!”

“That’s very kind of you, Captain Jay. I’m sorry to put you to so much trouble.”

The sound of his name was the sweetest thing when spoken by someone famous. The “Jay” was on his father’s side, his mother being pure American Indian. She was Northern Blackfoot and proud of it. Often, when he was a boy, she would tell him tales of her tribe. “Then, my son, the Blackfoot were the strongest and bravest on the north-western plains.” How proud his mother was, and how proud she would be when he told her that he had been speaking to the great English warrior, Captain Lewis.

These thoughts only briefly slipped through his mind as he answered, “Not at all, Captain! Not at all! It’s a pleasure...all part of the service!” Before Lechaim could respond, the pilot added, “Just one thing, Captain!”

“Yes?” Lechaim asked.

“Could you write your name here!” he said handing Lechaim a copy of ‘LIFE’ magazine. On the front it carried a picture of Lechaim in full uniform being presented with his Victoria Cross by the Queen. The caption read: “FOR VALOUR - CAPTAIN LEWIS RECEIVES ENGLAND’S HIGHEST AWARD “

Lechaim then comprehended. The man was asking for his autograph. It took Lechaim by surprise because until that moment he hadn’t really considered himself a celebrity. His mind had been too full of other things. But, there it was and he couldn’t deny it. He was now in the public eye, on parade for

the world to see. The thought brought him no comfort. The last thing he wanted was to be anyone's hero. Rather, he just wanted to lose himself in another world where no one knew about him and he could be left alone. He was hoping that the Far East would provide such an avenue of escape. Yet, the amiable man before him could not be denied.

As Lechaim took the magazine, the skipper explained, "For my little sweetheart! She'll be over the moon! She thinks you're great!"

Lechaim tried to hide his embarrassment. "Her name is?"

"Millie!" the pilot said proudly.

Lechaim duly wrote, "*To Millie from Jay's friend, Captain Lechaim Lewis*" and he dated it. The American captain beamed his pleasure as Lechaim handed the magazine back. "That's great Captain Lewis! - That's great! - Thanks a million!" Then his eyes lifted from the cover and he said, "Now you don't worry about a thing! We'll get you through the airport in no time". With that he decided at long last to light his cigar, which Lechaim hadn't seen out of the man's mouth. The pilot still didn't take it out as he ran a match down one wall and lit it. "You want one Captain?" he asked fumbling in one of his pockets.

"No thank you!" I don't smoke!" Lechaim answered.

Above the lieutenant's head, the words, "NO SMOKING" started to choke on the fumes of Cuban leaf as he then said, "Okay, Captain Lewis." Pausing to consider, he then asked, "Would you like to join us in the cockpit?"

Lechaim thought for a few seconds. "Why not!" he replied. "Many thanks!"

As Lechaim made his way forward with the smaller man, he was amused by the American's buoyant mood. "God damn!

That's great! Don't that beat all!" he kept muttering as he looked at Lechaim's contribution on the magazine cover. He turned to Lechaim as they were about to enter the cockpit and finally took the cigar from his lips. "My mother will be tickled pink!"

Chapter 23

THE WIZENED FILIPINO at the wheel, Leo by name and slothful by nature, finally shrugged his shoulders.

“No good boss! Too many people!” he exclaimed in doleful resignation waving a hand at the people milling past to emphasize his hapless plight. To be fair, Leo had done everything possible to cajole the car the last few blocks. Mounting pavements and using the wrong side of the road - something every Filipino driver was apt to do from time to time when driving in metro Manila - had not solved the problem. This time, the congestion had defeated even Leo.

“Sorry Boss!” Leo exclaimed again with an obsequious toothless grin. For once he meant it. Normally, it would be no skin off his nose if they were late. After all, the airport would still be there when they finally reached it. These foreigners were always in a rush to go somewhere, and, to his mind, life was far too short to be hurrying it along in this way. But, this time Leo was equally disappointed because today they were picking up the famous Captain Lewis. And he, Leo would get to drive him back to Forbes Park. Of course, he had been sworn to secrecy but surely it did no harm to tell his daughter.

“Okay, Leo!” Carlos said. “You stay with the car. I’ll walk from here. You meet us at the airport entrance.”

“Right Boss!” Leo acknowledged with a further display of gums that masked his frustration.

A hale mile away, Lechaim bid farewell to Captain Jay. “Thanks, Pete!” Lechaim said as the two men shook hands in the lounge area. “Not at all, Leck’um!” Pete responded. My pleasure! Now, you look after yourself. Yah hear!”

With a final wave the American disappeared through the lounge doors and back to the plane. Lechaim had tried to explain to the American that his name was pronounced, “Le kime!” but Pete had decided that Leck’um sounded better. It was amazing how many variations people thought up from Lechum to Leck’um, he mused. He then remembered what Monsignor Michael had told him. “It’s a Jewish name!” It seemed strange that his mother who was Catholic should choose a Jewish name for him. Yet another mystery that stemmed from his past.

He suddenly realized that his mood had changed and he put it down to the camaraderie he had found among the crew in the cockpit. Their easy manner and their complete irreverence for rank was very warming. Yet, it seemed to interfere in no way with their efficiency or the obvious respect they had for one another. The American way, Lechaim thought, had a lot going for it. The English style within its armed forces was more reserved and didn’t promote the same camaraderie. Perhaps the British Army could learn a thing or two from its American counterparts, he concluded.

His mood was further enhanced by the magic that seemed to fill the air; that magic that comes from being in an exotic land where all was new and interesting. Manila International Airport in New Mia was spacious and modern which came as a surprise to him, bearing in mind the penury of the country. The many impecunious people thronging its entrance were evidence enough of that.

“Captain Lewis?” a voice behind him inquired. Turning, he found a short officious looking Filipino staring up at him; the white barong he wore bearing the airport emblem on its breast

pocket. These people were all so small, Lechaim thought as he gazed at the man. Now he knew how Gulliver would have felt.

“Yes, that’s right!”

“Would you please come with me, sir! I have your luggage waiting outside. It’s already been checked through Customs for you!”

As they walked together, he found his steps slowing to match that of the other. Arriving in the airport reception area, Lechaim found his bags sitting on a luggage trolley awaiting attention. “Here you are sir! And have a pleasant stay in the Philippines!”

“Thank you very much.” Lechaim replied and watched the little man walk off. Perhaps he should have offered him something, but then again Lechaim had no Filipino currency on him. It was too late now anyway, he decided as he pushed the trolley with his luggage across the hall. The blazing sun beating through the large glass windows fronting the big reception hall gave colour and perspective to the vista before Lechaim’s eyes, so foreign in every way, with its many brown faces and energetic purpose. Almost consciously he could feel himself relaxing as the languid atmosphere permeated through him. The dull ache in his stomach that had been a constant companion since Sinead’s death began to recede, and it was almost as though he had come alive again.

Pushing the trolley through the entrance doors and out onto the thoroughfare, Lechaim was amazed to find that the bustle taking place inside also spilled out into the airport access. The inside and outside of Manila Airport was a veritable hive of activity. Airports were always busy, he knew, but this one seemed particularly so. Everyone from hotel pimps touting their employers’ wares to luggage carriers jostling for elbow-room

made up this conglomerate. In addition a herd of itinerant Filipinos seemed to be thronging around aimlessly on the fringes of the entrance. Was it always like this he wondered? Lost in the headiness of the Orient, he was unaware of the woman standing near him saying insistently to her companion, "It's him I tell you!"

"Are you sure it's not Elvis?" her male companion remarked, laughing at her foolishness. "Come on! Let's grab a taxi! I could kill for a drink!"

The woman decided that her companion was right and tagged along after him as he went in search of a ride.

It took Carlos half an hour to make his way along Roxas Boulevard and breach the crowd gathered around the entrance. He spotted Lechaim by his sheer size alone.

"Lechaim, my friend. How are you?" he warmly proclaimed as both men embraced. He hated raising a topic so raw to the other man but he had to. "I can't tell you how sorry Eva and I are about Sinead!"

Lechaim felt his stomach knot again as he said, "I know my friend, I know!"

Carlos had resolved that it would be the last time he would make mention of her. If Lechaim wanted to talk about his dead wife, then Carlos would listen, but he would leave it to his friend to touch on the subject again. Both he and Eva were in agreement on this. Time, they knew, was the only healer when someone close dies. In Lechaim's case he was strong enough to cope with his loss, but he didn't need be constantly reminded of it.

The two men chatted easily as they waited for Leo to make an appearance and Lechaim lost himself in the warmth of their friendship.

“I didn’t recognize you at first. It was only your height that alerted me. What have you done to yourself?”

Lechaim smiled ruefully. “You’ve no idea what being ...” he hesitated because he didn’t want to say ‘famous’ - it made him sound big headed so he said instead - ... “well known means. I needed a disguise!”

Carlos looked long and hard at his friend and found that he had lost much weight. He was thinner in the face and his change in appearance overall made him seem like a stranger. Yet it was still the same old Lechaim although he could see how grief had ravaged him. As for his friend’s words, he knew full well what being a celebrity meant. Carlos too had felt the attention of the media once his friendship with the famous Captain became known. Now as Carlos studied Lechaim, he was awed himself by the man before him, this man that had killed nine armed terrorists with nothing more than a sword. It had only been days before, that Eva and he had watched Lechaim receiving his Victoria Cross on world television. Now, here he was, a legend in his own lifetime, and their very dear friend.

“Unfortunately, Lechaim, like it or not, you’re a famous man now!”

His words made Lechaim colour slightly.

Then Carlos joked, “How about an autograph!”

“Cost you!” Lechaim joked back and that’s the way Leo found them shoving one another playfully on the pavement.

Leo was nervous, but then he was always nervous. This time, however, he felt that he had good reason to be. The man he was about to meet was the famous Englishman that he had seen on television. Being a Catholic country Lechaim’s feat,

because it involved the Church, had been widely publicised throughout.

This is Leo, my driver!" Carlos said by way of introduction."

"How are you, Leo!" Lechaim said in a friendly manner and held out his hand.

Leo offered a limp paw and said, "Good! Sir!" and then he asked, "Any luggage, Sir?"

"There, Leo!" Carlos replied pointing to the three large heavy suitcases on the trolley nearby. As Leo went over to the trolley, Carlos could not help but wonder at Leo's change of manner. Leo had never called Carlos anything but "boss" yet it now appeared that he did have a "Sir" in his limited vocabulary.

Retrieving the cases, Leo made a vain attempt to get the first up onto the lip of the boot.

"Let me!" Lechaim uttered as he plucked the heavy case from Leo's grasp and tossed it easily into the trunk. He then duly loaded the other two.

"Thank you, sir! Thank you, sir!" Leo was grateful and more. He was also impressed with the captain's obvious strength. He had read about this man in the Manila papers at the time when Lechaim had become a hero and he was thrilled to be in his presence now. Face to face, Leo thought, Captain Lewis was everything that he had been made out to be, although he was different in appearance now. Filipino women would fall in love with his blue eyes, he suspected, and with the man's kind, handsome face.

In general Leo hated God and mankind for making him who he was, putting him where he was, in the position that he was. In particular he hated foreigners with their wealth and the best of everything. However, there was something about the

captain that Leo liked and it had nothing to do with his fame. This foreigner didn't seem to have the arrogance and overbearance that the others had. Also, Leo thought, the captain spoke to him rather than at him. Yes, this was an exceptional man but then he already knew that.

"Forbes Park, boss?" Leo asked of Carlos when he was ready to drive off just in case his employer wanted to take a detour.

"Forbes Park please, Leo!" Carlos confirmed a little irritated that Leo still called him "boss" and Lechaim "sir". Carlos was not a petty man, however, and soon dismissed his chauffeur's slight. After all, he had other matters far more important to consider.

As they drove through the city, Lechaim found Manila a place of contrasts. Some parts were modern and they could have been driving through almost any city in the Western World. In many quarters, however, makeshift houses of bamboo crowded together in a sprawling mass. The homeless simply camped inside large wooden packing cases or the like erected along the broken pavements at the sides of the roads.

What a way to live, Lechaim thought, and we think we have it rough on our side of the world, he reflected. The smells that this kind of poverty creates assailed Lechaim's nostrils through the wound down car windows on either side.

"God!Leo. Would you please wind up the windows. The smell's diabolical! "

Leo pressed the buttons on the console to one side of him and the windows slid up.

Lechaim was lost in his own thoughts now. Despite the eyesores at every turn, it seemed to him that there was an air of excitement about it all. The flashing smiles of the people seemed

incongruous somehow, bearing in mind the conditions in which they lived, The disrepair of the many streets, the clamorous noise that hordes of people make, the malodorous smells that rose from the broken drains, the insistent beeps of the many vehicles as they fought the roads together, and all the other ingredients that went into this melting pot of humanity gave the city a life of its own. It had, it seemed to him, a vibrancy that few other cities around the world had. In truth, he had fallen in love again, but this time, it wasn't with a woman, it was with a city, the city of Manila.

Eva was waiting anxiously for them when they eventually arrived. Like her husband, she loved the big man and was looking forward to seeing him again, and yet she was apprehensive as well. She remembered how she had felt when Carlos had first gone away to the Malvinas as a young lieutenant. Then, like so many other young women in Argentina, she had been fearful that she would never see him again. Later, when he was invalided home, she was overjoyed that he had survived and so grateful to the man that had saved him life. Now, Lechaim, the man to whom they both owed so much, had suffered a terrible loss. What could she and her husband do to ease his pain? The maternal instinct, never far below the surface, was bubbling forth in her and she was determined to make Lechaim's visit as happy as possible. In the circumstances, however, would her efforts be enough?

As the car swept into the drive, she went out to meet it with her two young sons in tow. Her three young Filipino maids, who did not intend to miss out on this unique event, sidled out after them. The two men alighted and Eva looked up into that wonderful face once more. It was still the same face but he had changed so much. She hid her dismay as she took

him in her arms and hugged him tightly. Their mouths met in a kiss of warmth and affection and she stood back and stared into his eyes. It was all there - the pain, the grief, the deadness of soul that love lost could bring. "Darling man! How are you?"

She saw the tears in his eyes that he was desperately trying to control. She held her to him again as she said, "I know! I know!"

As they stood there in each other's arms it seemed to Lechaim that Eva was one of the few people that really understood.

"Enough of that, my girl!" Carlos said eventually aware that his friend was struggling to control his emotions. "Remember that your husband's watching!"

Ignoring her husband's banter but thankful to him for breaking the tension, Eva said softly with meaning as she released him again, "Welcome, Lechaim. It's so good to see you again!" Before he could respond, she stood further back and exclaimed, "And what is that on your lip?"

"Don't you like it?" he asked with mocked seriousness.

"No, I do not!"

"Well, in that case, my girl, no more kisses for you!" It suddenly struck Lechaim even as he said it that he hadn't felt this happy in months, not since that terrible day. Now, lost in the warmth of the Regas' affectionate welcome, he had forgotten about Sinead for just a little while. He would never forget her for long, though, he knew. Sinead was always there with him and she would always remain for as long as he lived.

He heard Eva reply through the fog that clouded his mind momentarily. "Who'd want to kiss you anyway?"

He laughed - it felt good to laugh again - he had come through.

Swooping up the two little boys at her side, he exclaimed, “And have you two been behaving yourself!”

“We have! We have!” Jose yelled in his excitement.

“Come and see what I’ve made! Uncle Lechaim!” Eduardo demanded on the other arm. There greeting was as warm as their parents for they too loved their surrogate Uncle.

“Boys! Boys! Eva exclaimed.” Give him a chance to get inside!”

Lechaim said to the two terrors in his arms. “Now, how about you show me this lovely house of yours!”

“This way! This way!” they responded and he put them down. They grabbed his hands, one on each side, and started pulling him forward.

Carlos and Eva grinned broadly at one another as Lechaim gave up the fight. Carlos put his arm around his wife and they followed Lechaim and the boys into the large house provided by Carlos’ employers. The three maids whom Lechaim had acknowledged with that wonderful smile of his excitedly followed. The famous English soldier whom they had read about was every bit as handsome as he looked on the world television news although a lot thinner. His blue eyes besotted them completely.

Chapter 24

LECHAIM HAD FOUND the peace that he so badly needed in the company of his friends. Carlos' family was a delight and Lechaim felt completely at home with them. Memories would flood back from time to time, but unfamiliar surroundings, wonderful fellowship, and life in an enchanted place helped him push the dark thoughts to the back of his mind.

In his position as the president of an American semiconductor company, Carlos enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle even by expatriate standards. The house was spacious, furnished tastefully, and designed for elegant living.

Despite his new found happiness, however, Lechaim soon realised that he couldn't stay long. It had only taken hours after his arrival, two weeks before, for the Press to get wind of his presence in the Philippines and his exact location. Now, the outside of Carlos' house was under siege by the Press and public alike. Eight Filipino security guards, that had been hired to keep out intruders, were patrolling the gardens. Life, Lechaim decided, was becoming intolerable for the Regas although they would never complain. The pool to the rear was the focus of their family gatherings, and it was here one evening, whilst they were sitting around the pool, the boys in bed, that he decided to tell them of his decision.

"Oh, no, Lechaim. Surely not!" Eva responded in dismay. Next to her husband and her father, there was no man on earth that she loved more than this powerful, gentle, placid, companionable man. The children also adored him and they would all feel a great loss when he finally went. Now, he intended to do just that.

“You’ve both been wonderful but it’s time to leave.” Eva went to object but he silenced her by saying, “This circus outside will give you no peace.”

It was true that they couldn’t go out and Carlos’ position as the head of his company was being affected by the constant attention but they would never have told Lechaim so.

“I thought I’d take a trip down south. See some of this beautiful country”. He had read much about the island of Luzon and the other many wondrous places that go to make up the Philippines, and he was eager to explore the country for himself. “I’ll travel around for a while and return here before I leave. That’s if it’s all right with you both?”

Eva rose from the plastic banana chair where she had been reclining and walked around to the back of his where she placed her hands on his shoulders. “Lechaim, it’s been wonderful having you here. As far as we are concerned, this is your home anytime, and for as long as you want.”

He placed one hand over hers and looked up at her. “Thank you, Eva. I’ll remember that.”

“Make sure you do” Carlos added with an edge of sadness to his voice, which he tried to hide with his next remark. “At least I’ll get my wife back now!”

Eva made a playful run at him but he rose quickly, hopped on his one leg for he had taken off his prosthetic limb, and plunged awkwardly into the pool.

“I have a good mind to run away with him, Hoppy!” she called after him. She would often call him that when she wanted to stir him up - it was always said with fondness, never with malice, and he knew that.

“I’ll take you up on that!” Lechaim responded loud enough for Carlos to hear.

Both Carlos and Lechaim knew that Eva loved her husband with a passion and would never leave him. Yet, Carlos also knew that if ever a man could fill his place in her eyes, Lechaim was that man. He also knew that both his friend and his wife loved him as much as he did them and the joke they now shared would never become a reality.

“Take her!” Carlos shouted from the safety of the pool. “She’ll make your life a misery! Mark my words!”

Eva snorted with indignation and dived into the pool after him.

“I was only joking!” he laughed as she began chasing him around the pool in mock anger.

Looking at the love that emanated between husband and wife, Sinead’s beautiful face swam before Lechaim’s eyes again, and the memories of their days together filled his mind. How he envied the ardour that existed between the pair in the pool. It would never matter to Eva whether Carlos had one leg, one arm or whatever. He would always be Carlos, the man that was the centre of her world. Lechaim could only covet what they had and grieve for the love of his life that was no more.

Carlos voice broke through his transitory melancholia. “Come and help me, you coward!”

“You must be joking!” he responded. “She’s dangerous!”

Eva stood up in the pool and waved her fist at Lechaim as she adopted the tough guy look. “Come on! Come on!” she taunted.

.....”*You wait till I get you upstairs!*”

“*Oh, yeh! I’m not scared of you!*” and Sinead held one of her small hands clenched under his chin. The “tough guy” look she adopted as she wrinkled her face made him laugh out loud

Someone was shouting at him. "Come on! Come on!" and he was back.

"Okay! You've asked for it!" Lechaim exclaimed and jumped into the pool after her. Eva let out a little girlish scream and went to get away from him, but he caught her in a moment and held her up above him in his powerful arms. The sensual feel of this beautiful woman had stirred his manhood - a feeling he hadn't had since Sinead's death.

"Well, are you sorry?" he said seeking to disguise the huskiness in his voice.

"Yes! Yes!" she panted and he lowered her tenderly.

Carlos joined them in the centre.

"We'll miss you, Lechaim!" Eva said softly with feeling.

"We will that!" Carlos agreed.

He looked at them both. "Not as much as I'm going to miss you!"

Chapter 25

OVERHEAD, THE MONSOONAL winds blew from the southwest, threatening but restraining. Beneath the approaching storm front, Lechaim had been driving since eight and it was now just past noon. The countryside through which he travelled was an amalgam of different images. Rice paddies, sugar cane and banana plantations, and coconut and pineapple groves intruded upon the senses. Interspersed within this mosaic were crops of maize, mango, citrus, and papaya for this was a chiefly agricultural land. In places, wild shocks of jungle would occasionally intrude and then slink away. The region, as was the rest of Luzon, was fertile like its people, the earth rich, unlike its people.

The Ford Ghia, circa 1976, which he had purchased from the boyfriend of one of Eva's house girls, was purring along in quite contentment, happy at long last to be free of the toothless wonder that had been playing with its innards. In this, car and driver were of one mind. Lechaim had some misgivings when Leo offered the previous day to service the car for him. Not wanting to hurt the old man's feelings, he had left it in Leo's hands. It would be wise at journey's end, he concluded, to give the car a through check just to confirm that Leo knew what he was doing. But where was journey's end, Lechaim wondered? For that matter why had he now turned off the main highway and down this more or less dirt track? The sudden impulse to do so had hardly been a rational one. Should he stop and turn back or carry on? Then again, it wasn't really important where he finally ended up, he quickly decided, so he put his foot back on the accelerator. The car expressed its approval by purring again. After all, Lechaim surmised, as he lent back in the seat,

there was all the time in the world and no place to go in particular.

As he drove along, his thoughts dwelled on the countryside that had derived its name from the King of Spain, Philip II, during the Spanish colonization of the islands in the 16th century. The land seemed to possess colours more vivid and vibrant than those in the cooler latitudes. Its scenery conjured up in Lechaim's mind pictures of what paradise would be like, if there were such a place. Then again, he thought, paradise would never be punctuated by the stark poverty that abounded throughout this bountiful archipelago. Yes, there was bewitchment in this land and he wallowed in its spell as he drove lazily along, intoxicated while the wind's hot breath played over him through the open windows. Ireland and the past were now forgotten - relegated to the back of his mind where they would wait for promotion again. This place in the sun, far from home, that he had come to by chance was providing sustenance for his body and solace for his soul.

It must have been a good half hour after Lechaim had turned off the main southern motorway, when he saw them ahead of him - two water buffaloes being shepherded along by a weather-beaten Filipino farmer. Lechaim slowed the vehicle as he realized that they were all converging together on a curve in the road up ahead, his intention being to trail behind until the man and his two lumbering charges negotiate the turn. It was at that point that Leo's former handiwork became evident as the engine cut out. The vehicle's momentum carried the car some distance as the whispering tyres discussed the reason for the engine's lapse into silence. Gravity then took over and it bumped to a stop where it stood sulking.

Lechaim sat back and gazed through the windscreen at the two carabaos moving slowly away, their swaggering flanks jeering him with their display of mobility. Searching around, he saw what looked like a Church across some fields. A bite to eat and then he would have a look under the hood to see if he could fix the problem. If not, the Church looked like a good place to begin his search for some assistance. Reaching into the glove box, he extracted the tuna sandwiches Eva had made up for him.

The water buffalo continued to disappear into the distance as Lechaim bit into the second sandwich. It was at that point that he heard a child's shrill strident voice floating on the barmy air.

“Hay Jo! Want gud tyme, Jo?”

He looked around with his mouth still full.

“Cum’n, Jo! Giv gud tyme, Jo!” the disembodied voice insisted.

Then he saw her at last. A little girl peering out at him from the gloom of the porch fronting the wooden shack nearby situated just off the track. She could have been no more than eight or nine, and was grubby and dishevelled. He nearly choked on the wad of bread in his mouth as he began to laugh uncontrollably at her ludicrous proposition. Convulsing with mirth, he delighted at that moment in the sheer joy of being alive and abroad in this strange country with its even stranger people.

The young girl walked into the sunlight and his levity abruptly ceased. She was horribly scarred down one side of her face, which the shadows under the porch had hidden from him. In her large brown orbs he saw huge tears forming and his compassionate heart went out to her. With a jolt he suddenly

comprehended that the little girl thought he had been laughing at her disfigurement - how could this child understand otherwise.

Little Clemence Subido, from her vantage point in the doorway, had seen the man approach in his car. Being white the man must be rich, she assumed. Arial, her older sister, would often call out to passers-by and Clemence had now plucked up courage to do the same. After all she could roll around on the bed in the same way as Arial, couldn't she. It didn't seem that difficult. Through the cracks in the bamboo, she had seen how her sister and the men had rolled together. Afterwards, the men would give her sister some pesos. Clemence couldn't understand why the men would pay to roll around and make a lot of noise, but their foolishness was none of her concern - as long as they paid. Once, when her sister was in the bushes washing her belly after a rolling fight, Clemence had asked the man that had been her sister's rolling partner whether she too could roll around with him. She had only a smattering of English and didn't really understand his reply but she went with him to his car anyway. Inside, he had taken his sausage out of his trousers and had bent her head to meet it. It had been wet when he put it in her mouth and she had pulled away at first. But then he offered her some pesos so she had taken it in her mouth again. When she sucked on it, she remembered the funny noises he had made and the taste of his milk in her throat. The milk, she recalled, had a funny taste to it, but it had not been unpleasant when she had swirled the lumpy mixture in her mouth and swallowed it down. Her head had hurt afterwards though because the man had held it so tightly and her mouth had been sore from the stretching. The pesos he had given her, however, had more than compensated for the

discomfort. Somehow, Clemence knew that her sister, Arial, wouldn't have approved so she didn't tell her.

Now, Clemence was hoping that the big man in the car in front of their house wanted his sausage pulled as well, but his laughter had shamed her. Remembering her ugliness she could only cringe at his derision and thought to hide away. That was when the coloured paper in the man's hand caught her attention. She didn't know how many pesos it represented and it had a different colour to any she had seen before. Clemence suspected that it was a lot of money. The hurt on her little face vanished to be replaced by a look of wonderment as she began to examine the many pieces of paper he had placed in her palm. She could feel the man's hands cupping her face, and she looked up into his eyes. They were such beautiful eyes, the like of which she had never seen before. The little girl then waited for the man to open his trousers and put his sausage in her mouth. Instead, she felt his tears as they fell on her upturned innocence.

Holding the girl's face in his hands, he cried unashamedly. What were his sufferings compared to this child's? What had she done to deserve such a fate? What could she hope for in an unforgiving world? God, if there were a God, his soul cried, help this child! Give her something to live for. He could feel himself being purged as a catharsis took place deep within, sweeping away all the despair, sorrow, pain, and grief he had been carrying with him these many months. How long he stood with her face in his hands, he wasn't sure or when he first became aware of the noise in his ears, far off at first, but then insistent. He pulled his hands away from her face as he realized what the noise was. It was the sound of her screaming, over and

over. The heat from his hands had cauterised her flesh although he was unaware of it

Once again she had felt the terrible pain as her skin seared the way it had when the blazing timbers fell on her. The same smell of burning flesh - her own - assailed her nostrils as her face roasted. The...

Lechaim caught the little girl as she fell against him. Plucking her up he carried the senseless child into the shack and placed her on a rickety wooden bed he found in the rear. He then tried to communicate with the Filipino man and women who had been sitting at a rough wooden table to one side of the small room. The woman - Lechaim guessed the couple to be in their thirties but it was always hard to tell how old Filipinos were passed a certain age - went quickly to the girl's side. Lechaim tried to make them understand but the couple just looked at him moronically. Returning to the child's side, he placed a hand on the child's forehead and found her burning up. He tried to explain to the couple that he was going to seek some help, but they obviously did not understand him so he gave up and went outside.

Resting his hand on the bonnet of the old car for a few seconds to gauge the distance to the church, he felt the trembling of the metal beneath his fingers. Incredulously, he placed his ear against the hood and listened. Sure enough the engine had sprung back to life. There was no time to think about an explanation as he jumped in and revved the motor, which roared lustily in its public exoneration of the much-maligned Leo. Lechaim quickly pulled away seeking a track leading to the church and he found it a hundred yards down the road. Turning off, it only took him two minutes to reach the church around which, a cluster of shacks had congregated.

As Lechaim entered the Church's shady interior, he could see that the building was in desperate need of repair with its crumbling walls and peeling ceiling plaster. The same could be said of the elderly Caucasian male, rather portly in stature, with a baldpate, and flaccid face that Lechaim came across. The man was making a concentrated but vain attempt with a battered broom to remove the dust from the floor. Dressed in an old white habit with a dog collar to proclaim his calling, the priest's craggy face was directed down as he toiled away. Thus he failed to notice Lechaim's approach.

"Excuse me, Father!"

The priest shot up at the sound of Lechaim's voice. "Good God, my son! You gave me a turn!"

"Sorry, Father! I'm looking for a doctor?"

"A doctor, my son?" the priest exclaimed as he eyed the big man before him. The man seemed oddly familiar somehow.

"Yes, Father! There's a little girl up the road! I believe she may be ill." Lechaim said indicating with his hand in the general direction from which he had come. "I'm not sure exactly what is wrong with her. I was wondering if there is a doctor nearby that could have a look at her?"

"No, I'm afraid not! Maybe I can help!" he suggested. "I often act as a doctor as well as a priest around here!"

On their short journey back, Lechaim asked the priest about the scarred little girl. Yes, the priest knew of her. Lechaim then inquired how she came to be disfigured in such a way.

"Her sister lives on prostitution" the priest explained. "One night while she was entertaining, so to speak, a lamp had been knocked over. As you can see, their shacks are like tinder boxes. The whole place was ablaze in seconds." He paused

briefly, "They got the child out but only just - and not before her face had been burnt"

The priest remembered then how he, himself, had helped tend the child. She had been a pretty thing as were most Filipino children but no more.

"And what about the parents? Where were they during all this?"

"In the fields!" the priest suggested, then he shrugged. "God knows!" He considered for a moment and then continued. "They know about the daughter selling herself, of course! It helps them survive!"

As Lechaim drew the car up before the hut, the priest added, "I've no doubt the little girl will be following in her sister's footsteps soon enough." As he said it, the priest realized that he was being unkind but it was true. He had lived here too long to have any illusions left.

They found the Filipino couple chatting excitedly inside the hut when Lechaim and the priest entered. Kneeling quickly by the side of the child who was lying on the bed with her back to him, the priest turned her over. "What the..?" he let out as he drew back.

"What is it, Father?" Lechaim inquired anxiously as he peered over the priest's shoulders to see for himself. What he saw made him gasp as well. Clemence had her eyes open and she yawned at both men as she stared back at their amazed faces. The skin on her face was soft like brown satin and completely without a blemish of any kind.

"But this can't be!" the priest exclaimed as he bent forward again and examined her face in wonderment. Turning around, he went to speak to Lechaim but the big man was no longer there. The priest rose and went outside where he found

Lechaim looking up at the sky. At that very moment the monsoonal rain decided to start its daily ritual, be it late, but Lechaim did not feel the slashing water on his face. His spirit was elsewhere singing a song of enlightenment as it soared aloft.

Chapter 26

THE DOCTOR WAS a little intimidated by the importance of his visitor.

“And how is the Monsignor?”

“It’s a little too early to say, your Eminence!”

“But what brought on this...this collapse?”

Doctor Lombardi considered for a moment. Cardinal Tsana was not a layman as far as his own calling, namely the Church, was concerned but in the doctor’s area of expertise, psychotherapy, that was another thing all together. Doctor Lombardi knew that he would need to frame his reply carefully.

“Well! In a word, shock...delayed shock in this case but nevertheless, shock!”

The surprise in the Cardinal’s voice was evident as he responded, “We all thought that the monsignor was coping very well! He showed no signs that anything like this would happen!”

The doctor eyed the man before him. Cardinal Tsana’s visit to his office had caught him completely off-guard but the doctor had now recovered his composure. The Cardinal’s visit now left him wondering. It was very unusual for a Cardinal of Rome to visit a hospital personally to inquire after a patient even if that patient was a monsignor. Strange indeed, and even stranger that the Cardinal was dressed in non-clerical dress - grey well tailored suit, white shirt with a light blue tie, and black shoes. And where was the man’s entourage. Didn’t Cardinals have a group of attendants especially a cardinal as important as Cardinal Tsana? The man was impressive though, the doctor had to admit. Probably in his seventies, the doctor guessed, but

his body was still lithe. The Cardinal had grey hair, thinning at the temples, high cheek boned face, somewhat arrogant posture, and youthful skin that belied his profession, his status and his age. Doctor Lombardi thought the Cardinal looked more like an elderly diplomat than a church dignitary but that was neither here nor there.

“The mind’s a funny thing!” the doctor said. “It shuts out what it cannot accept. The traumatic experience he had in Ireland, the recent death of his niece. These have been major factors.”

The Cardinal studied the man that was talking to him. He saw an elderly man with thick silver hair, thin sharp features, a long, slightly hooked nose, and a pocked marked face. With thick horned rimmed spectacles about the eyes, the doctor looked owlish in appearance. The short corpulent body completed the impression. Doctor Lombardi was no Lothario as far as women were concerned, Cardinal Tsana concluded, somewhat unkindly.

The Cardinal, still in denial, retorted, “But his niece has been dead for more than four months!” Then he threw in, “Anyway, the monsignor told me, more than once, that he couldn’t remember much of what happened the night!

“That’s because he has shut it out! The mind can only shut out something for so long. It could well be that something triggered off memories of that night and his mind simply refuses to cope now with the reality!” The doctor then offered a possible cause. “For instance, it could well have been the sight of Captain Lewis on television that stirred something in his subconscious!”

“You mean when Captain Lewis was receiving his decoration?”

“Yes!” the doctor confirmed. He, himself, had watched the event, and felt his emotions stirred.

“What sort of impression might it have on a man that had shared Captain Lewis’s experiences that night”, the doctor further remarked.

The Cardinal weighed the doctor’s words carefully. “I suppose it’s possible although it was time ago now!”

“Well, that’s my guess anyway!”

The Cardinal pondered for a while. “Your prognosis for the monsignor is?”

“Not good, I’m afraid. Rest and time will tell us whether the breakdown is long term or not. For the moment the monsignor has lost control of his mental faculties.”

“How so!”

“He’s saying some very bizarre things.”

“Ranting, you mean.”

“Not ranting exactly. He was calm enough when I saw him last but he’s not making a great deal of sense.”

“Hmm... May I see him?”

“I can’t see the harm, your Eminence, but don’t take too much notice of what he says, right now! He’s not himself!”

“Yes, I understand!”

The doctor led the way as the two men walked through the corridors of the large hospital. The noon day sun basked the modern building giving some cheer to its somewhat austere interior. They found the Monsignor propped up in bed in a private room and the Cardinal quickly went to his side.

The doctor checked the man’s chart and wanted to stay but the Cardinal asked politely, “I wonder if I could be alone with him for a while, Doctor!”

“Of course!” the doctor replied. “You know where I am if you need me!”

“Yes! I appreciate your time, Doctor Lombardi! Many thanks!”

Left alone Cardinal Tsana took stock of the Monsignor lying with his head back on the pillow staring blankly at him. The Monsignor’s eyes more than anything had a strangely haunted look, the look of a man possessed. Cardinal Tsana could not quite believe that Monsignor Cronin of all people was lying here suffering from a mental breakdown.

“Hello, Monsignor! How are you feeling today?” he said as he sat on a chair conveniently placed next to the sick man and looked into those desperate eyes. He could see only fear there.

“He’s coming!”

“Whose coming?” Cardinal Tsana asked curiously. The Cardinal had more pressing business, however, so he didn’t wait for an answer. “Monsignor! The report you have completed in relation to the Vatican Bank! Where have you put it?” The man did not respond.

“Monsignor! It’s important that you remember what you did with the report!”

Still no reply was forthcoming. Looking at the pathetic man lying before him, it was hard to imagine that this was the same man that had once been Monsignor Michael Cronin, a genius in one particular field, financial management. Monsignor Michael Cronin held numerous degrees in his area of expertise, and he had been the one man the Pope had turned to when an independent audit of the Vatican Bank had been sought. This man, the Cardinal knew, could ruin everything. He had to know where the report was. Checking to see that the door was firmly

closed, he seized the man in the bed by his shoulders and shook him. "What did you do with the report?"

The man was babbling now

"And I saw the heaven open, and behold a pale horse, and he that sat on it was called Faithful and True and in righteousness, he doth judge and make war."

"What did you do with the report?"

"His eyes were as flame of fire and on his head were many crowns, and he had a name written, that no man knew, but himself."

It was no use! The man was demented, the Cardinal concluded.

"And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God."

The Cardinal went through the drawers in the steel cabinet at the side of the bed. Perhaps, he had something on him when they brought him in, a key...something...anything.

"And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean."

He rummaged through the monsignors meagre personal effects for a clue.

"And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron..."

"Shut up, you crazy fool!" the Cardinal snarled. The Monsignor was starting to get on his nerves.

".....on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" Then the monsignor's voice changed and the Cardinal couldn't believe his ears as another voice overlaid the monsignor's. "I am coming for you, Steiner! I am coming for you!"

The Cardinal hadn't heard that name in years and the sound of it curled his blood.

He turned and ran from the room, colliding as he did so with a nurse that was about to enter. They landed on the floor together with the Cardinal atop her. Without an apology, he disentangled himself and ran down the corridor.

The fleeing man's feral eyes had given her a turn and she muttered as she picked herself up. "Some people!"

Out in the sunlight, the Cardinal's panic abated. How did the Monsignor know he was Wolfgang Steiner? Only a select few knew and they would never tell anyone, especially Monsignor Cronin. The Cardinal's mind went back many years to Dachau concentration camp. Somewhere in a Bavarian forest, Sergeant Mann, his driver that day had long since rotted away. Perhaps the skull with a bullet hole in it and a few bones remained, but, even if they were found, nothing pointed to him. The real Father Tsana had perished in the ovens of Dachau just before he, himself, had made his escape from Germany. The good doctor Wanke had perished with him. He, personally had broken the doctor's neck and had then placed his body in the same pile as the priest's. From experience, he knew that no one looked closely at naked dead bodies in Dachau, because there were so many scattered around at any one time.

No, they were both dead and dead men tell no tales, he concluded. He continued to rack his brains for an explanation but none came. He would have to learn from the Monsignor himself how he knew that he, Steiner, was posing as Tsana. One thing was certain, though, he decided. The Monsignor was a dead man! He had just sealed his own fate. He would die as soon as he disclosed the whereabouts of the report and revealed

how he knew Steiner's identity.

Chapter 27

THE EVENING JOHN DEVLIN'S life changed forever started out just like any other. Having debauched a young nymph from the provinces, no more than fourteen at most, he was now satiated. The mama san had taken the young girl away only minutes before to sew her back up. Not that he cared whether she bled or not but he did value his merchandise. Later, she could be sold many times as a virgin if the mama san's needles found enough purchase. Eventually the girl would join the others on the assembly line of sex objects he had produced and then discarded as their value depreciated. It was an assembly line where productivity needed to be high for the turn over in bodies was great. If pregnancy or disease didn't account for his girls, some gullible geriatrics of the foreign variety, after sampling the merchandise, would offer enticements of marriage with a trip overseas thrown in. Hoary Australians, for the most part, seemed to form the vanguard of this desperate brigade.

Not that John ever gave much thought to the fifteen girls that worked for him, sixteen now. He never paid them, of course. They had a roof over their heads, received money from their customers and paid him the set commission, which left them with very little if anything for themselves once he had deducted their overheads. "And God help any girl that tries to hold back!" he would often repeat. The silly bitches rarely took any precautions although he supplied them all with condoms. Altruistic, he was not, mercenary he certainly was. Unlike most prostitutes in the Western World, it seemed to him that these girls actually enjoyed sex no matter who was laying into them. Condoms would, they roundly protested, spoil the enjoyment for their clients. Did they ever think beyond their navel, he

wondered. Still, he welcomed their ingenuousness for how else could he lure them in the first place. One time, he had even recruited a girl by telling her she was going to work in his non-existent shirt factory. Even while he was entering her, she was still looking around for the sewing machines. However, he had discovered that in her case, the *mama san's* needles were not required because she had been breached many times before.

John Devlin's life to that point had been a deplorable one by anyone's standards but his own. As the name suggested he was an Irishman by birth although his American accent disguised the fact. He had lived in Ireland, for barely a decade before his parents had immigrated to the United States. Joseph Devlin, his foster father, had a proclivity for turning a penny dishonestly. It hadn't been too long, therefore, before the Devlins became part of the *nouveau riche* of which there were many in Boston, Massachusetts. Joseph Devlin had been a master in chicanery, anything from fencing stolen goods to outright larceny. If environment has anything to do with the construction of the criminal mind, the foundations were well laid in John's case.

John's chance to break free of his foster parents, his weak foster mother and overbearing foster father came ironically enough at the expense of Joseph Devlin, himself, who uncharacteristically left his cheque book lying around one day. John, then in his early twenties, had no compunction about writing out a cheque for the sum of five thousand dollars and adding his father's signature, one that he had practiced often. Quickly cashing the money, he fled abroad.

First, a steamer to the southern latitudes where he got off at its first port of call, Fremantle, the main seaport for Western Australia. He fell in with two gold prospectors and tried his

luck with them in the barren wastes of the state's vast interior. Emerging nearly penniless, he travelled overland by rail to Brisbane on the east coast of Australia. Menial work in Queensland followed, he was trained for nothing else, and he quickly became disenchanted. In search of fresh adventure, he then crewed aboard a trading vessel plying the South Seas around the Pacific islands north of Australia. John had done this for eight months before deciding to try his luck in Papua New Guinea. As luck would have it, he panned enough gold along the Fly River to set him up. Carried into Port Moresby on a litter following a bout of Malaria, he no sooner recovered than he purchased a small but profitable trading post within the harbour area which he operated for two years. Then, he made passage to the Phillippines, disembarking in Manila where did not take him long to invest in a brothel in Mabini, the red light district of the inner city. A brothel, he soon discovered, suited his temperament perfectly. Not only was prostitution a very profitable business to be in, but also it provided him with women, or to be more exact, girls of a very young age. He saw to it that each girl was broken-in personally, and when he had satisfied his own appetites, he would put them to work.

This idyllic existence had gone on for nearly twenty years during which time, he had branched out into other questionable activities such as gun running. There were factions all over these islands and he had no scruples about selling guns to any fool that had the money. For that matter, he had no scruples full stop.

This particular evening, as he lay back on his bed in happy contentment, for the young girl had been tight and it had given him considerable enjoyment loosening her up, he felt languid. He could barely remember how many women he had spoilt or

the pleasure of those defilements. After a time, just like eating too much cheesecake, his senses had become cloyed. Still, the girl he had recently penetrated had been extra juicy and his flagging interest had been restored. Yes, he would make full use of her body in the weeks ahead.

Lying there in his torpid state, in the half-light from the feeble light of the lamp atop a table in one corner, something on the ceiling above caught his eye. At first he thought that the dancing scintilla of light was caused by a reflection from something and he looked around for its source. Then something odd struck him. It was only when he moved his head that the light moved. Rubbing his hand across his brow the light went and returned when he took his hand away. Incredible as it seemed, the beam of light playing on the ceiling appeared to be emanating from him but he knew that was impossible. Lying back on the pillow, he experimented some more but the phenomenon continued and he was perplexed. Was it something he had drunk? The thought prompted him to lean over and sniff the half empty glass of gin lying on the small bamboo table next to the bed. It seemed all right, he concluded. When he lay back again, he was startled to find that the blob of light on the ceiling was increasing in size even as he looked. Fear then replaced curiosity as the light began to have a density to it and the colour started to change from yellow to white. Circular at first, the expanding orb started to distort as it took on the characteristics of a cloud. John Devlin was terrified now and closed his eyes tightly to keep the image out. Then he opened them and shut them and opened them again. The swirling vapour before his face was no illusion and he shut his eyes again and kept them shut.

Through his closed lids he sensed that there was something malevolent waiting for him without, and he became aware of the tightness in his chest as he held his breath. He heard it just once but it made his flesh crawl.

“Beware the man that bears the mark by which he is known.”

It took John Devlin many minutes to find the courage to open his eyes again, and when he did, the room was empty. The fear that had coursed through John’s veins was replaced by outrage. “Fucking girls!” he berated aloud. What had they put in his drink, he wondered as he lifted the half empty glass of gin beside him to his nose to smell it again.

“Whores! Nothing but whores!” he shouted aloud. He vowed he’d find the little cunt and when he did, she’d be sorry.

“Baby!” he bellowed insistently. “Baby! Get your fucking arse in here!”

The object of his anger, a Filipino girl of fifteen, appeared apprehensively in the doorway. Grabbing her by the neck, he beat her about the head as he screamed at her, “Play games with me, will you. Well, two can play at that!” he yelled forcing the remains of the gin down the girl’s throat. “Now, let’s see how you like it!” he gleefully declared like a schoolyard bully that had gained another victory.

Chapter 28

IT WAS EARLY DECEMBER and the dry season had begun. The monsoonal winds, blowing in reverse now from the northeast, billowed the mosquito net over his camp bed. Lechaim lay back for a few seconds contemplating the bloated material above his head and then eased himself off the wooden frame that had served him at night for the past two months or so.

Walking over to small basin of water Lyn had laid out for him, he doused his face and gave it a vigorous rub with the freshly washed towel that had been laid neatly to one side. Hanging the damp piece of cloth on the frame of the window he then returned to the bed where he sat down and studied the girl that was laying out some food for him on the table. She was young, no more than eighteen, and very pretty, but then most Filipino women were at her age. Her looks, however, were already marred by the absence of several teeth resulting, no doubt, from her inadequate diet of fish and rice. A dental plate, her constant companion, now overlaid the gaps. The teeth of Filipinos of Malayan descent such as Lynn was, Father Cameron had remarked to Lechaim once, suffered more in this respect than their counterparts of Chinese extraction.

As he looked at Lynn going about her tasks, he was aware of her slender flanks apparent under the thin cotton dress she wore. He felt his loins responding to her sensual body that he now knew so intimately because Lyn had been his bed companion for some weeks now. Lechaim had felt guilty at first in his betrayal of Sinead's memory but the arms of the young woman before him had been his salvation and he was grateful to her for that. For her part, she saw in him a handsome, strong,

gentle man; a lethal cocktail for any woman, no matter her race or colour

Rising from the bed again, he walked over to the open window and stood there looking out. How uncertain life is, he thought. A year had passed since he had first laid eyes on Sinead. Now, here he was living in a jungle with nowhere to go. Not that he was unhappy - far from it. In this small village surrounded by people who, for the most part, didn't know who he was and didn't care, he had found a measure of happiness. He had Father Cameron for company and they had spent many a happy hour together lost in chess, cards, and good companionship, that is when Lechaim and the good Father weren't touring the district administering help and succour to those in need. These trips had given Lechaim a wonderful insight into the Filipino people and their plight. They also gave him peace of mind and the feeling that his life had some purpose. The people in the surrounding district had heard about the girl with the burnt face that had been healed by this stranger and they treated him with respect bordering on veneration. He often thought about the girl and the miracle that had taken place for it seemed to be just that. He also thought about God and contemplated the implications of the miracle in relation to his own views on the Almighty and religion in general. By inclination he was not prone to think too much about the hereafter and never gave much credence to a divine being. Of late, however, with all that had happened, he had changed his mind. Within himself he had also changed. Sinead's death and the events that followed had seen to that. Bitterness had never been part of his makeup and it had therefore never occurred to him to rail against life's injustices. After all, what was the point? One had no control over these things - fate was too fickle!

As he stood alone at the window lost in his thoughts, the morning stillness was broken by the sound of approaching vehicles. When the convoy came into view, Lechaim saw that it comprised five trucks and a jeep. The leading vehicle, the jeep, ground to a halt before the church and one of the two men in it jumped out and walked towards him. The man was huge, about Lechaim's height, and bodybuilding had further enhanced his frame considerably.

"Vare ist da priest, muverfucker?" the man demanded as he stopped before the open window where Lechaim stood. Lechaim judged him to be European, possibly German judging by his accent. His bearing and appearance - closely cropped dark hair and make shift camouflage fatigues - indicated that he was ex-army - probably a mercenary.

In the exaggerated British accent of a supercilious officer he had once met in the army, Lechaim replied.

"Wouldn't know old boy! Just popped in for a game of polo myself!"

The man stared at Lechaim and then he did something that most men would not dare do. He walked into the hut and grabbed Lechaim by the throat. It was a mistake. Lechaim grasped the man's right wrist and pushed it down and out forcing pressure against the man's elbow. The man's knees buckled as the pain shot through his arm and he dropped to his knees as more pressure was exerted. The man's feet then beat in tune on the floor as he waited for his arm to be broken. Lechaim, however, just looked him straight in the eyes. Continuing with the affected accent he had used before, he said softly but menacingly, "Please don't do that old boy. You'll mess up my suit!" In fact, Lechaim only wore a pair of shorts so his retort was pure sarcasm.

The other man in the jeep, who had been watching Lechaim demonstrate a simple wristlock that a schoolboy could learn, was suitably impressed. When he alighted from the vehicle, Lechaim noted that he was tall for a Filipino, six feet or so, and handsome with a small moustache clipped in an “Errol Flynn” style giving authority to his youthful face. Lechaim judged him to be in his early twenties.

“My apologies for Lothar’s bad manners” he said flashing a perfect set of white teeth, which accentuated his good looks even more. “Lothar! I could’ve told you that it would be unwise to tangle with this man!”

Lechaim released the wristlock and the kneeling man rubbed his wrist ruefully. Lothar had never been beaten down by anyone before and his pride was hurt. Yet he had a grudging respect all the same. He would gladly have tackled the man again but there was something in Lechaim’s eyes that warned him that this might be unwise. His leader’s orders decided the matter.

“Lothar! Settle down! We didn’t come here to make trouble.” Then he turned back to Lechaim. “I’m Lito Moreno and these,” he said waving a hand to the men in the trucks, “are my men”. He hesitated for a moment. “We’re looking for Father Cameron. Do you happen to know where he is?” He said it politely sensing that this was the only way Lechaim would respond. He had been impressed with Lechaim’s statue the moment he had set eyes on him. The tall imposing man Lito saw before him had flaxen hair that was long and curly which had probably misled Lothar into thinking that the man was an easy target - a “queer” as the homophobic Lothar would say. Yet, there was nothing feminine about the man for he exuded

strength. Lothar had been a fool to take on the man, particularly bearing in mind who he was.

“He should be back shortly!” Lechaim declared dropping the affected accent he had adopted for Lothar’s benefit. “He’s tending a sick woman in a village nearby and left early this morning.”

“Fuck it!” the man exclaimed with feeling. I have a sick man with me. Malaria, I think! Can I bring him in?”

“Sure! Bring him through!” Lechaim replied.

Lito had recognized Lechaim at once. But he could hardly believe that the famous Captain Lewis was now hiding away here in the jungle. He and Lothar retrieved the man from the back of one of the vehicles and carried him through.

“Lay him here!” Lechaim indicated and they duly placed him on the bed that Lechaim had recently vacated.

“He’s been off his head for a while!” Lito said. “Keeps yelling out, ‘He’s out there!’”

Lothar decided to join in the conversation at that point. “Yah! I ask ‘Who dah fuck out dah - he don’t say?’”

Bending down, Lechaim lifted the sheet that had been placed over the lower half of the man’s face and drew back in amazement as he recognised him. It was the Monsignor, Michael Cronin!

At that moment John Devlin opened his eyes, and when he saw Lechaim delirium took hold of him once again. Screaming unnervingly, he sought to escape from his demons. The men in the room thought that the sick man was still caught up in his madness. How could they know that one kind of madness was now over for John Devlin but another kind of madness was about to begin. John Devlin’s eyes stood out of

their sockets as he screamed unceasingly because he recognized Lechaim for what he was, the dreaded demon in his nightmares.

Chapter 29

THE MAN STANDING before her bore little resemblance to the man that departed from her home more than three months before. Dressed in casual attire - khaki shirt, shorts to match and brown sandals - his swept back blond hair was long and needed attention. A deep tan hue his face and body; a body that had more than filled out again to its former proportions. It was the old Lechaim, Eva decided although he now looked more Nordic than English.

“Well, don’t I get a kiss!”

“Lechaim!” she exclaimed in delight and threw herself into his arms. “It’s lovely to see you again” She hugged him warmly and gave him a lingering kiss. “Why didn’t you let us know you were coming?”

Carlos appeared behind her in the doorway. “Lechaim, my friend! Welcome! Welcome!” he said as the two men embraced.

“Tell us what you’ve been doing all this time?” Eva demanded as the three of them walked into the house together.

The children met him in the hall. “Uncle Lechaim!” they both shouted in unison as they hugged him too. Then they were off again to vex Leo some more. As Lechaim passed the craggy Filipino still tinkering, but with Carlos’ car this time, the man beamed a smile through his gums. “Morning, sir!”

“Leo, my friend!” Lechaim acknowledged stopping to chat with the old man for a moment. “Problems?”

“No, sir! Just checking! Did you have any trouble with the car, sir?”

“No, right as rain, Leo!” Lechaim lied. “You did a good job!”

Leo smiled his gratitude and then watched the big man move off to join the others. Leo went back to his work happier of heart despite the boys who were hovering about him.

Sitting with Carlos and Eva by the pool, Lechaim then told them of his adventures but left out the part about the little girl whose face had been miraculously healed. He had still not come to terms with that himself so he could hardly expect them to understand.

“But who were they?” Eva asked when he finished.

“I’m not quite sure. Nobody would tell me anything!”

“The NDF probably!” Carlos exclaimed. “You have to watch yourself with them especially being a foreigner. How come they let you go?”

“Who are the NDF?” Eva asked.

Carlos explained, “They’re an outlawed political organization - they and the MNLF!” Carlos saw more questions in his wife’s eyes so he expounded. “The Moro National Liberation front...they’re a body seeking autonomy for Muslim Filipinos!”

“And the ... what you said before!”

“The NDF, you mean? It stands for the National Democratic Front. Basically it’s a communist led insurgency group.” Carlos paused for reflection and then said, “I didn’t know they were operating this far north though.”

Lechaim remarked, “They didn’t carry any weapons, at least none that I could see.”

Carlos repeated his original question to Lechaim, “Anyway, how come they let you go?”

“Why shouldn’t they? They just wanted someone to tend to the sick man.”

“Did they know who you are?” Eva asked. She was one of Lechaim’s biggest fans.

Lechaim smiled as he answered her. “Oh, yes, they knew!” Then he joked, “They weren’t there for any autographs though!”

Eva was not convinced. “But it seems incredible that they didn’t demand a ransom or something?” “

She has a point!” Carlos said in support of his wife.

Just then one of Eva’s house girls arrived with a tray containing a pot of coffee and some mangoes neatly sliced.

“Thank you” Eva acknowledged to the young nubile girl who kept flashing her eyes in Lechaim’s direction, but he was oblivious to her as he gazed into the distance contemplating his friends’ comments. It had never occurred to him that his life could have been in danger. Apart from Lothar’s initial aggression, Lito and his men had been courteous and polite.

“And this man, John Devlin! Where’s he now?” Carlos asked when the fawning maid had gone.

“Back in Manila! In fact I dropped him off on the way through!”

As Lechaim spoke, he recalled the seedy looking club that John Devlin had disappeared into after Lechaim had driven him to Manila. The man had constantly been on Lechaim’s mind in the two weeks that he had known him. It had taken John Devlin three days to recover from his delirium and a further two days before he would speak to Lechaim. For some reason the man had tried to avoid Lechaim like the plague. It had been Lito who had finally brought them together but Lechaim could still sense John Devlin’s unease. On their drive back to Manila together, a drive that John Devlin was forced to take because it was the only means of transport available, Lechaim had tried to

be as friendly as possible. He didn't like the man but he hid his dislike because he was struck by John Devlin's resemblance to Sinead's uncle. Lechaim meant to learn as much as he could about John Devlin. Any animosity between them would only hinder Lechaim's plan to win the man's trust. This was important because John Devlin didn't just look like Monsignor Michael Cronin, it was he, at least physically, although the two men were poles apart otherwise.

She's forgotten the sugar!" Eva exclaimed, breaking in on Lechaim's thoughts, as she rose and went in search of the sweetener. She arrived in the kitchen in time to answer the phone hanging there on the wall, which picked just that moment to demand attention.

"Work!" she called out to Carlos through the window!" and Carlos got up.

"Won't be a second!" Carlos informed his friend. As Carlos went to see what new crisis had arisen, he cursed inwardly. The weekend and they still wouldn't leave him in peace.

Sitting alone Lechaim had time to reflect some more on John Devlin. There was no question in his mind now that John Devlin was the twin brother of Michael Cronin. It was the only logical explanation. The physical appearance and the fact that John Devlin came from the same place as Michael Cronin, namely Ireland, was just too much of a coincidence. When John Devlin told him on their drive back that his birthplace was in Armagh, that had been the real "clinch" for Lechaim. In normal circumstances, Lechaim knew that the chances of his meeting up with the possible twin brother of someone he had recently become related to in Ireland way out in a province in the Philippines, was fanciful. Yet, nothing about Lechaim's life

to date had been normal. He was convinced now that he was on some sort of preordained path that was leading him somewhere. The only question was where?

Over the past few months Lechaim had given his life much thought. The dreams, the battle at the abbey, the little girl's miraculous healing and now the meeting with the monsignor's look alike. There was also the mystery of his car, which had stopped outside the little girl's home and then started again for no apparent reason. It added up to only one thing although he was reluctant to admit it. He was not in charge of his life any longer, something else was.

One thing was for certain. In some way Michael Cronin was part of the conundrum. Lechaim's letter to the Monsignor in Rome which he had mailed days before would, he hoped, elicit a response that might provide some answers. Enclosed with his letter he had sent the monsignor a photograph of John Devlin, which Lechaim had taken while the man, had been ill in bed.

Lechaim realised that he might be grasping at straws. Yet, it was a fact that the monsignor had been abandoned on the steps of St. Brendan's Abbey as a child. Because Michael's parentage had never been established, John could very well be his twin. Although he, himself, was convinced that this was so, he didn't think Michael would thank him for it if such proved to be the case. John Devlin was the complete antithesis of Michael Cronin in every way.

Carlos' voice intruded on his thoughts. "Sorry," he said, as he re-entered the room. "Nothing important!" he exclaimed dismissing the phone call with a wave of his hand as not worth mentioning anymore. Eva followed Carlos into the room having located the sugar's resting place in the kitchen.

As the pair sat down with Lechaim again, Eva asked, "This Lito Moreno! What's he like?"

"Strangely enough, I like him!" In this Lechaim spoke the truth. He had recognized in Lito the lovable rogue that lies beneath the surface in most men, the rascal element that has a charm all its own. The two men had taken to one another immediately. It had even been arranged that they would both meet up again at John Devlin's club some time during the following week, once Lechaim was settled. The rogue's phone number was now in Lechaim's pocket, but he thought it best not to mention his forthcoming assignation to the Regas. They would only worry.

"And where is he now?" Eva inquired.

"He's in Manila as well. Staying with his brother for a few days!"

"But he's a bandit!" Eva retorted. "Shouldn't you notify the police?"

"He's done no harm to me, and besides, what proof is there that his little band of men belong to any outlaw group." As he said it, he realized that he wasn't telling them the whole truth. Lito had been buying guns from John Devlin somewhere down south when malaria had stuck John Devlin down. Apparently, it was a reoccurrence of a malaria that John Devlin had contracted in PNG. Lechaim thought it best that he keep this information to himself. Again, his friends would only worry. Knowing that it would be pointless trying to defend Lito in Eva's eyes he quickly changed the subject.

"Look you two! Would it be all right if I stayed here for a few weeks?"

“All right!” Eva exclaimed joyfully. “Of course it’s all right!” Then she had a thought. “You’ll be staying for Christmas then?”

“Yes, I’ll be here over the Christmas!” he confirmed.

“We’ll be together just like last year!” Eva commented and the happiness showed in her eyes. Then the memory of the Christmas before in England came back to her. Lechaim had everything to look forward to then but now? Wondering whether she had been tactless in mentioning last Christmas, Lechaim quickly dispelled her anxiety with his cheerful reply.

“Just like last year! Wouldn’t miss it for the world! Break out that mistletoe, girl! There’s going to be some kissing done!”

Eva took Carlos’ hand in hers and their eyes met. Like hers, his eyes radiated their approval and they both turned back to their friend.

“Oh, I nearly forgot! Eva suddenly said bounding up as she spoke. “We have some letters for you!”

“Letters?”

“Yes!” Carlos said as Eva went to get them. “From Ireland and your mother”

Eva soon returned and put a number of letters in his hands.”

“None from the army?” Lechaim queried searched through his mail. It was a rhetorical question because he could see that there were none, the letters being from Maureen and his mother alone. As he started to read through them, Lechaim wondered why the army hadn’t been in contact but it was only a passing thought. The letters before him filled him with guilt. In the whole of his time in the Philippines, more than four months now, he had never once written to anyone. His mother would understand because Lechaim had seldom written when he had

been away but the Cronins would think his behaviour odd, if not down right rude. Yet, he knew that he could offer no excuse.

It was when he was reading the third letter that he broke his silence, "Sinead's Uncle's had some sort of mental breakdown!"

Carlos and his wife were startled to hear Lechaim use his wife's name. Never once since his arrival in the Philippines had he spoken her name or talked about her.

"A mental breakdown?" Eva said, "The Monsignor, you mean! Is he all right?"

"Apparently he's recovered now but he was very ill there for a while!"

Lechaim finished reading his mail and placed the letters back inside their envelopes. Then he remembered the letter he had posted that morning to the monsignor. In view of the news regarding the monsignor's illness, Lechaim wondered whether he had done the right thing. Would the monsignor be sufficiently well enough to deal with the possibility that he might have a brother on this side of the world? For that matter, would the Monsignor appreciate knowing that he had a brother that could only be described as a sleaze? Lechaim at once regretted writing but it was too late now.

"Would you mind if I phone England and Ireland later?" Lechaim asked.

"Phone who you want!" Carlos said.

Eva then thought of some news of her own that she had for him. "By the way, Lechaim, Angelina will be staying with us for Christmas!"

"What! You mean little Angelina, your sister?"

"She's not little any more!" Carlos chuckled.

“That’s great!” Lechaim replied. “It will be like old times.” It had been more than twelve years since he had seen Eva’s sister, at the Regas’ wedding, in Buenos Aires.

“How old would she be now?”

“Twenty!” Eva replied. “She was twenty last week!”

God! Lechaim thought. How the years fly by!

Chapter 30

CARDINAL TSANA re-read the letter and then he sat back in his chair and deliberated on its contents, a frown creasing his brow. It would seem that his instructions that all Monsignor Cronin's mail should be entrusted to him for the time being in view of the monsignor's malady had borne fruit. Unfortunately, the Monsignor was no longer *non compos mentis* and would soon be back on his feet so some swift action needed to be taken. The information in the letter had, in fact, given the Cardinal an idea. As if to confirm his thought processes, he studied the photograph one more time and agreed that the likeness was remarkable indeed. Hardly brothers though! Surely, a mere coincidence? Lifting the phone from its cradle he dialled out.

An hour later a thin man, quite short, with thick slicked black hair swept straight back, a thin pointed nose, ferret like eyes and dark features sat before the Cardinal. Peter Sartori, a Neapolitan by birth, wore a smart, well cut grey suit over a pink shirt with an elegant black silk tie and fashionable black shoes; his appearance, that of a man who knew what *dolce vita* was all about. In a word, he was immaculate in appearance but there was just a hint of femininity about him. There was nothing feminine about his nature, however, which was ruthless, vindictive, sly, and totally without a conscience of any kind. Those qualifications combined with his work experience, ten years with the Costa Nostra in the United States, had landed him a job with the Cardinal. That was eight years ago and now Sartori at the ripe old age of thirty-eight had enough money to retire. But then why should he when he enjoyed his work so much.

He scuffed a piece of lint off his highly polished shoes as he listened to the Cardinal elaborate.

“And where did you say this man John Devlin is, your Eminence?” he then asked.

“Manila! One thing though! This letter is from Captain Lewis! I’ve no need to tell you to watch out where he’s concerned!”

Sartori’s eyes narrowed as he heard the name. He well remembered the Englishman that had destroyed the team he had put together in Ireland. Their incompetence had nearly cost Sartori his life. In his line of work, failures were unacceptable, and his employers did not consider resignation a viable option

“Do you want me to deal with Captain Lewis while I’m there?”

“You will have to! He’s the only one so far that knows of the likeness between this John Devlin and the monsignor.” The Cardinal rubbed his nose and then issued a warning. “This man is famous so if he dies in suspicious circumstances there’s going to be a full scale enquiry. I want no loose ends! Do you understand?”

Peter Sartori smiled as he answered, “Perfectly, your Eminence!”

“I hope so, Mister Sartori. A repeat of the last fiasco and you’ll be out of a job!”

Sartori did not answer, the threat said it all.

“Are you taking Sam with you?” the Cardinal then asked.

“Yes, your Eminence. This John Devlin may need a little persuading!”

“Good! Can you leave tonight?”

“Of course!” Sartori replied.

Chapter 31

LECHAIM TRIED HARD to hide his dislike of the man behind the bar that was speaking to him but it wasn't easy. "Take any girl in the place and fuck the arse off her if you want!" John Devlin declared.

Lito to one side of Lechaim was listening with amusement to the crudity of John Devlin who was obviously trying to impress Lechaim. John would have to do more than that to impress this man, Lito thought. On the other side of Lechaim Lothar loomed. One of these big men sitting there would have been enough to deter anyone but two were just downright intimidating. It wasn't good for business, John had long ago decided. It frightened off his clientele but he wasn't prepared to tell the men this. He certainly didn't want to upset the Englishman who still seemed very threatening somehow.

"Well, Lothar!" Lito said across Lechaim. "Is it a girl, a 'San Miguel' or a fight?" Lito knew that Lothar couldn't hold his beer and he always baited the German when he saw his eyelids dropping from too much inebriation.

Lothar grunted and didn't respond. Lito couldn't be bothered to pursue the matter and spoke instead to his friend. "Doing anything for Christmas, Lechaim?"

"We'll celebrate Christmas around the pool, I expect."

Lito envied the big man his life style, the sort of lifestyle that Lito would never enjoy. The white man's way of life with all that it entailed was alien to him. Yet, Lechaim was not like other foreigners Lito had known. The colour of a man's skin and his position in life didn't seem to matter to Lechaim. What was even more impressive as far as Lito was concerned was the fact that despite his fame, Lechaim was a modest man. He had

done things that few men could, yet, never once had Lito heard Lechaim trying to impress anyone with who he was or what he had done. In fact, Lechaim never talked about himself at all which astounded Lito. If he had done what Lechaim had done, the world would have known about it. Even the irascible Lothar who had run foul of Lechaim in the beginning had come around. Both Lothar and Lechaim had done some pistol shooting together four days before and Lothar had on his return proclaimed to Lito, "That Englander.. him all right!" For Lothar that was a major speech and a seal of the highest approval. Now that he thought about it some more, Lito couldn't recall anyone that didn't like Lechaim. And, as for women, they fell over themselves for him but he didn't seem interested. Lito knew that Lechaim had been bedding Lyn when he was living in the provinces so the big man liked woman well enough. Well, that was his loss, Lito concluded. Personally, he loved women and couldn't get enough of them.

"What about you, my friend." Lechaim had got into Carlos' habit of calling everyone "my friend" - it sounded warmer somehow.

"Oh, I'll spend it with my brother's family - the usual thing."

Lechaim had a thought. "Why don't you come over on boxing day for a drink?"

"Boxing day! What's that?"

Lechaim remembered that he wasn't in England now. "Sorry! The day after Christmas Day, the twenty-sixth!" As Lechaim made the offer, he realized that he hadn't checked with the Regas whether it would be all right.

"Thanks anyway, but my brother would want me to spend Christmas with them."

Just like him, Lito thought, to ask that is. He appreciated the gesture and it warmed him that his friend had asked.

“Just a thought!” Lechaim replied relieved that he wouldn’t have to clear it with Eva. Lechaim was a brave man but Eva could cower the best of men when she wanted to. He had to get Lito and Eva together and then she would see that the rogue was harmless enough.

“Christmas!” Lothar exclaimed on Lechaim’s other side. “Plenty beer und gud fook!”

“Back to sleep Lothar!” Lito said and Lothar grunted his assent.

“Do you want to come out with me to the airport tomorrow?” Lechaim asked.

“What for?”

“I’m picking up my friend’s wife’s sister.”

Lito considered for a moment. “When?”

“In the morning, ten-thirty!”

“Why not!”

“I’ll pick you up at your brother’s on the way through.”

“No, best not! I’ll meet you! Say nine-thirty outside the Hilton Hotel.” Lito didn’t want Lechaim to see the shabby dwelling that his brother called home. He was that proud. Not that Lechaim would have minded, he knew, but he preferred that Lechaim didn’t see how his brother lived, all the same.

“Sounds good to me!” Lechaim replied.

The men lapsed into silence and sat watching John Devlin as he wiped down the bar top yet again.

From time to time girls in skimpy outfits would sidle up to the men offering their wares and Lothar finally decided that he still had enough energy left. Rising with his arms around a girl, Lothar made another major statement. “I go!”

Lechaim and Lito watched him stagger out of the club while the girl went to get dressed and join him outside.

Since his return to Manila a fortnight ago, this was the third time Lechaim had met Lito in John Devlin's club. Yet the degradation he witnessed therein still appalled him. If Lechaim had not felt the need to stay in touch with John Devlin he would not be there now. At the back of the club, girls cavorted on stage while coloured lights danced around them. Lechaim gazed in their direction and wondered how foreigners, and many rapacious lustful Filipino males for that matter, could justify such exploitation. It was, it seemed to him, a sorry indictment of the world at large. Yet, could he condemn such carnality when he himself had been sleeping with Lyn when he had been upcountry.

As he watched the young women swaying on the stage, Lechaim was reminded of how exquisite most Filipino women were, with their smooth skin, lithe figures, dancing brown eyes, and friendly natures. Time to go, he thought, before the place corrupted him as well.

"I think I'll be off as well!" Lechaim declared. "Coming?"

"No, I'll hang on for a bit!"

"Okay! I'll see you at, say, nine-thirty outside the Hilton then!"

"Right!" Lito acknowledged and watched his friend walk out.

Some young girls were standing outside the open doors of John Devlin's sex parlour pleading with passers-by to come in. As Lechaim passed them by, he could hear them peddling their wares frantically. It seemed so incongruous to him that so many young girls of questionable age could sneak up on likely looking males walking by and ask in a silky coquettish voice, "You want

fuck, mister?" English was a second language to these girls from the provinces and they had little mastery over it. As he walked down the street, he questioned why it was that saying something salacious in another tongue never quite seemed as bad as saying it in one's own language. Perhaps that was the reason for their seeming innocence when they uttered such vulgarities, he rationalized. For Lechaim, it was repellent rather than alluring when he heard these young women talking like this. He was not puritanical and in no way blamed these people for the way they lived. In similar circumstances, with stark poverty staring one in the face, most people, he surmised, would probably act in similar fashion. Are any of us really that different, he pondered as he walked along the smelly, crumbling pavement that fronted one bordello after another. If any one was to be censured here in the Philippines, it was the ubiquitous male tourist with his money and his insatiable sexual appetite, he concluded.

Glancing around him as he walked along, Lechaim observed the beggars, pimps and traders hawking their wares in this street of prurient pleasure. The fetid smells rising from the crumbling road, and the throng of people in this sultry oppressive place made it all seem very Eastern and somehow unreal. He contemplated, not for the first time, the paradox between this particular den of iniquity and the rest of this island paradise called the Philippines.

Strolling by the Sheraton Peninsula Hotel situated a short distance away from the club he had just left, on impulse, he decided to enter its cool interior for refreshment from the oppressive conditions without. The hotel, unlike the cat houses situated nearby, was of five star quality with its spacious thoroughfares, shops, restaurants, and spacious dining room,

Finding a suitable spot within the hotel dining area, he ordered a glass of mango juice and settled himself at a table in one of the alcoves. Somewhat sleepy from the alcohol he had consumed earlier, he failed to notice the women that had been following him for some time. She now made her move.

“Hi!” she said by way of an announcement as she planted herself opposite him at the table. “You’re Captain Lewis, aren’t you?”

He looked up from his drink to find an attractive young woman facing him. She seemed oddly familiar.

“Who wants to know?” he answered affably but guardedly.

She prided herself on her *savoir-faire*, but, for once, she felt herself unsettled by this man’s eyes that seemed to be boring into her. At the same time, she was struck by the softness she found within those wondrous pools of blue. Someone had once said, she couldn’t remember who, “Eyes are the mirrors of the soul”. If that were so, then this man’s soul was in very good shape, she fancied.

Since Sinead’s death, Lechaim had not been stirred by another woman. Lyn, the girl that had served his sexual needs when he had been staying with Father Cameron, meant nothing to him emotionally. He had appreciated the comfort of her arms, but she could never, even remotely, replace the love he had lost in Ireland. Now, facing him was a woman that was quite beautiful and very sensual. Her self assurance and manner exuded sophistication. Her nose was long and slender, bisected by large tawny eyes that offered much. Her soft sensual full lips parted to reveal a set of white teeth that were almost flawless and the long legs she now paraded as she sat crossed legged

beckoned. The effect she had on Lechaim, as on most men, was immediate.

“ You are Captain Lewis, aren’t you?”

Cautiously, he replied, “What makes you think that?”

“Well, Captain, I must admit that you do look a little different to the last time I saw you. But then you had an army haircut and you were wearing a uniform.”

“We’ve met before?” he queried. “I seem to know you?”

For a moment, he thought she looked vulnerable.

She hesitated for a moment and then said,

“Yes and no, Captain. I’m a free lance reporter. I was in Ireland when you made the news. You were quite the hero! Maxine Mant is my name”, she confided extending her hand. She hesitated again and then said, “I was very sorry to hear about your wife!”

For once the reminder of his wife did not cut through him. Time and circumstances were slowly but surely dispelling his grief.

“Thank you! Lechaim replied. And then not wishing to mention Sinead further, he changed the subject.

“And what are you doing here?” Lechaim asked as he shook the slim, cool hand she had offered.

“Believe it or not, I’m on vacation” she replied and noted his skeptical look.

“Really, I’m on vacation, but now that we’ve met, any chance of an interview?”

He smiled in a friendly way as he said, “I’m afraid not, Miss Mant. I don’t give interviews.”

“Surely captain, it wouldn’t do any harm. The world has been dying to know what really did happen that night in Belfast.

Besides, it would be a wonderful scoop for me” she added with a smile she knew he couldn’t refuse.

“Have you eaten yet?” he asked”

“No! Not yet!”

“A bargain then. You join me for something to eat, and I’ll provide you with some information but that’s all” he warned.

“Fair enough, Captain, a deal” she agreed

He called a waiter over and found that orders for lunch were still being taken despite the latest of the hour. When the waiter departed, she started her seduction. “Now, captain, what have you been doing since you arrived in the Philippines?” She could tackle him later about Ireland when his defenses were down.

Chapter 32

EVA WAS TOO excited at the thought of meeting up with her sister again to stay angry with Lechaim for long. It was not that Eva disliked Lito Moreno. She had no reason to because she had never met him before. It was the fact that he was a rather shady character that made his presence today unwelcome. She was too polite to make her resentment obvious to Lito, but she was giving Lechaim the cold shoulder.

When Lechaim had invited Lito the previous day to accompany him to the airport, he quite forgot about Eva's disapproval of him. It was thoughtless on his part and he knew it. Fortunately, Lito was a charmer and Lechaim felt Eva warming to his friend as they drove along. Still, she would not meet Lechaim's eyes in the rearview mirror above his head until they were almost at the airport and then Eva stuck her tongue out at him. Lechaim laughed and knew Eva's anger had passed.

Carlos could not spare the time, an urgent matter at work requiring his attention, so Eva had just her friend and the handsome Lito for company. The incomparable Leo had driven her husband to work earlier that morning so Lechaim was acting as her chauffeur and, she had to admit, he drove well. Watching him as he deftly handled the wheel, she could not help but admire the man. Why he had struck up a friendship with the man now occupying the front seat next to him had been a mystery though. But now, having met Lito in the flesh, she began to appreciate the attraction. Lito had been nothing like she had imagined him to be and his urbanity had come as a surprise. She was still considering the matter when Lechaim brought the car smoothly to a stop in the airport car park and the three of them got out. As Lechaim locked the doors, Eva

pinched him on the backside and whispered, "I'll deal with you later!" He grinned, "That's sexual harassment, Mrs. Rega. I'll complain to your husband!"

"You would as well!" she grinned back and put her arm through his as they made their way towards the airport building. Lito, walking beside them saw the warmth that this man and this woman had for one another and he felt somehow cheated. Never in his life had he had such a display of friendship by a woman towards him. Certainly, he had savoured many women in the physical sense but this was something else - genuine affection and he was somewhat envious.

"Come on, you!" Eva said suddenly and put her arm through Lito's as well. This show of good fellowship lifted Lito's spirits and it also spelt, he knew, acceptance in her eyes. Lechaim, on the other side, gave her a sly wink in appreciation of the kind gesture.

When Angelina finally emerged from customs control and out into the main airport reception area, Lechaim saw that the ugly ducking of Buenos Aires had been transformed into a beautiful swan.

"Eva! Eva! Angelina shouted as she waved to her sister. The two hugged one another and then the young woman turned to Lechaim. She, of course, recognized him instantly. "Captain Lewis" she said, a little awed by the man before her.

Angelina, Lechaim noted, had jet black hair, flawless skin, a delicate nose, pearl white teeth, and eyes that were dark and sensual. She was of average height, wore a cream outfit consisting of a plain skirt and coat with a white shirt and black high heel shoes that excentuated her long tapering enticing legs. Those legs, perfectly chiseled, had turned many a man's head and they certainly turned Lito's who was hanging back staring

at her agog. Lechaim, however, did not see her as the beautiful woman that she now was, but rather the pigtailed tomboy that had kicked a football around with him in a Buenos Aires park all those years ago. It would take him some time, he felt, to adjust to the metamorphosis that had taken place.

Angelina, for her part, remembered well the tall dashing blond Englishman that had been so kind to her as a child. Years later, when she saw him once again on the news, she knew that her girlhood image of the man had not been unrealistic. Now, here was the legendary Captain standing before her.

“Hi, kid!” he said and winked. “She blushed and said in a peeved voice, “I’m not a kid any more!”

“No, you’re a beautiful woman just like your sister!” Both women glowed at his compliment as he then reminded her, “And the name’s Lechaim!”

“She laughed, her former indignation forgotten, and then she became aware of Lito standing behind the big man.

“I’m terribly sorry!” Lechaim said. “This is a friend of mine. Lito Moreno!” Did he denote something passing between them or was it his imagination, Lechaim thought as he saw them both colour.

“Excuse please!” a voice behind him said and Lechaim turned to see who it was. Standing there were two young Japanese girls with packs on their back and cameras strung about them

“Yes!” Lechaim inquired. “What can I do for you?”

“You Captain Luwes...famous English person?”

It was Lechaim’s turn to colour as he responded, “No! he is!” pointing to Lito who looked bewildered.

The nonplussed look in the eyes of the young tourist that had demanded his attention told Lechaim that the joke was lost on her. “Yes, I’m Captain Lewis!” he admitted.

“You sign please!” she said thrusting an autograph book into his hand.

When they were finally through the airport and settled in the car, Eva said, “Will Captain Luwes, honorable English person drive two sisters home?”

Lechaim laughed and they all joined in as he pulled away. Sitting with her sister in the back, Angelina found it hard to believe that she was now in the company of a man whose face had been plastered in all the newspapers in her country less than a year before. Lechaim’s relationship with her sister’s husband had been played up by the media at that time and reporters had pestered her parents and Carlos’ parents for any information regarding the Englishman. The fact that Lechaim had rescued Carlos from a minefield on the Malvinas during the war had been made much of, as was the friendship that the two men had subsequently formed. For a few days then, Angelina had experienced what it was like to be a celebrity and now she was in the presence of one. And the handsome Filipino with him, how did he fit into the picture, she wondered. As she listened to the relaxed conversation about her, she studied Lito and found that her interest in him was not entirely impartial.

At that moment across town John Devlin had finally roused himself and was searching around for a fresh bottle of gin under the bar when the man walked in.

“We’re not open yet!” he growled, his head still befuddled from a sleepless night. That fucking nightmare again.

“Mr. John Devlin?” the dapper man asked.

“Who wants to know?” The effects of too much booze hadn’t helped his disposition, which was sour at the best of times, and he was in no mood for conversation.

Sartori, of course recognized John Devlin at once but he had to go through the formalities. “That’s not important for now!”

“It is to me!”

Ignoring the man’s antagonism which did not worry him in the slightest, for he had dealt with scum like this all his life, Sartori then said, ““Mr. Devlin! How would you like to make a great deal of money?”

Who was this clown, John Devlin asked himself as he found the bottle he was seeking. “Who would I have to kill for it?” he probed as he poured himself a drink.

Sartori smiled patronisingly. “No one, Mr. Devlin! All you will need to do is impersonate someone.”

“Impersonate someone!” Devlin retorted impatiently. “What the hell are you talking about!”

The other man chuckled. “You are a man without principles, Mr. Devlin. If you were not, we couldn’t use you. Just be satisfied that the stakes are high and the rewards are great.”

The insult ran off John Devlin’s back. Money had been mentioned. That was all that mattered to him.

“It will mean, of course, leaving the Philippines.”

This fellow was nuts. “Why the fuck should I do that?” Devlin said threateningly.

“To begin with, for one million American dollars, Mr. Devlin! Are you interested?”

“Okay, you’ve got my attention!” If this wanker wanted to fuck around, what the hell, Devlin thought.

Chapter 33

THEY LOOK GOOD together Eva concluded as she watched Lechaim and Maxine from her position in the kitchen, but she still had some reservations. Her house girls had been given the day off, it being Christmas Day, but Eva did not mind. In a way it gave her a break to have a day off from being waited on by others, and she welcomed the activity. Christmas fare was laid out everywhere - the girls had helped her with the preparation of the food the night before - and her guests were now recovering from too much of everything. Wasn't Christmas always like that, she reflected as she loaded more food into a bowl. Then she walked back into the lounge with a tray bearing a potpourri of different biscuits, nuts, and other assortments that people pick at over coffee and tea. Lechaim saw her coming and made some space for her on the table by re-positioning the large pot of tea that had been placed there. He made sure it was in easy reach though because Eva and her family were avid tea drinkers. Eva's expatriate women friends were always amused at Eva's insistence, even when her maids were on call, that she brew up herself. "This is Manila, my dear! Maids do that sort of thing!" Eva thought their remarks quite amusing considering most of them had never had people to wait on them before while servants had been part of her life style in Buenos Aires for many years. How quickly do such women forget their humble beginnings, she thought, and adopt supercilious airs and graces as if they were to the manor born. Such thoughts were furthest from her mind today, however.

She placed the tray on the table and off-loaded the food. Putting the tray to one side, she pored the tea.

“A cup for you, Lechaim,” she said as she placed an elaborately ornamented China cup brimming over in front of him on the table. “And one for you, Maxine, and one,” she paused looking at Carlos peering at her over his glass of wine, “for you, my darling.” Carlos smiled appreciatively at her endearment and joked. “Aye, aye! What are you after my girl?”

Ignoring his teasing, she distributed the food she had just carried in around the table and sat back in her chair alongside the other three. Laughter from the patio indicated where the last two members of the group were. Eva looked over and mild alarm went through her when she saw the two of them lying over the pool table coupled closely together. Lito was demonstrating, as only Lito could, how a pool cue should be held and Angelina was his willing pupil. It made Eva realize that her sister was very much a woman now and men desired her. Eva caught Lechaim looking at her in mild amusement and she lifted an eyebrow.

“They’re okay!” Lechaim said by way of assurance and she murmured back, “Hmmm” As Lechaim glanced again in the direction of the giggling pair, he recalled Lito’s change of heart, “Lechaim! I might take you up on that invitation for drinks on the day after Christmas after all!” Now, he was cementing his relationship with Angelina away from the others. Who could blame him!

When Lechaim glanced back, he saw that Eva had now focused her attention on a guidebook that had been lying close by on a side table, and she was casually glancing through it at the pictures inside. For a few seconds Lechaim’s thoughts went back to the previous Christmas they had all spent at his mother’s place in Brighton. He recalled that then, Eva had been

looking through a guide book of the Kent countryside. They had come full circle. It was strange, he pondered how he could think about those days now and not have that gut wrenching knot in his stomach. The memories of Sinead and Ireland were just that - memories. Even so, he could not help thinking that she would have loved it here, in the company of these people, his friends, one and all. Would Sinead, if she were looking down, understand the presence of Maxine. He could hardly believe it himself. It had been pure impulse on his part to invite her for he had known her less than a week. Eva's voice interrupted his musing.

"You know, we've never been there in all this time!"

Carlos added, "Meant to, but we've never got around to it."

"It should be an interesting place," Lechaim declared. The guidebook that Eva was now reading with such avid interest was a cheap publication with scant information on the Island's history; the black and white pictures within of very poor quality. Still, Lechaim thought, in a few days he would be seeing it for himself or rather they would because Maxine was going with him.

"What time's the ferry leave?" Maxine asked.

"Ten in the morning, Thursday" Lechaim answered. "The hydrofoil's not running so the crossing will take about three and a half hours by steamer."

"Wish I could come with you but there's a problem at the plant so duty calls," Carlos said.

There's always a problem at the plant, Eva thought resignedly.

"What about you and the boys? Are you certain you won't come with us," Lechaim asked Eva.

“No, you and Maxine go!” Eva replied. She would like to have gone too but she wouldn’t spoil their pleasure. Let the two of them go alone. Lechaim needed another woman in his life and she had recognized the look in Maxine’s eyes. The look of the female predator that had fastened her eyes on her prey and wasn’t about to be distracted. Eva had not decided yet whether she liked Maxine or not. Perhaps it was the thought that another woman had come into Lechaim’s life. Her relationship with Lechaim had always simmered between the platonic and the sensual. Although she loved Carlos and would never be unfaithful to him, she was a woman with a woman’s desires and Lechaim’s masculinity had not been lost on her. Was it possible, she asked herself, that she was a little jealous of this other woman that had entered Lechaim’s life. She had never met Sinead, Lechaim’s dead wife, so the issue had never arisen but she had now met the lovely Maxine. Eva realized that she was being a trifle foolish and gave herself a mild chastising.

“Go where?” Angelina asked as she came in from the porch with Lito.

Lechaim said, “You can come if you want!” his offer causing Maxine to stiffen anxiously. She wanted to be alone with him, not have to compete for him with this child in a woman’s body.

Lechaim handed the guidebook to Angelina who appeared disinterested.

“Thursday?” Carlos interjected as his memory gave him a nudge. “No she can’t on Thursday. Eva and I are taking her to Angelis City with us in the afternoon.”

Problem at the plant or not, Carlos had made a promise to Eva and he meant to keep it. He couldn’t make the Island trip though because that would take the whole day up.

“ When Lechaim looked at him inquiringly, he said simply, ‘rattan furniture’. Eva Peron here wants some new furniture.

“I’ll give you Eva Peron!” his wife warned.

Carlos always called Eva that when he thought she was getting a bit above herself. He was patently aware that Eva’s parents had named her after the legendary Evita (the Spanish form of Eva), second wife of Juan Peron, a former president of Argentina.

Both Lechaim and Carlos looked at each other and then they started singing in unison,

“Don’t cry for me Argentina....”

Eva, being Eva joined the happy men in their singing and that was the way the evening went. Good company, much to eat, plenty to drink, and the promise of more to come.

Above them the sun settled over the city and the sky turned red as the eye of heaven plunged below the horizon.

Chapter 34

THE FIVE CARDINALS, venerable gentleman in their seventies and beyond, sat looking expectantly at the pontiff who was seated at the head of the long highly polished mahogany table. The Pope had called a meeting of the inner circle only, comprising Cardinal Andretti, Cardinal Tsana, Cardinal Simons, Cardinal Fitz and Cardinal Desmond, so the reason for the assembly, they surmised, had to be important.

“Your Eminences. I have called you here today because I am deeply troubled.”

“In what way, your Holiness?” Cardinal Tsana asked.

“I will come to that, your Eminence but first I want to talk about the events that took place at Fatima in 1917.”

The Cardinals stirred as his words registered.

“As you know, at that time, Our Lady appeared to three children, Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta. The first visitation occurred on the thirteenth of May and every thirteenth of the month thereafter, with the exception of August when she appeared on the nineteenth. The last visitation occurred on thirteenth of October of that year.”

The Cardinals, of course, knew the story well for it was sacrosanct in the Catholic Church, and was known the world over as the Miracle of Fatima. The fact that the Pope was now elaborating on a story that was an icon of the Catholic Church was both surprising and compelling.

“It was during one of her visitations that the Virgin Mary gave the children three messages. These messages were recorded by Lucia, the oldest child. The first and second messages,” the Pope said “related to the two World Wars - the first World War and the Second World War.” The pontiff

reached into a small box placed before him on the table and took out a fold of paper which he then spread out. Looking up for a moment, he began to read from it.

... 'The war is coming to an end But if people do not cease to offend the Lord, another and more terrible one will break out during the next pontificate. When you see the night lit up by a great unknown light, know that it is a sign that God gives you of the punishment of the world by another war, famine and persecution of the Church and of the Holy Father...' "

He lifted his eyes from the paper and looked around the table as he said, "The prophesy proved to be fairly accurate because, during the next pontificate, that of Pius XI, people in Western Europe did see an extraordinary display of lights in the night sky. A phenomenon of nature, we are told, known as an Aurora Borealis, which lasted for two hours, and, we are also told, these lights were so bright that in the Alps night workers were able to see by them. This occurred in January, 1938 not long before the Second World War."

He paused for reflection. "That war, as we know, was even more terrible than the First World War."

The Pope gathered his thoughts before he spoke again because what he was about to tell them had been a closely guarded secret for many years. He had considered the matter at some length before deciding to divulge the secret to the men in the room.

"Your Eminences. What I am going to tell you now must not under any circumstances be repeated beyond these walls. I am going to reveal to you the third message given by Our Lady of Fatima to the three children. The one that's known as the 'Third Secret'.

He paused as his words caused a notable stir around the table for no one other than Popes had been allowed to know the contents of the third message before. Now, the Pope was going to discuss it with them and their excitement was intense.

“Again, like the second message,” the Pope said, “Third Secret is prophetic.”

All eyes were upon him as he once again read from the sheet of paper.

“A man will be born that is marked with the ‘Word of God’. When the Church is corrupted, this man will unite with Michael to do battle with the forces of darkness for the future of mankind. Death will follow for good and wicked alike and fire from the sky will destroy Peter’s rock. If good triumphs then the Church will rise again stronger than before, and peace will reign upon the earth. But if evil succeeds, the world will lapse into a new dark age. Satan will lead millions of souls to damnation and the whole world to eternal ruin.”

The Pope finished speaking and there was silence in the room. It was Cardinal Simons who finally spoke first, “It all seems a little unbelievable”

“Unbelievable!” the Pope exclaimed. “Need I remind you, your Eminence, that the messages of Fatima have been accepted by the Church as authentic.” He gave Cardinal Simons a scathing look and the Cardinal quickly responded.

“My apologies, your Holiness! I didn’t mean to imply that it wasn’t true. It just sounds all so...!”

The Pope cut him off before he could finish, regretting at once his angry outburst. “No, it is I that should apologise! You are right, of course, to have doubts. We wouldn’t be human if we did not. But I need only remind you of the visitation of Pope Leo the thirteenth.”

“Quite so, your Holiness”, Cardinal Simons conceded.

They all, of course, were familiar with the incident the Pope was alluding to. In eighteen eighty-four, on October the thirteenth, Pope Leo while celebrating Mass in the Vatican Chapel claimed that he overheard a conversation between Satan and our Lord.

“I can destroy your Church”

“You can? Then go ahead and do so.”

“To do so, I need more time and more power.”

“How much time? How much power?”

“Seventy-five to one hundred years, and a greater power over those who will give themselves over to my service.”

“You have the time, you will have the power. Do with them what you will.”

The Pope looked around at them all, then remarked, You may recall, that Pope Leo went immediately from the Chapel to his office to compose a prayer to St. Michael. He then gave instructions that it be said after all Low Masses everywhere.”

Again, the others in the room nodded for they knew the story well.

“One remarkable coincidence between this visitation and that of Fatima is that the miracle of the sun took place on the thirteenth of October, Nineteen Seventeen at Fatima, exactly thirty-three years later to the very day, that Pope Leo had his visitation!”

“Remarkable indeed!” Cardinal Tsana agreed.

Again, the Pope paused to give them time to digest his words. Then he said, “Why have I decided to disclose the Third

Secret to you all? Because I now believe that the events described in it have already begun!"

The atmosphere was electric as he continued. "You are, of course, all aware of the events that took place in Northern Ireland where, thanks to the heroics of a certain Captain Lewis, the life of our dear brother, Monsignor Cronin, was spared. I am now of the opinion that what occurred at the abbey in Belfast that night may have greater significance than was first realized."

The men around him were spellbound as the pontiff continued,

"The Monsignor has informed me of something quite extraordinary about Captain Lewis!"

Pausing to formulate his words, the Pope then said, "Apparently, after the attack, the Monsignor states that Captain Lewis' clothes were torn as one would expect. The Captain's trousers had split exposing one of his thighs. The Captain's thigh has the letters 'Y,' 'H,' 'W,' 'H' branded on it. These letters, as we all know, make up the sacred tetragrammaton. He also has the numbers: 6724 78 374 burnt into the flesh there."

"How so, your Holiness?" the German, Cardinal Fitz asked.

"It appears that the markings were caused by the engine block of an armoured car that the Captain commanded. He was outside the vehicle when it hit a landmine and exploded. It seems that the engine block of the vehicle landed on his thigh. The metal was hot, causing the engine number to be burnt into his flesh. This happened four or five months before the attack on the abbey took place"

“Your Eminences, please!” the Pope insisted as the Cardinals started to talk among themselves. “I know that most of you are already aware of many of the details concerning Captain Lewis following the newspaper coverage at that time. Under normal circumstances, one would, no doubt, conclude that the letters on the Captain’s leg that also make up the sacred tetragrammaton are just coincidental and no more. I too thought that! “

Again, he searched their eyes with his own and saw that he had there full attention. “It would seem, however, from an unimpeachable source, that the markings on the engine block, the letters and numbers that is, do not match up with the markings on the Captain’s leg.”

“Surely, that can’t be, your Holiness?” Cardinal Fitz said with conviction.

“Wait, there’s something else!” the Pope went on. “One of Cardinal Tsana’s studies, as we all well know, is numerology and its significance as far as theology is concerned.” He smiled at Cardinal Tsana as he said it and the other men in the room also looked in Cardinal Tsana’s direction.

“In fact, your Eminence, why don’t you, yourself, explain what the numbers appearing on Captain’s Lewis’ thigh next to the tetragrammaton mean” he suggested turning to Cardinal Tsana.

“Certainly, your Holiness”, Cardinal Tsana acknowledged, and he took up from where the Pope had left off. “Based on the Hebrew alphabet rather than the English, I have established that the numbers 6724 78 374 translate into the ‘WORD OF GOD’.”

The men in the room broke into a chorus of disbelief The Pope silenced them quickly. “Please!” he implored holding up

one hand to hush them. “I will now tell you something else, and then you can judge for yourselves the significance of the markings on Captain Lewis’ thigh and how it connects with the Third Secret!”

No one spoke as the Pope then exclaimed, “His name!”

The Cardinals around him were bemused so the pontiff elaborated.

“The Captain’s first name is ‘Lechaim’ which is not a Christian name as such. It is, in point of fact, Jewish! Take the letters in the name ‘Lechaim’ and rearrange them.”

“They spell Michael!” Cardinal Tsana uttered disbelievingly as the realisation sank in.

“Quite so!” the Pope agreed. “Lechaim is an anagram of the name, Michael”.

They were stunned for, if the Pope were correct, the implications of what he was telling them were truly alarming. Cardinal Fitz, never one to hold back, asked, “The secret stated that... ‘*When the Church is corrupted.*’ ... Is such a thing possible, your Holiness?”

The Pope responded, “It would be foolish of us to ignore the past and those events that have reflected badly on us. The inquisition for instance! Of course, then again, “when the Church is corrupted” may be a reference to a spiritual decline within the Church. After all, we have been faced with many moral issues these last few years. The celibacy of priests, the abortion question and many others. All round the world, Christianity is suffering, people are being persecuted and wars reign happily everywhere.”

Cardinal Desmond, the American Cardinal, chimed in, “What makes you so certain that Captain Lewis is the one

referred to in the Third Secret, your Holiness and who is Michael?"

"Of course I can't be certain but it seems quite remarkable that the Captain is branded so, and that the letters of his name can be rearranged to spell Michael."

"And Michael?" Cardinal Desmond repeated.

"Saint Michael springs to mind!" the Pope replied.

The Cardinals looked at one another and some found it difficult not to laugh. Saint Michael no less! Certainly, if one believed in angels then Michael, the archangel, leader of all the angels who remained faithful to God would be a logical choice, but they were men of this century even if they were priests. Surely, angels were a product of the past when men for the most part were kept in ignorance.

No one chose to voice this view however.

"Yes! Saint Michael!" the Pope reaffirmed. "Remember that it was Michael that overcame Lucifer and the renegade angels and cast them out of heaven. You may also recollect that Saint John speaks of the great conflict at the end of time, which reflects also the battle in heaven at the beginning of time."

"You may be right!" Cardinal Tsana agreed. "Tradition gives to Saint Michael four tasks. To fight against Satan. To rescue the souls of the faithful from the power of the enemy, especially at the hour of death. To be the champion of God's people, the Jews in the Old Law, the Christians in the New Testament. To call away from earth and bring men's souls to judgment. He is, in fact, the patron of the Church."

For some seconds every one was silent as they absorbed the Cardinal's words. Cardinal Andretti was the first to break the silence, "If we suppose for now that Captain Lewis and the

‘Third secret’ are linked, what is the Church’s next step, your Holiness?”

“A good question” the Pope acknowledged. “That is the reason I have called this meeting so you can help me decide our next course of action. Whatever we decide here today, for the time being our discussions must be kept confidential. No one other than those in this room must know, and no one is to discuss these matters outside this room. Is that quite clear?”

“Quite so, your Holiness!” Cardinal Desmond, the American uttered. “And where is Captain Lewis at this time?”

“He’s in the Philippines on the island of Luzon. Manila, in fact.”

They continued to discuss the matter for some hours but they could not agree on a solution. Finally, it was decided that an agent of the Church should be sent to Manila to report the movements of the Captain. In the meanwhile, the matter would be left in abeyance unless events overtook them. Cardinal Tsana was entrusted with the task of arranging for a suitable person to be sent to the Phillipines to seek out Captain Lewis and report back.

“Well, I think that will be all for now” the Pope said as he dismissed them. “We’ll meet again if and when something materializes that gives credence to the possible connection between Captain Lewis and Sister Lucia’s prophesy.”

Ten minutes the cardinals had gathered in Cardinal Tsana’s office.

“I thought it went very well!” Cardinal Fitz said.

“That part about the markings on Captain Lewis’ thigh was masterful!” Cardinal Simons exclaimed.

“But how did you know what the ‘Third Secret’ was?” Cardinal Andretti asked.

Cardinal Tsana beckoned them to sit down on the chairs that had been placed around his desk. He then sat down at his desk facing them and spoke. As he did so, he could not hide the satisfaction in his voice.

“I make it a point to know about these things!”

Cardinal Tsana, or rather the organization he was employed by, had the money to pay for the best and the seals that had been placed on Lucia dos Santos’ records had been opened and carefully resealed by experts. It had been done years before and now this foresight on his part was starting to pay dividends. While the Pope and the Monsignor were being fed red herrings, the pair of them wouldn’t be concentrating on the issue in hand; namely, the Vatican Bank and the missing millions. It gave them, Cardinal Tsana hoped, just a little more time and that was all he needed.

“The markings on the Captain’s leg? That was a fabrication?” Cardinal Simons asked.

“Not quite!” Cardinal Tsana responded. As luck would have it, the noble captain does bear the letters, ‘Y,’ ‘H,’ ‘W,’ ‘H’ on his leg.”

“But the numbers that were mentioned. Surely they do not mean, ‘The word of God?’“

“Of course not! They were just the serial numbers of the engine block, no more. I told the Pope that the markings and numbers on the Captain’s thigh do not match those on the engine block to give substance to the notion that there is a supernatural link between Captain Lewis and the Third Secret,” he said smilingly. “So I lied.”

The men before him smiled back.

It does seem odd that the Captain should have the Tetragrammaton on his leg though!" Cardinal Andretti remarked."

"A coincidence, nothing more!" Cardinal Tsana said, "and a lucky coincidence at that."

"But the name, surely that's odd?" Cardinal Andretti persisted.

"Again, just a coincidence!" Cardinal Tsana answered but it serves our purpose well.

"What about the Captain?" Cardinal Andretti then asked.

"He will be taken care of, have no fear of that." Cardinal Tsana replied as he got up and went across to the cocktail cabinet in one corner. "Sartori and Sam are in the Philippines now!"

"As agents of the Church?" Cardinal Fitz jested.

They all laughed.

"A drink gentlemen to celebrate the future," Cardinal Tsana proposed. "Soon our plans will come to fruition and we will rule alone here."

As Cardinal Tsana pored drinks for the others, he congratulated himself. The combination of a senile Pope and a demented Monsignor provided the ingredients for complete success. In one of Monsignor Cronin's more lucid moments, he had conveyed to the Cardinal that he had seen the markings on the Captain's leg that night at the abbey. It had been this one piece of information that had given Cardinal Tsana the idea of concocting the story of Captain Lewis and his connection with the 'Third Secret'.

Cardinal Tsana held up his glass and the others held theirs up also. "Here's to Captain Lewis, and the Archangel Michael.

May they rest in peace.” The other Cardinals chuckled and then drank lustily.

Chapter 35

THE MORNING SUN beat down on the ferryboat as it chugged its way out passed the moored freighters and small craft that dotted Manila harbour. Barely a ripple disturbed the placid turquoise sea as the small steamer made its way slowly but inexorably towards the entrance to the Bay. To those on board, it seemed to make little progress but after an hour or so, its passengers could make out their destination; an island that hung low on the horizon in brooding isolation. The rugged peninsula of Bataan began to slide along the starboard side, whilst flying fish cut the waves ahead like dolphins leading trusting sailors home.

The two of them leaned on the bow rail looking out at the dancing water spraying off the boat's hull as it butted the flat sea apart. Standing there with her by his side, Lechaim felt ambivalent - happy and sad, joyful and regretful and he knew why. The woman next to him wasn't Sinead whose face had been floating before his all morning like a cloud that would not go away. Lechaim was not a man given to too much soul searching. However, these past few days, he had felt pangs of conscience at the thought that he was being unfaithful to his wife's memory. His guilt was compounded by the fact that he found himself thinking less and less of Sinead and more and more of Maxine. Such is the fickleness of the human heart, he thought sardonically. Deep down he knew his feelings for Maxine could never compete with those he had for Sinead, but one was dead, the other, alive. The love between him and Sinead had been akin to an instant binding of two souls joined together by emotions too profound to really understand. On the other hand, his relationship with the woman by his side was

more basic, carnal, down to earth. Maxine was very much a woman of the flesh whereas Sinead was now but a memory.

If the truth be known, Lechaim was really a man of the “old school” where morality was concerned. For him, love and marriage were synonymous, and sex the nexus whereby the union became complete and whole. It was in his nature, for better or worse, to have old fashioned virtues in an age of so called enlightenment. The new woman in his life, Maxine, was one of the “new age” breed complete with a full armoury of resourcefulness, independence, and sexual liberation that bordered on licentiousness. There lovemaking had been a mixture of thoughtful consideration on his part and wanton sexuality on hers; a combination that went together like “comflakes and milk”. For the first time since that day in Ireland when his world had fallen apart, Lechaim had found a measure of happiness with another woman. Deep down, he knew that he would never again recapture the bliss of Ireland and the love he had lost, but he could diminish, perhaps extinguish, the pain in the arms of this woman. Yet, the memory of Sinead could not be doused that easily, he found. She had flitted back into his mind often these last few days, and he had allowed her to remain like a soothing balm.

For a brief instant in time, he imagined that the body next to his was no longer Maxine’s. Rather, it belonged to the girl with the sensual green eyes and shock of red hair that she had often tossed provocatively in his direction with a shake of her beautiful head. How she would have loved it here in this bewitching land, he reflected as her soft Irish brogue and the smell of her hair seemed to carry to him on the wind.

“Anything wrong, darling? You seem miles away” Maxine said as she squeezed his arm

“No, nothing!” he lied defensively as he smiled down at her. Looking at Maxine’s trusting beautiful face staring up, with the sun highlighting her high cheekbones and perfect features, his heart lifted. He willed himself to lift the depression that had descended on him. After all he still had his life to live, and he had an alluring girl on his arm to help him live it.

In a change of mood, he said, “All being well, we should be there in an hour or so. Come on! Let’s grab a coffee downstairs. It might be our last for a while!” Gently leading her with his arm about her waist, they went below together.

Maxine and he were on their second cup of coffee and her third cigarette when the boat started slowing and they returned to the deck above to observe its arrival. The boat had almost reached the island now, and it was making its final cautious approach to a square dock of rough concrete partly overgrown and heavily crated in places. To the forefront of the dock lay the large corroded barrel of a coastal gun that had not fired a shot in anger for many years. Lechaim turned his head as the vessel ran in and spotted a small pier off to the left and low forbidding crags beyond. As the cheerless place echoed to the low growl of the boat’s engines in reverse, Lechaim thought of the history in this one place alone, never mind the island as a whole. More than fifty years before, on a tropical barmy night, a man, his wife, and their son had stepped aboard an American PT boat at the very pier he was gazing upon. That PT boat, accompanied by two other PT boats, had then made a dash for Mindanao in the south, and on to Australia.

As Lechaim took in the scene, he could picture in his mind the famous man with his trademark corn cob pipe and his “scrambled-eggs” hat. This island, from which that man and his family had left, had been the scene of some of the bloodiest

fighting in the Second World War. The Spanish had first fortified this natural fortress in the 18th century, using it as a registration site for ships entering the Bay. Now, it lay deserted, remembered only in a guidebook or two, or books on the war in the Pacific. The four miles long tadpole shaped strip of land seemed to simmer in the heat, asleep now, confident of its place in history. The image of the man with the pipe, General Douglas MacArthur, slipped quietly back to Valhalla as Lechaim became aware that Maxine was no longer beside him.

She had wandered down the deck and was talking to a weedy dapper little man that stood out from everyone else because he was dressed as though he were dining out while the other passengers were just your average tourists, dressed in jeans, casual shirts, sandals and the like. Maxine saw Lechaim looking at her and sidled back down the deck.

“Who was that?” Lechaim asked curiously.

“Just wanted a light!” Maxine replied. She smiled and then said, “He remarked that you looked like the famous Captain Lewis! I said, hardly! You were my husband and you were not nearly that brave!”

He chuckled with her.

“So this is Corregidor!” she exclaimed looking around her. “It’s very different from what I imagined.”

“It’s just as I imagined it would be!” Lechaim replied.

For most of the morning the pair of them browsed on their own, away from the small group of tourists they had arrived with. The day was sultry and they took their time as they meandered up to ‘Topside’, a small plateau where a large barracks once stood. Its mocking ruins of crumpled walls and shattered innards bore stark testament to the ravishes of the fierce battles that had taken place there. They found a memorial

on the summit, erected by Filipinos and Americans, with a small museum close by. Inside, they ambled around the small building and looked closely at the faded black and white photographs displaying snatches of the island's chequered history. Finally, they returned to the sunlight, linked themselves together again, and continued to stroll at a leisurely pace.

Presently, Lechaim's eyes took in the fluted, rusted iron flagpole that stood on what was the former parade ground. In the island's heyday, the grass on this parade area had been shorn and treated with tender loving care by a flock of Filipino gardeners. These days it lay slovenly and unkempt with no hint of its former crowning glory. He deserted her for a moment and walked across to the old flagpole that had caught his eye. Running his fingers over the rough metal, he couldn't help but reflect on the events that had taken place around it. If only inanimate objects could speak, he mused, this old flagpole would tell some stories. The metal was hot beneath his fingers and the pitted surface seemed to be crying out in protest as it was slowly being consigned into oblivion. Having been a soldier of recent vintage, Lechaim pondered whether the ultimate sacrifice made here was ever really worthwhile. The failure of politicians to learn from history or remember the slaughter of men and women in these far flung outposts gave little comfort to the ordinary footslogger, he reflected. Yet, there was something noble, almost profound, he felt, in laying down one's life for a set of beliefs, however foolish the logic of it all was. What had General MacArthur said in his final speech to Congress, ... "*Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.*" Glancing around, Lechaim could see that this island's deeds, like its famous commander, were also just fading away, but

history would remember even if people did not. He smiled to himself as he realized that he was becoming maudlin.

Maxine sidled up as he flicked through his guide book and read, *"In days gone by the lowering of 'Old Glory' on this flagpole had been a daily ritual. That is, before 1941 when Japanese soldiers had come and replaced the American flag with their own 'Rising Sun'".* In his mind's eye he could picture General MacArthur taking the salute beneath this old rusted relic after the Island's recapture in 1945. He shrugged off his dolefulness. It was a wonderful day, he felt happy, and he was in the company of a beautiful woman. What more could a man want? The soporific atmosphere of the hibernating island was making him drowsy. "Let's sit for a while!" he suggested.

They found a spot on a grassy bank to one side of the old parade ground and lay down, he on his back and she on his chest. Closing his eyes, he lost himself in the ambiance of it all. The staccato beat of a bee's wings close by as it busied itself in a cluster of wildflowers was the only sound to be heard in the still air. Maxine snuggled down as she lay on his chest and they clung together in lulling contemplation. He felt contented and at peace with the world.

... The parade ground was full of noisy men as they poured out of the long barracks in response to a trooper blowing reveille on his bugle. Quickly, the men formed ranks and then an officer on a white horse appeared and trotted past them. The pointed brown hat on the officer's head, a product of a bygone era, gave the man the appearance of a scout master rather than a soldier. The khaki shirt and white riding breeches he wore were augmented by brown riding boots and a Sam Browne cross belt. The hot afternoon sun beat down on the officer, shining off his brass buttons and the leather sheen

of his belt and boots. Presently the officer reached Lechaim and he drew up his horse. The figure before Lechaim seemed to dance in the heat like a mirage in the desert, and, for a moment or so, he couldn't make out the rider's face. Then the sun went behind a cloud and Lechaim saw that the rider had no face. Just a skull full of maggots that crawled out of the eye sockets and down the flayed bone ...

“ Ahhhhh! “ he cried awaking with a start that made Maxine jump.

“Are you all right?” she asked as she noticed a strange look in his eyes that she hadn't seen before. He was also sweating profusely although the sun had gone in and the day was beginning to cool.

For a moment or so, he didn't answer but instead gazed around the open ground before him.

“Yes, Just a bad dream!” he told her finally. “More a nightmare really. God! I haven't had those for a long time!”

“You mean you use to have nightmares?” she asked.

“It's a long story. I'll tell you about it some time. We'd better get on if we want to see the rest of the island.”

He rose and she followed, the nervous tension coursing through his veins. Arm in arm they set off anew to explore the rest of the island. The narrow lanes along which they had to walk to reach most of the Island's gun batteries were overgrown and unused except by the sightseers that came twice a week. The gun batteries themselves contained large mortars that stood silent and rusted; their metal barrels scarred with the shock of battle and age, the scrub around them, wild and insistent in its efforts to place a shroud over these celebrated field pieces.

It seemed to Lechaim as they strolled along that only unruly vegetation flourish today on this shock of land in the sea that had once abounded with so much activity.

"I don't think we have time for Malinta Tunnel if we want to get back!" Lechaim said finally.

"Oh! let's see the tunnel!" she insisted. "I do want to see it!"

It came as a surprise to Lechaim that Maxine should be so interested in the island and its history. That sort of thing, he imagined, was more a man's thing or was he being too sexist. Certainly, she would have accused him of being such if he had voiced his thoughts to her. He had to admit that it was a nice change to have a woman share his interest in historical things..

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! We must see it now that we've come all this way!"

"Okay!" he agreed, "but we can't stay too long or the boat may leave without us!"

"What time's it going back?"

"Not sure! An hour or so perhaps! Still, I expect they'll give us a blast on the ship's horn to warn us to return to the ship." He looked about him and saw Malinta Hill off to the left. "This way!" he said pointing to Malinta Hill in the distance.

It took them ten minutes to reach the 'Malinta Tunnel' and enter its shady gloom. Walking through the tunnel's deserted interior, Lechaim tried to forget the nightmare he had experienced nearly forty minutes before. It had shaken him up but he tried not to dwell on it. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled forth the cheap guidebook and browsed through its pages. Reading through the information it contained on the Malinta Tunnel, he realized, not for the first time that day, that

they were literally walking through history. According to the book, the Japanese did not only try to bomb the island into submission, but they had also shelled the island from the mountainous peninsular of Bataan which lay well within range. The Malinta Tunnel that they were now in had been the place where the American and Filipino soldiers had made their last stand before surrendering to the Japanese in 1942. Later many of the island's survivors were to perish on the Bataan death march.

Lechaim now forgot the horror of his nightmare as he lost himself in the tunnel's history. They walked past the dusty silent passages on either side of the main tunnel, one of which had served as General MacArthur's headquarters when Fort Mills on Topside had become untenable. Another had served as a hospital whilst yet others had sheltered the island's occupants from attack those many years ago. Lechaim glanced down at the dusty concrete floor as he read in his guidebook, *"some two thousand Japanese soldiers squatted on the floor of Malinta Tunnel just before the island was retaken by the Americans. The two thousand or so 'Empire of the Rising Sun' fanatics then blew themselves up in true samurai style rather than be taken."*

Lechaim glanced away from the book in his hands to the parallel set of rusty iron rails set into the concrete beneath their feet. It took him a few seconds to realize that they had been laid to guide the tramcars that once clanged around Corregidor. Some of these tramcars had originally served the public in San Francisco before being imported to service the army personnel garrisoning the Island. Lechaim's aroused imagination conjured up pictures of these old tramcars rattling along the rails beneath him, their interiors full with people long since dead and

forgotten. A voice from the darkness of a lateral close by intruded on Lechiam's daydreaming.

"Captain Lewis!" the man insisted as his melodious voice broke the tranquillity.

When the man stepped out, Lechaim saw that it was the same man Maxine had been speaking to on the boat. He was European in appearance although he had an American accent of sorts. A shaft of sunlight played on the man's thin features displaying a face that was unimpressive with a pair of ferret eyes atop a small wiry body. Certainly, the man's puny physique and evident lack of body strength posed little threat to a man like Lechaim but the revolver in his hand did.

If Maxine hadn't been with him, Lechaim would have immediately rushed the man even though the gap between him and the gunman was too wide for safety.

"What do you want?" Lechaim asked as he sought an opportunity.

"Come!" the man demanded, making sure to keep his distance, as he gestured with his gun in the direction of the lateral from which he had emerged.

"And the girl?"

"She's safe enough!"

"You'd better go, darling. I'll be all right!"

Lechaim was impressed by Maxine's calmness in such a situation. Some women would have screamed. For that matter, some men may have as well. Lechaim knew though that he couldn't leave her here with this man who would surely kill her after he had disposed of him, that much was obvious. Lechaim felt he had no choice, and he lunged for the man knowing as he did so that he wasn't going to make it.

In the normal course of events, the gunman would have had enough time to get off two shots. However, his gun failed to fire. The man's eyes filled with terror as he pulled the trigger and nothing happened. The sound of the clicks were still ringing in his ears as Lechaim's hands seized his throat and the man realized that he was about to die. Flashes of light bombarded his eyes as his dazed brain registered the pressure being applied to his throat.

Lechaim knew the man was his as his large hands dug into the man's soft flesh then all was blackness. Relinquishing his hold on the gasping man's throat, Lechaim slowly crumbled to the ground and lay there unconscious. Clouds of fine dust started to rise around Lechaim's inert form as the gun man wheezed at his colleague who had felled Lechaim from behind.

"Come on, Sam! We have to get rid of him!"

Maxine responded by grabbing Lechaim's other arm and they both dragged Lechaim into the gloomy lateral. She pulled a gun from her bag and put it to his head.

"No!" Peter Sartori said. "If someone finds him, let them think it was an accident, a rock fall or something!"

Maxine lowered the gun and she then kissed Sartori passionately on the lips. "What kept you?" she asked.

"I couldn't find a suitable spot. Too many tourists wandering around." he replied. "Anyway, Sam, you seemed to be enjoying yourself!"

"What do we do now?" she asked, ignoring his barbed remark.

"I have something with me that will take care of the good Captain. Let's get out of here!"

"But he might wake up!" she said. "Shouldn't we kill him now just to make sure."

Sartori's eyes narrowed. "I've told you before, it has to look like an accident. Don't worry, when he wakes up, he won't be going anywhere."

Peter Sartori knew his stuff so the explosion that followed was not a large one; he didn't want to attract undue attention. It was just powerful enough to bring down the entrance to the lateral entombing Lechaim within.

Sartori and Maxine satisfied themselves that the sound, muffled by the tunnel itself, had not been heard by anyone else, then they returned to see the results of their handiwork.

"God, the dust!" Maxine exclaimed.

Turning to her, Sartori said in a satisfied tone, "Good! It will be weeks, maybe months before anyone bothers to dig out that particular passageway!"

"With luck, maybe never!" was her reply.

By the time his body was found they would both be on the other side of the world, she thought, and no one would even remember that she and the Captain had been on the island together. That is except for the Regas and Lito Moreno, but Peter would deal with them as he had with Captain Lewis.

The pair made their way casually back to the ferry and went aboard.

Some of the other visitors to the island that day heard a dull noise but took little notice. However, one alert tourist did remark, "Was that something exploding!"

Her husband, a decrepit Australian, turned on her and scoffed, "Don't be so bloody stupid!"

Arsehole, she thought resentfully, couldn't the fool read? It had said in her guidebook that there was still unexploded ammunition lying around. It could have been an explosion. What did he know anyway. However, she kept her thoughts to

herself rather than voice them. Being young, nearly fifty years her husband's junior, pregnant, and Filipino, she was content to wait. She would have her day in the sun when he took her back to Australia with him. Until then she would put up with his smelly, flabby, odious body. In Australia it would be a different story, then he wouldn't see her for dust.

"Can't we go home now?" she asked in a huffish voice. "I'm not feeling very well!"

God! he thought. If it wasn't for the bloody sex, who'd ever marry the bitches?

Thirty minutes later the geriatric and his miffed wife were at sea and the Island was receding with every minute that passed. Sartori and Maxine were leaning on the ship's rail close by gazing back at the lonely sentinel when the noise and the shock wave hit simultaneously as the Island belched a ball of fire and a column of earth rose into the air. The four of them together with the other passengers ducked for cover as flying debris rained down churning up the water.

"Christ!" Maxine exclaimed as the ringing in her ears gradually subsided. "What was that?"

Sartori was equally puzzled as he got up from the deck where he had flung himself and looked out. Across the water a quarter of a mile away, he could see a pall of black smoke shrouding the side of the five hundred foot high mass of Malinta Hill.

"It must have been some unexploded ammunition going off!" he muttered in reply.

Could it have been caused by the charge he had set off earlier, Sartori wondered. No, it wasn't possible, he concluded. Sartori was an explosives expert courtesy of the Italian Army and he was therefore aware that things do not normally explode

without human intervention of some kind. Certainly, man-made explosive devices do not and that explosion had been caused by something constructed by man; his highly trained ear told him that.

Maxine's eyes met his and she shuddered as she realized the risk they had run when Peter had used explosives earlier.

Some feet away a crisis was occurring as the geriatric Aussie clutched his chest and tried to get the elephant off it. His young wife held his hand and looked into his screwed up face with genuine concern.

Please God, she prayed inwardly, don't let the bastard die until we get to Australia.

Chapter 36

HE WAS AWAKENED by a pounding in his brain that was insistent. The dust that had erupted through the passageway, covering his prone body in a layer of dirt and grime, assaulted his nostrils, causing him to choke. He buried his face in his arm to shield it from the fine particles that permeated the air around him. Lying there in the dark, he became aware of the dullness in his body and the pain in the back of his head and remembered. There was a smell of cordite in the air and he couldn't hear.

More than ten minutes passed before his hearing came back. By then the dust had sufficiently settled to enable him to look up and survey his prison. He guessed that he was inside the lateral that the gunman had been pointing to earlier. He also guessed that the gunman had used explosives to entomb him. It was curious though that he had been left in the tunnel alive, he thought. Why had he not been finished off.

Getting to his feet, he fingered the lump on the back of his head and thought ruefully, that the gunman's companion had meant business. Then Maxine's face appeared before him and he became anxious. If she were still alive, he needed to get out of this place and find her.

The blow on the head must have dulled his brain, he decided, or he would have noticed it before. The place was gloomy but not pitch black as you would expect in a place without light. As he moved along the tunnel his surrounds began to take shape. Then he saw why. A thin shaft of sunlight was filtering through a hole in one side of the tunnel. Looking around, he found a piece of rusty iron that would serve as a pick and he set to work. There was little earth and rock to excavate though and he soon found himself standing on Malinta

Hill in the brilliant sunshine. A pungent smell was in the air, a smell that Lechaim was familiar with, the unmistakeable smell of cordite that he had smelled earlier.

As he started down the hill he walked by, but did not notice, the tiny piece of twisted metal that had landed back on earth twenty minutes before. The chunk of shrapnel lay there preening itself in the sun as it wondered where the rest of its huge casing had disappeared to. Never again would it form part of the large shell that members of the Japanese 2nd Independent Heavy Artillery Regiment of the Hayakawa Detachment had once loaded into the breech of a 240 millimetre gun. Settling down as it cooled, the discarded fragment recalled that first and last glorious flight so many years before from the hills of Pico de Loro across the sparkling blue water, and that fateful plunge into the earth. It would be good to rest again now that it had finally served its purpose.

To Lechaim it was evident as he scrambled down the hill that something had discharged violently within the earth. The acrid smoke hanging in the air and the torn fresh soil scattered around were evidence enough of that. Surely, no one but a fool would have used a charge that large just to imprison him in the tunnel, he thought. Then his mind was elsewhere as his eyes became fixed on the horizon where a speck belching smoke was all that could be seen of the departing island ferry.

Before he had time to contemplate his situation, he saw his means of getting off the island. Unbelievably, there it was, a yacht sailing inshore. Running down to the water's edge, he waved his arms frantically.

"Who's that, Don?" the slender dark haired woman on the yacht asked her husband.

"I'm not sure!" he replied. "Hand me those binoculars, sweetheart!"

He put them to his eyes and exclaimed, "Shit! it's a man and he's covered in..."

"What!" his wife exclaimed as her curiosity took over.

"Shit!"

"Don, do you have to swear?"

"Sorry sweetheart, but it does look like crap all over him!"

As he turned the thirty foot white hulled boat towards the shore, two girls, in their late teens, joined them on deck. "What is it dad?" one asked

"Be careful, Don! It could be anyone! It might not be safe!" his wife exclaimed.

"What is not safe?" their son asked as he too appeared on deck. A tall strapping lad in his early twenties, he was the clone of his father in every way.

Don left the questions unanswered as he guided the boat in. Instead, he commented, "We can't leave him there. We'll stand off a bit though just in case."

Lechaim shouted to them when they were within hailing distance, "Hi there! I've been stranded! Any chance of taking me back to Manila?"

Don, reassured by the educated voice of the man on shore, said to his son, "Go and get him, Hank!"

"Right dad! Come on you two!" he then said to his sisters, "Come and help me with the boat."

It took Hank only a few minutes to retrieve the castaway and ferry him aboard.

"Hi! Don Talbot's my name and this," the skipper said looking at the small woman beside him, "is my wife, Jenny!"

“Pleasure to meet you all. My name’s Lechaim!” he said holding out his hand.

A likable man, strongly built, tall, tanned, fair haired, around forty-five or so shook the hand Lechaim offered.

“What are you doing here, buddy?” Don, asked. “And how the hell did you get in that state?” Then he remembered why they had turned towards the island to begin with. “Don’t tell me you were caught up in that explosion?” he asked and looked questioningly at the dirty and disheveled figure before him.

“Something like that!”

“What caused it anyway?” Lechaim heard the petite woman next to him ask.

“I’m not sure!” Lechaim replied. “An unexploded shell finally decided to go off, I suspect!” He had been mulling over the cause of the explosion while he had been watching the boy rowing over to him. Now that he had time to think about it, it seemed the most likely cause of an explosion of that magnitude.

The man’s daughters had been looking closely at Lechaim but they still found it hard to believe their eyes.

“Dad!” one of them nudged him with her elbow. “Not now, Becky!” but she continued to elbow him.

“What?” he asked exasperatedly

She whispered something in his ear and his eyes narrowed as he took fresh stock of Lechaim.

He could see that he had been recognized so Lechaim got his question in first.

“Do you have a ship to shore radio aboard?”

Chapter 37

A LITTLE MORE than four hours after leaving Corregidor Peter Sartori opened the door of his rooms at the Hilton Hotel in Manila. For the next hour, he and Maxine indulged in some violent sex. They both knew each other intimately for their affair had gone on for some years, yet they never tired of one another.

He took her to him so many times that his testicles started to run on empty from pumping juice into every orifice in her body that his hectoring penis could penetrate. Sartori might be small in stature but he was abnormally big between his legs. Sam, for Samantha Jessep, was Maxine's real name, had played Sartori's organ so often in the past that she was now a consummate musician.

"How's your throat, darling?" she asked tenderly.

Out of working hours she was allowed to use endearments on him. He never responded in kind however. After all, he was her master, and she was his employee. Sometimes, as of now, he would throw her a sop by giving her a good screw. He had to admit that her body pleased him but he was always sore afterwards from her demands. Tonight, however, his soreness had little to do with her. Placing his hand to his throat, he tested its tenderness.

"That man was strong!"

"He had already killed nine men in Ireland, remember!"

"Well, he nearly killed me as well!"

"There, there, darling!" she purred and reached down again for his overworked cock.

"Not now!" he said impatiently. "I have some unfinished business!"

“You mean the Regas! They won’t be back until ten or so. A trip to Angeles City to buy some furniture.”

He pushed her away, rolled off the bed and glanced at the expensive Rolex on his wrist that he always wore even in bed.

“I have just two hours so I’d better go.”

“How do you intend to do it?”

“A gas explosion, I think. Yes, why not.”

She had always admired his skill at killing people, much of which she had witnessed first hand over the years. Sam was also an avid fan of the swaying appendage now dangling before her face, and she made a final grab for it but he was too quick.

“Later, when I have finished the task in hand,” he said in the manner of a man promising his dog a bone.

Forty minutes later Peter Sartori was walking by one of the entrances to Forbes Park. The lights around the security guards’ hut lit up the darkness, exposing the two browned skinned men that manned the gate. Sartori acknowledged the friendly smiles as he passed the Filipinos by and the blue uniformed figures returned to their hut and the dull monotony of routine. They expressed some surprise to one another that an expatriate was walking instead of driving but they were not overly concerned. White men had little need in the Philippines to break into people’s houses for money. Rather, they were normally the ones paying to keep thieves of the indigenous variety out.

Further on down the street, Sartori found what he was looking for. Here, the high brick wall was partially hidden from the road by leafy trees. The branches made a convenient ladder and he shinned silently up and over. Peter Sartori had penetrated armed enclosures before but they had never been this easy. Pulling the paper from his pocket, he glanced at Sam’s

directions. Then he walked along the pavement on one side of the well laid out avenues of trees, which bore testimony to the Phillipines' former days of American colonialism. He soon came to the Regas' residence and saw lights burning in two of the basement windows. That meant that the maids were still about so he needed to be extra cautious. It took him only a few minutes to find the gas main which he quickly checked for suitability. No problems here, he decided as he reached into the pouch of his jacket to extract the plastic explosive and detonator. The barrel of a pistol pressed against the back of his head at that moment making him forget all about the work he had come there to do.

"Vat yah do deh, muverfucker?" The man's grip on his thin arm was like a vice and Sartori knew that he was well and truly trapped. While he was trying to come up with some plausible explanation for being in the Regas' garden, the other man spoke again.

"Vat yah got in pocket?"

"Nothing, really!"

The hulk beside him ignored this obvious lie as he went through the pouch and the other pockets in Sartori's jacket and trousers. Relieving him of the pistol in his shoulder holster and the Semtex and detonator as well, he asked Sartori, "What this?"

Before Sartori could think of a credible answer if indeed one could be found, a voice from the shadows inquired, "Did you get him, Lothar?"

"Yah! Got muverfucker here!"

"Bring him over! Lechaim will be back soon. We'll wait for him!"

Lothar considered this option. “Okay, but if muverfucker giv trouble, I take care, huh!”

As Sartori was bundled onto the patio, he wondered why the two men were here at the Regas house at this time of night. He knew about the Filipino and the German, of course, because Sam and he had been watching Lechaim’s movements for some time; her up close, and he at a distance. He was also aware that the Filipino had the “hots” for the kid from Argentina that had turned up a week before Christmas. But why were they there now, waiting, presumably, for the Regas to return. Sartori, had little time to wonder about this, for he had to get away. The situation he found himself in was not overly desperate though. For one, the two men that confronted him, and there appeared to be only two, did not know that Captain Lewis was not coming back that night or any other. For another, the oaf that had the manners of a pig had only relieved him of the gun in his shoulder holster. Sartori still retained the small spring released pistol strapped to his right arm under his jacket which the blockhead had missed. Sartori had got the idea from a movie, ‘RED HEAT’ where the Russian policeman played by Arnold Schwarzenegger had been up against a Russian drug peddler with a similar device. An arms expert within the organization had been able to obtain one for him, and the gadget had got Sartori out of more than one tight situation since then. The short Italian waited for his chance and it came as Lothar, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s double, released him and threw him forward a few paces.

“Now little man,” Lito said. “Who are you?”

In the half light luminescence of the patio Sartori could see the threatening faces of his adversaries and instinctively knew that the moment had arrived. Snapping his elbow hard, he

heard the mechanism click. In an instant the spring released extendable arm of finely engineered metal plunged out of his sleeve thrusting the gun it held into the palm of his hand. The faces of the two men before him had no chance to register surprise as he fired once. The shot took Lito in the shoulder from five feet away and lifted him back in the air before he sprawled to the ground clutching at the pumping hole. Lothar who had phenomenal reflexes for a big man did a rolling breakfall off the patio into the darkness before Sartori had a chance to fire again. Sartori did not bother going after him because he had to get away himself. Despite the silencer on his weapon the guards on the main gate might have heard something and decide to investigate. The hulk had gone to ground and was nowhere in site so Sartori took off like a greyhound, the cover of darkness working for him as well as Lothar. Soon he was scrambling over and down the wall. Regaining the footpath outside the enclosure, he tried to look inconsequential as he walked along. He could see that the guards were still on the gates as he approached so he assumed the shot had gone unnoticed after all. He heard the sound of an approaching vehicle but kept his head down. A beaten up car, somehow incongruous in such a high class residential area, passed him and turned in at the gates. He stopped to let it pass in front of him and glanced casually at the driver. Suddenly, Sartori felt sick and wanted to vomit as the trembling in his limbs began. Fear can do that to a man. It was not conceivable, yet he could have sworn that the man driving the car was the man he had left for dead on Corregidor earlier that day. Was it a touch of conscience, perhaps? Surely not for he had killed many men in his life and never gave any of them a second thought. Sartori tried to convince himself that it was pure imagination on

his part. After all, he knew, it just wasn't possible for Captain Lewis to be here.

Chapter 38

AS LECHAIM PULLED into the Regas' driveway, someone called from the shadows "Hey, Lickum!" It was Lothar and he looked nervous as he glanced around continuously.

"What's wrong!" Lechaim asked as he got out of the car.

"Lito! He's been shot!" Lothar said, pointing in the direction of the patio.

"What!" Lechaim exclaimed as he brushed past and ran to the Filipino who was propped against a wall of the house with his arm covered in blood. The pain was evident on Lito's face as he tried to smile but it came out as a grimace. Lechaim quickly bent over him and examined the wound.

"Can you move your arm?"

"Yes! it missed the bone I think but it fucking hurts!"

"You'll need a doctor!"

"We'll get our own, a sympathiser. Can't afford to have the police involved," Lito replied and then pursed his lips as Lechaim examined the wound with his fingers. "We'll need to use your phone though to contact him."

Lito had not mentioned much about the cause he was fighting for and Lechaim briefly wondered what Lito's doctor friend was sympathising with but it was an idle thought and quickly forgotten.

"Of course! Come on! We'll get you into the house and make that phone call" Lechaim said as he picked Lito up in his arms.

Lito, despite the pain, went to protest but decided against it although he felt like a child as Lechaim carried him with ease to the front door. Lothar grinned at the sight until he saw Lito's eyes which were sending out a warning.

“Lothar!.. keys on my belt...get them and unlock the door.” Lechaim ordered.

“Yah!” the German grunted and fumbled around at Lechaim’s hip.

As they went in, Lechaim exclaimed, “Keep the noise down! We don’t want to wake up the maids!”

“Yah!” Lothar acknowledged in a conciliatory mood. He knew that Lito would be on his back about the gun, the gun that Lothar should have taken off the little man. Lothar was eager therefore to make amends.

Lechaim put Lito down on a stool in the kitchen and rummaged around in the cupboards until he found what he was looking for, Carlos’ first aid kit.

Lito winced as Lechaim carefully removed his shirt. “Get a bowl of water and a cloth or towel of some kind!” he said to the hulk next to him.

Whilst Lothar was doing this, Lechaim searched around again for something that would serve his purpose. He found it, a brown leather belt in one of the clothes cupboards in one of the bedrooms upstairs. Returning to the kitchen, he saw that Lothar had also returned with a bowl and a clean tea towel. Lechaim went to work washing the arm around the wound, then placing the belt around it, he spoke to Lito,

“Hold the belt so! Once the blood stops flowing, you can release the pressure a little!” As Lito looked into his eyes, Lechaim said, “Best I can do for now!”

“Thanks!” Lito muttered. “Sorry about the mess!” he said apologetically as he eyed the stone floor which was becoming bloodied.

“Forget it!” Lechaim replied and then sought to comfort his friend. “I know a little about wounds. It looks as though the bullet went straight through!”

“Great!” Lito murmured sarcastically. “That’s a great comfort!” Lito smiled though as he spoke and Lechaim was relieved. The wound was not too serious by the look of it, Lechaim decided, and with some tender loving care - he had Angelina in mind for that - Lito should be all right.

“What happened anyway?” Lechaim thought at last to ask.

“Your friend arrived!” Lito responded. “Unfortunately, he’s smarter than he looks. Didn’t know he had a gun up his sleeve.

Lechaim looked at him quizzically. “Lothar will explain!” Lito muttered as he screwed his eyes up in pain again.

“Want a drink?” Lechaim asked.

“Yes, something strong!”

“Best not until the doctor’s seen you!” Lechaim replied and pored Lito a glass of water from the tap. “Take this, it will help!”

“If you say so!” Lito replied as he eyed the glass in Lechaim’s hand. “A ‘San Miguel’ would go down nicely though.” “Lechaim relented and went to the large refrigerator standing in one corner. “Here!” he said, “if it’ll keep you quite!”

Lito put the bottle of beer to his lips and gulped. “That’s better!” he exclaimed as he put the half finished bottle down. “Now where’s that useless specimen gone?”

“Lothar! he’s outside. Probably thinks our friend will be back!”

Lito thought for a moment. “He’s the same man, I’m sure of it. The one that tried to kill you on Corregidor.” Lito paused

and then commented,. “You wouldn’t think he could harm a fly though!”

“Did he have anyone with him!”

Lito examined his arm as he said, “Don’t think so!”

Lechaim saw the pain his friend was in. “That doctor’s number. You’d better give it to me.”

While Lechaim was speaking to the doctor on the phone, Lothar walked into the kitchen

“Okay, Lito?” Lothar inquired as he bent over the wounded man.

“No thanks to you!” Lito responded. “Didn’t you think to search the man properly?”

Lothar looked rather crestfallen. “Yah, my fault! Sorry Lito.”

Lito was not mollified by Lothar’s apology. “Sorry don’t make it right! In future, make fucking sure, will you!” he snapped as the pain began to get to him.

“Yah!” Lothar replied and avoided Lito’s eyes. “I go now! Keep watch?”

“You do that, Lothar! You do that!” Lito said resignedly.

Lito met Lechaim’s eyes as Lechaim replaced the phone.

“It’s not like Lothar to be that careless!” Lito commented.

“We can all make mistakes!” Lechaim replied aware that the German was embarrassed by his gaff.

As Lothar slunk outside, he was grateful to the Englishman for his support. On the patio, he cast his eyes aloft and contemplated the stars as he cursed himself for being such an idiot.

Across town those same stars watched Sartori arrive back at his hotel.

“What happened?” Sam asked when Sartori let himself in. “Everything go all right?”

“No, everything did not go all right!”

She could see that he was nervous and worried. Anxious because she had never seen him quite that way before, she then asked, “But, were the Regas in? Is that it?”

“No, they weren’t there but Moreno and that German ape of his were!”

“Did they see you?”

He laughed but his laugh had no conviction to it. “They saw me all right. I had to shoot one of them! Moreno! No, it’s all right, I didn’t kill him. Bodies lying around the place are the last thing we want.” Sartori was a quality marksman and could have killed the Filipino if he had wanted to, but he had deliberately shot him in the shoulder.

“What are we going to do?” she asked uncertainly. She had never seen Sartori concerned before and it was unsettling. There was something else she thought as she watched him taking off his jacket. Something that he was not telling her. She forced herself to ask, “Was anyone else there..the Regas perhaps?”

He looked at her for a long while before he spoke. A man in an old car drove past as I was walking down the road.

“Yes, a man?” she inquired. “What about this man?”

“I thought for a moment it might be Captain Lewis!”

She laughed and he saw it as ridicule. Slapping her hard across the face, he spat, “Don’t laugh at me, you bitch!”

“She started crying as she implored, “I’m sorry, darling but I thought you were joking!” Then she stared at him and her eyes opened wide. “You say a man drove past in an old car?”

“Yes, an English model, I think.”

But it wasn't possible, she thought, remembering the antiquated vehicle that Lechaim had driven her around in. She had once pulled his leg about it.

"Lechaim had an old car!"

"I know, I followed it around often enough! It looked to me like the same car."

"But there was no way out of that tunnel! You said so yourself."

Sartori had made up his mind. "Give the Regas a ring and ask for Captain Lewis!"

"But they'll recognize my voice."

He fished around in the pockets of his jacket and took out a packet of cigarettes he had purchased minutes before in the hotel lobby. She could only look at him in amazement as he lit one because she had never seen him smoke before. That was better, he sighed, as he inhaled the soothing fumes. It had been years since he had needed one, but he needed it now to calm his nerves

"Just do as I say."

She wasn't about to argue with him again so she picked up the phone and asked for an outside line.

Lechaim was in the garden talking to Lothar when he heard the ringing in the kitchen. Thinking it might be the Regas, he went in and plucked the phone from the wall.

"Lechaim here!"

He heard a gasp at the other end and then someone breathing heavily.

"Hello! hello! Anyone there?" and then he was greeted by a man's voice that he recognized at once.

"Captain Lewis!"

"Yes!" he said, waiting expectantly.

“ I don’t believe that you are Captain Lewis! Who are you?” the man demanded, the voice sounded uncertain, almost afraid

“I’m Captain Lewis, creep! The same Captain Lewis you left on Corregidor.”

There was silence at the other end and Lechaim wasn’t certain whether the man had gone.

Eventually, the other man spoke again. “But, but how did you get out of the tunnel?” the voice asked incredulously.

Lechaim paused while he considered the question, then he gave a low laugh which made Sartori shiver. “I changed into a bird and flew out!”

There was more silence and then the man’s voice took on a new tone. “If you want your girlfriend back alive, you’d better do what I say!”

Suddenly Lechaim was alert. He had forgotten in the excitement of the moment about Maxine. His spirits lifted as he realized that she might be still alive.

“You have her?”

“She’s with me now!”

“Put her on so I know that she’s still alive.”

More silence and then Maxine came down the phone. “Lechaim, darling, is that you?”

Lechaim then heard her scream, her pain was real enough.

“Maxine! Maxine!” Lechaim could only say helplessly.

When the man came back, Lechaim threatened, “If you hurt her, you creep, I’ll kill you very slowly indeed.”

He could hear Maxine moaning in the background as Sartori replied. “The day after tomorrow at Saint Nicholas Church. Ten in the evening! Got it!”

“Ten in the evening, day after tomorrow, Saint Nicholas Church! Now put Maxine back on!” but the phone went dead.

Sartori replaced the phone and stared at the sobbing woman. “Sorry about that!” he said as he saw the blister forming on her arm from the cigarette. “I had to make it sound real!”

She was oblivious to the pain, however, as she looked at him. “But how can he be still alive?”

“Someone must have dug him out. It’s the only explanation! Wait a minute! That explosion on the island after we left! That’s it!” But even as he said it he wasn’t convinced. The explosion had been considerable, not the sort of charge that anyone in their right mind would use to release a man from a tunnel.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Do,” he replied, “I’m going to kill the Captain once and for all! That’s what I’m going to do, but first we need more men. Phone Carl Petersen in Hong Kong and have him send two men!”

“But the Cardinal told you to keep our trip a secret.”

He sighed and slapped her again. “Can’t you do one single thing I ask without questioning it?”

She reached for the phone and placed a call to the organization’s head office for South-East Asia.

Over in Forbes Park Lechaim pored himself a drink of malt whisky from Carlos’ cocktail cabinet and was about to gulp it down when Lito’s doctor arrived closely followed by the Regas which was also the cue for the appearance of the three housegirls. The young women in their basement dwellings had heard the men in the house earlier, but knew it was all right, because they could hear Captain Lewis with them. Now that the

Regas were home, however, it was time for them to come out of their burrow and prepare an evening meal.

“What’s been going on?” Carlos’ voice echoed down the corridor and Lechaim, after showing the doctor into the kitchen where Lito was still sitting, went out to meet them.

Lito saw him disappear and then looked at the mess on the floor with some trepidation while the doctor made a clucking noise of disapproval which only added to Lito’s depression. Angelina’s sister, Eva, would be none too pleased at the mess, Lito thought, and if he were to have any chance with Angelina, he needed to stay in Eva’s good books. One of the housegirls, half asleep, decided to wander into the kitchen at that moment. As soon as she saw the blood on the floor and Lito crouched over on a stool, she let out a piercing scream and ran out again.

“What the...” Carlos exclaimed, startled by the screaming maid that ran past him.

“It’s all right!” Lechaim said. “Nothing to worry about!” He ushered Carlos and his family into the front room and told the maids to go back to bed.

“Better get the kids to bed as well!” he suggested to Eva and she nodded. For once she wasn’t about to give him an argument, he was too grim for that.

“Regina!” please take the boys up! I’ll be there in a few minutes!” Eva said to one of the departing girls.

Regina nodded dumbly and took the two children, who were still bemused by the long car ride, up the stairs. Both were too tired to wonder what the two strangers were doing there in their parents’ house and why one of them looked like a monster.

They had seated themselves and were waiting for Lechaim to provide them with an explanation as to what was going on when Angelina gave a little cry of alarm. Through the window, the monster was staring in at them. The three of them could only stare back in astonishment and a little terror at the menace that Lothar posed.

“Don’t worry!” Lechaim exclaimed. “It’s only Lothar! He’s on our side!”

“Our side?” Carlos asked as he tore his eyes from the hulk outside. “Exactly what is going on, Lechaim?”

“It’s a long story but basically, in a nutshell, someone tried to kill me earlier today on Corregidor. Maxine has been kidnapped and someone tried to blow up your house earlier and, oh, yes, Lito has been shot!” In the circumstances, Lechaim thought it best to be as flippant as possible.

“What!” they exclaimed in unison as Angelina tightened her grip on her sister’s arm.

“Before they could ask him anything, Lechaim called Lothar from the front patio.

“This is a friend, Lothar Hartmann. Your bodyguard for the next few days!”

“Yah!” Lothar confirmed, pleased that Lechaim had referred to him as his friend. The Regas eyed Lothar with some consternation as he showed his teeth. They were one of his better features.

“Oh, one other thing. “Lito’s now in the kitchen receiving treatment.”

Angelina was the first to respond. “Lito! is he all right?” she asked anxiously.”

“Flesh wound, nothing more, but he’ll need to rest up for a few days”

As he said it, he looked across at Eva who, he knew, was about to protest at this invasion of their house and privacy “I think I should also mention that Lothar and Lito probably saved your lives tonight!”

“You mean,” Carlos replied, “that someone was going to blow the house up with us in it?”

“Afraid so! Lito and Lothar prevented it but Lito stopped a bullet in the process!”

“But how did Lito and Lothar know?” Carlos then enquired.

“I asked them to come over and make certain you were all safe just in case! Fortunately, Lothar collared the man before he could rig the gas cylinder.”

“But if you were on Corregidor?”

“Ship to shore radio to Lito’s contact in Manila!”

Before Carlos could inquire further, his wife exclaimed, “Who would want to do such a thing? Kill us, I mean?”

“It’s me they’re really after, I’m afraid!” Lechaim said. “But you have, it seems, got in the way!”

“Who are they?” Carlos asked.

“Tonight, it was one man, the same one that tried to kill me on Corregidor, but he’s obviously working for an organisation!” Lechaim replied.

“But why do they want to kill you?” Carlos enquired..

“I’m not sure but I think it has something to do with what happened to me in Ireland.”

“Revenge, you mean, by the IRA?” Eva chimed in.

“Possibly, but I’m still not certain. After all there was no proof that the IRA was involved that night. That’s why I want to take this man alive.”

“Alive!” Eva exclaimed. “But you don’t mean you were thinking of killing him?”

Lechaim’s answer made her blood run cold. “This man is evil, Eva. He would gladly have blown you and your family to kingdom come if Lothar and Lito hadn’t stopped him! Yes, I’ll kill him if I have to!”

Carlos got them all a drink and pored another for himself while Lechaim then told them of how his day had unfolded. While Lechaim was telling his story, Lito joined them looking sheepish and Angelina immediately began fussing over him.

“Where’s your doctor friend?” Carlos asked. “I wanted to offer him a drink!”

“He’s gone! Didn’t want to get involved, so to speak!”

Carlos nodded and then turned his attention back to Lechaim who was telling of his adventures on Corregidor.

“But what caused the explosion?” Lito asked.

“An unexploded shell I would guess!” Lechaim said. “There must be thousands lying around on the island. Something set it off! The heat of the sun probably!”

“Lucky for you though!” Carlos answered.

Eva shuddered as she realized that Lechaim could still be lying on Corregidor now, and she began to tremble as the thought crossed her mind that they too would have been killed but for Lechaim’s friends. Eva had been thinking a lot about Lito and his menacing companion these last few minutes. Rough, diamonds they might be, she concluded, but she had so much to thank them for. Like most Latins Eva was a person that reacted on pure emotion and she could not contain herself now.

Lito saw Eva approach him and became apprehensive, mindful that Angelina was sitting on the arm of his chair with

her hand resting on his good arm. Was her sister about to make a scene, he wondered. It therefore came as a surprise when Eva bent over him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you!” Eva whispered. Thank you, so very much, Lito!” Before Lito had quite recovered from the unexpectedness of her action, and thought to respond, Eva had passed on.

Lothar standing impassively to one side, with his arms folded across his chest, looking like a huge genie that had just popped out of a bottle, suddenly found her gazing up at him. “Thank you! thank you, Lothar!” Eva said in that low quite voice of hers, “so very much for giving my family back to me!” and she placed her hand on his arm, reached up on tip toe and kissed him on the cheek too.

Like many big men, Lothar was really a marshmallow inside.

“Okay pretty lady!” he growled as his eyes watered and he shuffled his feet. Watching the graceful woman walk away, he vowed that if anyone were to hurt these people, particularly the angel that had just kissed him, he Lothar Hartmann, *like Lickum say on phone earlier*, “*would kill them slow*”.

Lothar would be putty in her hands now, Lechaim thought as he watched Lothar’s reaction to Eva’s genuine gesture of appreciation. It’s strange how some women can have this affect on men; a desire to protect while others can bring out the worst in a man’s nature. Then something else stuck Lechaim as odd, Lothar hadn’t sworn since the Regas had returned home, some sort of record for him.

“Look! I think we’d better get Lito to bed!” Lechaim suggested.

“Yes,” Eva agreed. “Angelina, take him to one of the guest rooms!” Lito tried to protest but Angelina would have none of it. An arm around him for support, Angelina led Lito away.

Eva caught Lechaim looking at her with that amused look on his face again.

“Well, hero” she said, “and what are you staring at?”

“Hey, pretty lady!” he mocked, “don’t start on me. Bad men, I can handle, but you’re something else!”

She stuck her arm through his. “Come on, help me tuck the boys in!”

Looking at them, Carlos realized that Eva was as close to Lechaim as he and it warmed his heart.

Turning to the incredible hulk lurking at his side, Carlos stuck out his hand.

“What my wife said, it goes for me as well! Many thanks!”

“Okay!” Lothar replied as he gripped the hand he had been offered feeling suddenly like part of the family.

“Another drink?” Carlos inquired as he tried to get some feeling back into his hand.

Chapter 39

ITS CAVERNOUS INTERIOR with its sixteenth century walls, yawning naives, heavy ornate fittings and forbidding inner cloisters gave the church a gloomy and sombre air. A tourist attraction, the church of San Nicholas within the intramuros, the name given to the old Spanish inner walls of Manila, was an unlikely spot for a rendezvous so late at night. The fact that it was still open came as a surprise to Lechaim and he suspected that some pesos had greased someone's hands

As he entered its inner sanctum, he glanced at his watch and saw that it was five to ten. The heavy wooden pews cried out for attention, and he chose one in the centre. Sitting there beneath the heavy lanterns hanging from the hammerhead ceiling, he felt like a fly in a web awaiting the spider. It was an obvious trap but Lechaim knew that he had no choice if he wanted to get Maxine back. Alone on the old pew that had borne the weight of many over the years, he cast his eyes up to the small balcony high in the wall to the left of the nave. Within its dimness, Lothar lurked with a rifle, a position he had taken up more than an hour before. At the pistol range, Lechaim had found Lothar to be a marksman without peer with a hand gun. Lito had assured Lechaim that Lothar was equally as good with the longer version.

Lothar's shooting ability was one of the reasons that Lechaim had picked him for his backup. He needed someone that could shoot straight and was not frightened to pull the trigger if "push came to shove". The other reason was that Lothar had one quality, if it could be termed a quality, that few other men possessed. He was completely ruthless when he

needed to be. Lechaim suspected that ruthlessness would be required before the night was out.

The church was empty, not even a priest to break the silence as both men waited, the hunted and the hunter. The question was, who was the hunter and who the hunted? The minutes ticked by but still no sign of activity. Ten past ten came and went but Lechaim remained where he was. Then, at quarter past the hour, Lechaim heard the sound of footsteps on the marble floor and turned around. Two men were walking towards him, both tall for Chinese. They slid in on either side of him and one spoke, "So, Captain Lewis! The famous Captain Lewis! You decided to come!"

"You are?" Lechaim inquired as he eyed the bulky men, both similar in stature with puggish faces that were also alike. They were not pretty, Lechaim thought, but in their line of work, they weren't required to be.

"That's not important! If you want to see Miss Mant again, I suggest you come with us."

Lechaim said in a dry manner, "There's a marksman above your heads, gentlemen. I advise you to remain perfectly still or no one will be seeing you again! Alive, that is!"

The men had not expected this and Lechaim guessed as much. He had long decided that he would not play the game according to their rules but rather his own. It was the only way he and Maxine had a chance to survive. The two Chinese stiffened as they glanced up. Lothar emerged from the gloom and the men relaxed their hands which were straining to go for the pistols in their shoulder holsters.

"Where's the girl?" Lechaim demanded.

Both men looked at him contemptuously. "You fool! You'll not see her alive again if you persist in this foolishness,"

one said. As he spoke, both men looked into Lechaim's eyes, and they were suddenly uncertain for there was no pity there. Lechaim relieved them of their weapons and waved Lothar down from the balcony. A few minutes later they were outside the church and down one of the side alleys. The two men were made to stand with their feet apart facing a fence with their arms spread and their fingertips touching the wood.

"I'll make this short and sweet!" Lechaim said. "Tell me where the girl is or you'll die!" They were both afraid but confident that this Englishman would not kill them, he was too civilized. The other man perhaps, but not Captain Lewis. Still, they hesitated because there was something in the man's voice that suggested a finality. They were right about the Captain and they were right about the German. Before Lechaim could stop him, Lothar seized one of the men and snapped his neck with a twist of his powerful hands. As the man slumped to the ground with the life fading from his eyes, the second man recoiled in fear.

"No! please don't kill me!" the frightened man pleaded.

Lechaim felt revulsion at this cold blooded execution by Lothar but vermin needed to be eradicated and these men were vermin. What's more, these two would have killed Lechaim and Lothar just as callously if the circumstances were reversed.

"Talk muverfucker or me kill!" Lothar snarled.

Lechaim quelled his sensibilities and steeled himself to the task in hand. Lothar, who was in killing mode now, put his hands around the second man's neck terrifying him even more. Lothar was not about to kill him though for he knew full well the importance of making this second man talk,

Lothar looked at Lechaim and smiled. "I kill, yah?" he asked politely.

Lechaim said, more for the benefit of the terrified man, than for Lothar, “Not yet! We’ll let him live if he tells us what we want to know!”

The man looked at his tormentors wildly and realized that it would be pointless to hold out now. Death was too final for that.

“I’ll take you to her - the girl! I’ll take you to her!”

“No tricks, mind!” Lechaim threatened, “or I’ll give you to my friend here!”

Lothar smiled like a man awaiting a prize and the Chinese seeing this paled and felt physically ill as he remembered how his brother had died minutes before.

“Now, take us to your car!”

“You follow behind in my car!” Lechaim told Lothar when they had reached the man’s vehicle.

“Not me!” Lothar replied,..no drive!..no learn!”

“You can’t drive?” Lechaim asked incredulously. He hadn’t planned on this for it had never occurred to him that Lothar couldn’t drive.

“Okay! we’ll all travel together then in his car!” Lechaim said and turned to the man he had by the arm, “Where is she?”

“Quezon City! Quezon City!” the man hurriedly volunteered.

“Okay! Let’s go!” Lechaim ordered. “You do the driving”

Turning to Lothar, he said, “Make sure this turkey does what he’s told!”

Lothar, still feeling somewhat inadequate because he didn’t know how to drive, and wanting to prove that he could still be useful, answered, by turning to the Chinese man, “ You trick us, I cut dick off...put in mouth” and he indicated what he

meant by putting his hand to his mouth, imitating someone munching on something..

Lothar's crudity was repulsive to Lechaim but he had to admit that the German's direct approach was a great time saver. The Chinese man's eyes rolled as the threat sank in and his fingers trembled as he turned the key in the ignition.

"Take it easy!" Lechaim warned the driver as the car shot away. "We want to get there in one piece!" The man lifted his foot off the accelerator and the car slowed appreciably. "Not that slow!" Lechaim added.

The confused, frightened man tried to maintain a speed that he felt was pleasing to the two thugs in the car with him while he tried to think of a way to escape. Lothar's threat constantly played on his mind as he tried to imagine life without a dick. It was the only thing about him that women admired.

When they arrived in the street where the driver claimed the house was that Maxine was being held, Lechaim told him to stop the car and douse the headlights.

"Which one is it?" Lechaim asked.

"There!" the driver said pointing to a house in the street that was shrouded in darkness.

"How many inside?" Lechaim demanded.

"No one!"

"No one!" Lechaim echoed. "I asked how many inside?"

Lothar from his seat in the back grabbed the man by the throat. "Cut dick"

"No one!" the Chinese man gasped. "There's no one inside! Just the girl! "

Strange, Lechaim thought. Why wasn't the girl being guarded and where was the man that Lechaim had expected to

confront at the church, the man that had tried to kill him on Corregidor.

He voiced his reservations, "Why isn't the girl being guarded?"

The man hesitated as if searching for an answer and Lechaim became impatient.

"No like!" Lothar muttered. "something wrong!..I cut dick!"

"No! no!.. the girl's inside..you'll see!" the sweating man shrieked.

"You lie..hang dick on fence!" Lothar warned and the man shrank back in his seat. No longer the smirking, confident gunman, he had been an hour before, he now checked between his legs with the palm of his hand to confirm it was still intact. Seconds later his worries were over for ever as the windscreen shattered and his head exploded in a bloody mushroom

"Fooking Jesus!" Lothar exclaimed as the contents of the driver's cranium showered him. He threw himself out the door onto the broken paving stones and landed beside Lechaim who had beaten him by milliseconds.

"Night scope!" Lechaim exclaimed as he and Lothar huddled against the car, waiting breathlessly for more shots to follow, but none came.

"You okay?" Lechaim asked as he saw the bloody state Lothar was in.

"Yah!.. pig's brains!" Lothar answered as he wiped away some of the gore from his face and vest, once white, now red. "Head has plenty blood, yah?"

Sartori had been waiting for some time wondering whether the two Chinese brothers would have any problems. When he saw the car stop at the top of the street and he looked

through the scope on his rifle, he saw that there was only one Chinese in it. Then he saw Lechaim's face for a moment as he leaned across the other man. However, a tree on the verge of the road was blocking his shot so he couldn't take Lechaim out. Never mind, he would pick the Captain off when he broke for cover. From his vantage point on one of the roofs above, he took the Chinaman out with his first shot. Now, Captain Lewis and the German were trapped behind the car and they would have to expose themselves eventually. It was just a matter of patience and he had plenty

Lechaim saw Lothar reach slowly back past the open door into the back seat and retrieve his rifle.

"Can you see anything?" Lechaim asked.

"Nine!"

"We can't achieve anything staying here! I'm going in!" Lechaim whispered. "When you see the flash from his gun, shoot to kill!"

Lothar nodded as Lechaim crouched to run. Bracing himself, Lechaim launched forward expecting as he did so to feel the impact of metal.

He had the perfect shot, Sartori noted with satisfaction - he couldn't miss. As Lechaim's frame filled his sights, Sartori's finger took up the slack on the trigger. The flurry of wings before his face as he fired was sufficient to spoil his aim, and the shot only creased Lechaim's shoulder as it flew harmlessly past.

"Fuck! fuck!" Sartori swore as he fired again but Lechaim had already reached cover and the bullet howled overhead into the night

Sartori shouted in terror as a black shape landed on his chest and he smelt its rancid breath. Screaming, he forgot about

the two men below as he leapt to his feet to brush the hideous thing from him. His companion and he were then joined permanently in death as a bullet tore through the dark furry shape, through Sartori's body, and on into the night in search of other game. The force of the impact threw the man back onto the tiles where he lay clutching feebly at the jet of blood that was erupting from his ruptured aorta; the thing still clawing at his chest in its death throes. Seconds passed and the stars overhead started to go out one by one. He was once again that same frightened little boy that lurked in the back alleys of Napoli long ago stealing to feed himself. Vaguely aware that the evening had not gone exactly to plan, he slipped away from this life.

Seconds ticked by and then Lechaim waved Lothar forward. Arriving at his side, Lothar was panting with excitement more than exertion. "Got the muverfucker!" he exclaimed.

"You certain!"

Lothar looked aggrieved.

"You'd better check on him anyway just to make sure!"

Lothar was soon back with a show of teeth, "Him dead!" He tossed something down at Lechaim's feet. and laughed, "Muverfucker jump up when see this!"

Lechaim looked at the furry animal with the membranous wings that had been killed by the high velocity bullet and gave it only a moment's thought - after all it was just a bat.

Lechaim searched the darkness of the house trying to sense out where fresh danger lay.

"It's too quite! Surely he couldn't have been on his own!"

"Yah, too quite!" Lothar agreed, "Go in now?"

“Why not!” Lechaim said and they both crept towards the back of the house and peered through one of the windows. The glass was clouded with dirt but a pane was partly broken, giving then a clear view of the interior. The light from the street picked out the shape of the woman lying supine on the floor of the room. Lechaim thought at first that she might be dead until he saw the steady rise and fall of her breasts. It was too dark to see the woman’s face but the legs looked familiar. They found a door which was unlocked and cautiously entered, Lechaim leading the way. The only sound that could be heard in the house was their breathing as they inched their way slowly forward. The place had been empty for some time judging from the grime and dust that lay on everything. There had been some recent comings and goings however judging from the footprints on the floor. They searched the house thoroughly upstairs and down, but it was empty save for the woman they had seen. Lechaim and Lothar then returned to the room where the woman lay and Lechaim knelt beside her. He felt the relief flood over him as he saw that it was indeed Maxine, and she was alive. Furthermore, she appeared in excellent health and condition for a woman that had been in captivity for some days. He could also see that she was conscious because she had her eyes open, and was staring at him but seemingly without comprehending.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he pulled her to him.

“Pe..the man! Where is he?”

“It’s all right, Maxine..You’re safe now!”

“Where is he?” she insisted as she tugged on Lechaim’s arm.

“I kill muverfucker gud” Lothar exclaimed with evident pride from his position behind Lechaim

Maxine let out a stifled scream and passed out against Lechaim's shoulder.

She's had a bad time of it, Lechaim thought. God knows what he did to her.

Lechaim lowered her gently back to the bare floorboards and said to Lothar, "I'm going to scout around outside to see if it's all clear. I'll be back in a few minutes"

The German went to protest but then realized that the Englishman was more than capable of carrying out the task alone. "Okay!"

Satisfying himself that the perimeter was clear, Lechaim checked on the man lying dead on the roof nearby. Sure enough it was the man in the tunnel who seemed even smaller in death. Searching through his pockets, he found nothing, not even some loose change. What had Lothar said, "*Muverfucker jump up when see this!*" and Lechaim recalled the bat. Was it coincidence or something more? Whatever, Lechaim decided that he was leading a charmed life. Was something protecting him or was it merely luck?

He descended from the roof and went over to the car where the dead Chinaman lay slumped over the wheel with half his head missing. Again, there was nothing in his pockets. Both men, Lechaim suspected, were professional assassins.

Returning to the house, he took Maxine, who was still in a faint, up in his arms and the two men then began walking into the city. Along the way, Lothar found a tap in someone's yard and washed the blood off himself as best he could. Throwing his bloody vest in the gutter, he caught up again with Lechaim. They were seen more than once on their journey by Filipino malefactors that lurk in the dark of night. There was no one around, however, who was game enough to accost these two

formidable looking white men as they walked into the heart of the city in search of a taxi.

Chapter 40

LECHAIM SHOOK LITO'S hand and held it for a moment. "Well, my friend, thanks for everything?"

"No, I am the one to thank you!" Lito replied, flashing a smile at the girl on his arm, a permanent fixture there these days.

Angelina left Lito for a moment and gave Lechaim a hug and a kiss. "Please take care Lechaim!" she said. "Don't try to be a hero again!"

Lechaim laughed and retorted, "Not likely! I'll leave the heroics to old Lothar here!" He then turned to the German who was standing about as usual with that impassive look on his face as little Jose tried to climb up one of his legs.

"Take care Lickum!"

"I will!" Lechaim replied as he took the hand that the German offered. He and Lothar could never be real friends for they were poles apart in their natures, but they respected each other as fighting men and both knew it. "You look after them, Lothar!"

"No worry, Lickum..they okay!" he responded implying that the Regas would be quite safe while he was around.

"Well, you two scalawags!" he said to the boys, "You behave yourselves, you hear!"

Jose and Eduardo flung themselves into his arms. "When will you come back, Uncle?" Eduardo asked.

"One day, my young friend. One day!"

"We'd better go!" Carlos said, "otherwise you'll miss your plane. We also have to allow for the traffic!"

Lechaim's luggage had already been loaded so Leo opened the doors of Carlos' car for them. As Lechaim got in

with Carlos and Eva, he said to Angelina who was standing with the others, "Don't forget! Betsy needs a lot of oil!"

"That old car of yours needs more than oil!" she exclaimed.

"It's yours now!" he proclaimed and threw her the keys.

"Oh!" she responded in delight as she saw the old "bomb" in a new light. "Thank you! thank you!"

"Well! isn't that worth another kiss!"

Through the window, she threw her arms around his neck and gave him a real kiss long and deep. As the car pulled away, Lechaim thought to himself, that girl's been practicing. Their waving arms were then lost to sight as the car turned at the corner and his trip to the airport had begun.

Lechaim was returning to England for four reasons really. The first was that his holiday had to end sometime and he needed to return to see his mother again. Secondly, he felt that the Regas would be in danger as long as he stayed in the Philippines. Lito and Lothar could only protect them for so long but then what? Thirdly, Lechaim felt that the answer to who was trying to kill him lay in Europe, not in the southern hemisphere. Lastly, he wanted to find out why he had been unable to communicate with Monsignor Michael Cronin either by letter or telephone.

As Leo drove along, Lechaim and Carlos talked between themselves but Eva just stared out the window. Both men were aware that she was crying although she made no noise and was looking away from them. Before the car drew up at the entrance to Manila Airport she dried her eyes with her handkerchief and put on her happy face.

Lechaim lifted his luggage out of the boot for Leo and turned to the old man who smiled back at him with sad eyes.

“Take care, my friend and leave the young girls alone!” Lechaim joked.

Leo took the hand that the Captain offered and shook it. “Good bye sir!”

Before Lechaim could reach down to pick up his cases Leo placed something in his hand, a small box. “For you sir!”

Lechaim was touched by the gesture. “For me, Leo! but you shouldn’t have!”

“It’s nothing really sir! Just a small gift!”

Lechaim opened the box and found a Saint Christopher medal inside complete with chain. It was cheap and would have cost only a few pesos but to Lechaim it would always be treasured. In front of Leo he put it around his neck and, his eyes moist, he took the old man’s hand again. “You take care of yourself, you hear me!”

“And you sir! and you.”

As Lechaim walked away carrying his cases and Carlos carrying the remainder, he realized just how much he would miss this country and its people.

“That was a surprise!” Carlos said when they had checked Lechaim’s luggage in. “About Leo, I mean!”

“We have a present for you as well, Lechaim”, Eva said. She opened her bag and handed him a small brown paper package the size of a book. “No don’t open it now” Eva exclaimed as he went to take off the paper. “Do it on the plane!”

“All right!” Lechaim replied. “This is a day for giving things. I have something for you also!” He took from the travel bag on his shoulder a small package and gave it to Carlos. “Open it when I’m gone!”

“They’re calling your flight Lechaim!” Carlos said as he noticed the flight details flashing on one of the overhead monitors in the reception area.

“Okay, you two..time to go, take care of yourselves!” Carlos and he embraced and then shook hands. “Look after yourself!”

“I will Carlos said, “and take care of yourself too! Remember what Angelina said, no heroics!”

“No way!” Lechaim said in mock horror. Turning to Eva, he found her crying again and he took her in his arms. “Hey, kid! I’m only going away for now. I’ll be back!”

She looked into his eyes and he realized that she knew. “Will you?” she asked. “Will you be coming back!” He never lied to her and he wasn’t about to now so he changed the subject.

“You have a wonderful man there! Mind you look after him!”

“I will,” Eva said, “but who’s going to look after you?”

Lechaim fingered the medal around his neck. “Saint Christopher, of course!”

Forty minutes later the Regas watched as the 747 climbed away into the clear blue sky taking their friend with it. Arm in arm they made their way silently back to the entrance where they found Leo and the car waiting. When Leo had wound his way back onto Roxas Boulevard Eva remembered the package Lechaim had given them. Unwrapping the brown paper, Eva found it contained an old shoe box with a bulky brown envelope inside which had scrawled across it, “*TO BE OPENED IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH*”. In addition there was a small red case which she opened. Inside she found a small card with Lechaim’s handwriting scribbled on it. “*Keep this, it might be*

worth something one day.” She took the red ribboned medal with the words “FOR VALOUR” inscribed on it out of the box and held it reverently as she turned to Carlos and their eyes met. She knew then that her worst fears had been realized. Their friend would not be coming back to them.

At that moment, many miles to the east, in the sky above, Lechaim pulled his window shade down a little to keep the glare out of his eyes as he gazed down at the endless choppy water of the South China Sea. The land he had grown to love was fast disappearing from view and his heart ached for the peace and warmth he had found there. He touched the Saint Christopher around his neck and turned the medal over. On the back was inscribed just one word, “Leo.” Lechaim smiled as he thought of the toothless Filipino that had given him the medal. Its value was of little importance, the thought was everything.

“Orange juice, Captain Lewis!” the pleasant voice of the stewardess inquired from the aisle and he turned to her. She was a girl with Grace Kelly looks, cool and elegant, but he was immune for now.

“No thank you!” he said. “Will anyone be sitting here?” he then asked as he looked at the empty seat next to him.

“No, Captain, we thought you might like some privacy, seeing who you are and all!”

It was then that Lechaim realized that not only was he leaving behind a country and people that he loved but he was also leaving behind his anonymity. The look of admiration and reverence on her face and those of the passengers around him said it all.

“I see! Many thanks!”

“All part of the service, Captain!”

Lechaim could see that she was flirting with him and wondered whether she saw the fame or the man.

He did not encourage her, however, and she reluctantly departed promising to be back later to check on him. Her perfumed lingered in the air and her femininity brought Maxine to mind. It had been nearly two weeks since he and Lothar had rescued her and she was now back in Europe. It was strange how much she seemed to have changed. He could only surmise what had happened to her in the little man's hands after he had abducted her. Maxine had not even confided in Eva and her withdrawal within herself, her inclination to weep long and often, and her reluctance to talk had got on everyone's nerves. Lechaim recalled the scene she made when Lechaim had wanted to inform the police that she had been kidnapped and worse. "*No! no! no!*" she had insisted. In a way, he was thankful that she didn't want to bring the authorities into the equation. There were a number of bodies to explain away and his involvement would certainly have meant more media attention which he didn't need at this time.

Lechaim had tried to understand and make allowances for Maxine, but, he had to admit, her departure three days before had come as a relief. Perhaps a change of environment and a fresh start was all she needed, he thought. Lechaim had his doubts however. Once again, there had been another scene when he had tried to advise her to seek counseling. For a while there he had almost detected hatred in her eyes, and he had not pursued the matter. Their planned meeting in the next few days in Brighton was not a prospect he was looking forward to with any relish but he tried to make allowances for her attitude and her change of manner. It must have been a shocking ordeal for her if the effect could be so marked, he concluded. When he had

asked her where she planned to go to in Europe she had remained vague. “*Oh, somewhere that will allow me to think!*” He was certain of one thing now though. Maxine would never be an important part of his life, and, for that matter, she never had been.

He forgot about Maxine as he settled back in his seat and took out the package that Eva had handed him. Taking the wrapping off, he found that it was an expensive Bible in black leather embossed with gold leaf. That would be Eva’s idea he thought, and he smiled when he read the inscription she had written on the flyleaf. “*To our much loved friend Lechaim Lewis from Carlos Rega, Eva and family - May you walk with God always.*” He felt the warmth of their love in those words and his homesickness increased. Not for England where he had grown up but rather for the tropical paradise he was leaving behind and the friends in whose company he had spent so many happy weeks.

The Bible fell off his knees onto the cabin floor where it lay half open. Stooping down to pick it up, he saw that it had fallen open at a page where someone, Carlos perhaps, had underlined something in red ink. That was strange, Lechaim thought as he read the underlined passage. Why that particular piece of scripture?

“Anything I can get you, Captain Lewis?” the flirty fair haired flight attendant asked as she walked by. As she spoke she glanced at the Bible he had open in his hands. Funny, she thought, he didn’t look the type and his reputation as a killer of men certainly contradicted his apparent interest in religion.

“A coffee please!”

“Certainly sir!” and she went in search of one.

“What’s he like?” one of the other girls in the galley asked.

“Gorgeous and those eyes!”

“Hey! what about letting me serve him later?”

“Maybe!” I’ll see!” the fair haired girl replied but she really intended to keep him for herself.

Returning to Lechaim’s side with a cup of coffee, she folded down the tray from the back of the seat before him and placed the cup on it.

“Thank you!” Lechaim said and seeing the name tag on her jacket added, “Victoria!”

“My father is a vicar!” she exclaimed as she glanced at the Bible in his hands and read aloud the underlined text, “*And I saw heaven open and behold a pale horse, and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.*”

“Do you know the passage?”

“Yes!” she replied. Then to prove she was really a good Christian girl despite the bruises on her inner thighs from the co-pilot’s close attention to duty the previous night in her bed, she quoted from memory, “His eyes were as flame of fire and he had a name written that no man knew but himself.” She then searched her brain for the next bit. “And his name is called the Word of God.”

“I’m impressed!” Lechaim said to her.

She flushed with pleasure. “Never quite understood what it meant though!”

“That makes two us!”

The pair chatted pleasantly for a few minutes and then she moved on. Turning his attention back to the sea below, Lechaim wondered what lay ahead. Suddenly, he thought of something

Father Cameron had once said to him some months ago while he was still in the provinces. It was to do with the game of chess which they had often played together in the priest's living quarters within the old church that the good Father called home.

“Good chess players are always masters of the endgame, where only a few pieces are left on the board and the result often hinges on the individual player's ability to draw on his knowledge and experience.”

As he looked out he pondered whether his skills would be quite good enough to ensure the ultimate checkmate in the endgame of life and death he was about to embark upon. Pulling his wallet from his pocket, he took out the two photographs, the one of Sinead and the one of her uncle.

Studying Michael Cronin's blurred image once again, he wondered why there had been so much silence from Rome. Even Shaun and Maureen, who had spoken to him earlier that morning by phone, had heard nothing at all. He had not mentioned to the Cronins when he spoke to them that he had written to Michael Cronin regarding John Devlin. In fact he had not mentioned John Devlin at all to them. He would establish the truth about the man first before he burdened them further.

All in all, it was very strange that the monsignor had not responded to his letter or communicated with him or his family in any way. There was only one way to solve the mystery and that was to go to Rome himself and find out. That's exactly what he intended to do within the next fortnight or so if some answers were not forthcoming beforehand. He owed that much to his dear wife's memory.

As he thought of Sinead, he began to realize that the numbing effect of being in another country among people that

were not a constant reminder of his dead wife was, with every mile, diminishing. As the plane winged its way north into the starkness of an English winter that was as bleak as his heart, he felt her presence more and more until her proximity was almost tangible.

Chapter 41

THE MEN TENSED in their chairs as Cardinal Tsana repeated the question.

“Why, gentlemen, am I surrounded by fools?”

It was a rhetorical question but the Cardinals felt uncomfortable as he gave each of them a steely look. Simons, Andretti, Fitz and Desmond were hoping he had not included them in his overall assessment.

The cardinals that Tsana addressed were a mixed bag. Cardinal Simons had been a former concentration camp officer like Steiner or Cardinal Tsana as he was now known. Like many others in Nazi Germany, when the war ended he had fled, making his way to Italy. Being able to speak fluent Italian on his mother's side, he had quickly lost himself in the post-war confusion that existed in that war-torn country. It was Steiner himself who recruited him after a chance meeting in Rome. Steiner had known Simons when they were both in Germany so it was a fortuitous meeting for both of them. Steiner persuaded Simons to enrol in the priesthood and Simons who was penniless by then agreed. Elevation through the priesthood with Cardinal Tsana as his patron had been a formality for Simons. As Steiner in his role as Tsana rose to prominence, so too did he ensure that Simons rose with him.

Cardinal Andretti was a product of Mussolini's Italy. In his youth he had joined the National Fascist Party (PNF), but quickly decided to seek a more rewarding career. War clouds on the horizon had made his mind up for him and in 1939, with a good education behind him, he had entered the priesthood. In the confines of his calling, his homosexuality had been safely

cloaked in the folds of respectability. His recruitment by Cardinal Tsana had been easy enough because Cardinal Andretti had a penchant for the good life and young men. He was the only true priest in the room, however, and this sometimes made him feel superior although any evidence of a superior intellect was lost on his colleagues.

Cardinal Fitz, a bull like man, course in manner despite his position but exceedingly clever and cunning as a fox, had once held a very high position in the Nazi party. No one, not even Steiner had been able to establish his real identity but it was of little importance. One thing about him that they all knew though. He was a very old man, but again no one could determine his age. He too had taken on the guise of a priest when the war ended, and, he too like Steiner, had murdered the man whose place he took. His elevation through the ranks of the Church was due to the wealth he seemed to have at his disposal. He simply bought his way to a position of power. In fact, it was he that was the driving force behind Cardinal Tsana's rise to the position he now held. In political parlance he would be termed a "power broker". Over the years Fitz had become Steiner's close confidante and adviser, a role he was well versed in.

Cardinal Desmond, who was really Paul Webber, had originally started off in the German-American Bund in New York. The Bund's members were mostly American citizens of German ancestry but Cardinal Desmond was an exception. Then, in 1939, when he had been holidaying in Germany, the Second World War broke out, and he immediately volunteered to work for the Nazis. Just before Germany's defeat, he bought a new identity, that of a priest, Father Desmond. As in the case of Cardinal Simons, the meteoric rise of Tsana through the

ranks of the Church had ensured Cardinal Steven's rapid elevation as well because Like Cardinal Simons, Steiner knew of Cardinal Steven's past and was therefore certain of his allegiance.

His Cardinals now waited patiently for Tsana to elaborate and he did not disappoint them.

"First of all, there was the fiasco in Ireland, where nine of our men couldn't get the job done and now..." he paused to glance at the document once more,.. "I have this!" he said in a low controlled voice that barely disguised his anger. The Cardinals looked at the sheet of paper he was holding and wondered what it contained that had upset the man so.

"This, gentlemen, is a dispatch from our office in Hong Kong informing me that not only have two of their own men been killed in Manila, but Peter Sartori has died as well!"

"Peter Sartori! Impossible!" Cardinal Andretti exclaimed in disbelief.

"Yes! Peter Sartori, one of our best operatives."

"But how?" Cardinal Fitz asked.

"How indeed!" Cardinal Tsana answered. "How the fuck do you think!"

The Cardinals were not shocked by Cardinal Tsana's language, for, in the privacy of his chambers, his Eminence often reverted to the language he had used in his younger days, when he was an officer of the Third Reich.

"Captain Lewis?" Cardinal Fitz suggested.

"Captain Lewis?" Cardinal Tsana confirmed. "The same Captain Lewis that thwarted our plans in Ireland has, it seems, done it again!"

"But how?" Cardinal Andretti inquired. "Peter Sartori has never failed us before!"

“You forget that he failed in Ireland against the same man!” Cardinal Tsana reminded him.

There was silence in the room while each of them considered what he had told them.

“Oh, and one other thing, Sam, has disappeared on us.”

“Disappeared?” Cardinal Desmond queried.

“Yes, it seems that Captain Lewis is still unaware that she works for us or he wouldn’t have seen her off at Manila Airport last week. However, since her arrival in London, we’ve had no word at all.”

“That’s odd!” Cardinal Fitz said. “Is she all right? You know how fond she was of Peter Sartori.”

“He was fucking her if that’s what you mean!” Cardinal Tsana responded. “Then again, we would all like to do that!”

The other men laughed as they considered the prospect although two of them at least were not up to it any more.

“For now, we must consider her out of the picture.” Cardinal Tsana said. “No matter, gentlemen! I will now take care of Captain Lewis personally!”

“But how?” Cardinal Andretti exclaimed. He seems to have the lives of a cat! “

“You leave that to me!” Cardinal Tsana reassured Andretti. He paused then and addressed the group. “As you are all aware, I have been housing Monsignor Cronin at my villa while he recuperates from his illness!

“How is the Monsignor?” Cardinal Fitz inquired.

“He seems to have recovered his faculties somewhat, but I still cannot establish where he has put his financial report.”

“You’re quite certain he has uncovered the organization’s holdings?” Cardinal Andretti asked.

Cardinal Tsana looked at him as if he were an idiot and didn't bother to reply to his question.

Turning around in his chair, Cardinal Tsana stared through the window at Saint Peter's Square below as he tried to retain his composure. He knew that if he weren't careful, he would lose his temper, and this was the time to stay in control.

Turning back, he said to them, "Gentlemen, let me remind you all what is at stake here. We have within our grasp the means by which we can establish a new world order. A world order that will go far beyond that ever dreamed of by our predecessors!" He paused to let his words sink in. "The Catholic Church has almost a billion followers around the world, a billion minds that we can mould. We have the finances and we have the technology!" His eyes gleamed in anticipation as he then said, "And, gentlemen, we have the date!"

The other men in the room had heard it all before but they never tired of listening to his propaganda for unlike that other great propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, the Cardinal's words had real substance.

"Herr Bar has set the date then?" Cardinal Desmond asked eagerly.

The ardour disappeared as Cardinal Tsana was reminded that he too had a master, Oscar Bar."

"Yes, gentlemen! The date has been set! It will be soon. That's all you need to know for now! Oscar Barr will be meeting with you all in the near future to outline his plans and give you the date"

"Good!" Cardinal Fritz said. "At long last!"

"Yes, gentlemen! At long last!" Cardinal Tsana acknowledged. "Now we come to the question of John Devlin!"

“Him!” Cardinal Andretti exclaimed. “The man’s a monkey! How could we ever pass him off as Monsignor Cronin?”

“True!” Tsana responded, “but he looks the part and his face may be all we need.”

“How so?” Cardinal Andretti asked.

“It’s almost certain that Monsignor Cronin has placed a copy of the financial report in a safety deposit box somewhere. Now, if we can obtain confirmation from the Monsignor, we can use Devlin to collect it from wherever that somewhere is.”

“But surely there will be more than one copy?” Cardinal Desmond said.

“Quite possibly!” the Cardinal answered, “and if there is, hopefully we can use Devlin to obtain those as well.”

“But we’ll need to know where those copies are!” Cardinal Andretti said.

“Obviously!” Cardinal Tsana replied scornfully. “Why do you think we are keeping the Monsignor alive?”

“Where is this man, Devlin, now?” Cardinal Fritz asked.

“I have him at the Villa as well. Needless to say, I am keeping him well away from the Monsignor. It would hardly do for both of them to confront one another, now would it?”

The men before him laughed as one at the prospect.

Chapter 42

COLONEL JAMES R. Coburn, DSO stood before the open window of his office looking out at the white blanket of snow that covered the countryside from the South Downs to the Yorkshire Dales and beyond. England in the winter was a grim prospect for some but Colonel Coburn loved it. Too many tours in hot climes had given him a taste for the harsher weather of his country of birth, Scotland, and the Highlands where he had roamed as a laddie.

His tanned features belied his propensity for the cold. He was a tall good-looking man with his head of thick dark brown hair, broad face, and regular features. He was, in fact, the embodiment of that expression, “tall, dark, and handsome” but he had long ago stopped thinking of himself as such.

The poor substitute that the English countryside provided outside his window made him yearn for the heather in the glens of his beloved land and the warmth of his bonny Sarah. But then he knew it was not to be, for those days in Scotland were far behind him, and Sarah had been dead for more than twenty years. What had the doctors called it, an ‘embolism’. One minute she was buried in a book about gardening, she loved the open air so, and the next she was being buried, or so it seemed. Afterwards, the Colonel, or Captain as he had been then, had volunteered for every dangerous or dirty mission available in an effort to end his misery but others died instead, and he was the one that ended up with a medal.

“You wanted to see me, Colonel?” the voice behind him inquired and he bid a quite farewell to Sarah. Turning he found that it was Captain Anthony Wright.

“I knocked but ..”

“Come in, Tony, come in! Take a seat” he said to the sandy haired captain that was of average height with a bland face - the SAS’s Mister “average man”.

As the captain sat down, the colonel continued, “Peter Sartori has surfaced at long last!”

“Really! where?”

“Well, when I say he’s surfaced, his body has! In Manila together with those of the Wong Brothers out of Hong Kong!”

Tony made the connection, “Lechaim Lewis!”

“Exactly!”

“But Lechaim wasn’t aware that we had Peter Sartori pegged for the attack on the abbey that night, or at least, for organizing it! How could he know?”

“Precisely!”

“The plot thickens!” Tony replied rubbing his arms.

“It does indeed!” the colonel responded. “If Sartori went after Lechaim in Manila, and we can only assume that he did, then there can only be two reasons for doing so!”

Tony beat his colonel to it, “Either it was for revenge or Lechaim was the original target that night!”

“Just so! Either way, we have to know what’s going on and who’s behind Sartori!”

“Any information on that front!”

“We thought he was working for the Mafia out of Rome but we now have reason to believe that this is just a front for something bigger!”

Tony Wright wondered what could be bigger as he asked, “And Lechaim? Is he still in Manila?”

“No, he’s back in England and that’s where you come in!”

“How so, Colonel?” Tony asked as he rubbed his arms again to appease the goose bumps that were appearing.

“Are you cold, my boy?” the colonel grinned, then he relented. “Okay then, close the window! God, what breed of men are we recruiting these days?”

When Tony returned after closing the window, he got his dig in, “It’s all right for you, Colonel, you being a Scot, but we wee Sassenachs need some sun on our back!”

“You do, you mean!” the colonel retorted with a chuckle. “Anyway, Tony, I have a little assignment for you!”

Aye, aye, here it comes, the captain thought. What is it this time?

“You and Lechaim were pretty pally, as I remember, when he served with us for a spell?”

“That’s right! Lechaim and I go way back!”

“Good! well I want you to get down to Brighton and keep your eye on him. I presume you can still remember where his mother lives?”

The captain smiled. “I think so colonel!” How could he forget. He had spent many a happy evening at Lechaim’s mother’s house. However, he and Lechaim had not met up for two years now. Tony had been on a recent tour of operations in the Far East and Lechaim had been in Ireland and then abroad.

“Just one more thing, Lechaim’s been keeping bad company, I’m afraid!”

“Lechaim? Hardly, sir!”

“You know this woman?” the colonel asked as he passed the photograph across his desk.?”

Tony Wright examined it for a few seconds. He wrinkled his brow and then exclaimed, “Samantha Jessep!”

“I see that memory of your is not failing you!”

“But she works, or did work with Peter Sartori, as I remember?”

“She also worked under and over him as well by all accounts!” They both smiled at the Colonel’s jibe.

“But, surely Lechaim doesn’t know this! About her, I mean, being Peter Sartori’s sidekick!”

“What’s this! Are you turning into an American on us? Sidekick indeed! No, of course Lechaim doesn’t know about her, and I’ll lay you odds she hasn’t told him either.” Again both men smiled.

“You want me to tell him, is that it, Colonel?”

“No! better not! He’s our bait, I’m afraid! I have a hunch that she’ll be paying him a visit shortly!”

“Bit rough, sir!”

“Life is rough, Tony! Life is rough, and it’s going to get rougher as far as Lechaim is concerned.”

“How do you mean, Colonel?”

Colonel Coburn rubbed his chin as he replied, “Samantha Jessep is now known to have been in the West of Ireland with Peter Sartori at the same time that Lechaim Lewis was on honeymoon with his wife.

“What!” Tony Wright exclaimed. “You mean!”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, Tony, but let’s say I’m not a great believer in coincidences!”

Chapter 43

THE ENGLISH CHANNEL was pouting angrily that morning as she beat demandingly against the hemline of chalk cliffs underpinning the Wealds of South East England between the North and South Downs. It was a day, many would consider, for a warm fire and a good book, and they would be right. Other more hardy souls would call the elements bracing and venture abroad. The couple that strolled along the cliff tops away from Saltdean in the direction of East Sussex were two of the more stalwart type.

As their feet crunched through the softly packed carpet of snow that covered the undulating roll of the land, the ill-tempered seagulls overhead screeched incessantly for their breakfast. The booming sea pounding against the foot of the cliffs sought to drown out the gulls' plaintive squawks as it steadily maintained its centuries old task of eroding the land. As he listened, huddled in the warmth of his sheepskin jacket, to the feeble protests of the snow as it crumbled beneath their feet, Lechaim had, like his companion, lapsed into silence; the gulf between them widening with every step they took. She had hardly spoken a word since they had begun their saunter along the cliff tops despite his best efforts to engage her in conversation.

When Maxine had turned up on his mother's doorstep an hour before asking, "*Is your son in, Mrs. Davies? I'm a friend of his!*" his mother had asked him when they had a moment alone, "*Why didn't you mention her to me before?*" Why indeed, Lechaim wondered, although her arrival that morning had been as much a surprise to him as it had been to his mother. Deep down, of course, he knew why he had never raised her

name with his mother. Beautiful, Maxine may be, but she had shown Lechaim a side of her character these last few weeks that he found less than appealing.

Lechaim was not a man given to too much introspection but as they strolled along, he lost himself in it now. Try as he might to make allowances for what had happened to Maxine in the Philippines, he could not help but feel that she had assumed the mantle of a martyr, and he had little time for such people. It was not that he was a cruel man, far from it, but, to him, there comes a point in everyone's life when inner fortitude is required. Wallowing in self-pity was all right for a time - indeed, he had done a bit of that himself when Sinead died - but this continuous air of despondency that Maxine carried with her was depressing for everyone, himself included. Was he being insensitive? he asked himself. Had he finally acquired that streak of hardness that the army had tried at various times to instill in him. "*Captain, sir!* an SAS instructor had once said to him, "*Winning is everything, the people that come second get buried.*" He could well remember the words of his commanding officer on the Falklands after he had carried Carlos out of the minefield in 1982, "*You're a fool, Lieutenant! This is not a game of cricket where, win or lose, you must be a good sport. Stick the fuckers before they stick you! You have a soft spot in you Lieutenant Lewis. One day, it may get you killed!*" Was he sticking it to her now, he questioned, yet he felt within himself that he had tried to be sympathetic. What got Lechaim down the most was her silence through which he did not seem to be able to penetrate. It had been evident in the Philippines and it was evident now. Like most men, he found it hard to cope with a woman that would not communicate. He had tried very hard to be patient but it was now wearing thin. That's where Sinead

had been so different from most of the other young women he had been involved with. Like Maxine, from time to time, his former girlfriends would start brooding, normally over some trifle or other. Sinead had been like a breath of fresh air in a sea of feminine neuroticism. Among the many qualities his dead wife had possessed was the ability to be able to laugh at the world and herself; her sense of humour being one of her most endearing traits.

There again, he reflected, perhaps it was he, not women in general, that was at fault. For most of his life, he had been fiercely independent and the army had scarcely trained him to be a sensitive new age man. Women, with the exception of his mother, his late wife, and, of course, dear Eva, saw mostly the uniform and never the man. To most women he represented some kind of super hero without fear or feelings. For that matter, he thought, to some men he symbolized the same thing.

Of course he had feelings, and none more so than for his beloved wife's memory - that would never fade down the years. As for his being a hero, it was more myth than reality. It was true that in battle he had never experienced the qualms that seemed to grip so many others. That wild exhilarating dash up the slopes of Mount Harriet in the Falklands, the abbey attack, the encounter with the little gunman in the Philippines had never been fearful experiences to him. Why, had he included the abbey attack in his summation? That was self deceit right there!

As they continued to walk along in silence, he thought ruefully of the VC they had awarded him for his actions at the abbey that night. Everyone assumed afterwards that he was being self-effacing when he refused to speak of his feat. Yet, the truth was that he remembered nothing of that experience from the time he picked up the sword to the time when he had found

the monsignor unconscious on the grass outside. Did he have a right, therefore, to receive a medal when his personal bravery had never been really tested. He knew in his heart that he would have fought until he fell anyway, but he had always felt reluctant to take credit for something that he was unable to recall to mind. The VC tag next to his name had been an embarrassment, a reminder of his personal deception, and he had never used it once. As for the medal itself, it had always been a source of reproach, and the Regas had been welcome to it

Often, he had mulled over that night in an effort to recall the events from the time he had lifted the sword from its case. He remembered well enough the strange power that the sword seemed to possess and the feeling of invincibility that had flooded through him when he held it in his hands, but the rest was lost somewhere in his mind. Never once had he confided his lapse of memory, not even to Sinead, but the sham was slowly eroding away within him.

Pulling his collar closer to his icy cheeks, the comfortless climate he had so recently returned to made him long for the tropical land he had left behind a lifetime ago. The salt from the sea sprayed his nostrils as if to remind him that he was home now, and he had better get use to the idea.

Her words came as a surprise for he had quite forgotten about the woman walking beside him.

“Can we stop here for a bit?”

“Sure!” he replied thankful that she had decided to come back to life.

The two of them stood looking out to sea with just a shaky fence to stop them from wandering over the edge of the chalk to the breaching water below.

“Are you all right?” he asked turning to her.

“Not really!” she replied, her eyes cold like a fish. Then, she walked along a few paces as if he were contagious to be around and turned to face him. Lechaim frowned at her continuing coolness which was really beginning to annoy him and looked seaward again where the low overcast hid France from view.

“You remember that man that you killed in Manila?” she said as she reached into the shoulder bag she carried.

The question caught him by surprise and he turned to face her again hoping that she was going to open up to him at long last.

“The man that was on Corregidor, you mean? The one that kidnapped you?”

“Yes, that one!”

“What about him?” he inquired letting her lead the conversation now that she was finally talking.

“He was the only man I ever loved!”

Lechaim thought he had misheard her until he saw the pistol she had taken from her bag and was now pointing at his chest.

“Maxine! what the hell is wrong with you?” he said thinking that she had taken leave of her senses.

With eyes that were blazing like a mad woman’s and a voice pitched too high, she said,

“Why, Lechaim, why should there be anything wrong. My lover lies dead at your hands and you ask me what’s wrong!”

The pair stood staring each other down for some seconds, their only discourse, the puffs of condensation from their breathing. As he looked at her he idly noted that snowflakes were beginning to fall about her shoulders and one settled on

the barrel of the gun. The small compact weapon was a Glock Model 26 by the look of it, he concluded, a weapon designed for concealment. Lechaim, himself, had used the larger version, the Glock Model 17, on a firing range as he had many other handguns,. The short stocky firearms instructor that Lechaim had listened to many times in his army days had been almost ecstatic when describing that particular handgun. *“The ‘Glock Model 17’ is a self-loading pistol made in Deutsch-Wagram, Austria and was designed by one, Gaston Glock. It is erroneously called by some the terrorist’s pistol because of the polymer materials that have been used in its construction. The theory being that it can be passed through the x-ray machines and metal detectors used by airport security. Don’t try it, gentlemen, it doesn’t work. The Model 17 has a magazine capacity of seventeen rounds and fires 9mm Luger ammunition...”*

As Lechaim stood staring down the barrel, he felt strangely detached and unconcerned. Fear still did not course through his veins, but this time he knew why. The woman before him could not kill a dead man. Lechaim could feel that wet sand beneath his bare feet again as they walked by the water’s edge and her words carried to him on the wind. *“I’m waiting for you, darling! It’s almost morning and the sun’s coming up!”*

This was not going as planned, she thought as she saw the smile on his face. Her anger mounted again and she fought to calm herself. She wanted to savour the pleasure of this moment and remember it for as long as she lived.

His voice when he found it was calm and without emotion.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Samantha Jessep and I’m going to kill you! Not the way you killed Peter! That would be too easy! No don’t think about it!” she warned as she saw the danger signs in his eyes. “I’m a qualified marksman with this weapon and you wouldn’t make it!”

“I see!” he acknowledged and that smile played around his lips again.

“I’m going to cripple you first. I’m going to watch you crawl and beg for your life like a dog!”

In a voice that betrayed no fear, he said, “You’re a sick woman, Maxine or should I call you Samantha!”

What was wrong with the fool? she thought. Didn’t he realize that he was about to die! Since Peter’s death she had pictured in her mind, over and over, how she would kill this man. How he would plead for his life, yet the man before her was not reacting the way she had anticipated. She wanted to tear his heart out the ways hers had been. Then her eyes glinted as she thought of another way by which she could bait him.

“How’s your memory, Lechaim ?”

“My memory!” he responded puzzled at the question.

“Think back to that day in Ireland when you ran down the beach searching for your wife and you could only find a woman with a dog!”

The small Dalmatian puppy playing around her legs yelping for attention as the woman exclaimed, “I’m sorry! I’ve seen no one!”

“How do you know about that?” he asked in surprise as realization began to dawn on him.

“Because I was that woman, you dummy!”

“You!” he exclaimed, but..”

“Peter and I! Peter, by the way was the name of the man that you killed in Manila. Peter and I met up with your wife on the beach that morning while she was taking a walk. You were asleep, as I recall.”

Lechaim said nothing as she continued but a feeling he had never felt before was welling up in him, pure hatred, and he knew that it was about to engulf him.

“Peter wanted to fuck her first, but we couldn’t leave her cunt full of him, now could we?”

There it was, the look she had been striving for. At long last, she could see his pain as she added, “We had to make it look like an accident, don’t you see!”

She then thought of some more poison she could use. “He would have filled her up all right, believe me!” As she was speaking she could feel the excitement building in her as she recalled the size of her lover’s organ. It had been one of his most redeeming features.

“Oh, and that stupid cow of a mother, you have! She’s next!”

The cold biting wind and the gun in her hand were no more than a blur now as his senses were consumed by the desire to kill.

She was the one to smile now as she saw it in his eyes, the same hate that she herself was consumed by. Satisfied that he now shared her pain she lowered the pistol as she backed off even further. She knew he was about to make his move, and when he did, she would blow his left kneecap apart with her first shot. Then she would take her time about killing him. One thing was for certain, she decided, his death would be long and very painful.

On the summit above Tony Wright had been studying the pair through binoculars that hung around his neck. Hanging back so as not to be seen, he knew he was now too far away to intervene. The pistol Tony could see in the woman's hand had made her intentions all too obvious. Taking the binoculars from his eyes, he let them hang loose as he reached inside his fleeced lined survival jacket. The SIG-Sauer Model P226 pistol, standard issue in the SAS, which had been resting in his shoulder holster came out in his hand. The aluminum framed gun felt reassuring as it always did and he held it beneath his armpit away from the elements as he decided what best to do. The distance, the wind factor, the ever increasing flakes of snow obscuring his vision, and the close proximity of the target to his friend precluded taking the woman out with his pistol. Tony Wright was one of the best shots with a handgun in Special Air Services but even he could not do the impossible. There was only one way, he thought, as he considered the problem. He had already noticed a small cairn of stones just off to the couple's left which he had picked up through his binoculars. To the naked eye, it was just a distant speck but it would serve as an aiming point. The shot, he hoped would distract the woman just enough to give Lechaim the opportunity to make his move. It was a long shot in every sense but it was the best he could do in the circumstances. As he took aim the flurry of snowflakes before his eyes ceased so that his line of sight was unhindered. The wind dropped to nothing as his finger took up the slack on the trigger, and a strange sensation flooded through him. It was almost as if he were one with the weapon. Only once before in his life had he experienced such a feeling. He had cause to remember it well because it was the day he had shot a perfect score.

Lechaim was about to launch himself at her, when the side of her head exploded like a wet dog shaking its coat and the smell of her warm blood doused the smell of salt in his nostrils. The sound of the bullet echoed along the rolling gait of the white slopes as her body was flung to the ground where it lay twitching. With the reflexes borne of considerable experience, Lechaim launched himself into the snow beside her contorting limbs. Quickly, he leaned over her blood soaked head seeking the pistol she still gripped in her hand. Even in her death throes the woman tried to hold on to it, but he prized it roughly from her fingers. Rolling back, he saw the tiny figure running down the snow covered hill towards him, and he made himself as small a target as possible. There was no sign of a rifle in the man's hand and Lechaim searched around for an alternate shooter, then he relaxed as he recognized the short frame of Tony Wright drawing near.

There hands clasped and Lechaim exclaimed, "Christ, Tony! what are you doing here?"

"Just as well, I was!" Tony replied breathlessly after his long run in the snow and bent over the still twitching form on the ground. Standing upright again, he looked at Lechaim who nodded. Tony's gun kicked in his hand and a neat hole appeared between the woman's eyes - she no longer moved. The noise of the second shot like the first rolled around the empty landscape as Samantha Jessep departed. The two men spoke no more of it. The woman was finished and it was the most humane thing to do in the circumstances.

Tony took the weapon from Lechaim's hand and studied it. "Lovely weapon but a rather heavy trigger pull for a lady, I would have thought!"

“That was no lady!” Lechaim declared bitterly as he looked at the body that he had once fondled and entered. The same body that had in life helped to end Sinead’s life. He felt his betrayal was complete now. Not only had he been unfaithful to Sinead’s memory, but he had also slept with one of her killers. He resolved there and then that he would kill them all, every last one of them that had had any part to play in his wife’s death.

“You’re right there! that was no lady!” Tony responded.

“You know her then?” Lechaim asked.

“Yes, I know Samantha Jessep! A very unsavory person, believe me! I’ll tell you all about her later. For now, we need to get the body out of sight!”

“Lechaim looked around and spotted the stone cairn.

“What say we take her over there and put some of those small rocks over her? The snow should help to camouflage her for now.”

“Sounds good to me! I’ll make a call to have her removed later.”

“So you’re still working for the firm then?”

“Of course! Couldn’t do without me!”

The two men grabbed a leg each and dragged her body to avoid the spillage from her shattered head getting on their clothes. As they dragged her along, her carcass left a bloody trail in the snow.

“What did you do with your rifle?” Lechaim asked when they reached the cairn.

“What rifle?”

“Good God! Don’t tell me you took her out with your pistol!”

“Hmm, not a bad shot, hey!”

In their days together in the SAS, Lechaim and he had often competed against one another on the range. There had yet to be a clear-cut winner.

“That was one hell of a shot, Tony! I knew you were good, but I didn’t know you were that good!”

“Hmm!” the other man said but was noncommittal.”

Placing her beside the mound the two of started to pile the small boulders over the cooling corpse and then Tony saw it. The small nick on one of the stones where his bullet had struck before ricocheting away. The one shot in a million had become the one in ten million as Tony realized what had happened. Like a cannon shot in billiards, the bullet had hit the stone and then deflected at right angles into the woman’s head. Tony blanched as the thought occurred to him that the bullet could just as easily have hit his friend. No, he would not be bragging about that shot to anyone, least of all, Lechaim.

When they had finished covering her over, Lechaim turned about to attend to the job of hiding the smear trail her body had made across the snow, but found that the ever increasing flakes were already setting about the task for him.

“The weather’s closing in,” Lechaim remarked. “We’d better make for home!”

“Right!” Tony agreed. “Tell me, does your mother still make cheesecake?”

“You’d better believe it, my friend!” Lechaim replied clapping the other man on the back. “God! but it’s good to see you again!” Then he thought for a moment.

“Hey! I owe you one!” he said nodding to the buried corpse they were now leaving behind.

“My pleasure!” Tony acknowledged. “We’ll arrange to have her collected later today.”

To save the life of a Victoria Cross winner was very satisfying indeed. The fact that the man was also a good friend made it doubly so, Tony thought. Strange about that bullet though!

Chapter 44

THE SNOW HAD started to melt in the south of England leaving a soup of watery muddy substance that was the bane of shoe leather. There were three men in the room that morning but only one man had been recently fighting the elements, the same man that now looked so conspicuous in his civilian clothes.

Lechaim had opted for a blue blazer and grey slacks with black shoes that had acquired white tide marks from their skirmish with the soggy slush. The white shirt and striped Sandhurst tie he had put on for the occasion felt uncomfortable after many months of dressing casually and he was looking forward to discarding them when he returned home. However, at this moment, he had other things on his mind as he listened to Colonel Coburn

“We are quite certain now that the IRA had nothing to do with the attack on the abbey that night. For one the arms they carried were far too sophisticated, and for another, the men were highly trained!”

Lechaim listened to the Colonel’s words with interest. It had been four days since Lechaim and Tony had met up on the cliff tops near Brighton. With the passing of Samantha Jessep, the gloom that had hung over England seemed to lift as well, and the sun was now awake again. Its morning rays cast shafts of light through the window of the Colonel’s office playing in his eyes.

“Tony! pull the blind down a bit, would you!” the colonel requested as he broke off for a moment.

When this had been done and Tony had returned to his chair next to Lechaim’s in front of the large oak desk, Colonel

Coburn, from his seat behind it, continued with what he had been saying.

“We have established that Peter Sartori organized the attack on the abbey and Samantha Jessep had been his accomplice at the time. The reason for the attack, we are still not clear about, but one thing is certain. Those behind it now want Lechaim here out of the way!”

The colonel smiled at Lechaim and he returned the smile.

“Until now we have not been able to link either Peter Sartori or Samantha Jessep to their employers, but we may have had a break! Hence my reason for calling you in this morning,” the colonel said looking directly at Lechaim. The colonel then paused to gather his thoughts before he continued.

“It appears that this woman, Samantha Jessep made a telephone call to Rome while she was in London!”

“You mean she used an open line, sir?” Lechaim asked incredulously.

The Colonel’s ears noted the “sir” and concluded that Lechaim had been away from them far too long.

“Yes! Highly unusual in her line of work but that’s exactly what she did.”

“But surely, sir, that means that the phone call cannot have been important. She would never use an open line to contact her employers.”

“Quite right, Lechaim, quite right! We too assumed at first that the phone call was irrelevant, that is until we checked out the other party. According to the hotel register, she placed a call to the Vatican in Rome!”

“What!” This time Lechaim forgot the “sir” in his astonishment.

“That’s not all, Lechaim! The call she made was to one of the most senior dignitaries in the Roman Catholic Church!”

Lechaim did not know what to make of this information and could only sit and look at the Colonel and Tony Wright in bewilderment. Finally, he asked, “And just who exactly was it she called?”

“A Cardinal Tsana, probably the highest placed Cardinal in Rome and one of the Pope’s likely successors.”

“I see!” Lechaim said, but he did not really. What had Samantha Jessep been doing talking by telephone to a Cardinal of Rome, he thought. It did not make any sense at all.

“I understand from Tony here that you intend to go to Rome next week yourself?”

“That’s right, sir. I want to see how my late wife’s Uncle is faring. He had a breakdown some time ago and I thought I’d see how he is!”

The Colonel didn’t need reminding that Lechaim and Monsignor Michael Cronin were related or that Lechaim had lost his own wife not so long ago. Sarah flashed through his mind for a second and his face darkened.

“Are you aware that Monsignor Michael Cronin is in the care of this same Cardinal Tsana?”

“No, I did not!” Lechaim replied, astonished by this news.

“That’s why you’re here!” the Colonel said. “We need to find out more about this Cardinal Tsana and your going to visit the Monsignor gives us a perfect opportunity to nose around! That’s if you have no objections?”

“Of course not, Sir! I’ll be interested to find out more about him myself!”

“The army hasn’t been in touch regarding your formal discharge?” the Colonel then asked.

“No, sir! I would have thought by now that I would have heard something.”

The Colonel looked a trifle embarrassed as he said, “My fault, I’m afraid! I delayed the paperwork!”

Lechaim’s eyes narrowed as he posed the question, “May I ask why, sir?”

“That attempt on your life on Corregidor convinced us that you would be better off under the Army’s wing, for the time being, so to speak.”

“But how did you know about that? I told no one!”

“We got the information through our American cousins, late as usual, of course!”

Lechaim remembered the yacht that he had hitched a ride back to Manila on and the American, Don Talbot, and his family. Had that really been a lucky coincidence he wondered.

Lechaim responded, “Sorry, sir, I don’t quite understand what your mean by ‘under the Army’s wing’“

“It means that you’re still Army, one of us and we protect our own. We lost eight good men in Ireland to this mob and we don’t intend to lose any more. From now on you have our complete support and any back up that you require.”

“That’s very kind of you , sir, but...”

“No buts, Lechaim. We mean to catch these shifts and we’ll use every means at our disposal. You’re one of our trump cards, so to speak!”

“How so, sir?”

“They want you dead!”

The two men smiled at each other again. There it was! He was to be the sacrificial goat that would entice the beast out of its lair.

Tony Wright who had been quite all this time, joined in, "It's the only way, Lechaim. If the trail does lead to the Vatican, you're perfectly placed to penetrate the place. You have a relative that is a monsignor of Rome, and you now have a good excuse for going there."

"We are not going to leave you out on a limb. Tony's going along for the ride!" the Colonel added.

"You mean that this is an official SAS operation, sir?"

"You know better than that, Lechaim. Officially, we cannot get involved. Certainly not, as far as anything to do with the Vatican is concerned. No, if you two are silly enough to get yourself killed, as they say on that facile television show, we'll disavow all knowledge of you!"

The three of them chuckled for it had always been accepted in the SAS that on covert operations, you were on your own - your body could end up literally anywhere. It was the nature of the job and the men that did it were more likely than not buried in unmarked graves in foreign fields, if they got a burial at all.

"Now, Lechaim, you're looking a little out condition. What say you come to us for a few days and Tony here can take you through the ropes again." Colonel Coburn smiled mischievously as he said this because he had never seen a man look fitter than the man to whom he spoke. However, the colonel also knew that it wasn't always the strongest or the biggest that survived but more often the most adept.

Tony looked at Lechaim and added some words of his own to the Colonel's. "I think that I can still show this young

fellow a thing or too!” In fact, Tony was a year younger than Lechaim and there was little he could teach the other man, but he could sharpen up his friend’s skills. The pair of them had always been fierce competitors and Tony therefore knew that Lechaim would not be able to resist another challenge.

Lechaim smiled at his friend’s words, “If you can do everything else now as well as you can shoot, I think you can show me more than a thing or two.”

Tony looked uncomfortable as he replied, “Lucky shot! That was all!”

“Lucky shot, my arse!” the Colonel exclaimed. “I’m still not convinced he didn’t use a telescopic sight though!” Of course, the Colonel was only joking. If Tony told him that he had shot the woman with a handgun from that distance, then it was true enough - he had never known Tony to lie.

For once, however, Tony had not told the whole truth, only half truths. Like most, he valued his reputation that had taken years to build up, and he didn’t want to lose it. Therefore, he had left it to others to draw their own conclusions regarding the shot that was rapidly becoming part of SAS folklore.

Changing the subject which he was uncomfortable with, Tony said, “Well, Lechaim, what about it!”

“You’re on! When do you want me?” Lechaim asked the Colonel.

“Say tomorrow morning, early, for three days of extensive training!”

Lechaim smiled back at him ruefully. “Tomorrow morning it is then!”

“Oh! one other thing.” the Colonel added as he reached into his desk and pulled out a clipping from a newspaper article that had been written about the Cardinal. “Your man, Cardinal

Tsana!” Colonel said as he pointed to the newspaper picture that accompanied the article.

Lechaim took the clipping from him and looked closely at the picture of the Cardinal.

“Good God!” Lechaim uttered.

The other two looked at him as Lechaim tugged his wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a photograph. “Yes, it’s him, all right!”

He pushed the photograph of Sinead’s Uncle across the desk. “The other man in the picture, Colonel!”

The Colonel looked at the fuzzy face of Monsignor Michael Cronin and then at the man behind him whose features were in focus.

“Bloody hell!” the Colonel exhorted. “It’s Cardinal Tsana!” He then passed the photograph over to Tony Wright.

Tony took it and studied it for a while.

“Synchronicity!” Tony Wright exclaimed

“What are you babbling about, Tony?” the Colonel asked.

“Synchronicity!” Tony replied. “Carl Jung developed a theory about the collective unconscious.” Tony screwed up his face as he tried to remember the book he had read on the subject. “It was called ‘The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche’, or something similar!” he said. “In it Jung explained that you could have a number of coincidences that are connected in some meaningful way although their occurrence defys the calculations of probability. He called his theory, ‘synchronicity’!”

“Synchronicity or not!” the Colonel said, “there are more coincidences here than in a Charles Dickens novel.” He name-dropped ‘Dickens’ deliberately to let Tony know that he too read books.

“It’s certainly unbelievable,” Lechaim remarked as he recovered the photograph. He believed now though that it was more than synchronicity that was guiding him along his own particular path in life. Forces were at work that were certainly not of this world.

Chapter 45

THE MEN SITTING together in a Rome hotel room looked for all intents and purposes like businessmen. However, only the short stout middle-aged man in the pinstriped suit and the red bow tie qualified for the other five were Cardinals of Rome. The civilian was a dapper man in every way with brown hair that was now greying at the sides. There was nothing remarkable about him except for his eyes, which were penetratingly blue. Yet, he seemed to dominate the room and the others around him clearly acknowledged him as their superior, which, of course, he was. Even Cardinal Tsana who bowed to no man, except the Pope, but there, he had little choice, conceded that Oscar Bar was their leader. There again, as with the man's father, the Cardinal had no say in the matter.

"Well, gentlemen, we have a lot to discuss so let's begin," Oscar Bar said and then paused to look at the Filofax he had spread out on the coffee table they were sitting around.

"The first thing on the agenda is Samantha Jessop. Now, as I understand it, she made a telephone call to Cardinal Tsana last Monday. Is that right, Cardinal?"

Oscar Bar always called them by their assumed names and gave them the respect their positions deserved even if, with the exception of Cardinal Andretti, they were all usurpers.

Cardinal Tsana nodded but thought it unnecessary to make a formal reply.

"And since then, no one has heard from the woman?"

Again, the Cardinal nodded.

"I concurred with the Cardinal's decision to have her eliminated but that will no longer be necessary!"

The others listened intently. There was always something charismatic in the way Oscar Bar spoke and he was not a man to waste words.

“How so?” Cardinal Tsana asked.

“It appears that the SAS in England have taken care of the problem for us!”

“Your contact, you mean?” Cardinal Desmond queried.

They were all aware that Oscar Bar had an operative working within Special Air Services in England placed at a senior level, but only Oscar Bar knew who he was. The success at the abbey in taking out the SAS men assigned to protect the Monsignor was due entirely to the information the Judas within had provided.

“Yes, my contact,” Oscar Bar acknowledged. “It appears that your woman, Cardinal Tsana, tried to kill Captain Lewis but the SAS got her first!”

Cardinal Tsana noted the rebuff in the man’s voice as did the others.

“That man again!” Cardinal Andretti remarked. “He has nine lives!”

“He has indeed but they’re running out!” Oscar Bar commented. “We’ll deal with Captain Lewis once and for all when he comes here!”

“The Captain is coming to Rome?” Cardinal Tsana queried.

“Next week, in fact! Principally, he’s coming here to see about Monsignor Cronin, but he’s also going to be checking into you!” Oscar Bar said looking directly at Cardinal Tsana.

“The phone call from Samantha Jessop?” Cardinal Tsana remarked.

“The phone call indeed!” Oscar Bar confirmed. “The SAS have traced it to you!”

A frown furrowed the Cardinal’s brow but Oscar Bar was quick to reassure him.

“Don’t worry, we’ll take care of him and his watchdog at the same time. Before anyone could ask, he went on, “Oh, yes! Captain Lewis will be accompanied by a Captain Anthony Wright, a crack shot with a handgun by all accounts. We’ll take care of Captain Wright at the same time.”

Pausing, he then added, “But with discretion, of course, gentlemen! but with discretion!”

They knew that Oscar Bar did nothing without meticulous planning and attention to detail so they all relaxed, the problem now seeming trivial.

“Doctor Nieuwhof has the suite next to this.” Oscar Bar informed them. “He’ll deal with Captain Lewis first and then we’ll deal with Captain Wright later!”

Doctor Willem Nieuwhof, a Dutchman by birth, was well known to all of them. Apart from being Oscar Bar’s personal physician, he was also an expert in toxicology. One of his brews had seen the demise of Pope John Paul, the first. Cardinal Albino Luciani of Venice had been elected in August 1978 and had taken the name of Pope John Paul. Apart from being the first pope to choose a double name in commemoration of his two immediate predecessors, John XXIII and Paul VI, his thirty-four day pontificate was the shortest in modern times. The sudden death due to a heart attack of the “September Pope” had aroused suspicion, but it was unheard of to carry out an autopsy on a Pope so Doctor Nieuwhof’s handiwork had gone unnoticed. If Pope John Paul had not expressed such an

interest in the dealings of the Vatican Bank, he would have reigned somewhat longer.

“We’ll invite Doctor Nieuwhof in for a drink once we have concluded our business here! Speaking of which, perhaps you would be good enough to furnish us with some refreshments, Cardinal Desmond!”

“Certainly, Herr Bar, the Cardinal acknowledged. “What will it be gentlemen?”

Cardinal Desmond then went to the bar refrigerator to get the drinks while Oscar Bar continued.

“Now we come to our friend, Monsignor Cronin. As I understand it, we still have not been able to ascertain what he has done with the financial report he has completed in relation to the Vatican Bank. We know for a fact that he has not had an opportunity to notify the Pope of his findings and, of course, he must not!” He looked once again at the Filofax before him and then carried on.

“Cardinal Tsana informs me that the Monsignor has now fully recovered, but he still appears to be putting on a performance for the Cardinal’s benefit!”

Cardinal Tsana nodded to confirm that he had said such. The sick man’s room had been under surveillance from the beginning, not only by radio transmitters concealed behind the wallpaper and within the bedstead of the bed on which he lay, but also by optical surveillance. Not the optical surveillance afforded by cameras which would have been far too obvious, but by means of a two way mirror. It had soon become obvious to those watching that the monsignor was pretending to be far sicker than he actually was.

“It could be that Captain Lewis’ forthcoming visit is a blessing in disguise!” Oscar Bar exclaimed. “If the Monsignor

trusts the Captain, he may well open up to him. It's worth a try anyway!"

"And what of this man, John Devlin?" Cardinal Tsana asked.

"Once we have the necessary information regarding the financial report, we'll try to pass him off as Monsignor Cronin in order to obtain it for us if indeed it is locked away in a safety deposit box somewhere. However, from what Cardinal Tsana has told me, the man is not really suitable for anything else!"

"He couldn't pass himself off as Michael Cronin to anyone that knows the Monsignor, that's a fact!" Cardinal Fitz remarked.

"Whatever, it's all academic at the moment! Oscar Bar said. "We can't do any more until Captain Lewis arrives, so we'll move on." He then took a pen from his top pocket and ticked off the items in his Filofax that he had so far covered. Then he spoke again.

"Now, gentlemen, we come to a matter that is of some real concern! Cardinal Tsana's sources in United States intelligence have informed him that certain documents are about to be declassified. These documents will reveal that the Vatican is holding some 200 million Swiss francs appropriated from Serbs and Jews in Croatia by the Third Reich during the Second World War."

Oscar Bar paused for a moment to let the others consider his words. The men in the room knew well enough that they could ill afford to have information of this nature leak out. They also knew that the 200 million Swiss Francs were just a small part of the vast sums that had been amassed. The foundations of the Fourth Reich were being built on the loot that the Nazis had appropriated during the Second World War, everything from art

treasures to gold bullion, augmented by the plunder of the Holocaust victims. Over the years this financial base had been growing at a prodigious rate as the funds from the organization's many sources, legal and illegal, were being added to it. The organization's puppets at the Vatican Bank, the controlling and consolidation point for these funds prior to their transfer to Swiss bank accounts, had been able to operate freely until now. The veil of secrecy that the Vatican Bank is allowed to impose over its banking operations had provided the aegis the organization required. Michael Cronin's appointment as an internal auditor had been the first setback and now the organization's financial arrangements were under attack from a new quarter.

"That is why, gentlemen," Oscar Bar went on, "we need to obtain the financial report, or reports, that Monsignor Cronin prepared. If such were to fall into the wrong hands, well..." He spread his hands and did not bother to finish the sentence. They knew full well what would happen if the Vatican Bank's dealing came to light. Not only could the organization be exposed but they as well.

"We can ill afford to have the gnomes of Zurich down in their vaults disturbed by the sound of digging!" Oscar Bar joked.

Cardinal Tsana smiled at the epithet Oscar Bar had used for their Swiss Bankers. A contradictory people, the Swiss, he reflected. On the one hand they provide the Pope with a bodyguard and on the other they provide repositories for the spoils of past and present despots. Then again, he thought, the Swiss Guards had once been mercenaries themselves so it was in keeping that Switzerland's bankers maintained the tradition. Not that he or any of the others in the room would complain,

far from it. Where else but Switzerland could the organization safely bank its capital with no questions asked.

“But gentlemen, these matters are not the reason I’ve called you all here today!” Oscar Bar said. “No, doubt, Cardinal Tsana has informed you that a date has been set for our venture to begin! I will now explain what I have been spending the billions of dollars laundered through the Vatican Bank on!”

He reached down under the table for his laptop computer, and the other men watched as he then placed it on his knees and turned it on. Manipulating the rollerball mouse with his fingers, he clicked on the screen until the word processing document he had been seeking appeared. He then placed the laptop on the table for all to see.

“This, gentlemen is a brief synopsis of what we are about to embark on. I prepared it earlier today before your arrival!” Oscar Bar then took up his drink of tomato juice which he had quite forgotten about as the five Cardinals gathered around the monitor.

Oscar Bar scrolled down the screen as they read.

“OPERATION ACHILLES’ HEEL”

This operation has been codenamed “Achilles’ Heel” because its purpose is to strike at the Achilles heel of global economy.

In Greek mythology, Achilles was the son of the mortal Peleus, king of the Myrmidons, and the Nereid, or sea nymph, Thetis. As a child, he was dipped by Thetis in the waters of the River Styx to make him invincible. She forgot,

however, about the heel by which she held him. Achilles subsequently grew up to be the greatest warrior in the army of Agamemnon during the Trojan War. Eventually, however, he was slain in battle by Paris, whose arrow, guided by Apollo, struck him in the only place where he was vulnerable, his heel.

The Achilles' heel of global economy today is the technology it relies on; namely, computer hardware and software.

We at Bar Computer Industries-Austria have perfected a one-gigabit microprocessor chip, with enormous capacity. An entire encyclopedia can be stored on one such chip alone. The 'Apollo 2000' computer, introduced early last year, is fitted with these new chips. This fifth generation computer with its unique microprocessing chips has revolutionize the industry, and its low price, has provided the marketing edge whereby a large percentage of the computer market has been secured. Our aim at Bar Computer Industries-Austria is not, of course, profit driven. Rather, our intention has been to saturate the computer markets. In this we have succeeded. Our 'Apollo 2000' now accounts for most of the world's computing needs.

Beware the Greeks bearing gifts for the 'Apollo 2000' is a Trojan horse in every sense. Within its operating system a portion of its program code consists of a set of instructions, a computer virus, that will be activated when the computer's internal clock reaches a certain date. That date is the 1st of next month, some sixteen days away. Once the "Paris Virus", named in deference to its namesake in Greek mythology, is released and transmitted over networks, it will attach itself to other computer programs in any computer's operating system it comes into contact with, and be seamlessly assimilated with them. The corrupted programs will continue to perform their intended functions whilst they spread the virus. The virus will be transferred to files and code on other computers through magnetic disks or other memory-storage devices, computer networks, or on-line systems.

The "Paris Virus" is a replicating virus that will multiply until it destroys data or renders other program codes meaningless. It is a particularly virulent virus so designed so no screening device will pick it up.

Different sections within Bar Computer Industries-Austria have been set up to specialize in various aspects of computerization such as banking, industrial,

manufacturing, retail, security, stock markets, telecommunications, and so on. Their objectives have been to infiltrate the computer systems that are being used by industry and commerce. On the 1st of next month, they will penetrate any computer network systems not using Apollo computers and infect those systems with the “Paris Virus” also. We have recently perfected a strain of the “Paris Virus” for just such a purpose. A complete breakdown of the financial markets of the world’s software and equipment will lead to financial chaos.

The ‘Apollo 2000’ computer will, like its namesake, Apollo, have guided the arrow to its target, the Achilles’ heel of global economy. Like Paris’ arrow, the “Paris Virus” combined with our actions in penetrating the security systems of computer networks worldwide, will inflict a mortal wound to the financial markets around the globe and commerce in general, leading ultimately to fiscal ruination.

Because the only computers unaffected by the “Paris Virus” will be ‘Apollo 2001’ computers, the ones we ourselves use, and the next in line to the ‘Apollo 2000’ computers, our networks throughout the world which are now using ‘Apollo 2001’ computers will be the only networks by which business can be conducted.

This together with our many resources set up to support business should enable us to take control of not only the global economy but the organisations that are part of the monetary system.

In Germany the First Reich was based on the medieval and early modern Holy Roman Empire of 800 to 1806, the Second Reich, the German Empire from 1871 to 1918, and the Third Reich, the one my father created, from January 1933 to May 1945.

The Fourth Reich will be written down in the pages of history as commencing on the first of next month. This new Reich will not have arisen from any force of arms for those days have long since passed. Instead, it will be brought about by the economic ruin of many nations. This economic ruin will cause social unrest and social unrest will, with careful orchestration, lead to world anarchy. The minds of the people will then be ready to accept a new leader. Anyone that can give them vision and hope for the future. We, with the endorsement of one of the most influential bodies in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, will provide that leader - the Fourth Reich will then no longer be a dream but a reality.

Oscar Bar had been watching them read the screen and he was amused by their reaction, which was, without exception, one of amazement. Of course, the leader he had referred to would be himself. He knew it and so did they.

“I never dreamed!” Cardinal Andretti exclaimed.

“Brilliant!” Cardinal Desmond uttered.

“Unbelievable!” Cardinal Fitz observed.

“Incredible” Cardinal Tsana said but then again, he had already been briefed by Oscar Bar beforehand so he was only reaffirming his original view.

“Well, gentlemen, you can now see now why we have to be vigilant. We are on the verge of a new world, our world, one in which we will all prosper.” He paused to draw breath. “What we must now do is keep the wolves from our door! We will need to deal with the two Englishmen that are on the way, and we must somehow try to suppress that information that United States intelligence sources have informed us is about to be released. The good doctor next door will take care of the first problem, the second, I’ll leave to Cardinal Tsana to take care of. Needless to say, money is no object. If we need to spend a couple of hundred million, then we do so!”

He looked around at his audience. “Well, I think that’s about it, gentlemen, unless any of you have any questions?” They were well satisfied however so he deleted the document from his computer and shut it down. As he was closing the lid of his laptop, he asked casually, “How did that red herring we sold the Pope go?”

“The one about Captain Lewis and the Archangel Michael?” Cardinal Tsana asked as the rest chuckled.

“Yes! what did the Pope have to say?”

“It was quite funny, really!” Cardinal Tsana responded. “He bought the notion that the Third Secret, documented by Lucia dos Santos, the Fatima child, and Captain Lewis were somehow linked.”

“Hmm..Doctor Nieuwhof believes that the Pope is showing signs of dementia. He could be right!” Oscar Bar retorted. Again, they laughed.

“It’s a funny thing though, about Fatima, I mean!” Cardinal Andretti said.

“What’s that?” Cardinal Tsana asked although he was not really interested. Cardinal Andretti was always going off on a tangent. Perhaps the Pope was not the only one with a trace of dementia.

“I read the other day that in May, 1981 when Mehmet Ali Agca tried to assassinate John Paul the second, he tried to shoot him in the head twice but both bullets missed!”

“So?” Oscar Bar said who had about as much patience with Cardinal Andretti as Cardinal Tsana did.

“Well, he missed because the Pope had bent over at that exact moment to touch a child in the crowd!”

“And?” Oscar Bar said impatiently. He really didn’t have the time to listen to the maundering of this old man.

“The reason the Pope had leaned over to touch her was that the little girl was holding a small picture of Our Lady of Fatima!”

“And?” Oscar Bar asked.

“I just thought it was curious, that was all!”

“Just so!” Oscar Bar said and his eyes met Cardinal Tsana’s as he turned away. The Cardinal knew what that look meant. Cardinal Andretti would have to get with the program if he was going to last much longer in the organization.

“Oh, there was one other thing!” Cardinal Andretti said as an after thought.

“And what’s that?” Oscar Bar asked in order to humour the man.

“The Pope was shot on the 13th of May! Strange, don’t you think?”

“How so?” Oscar Bar replied in a resigned manner.

“It also happened to be the anniversary of the first appearance of the Virgin Mary at Fatima.

Chapter 46

CARDINAL TSANA'S ESTATE, the Villa dEste, in Tivoli near Rome comprised buildings, fountains, and terraced gardens designed in 1550 by the Mannerist architect Pirro Ligorio for the governor Cardinal Ippolito II dEste. Before being designated as his residence, the property had been a Benedictine convent. The Villa itself was less noteworthy than the spacious park and the magnificent fountains, supplied with water by two canals dug especially for the purpose.

Franz Liszt, the Hungarian piano virtuoso and composer, had once occupied the top floor from 1865 until his death in 1886. Now, on that same floor, Lechaim was talking with his dead wife's uncle. They had been speaking for over an hour, and Lechaim was about to make his departure. He had done most of the talking while the Monsignor listened. Lechaim put the other man's sluggishness down to the illness he had undergone and the drugs he had been given. The Monsignor appeared to be only a shadow of the man Lechaim had known in Ireland. He had not yet mentioned Sinead and Lechaim was grateful for that. Her loss was still at the back of his mind and he did not want to be reminded. That's why he had been dreading this visit because it brought back all the old memories. Because he had found the Monsignor taciturn and withdrawn, he found himself making conversation. Mainly, he had talked about the Philippines leaving out everything that was not pertinent to the holiday itself. He had not raised the subject of John Devlin because he felt the Monsignor was in no state to consider the matter. He wanted the Monsignor back on his feet and focussed before he broached the subject.

“Well, Father!” Lechaim said looking at his watch. “Time for me to go and let you get some rest! I’ll call back tomorrow if that’s okay?”

The dullness that had been evident in the Monsignor’s eyes was replaced by a sudden intensity.

“Lechaim!” he whispered. “Come closer! I have something to tell you!”

Somewhat curious, Lechaim leant over the monsignor who pulled him down even more and whispered in his ear.

Lechaim stood crouched over him for some minutes listening, and when he stood up again his jaw hardened.

“The first thing we have to do is get you out of here!”

The monsignor nodded and said, “Go with God, my son, and remember what I said!”

“Certainly, sir! You can count on me!”

“I know I can!” Then the monsignor hesitated before he spoke again. “You’ll be with her again one day, be sure of that!”

There it was, that reminder of Sinead but the Monsignor’s words were comforting all the same.

Lechaim waved farewell from the door and then strode purposefully down the long hall, his mind awash with the information the Monsignor had given him.

“Ah, there you are!” Cardinal Tsana said as he greeted Lechaim on the stairs. “I have had lunch prepared. Would you care to join me?”

Lechaim’s eyes narrowed. “Certainly, your Eminence! Very kind of you.”

He had met the Cardinal earlier and they had discussed the Monsignor’s condition at length. There was no doubt now from what the Monsignor had told him that Cardinal Tsana was

not all he seemed to be. Then again, the Monsignor was ill and he could well be imagining things. That was something that Lechaim needed to consider carefully. And then there was the matter of the financial report. If what the Monsignor had told him was true, then the Cardinal was obviously implicated. Whatever, Lechaim was determined that he would find out one way or the other.

The Cardinal accompanied Lechaim down the stairs and then led him into a side room, expensively decorated, where a meal was already awaiting them.

"I would have invited you onto the terrace but the elements have conspired against us!" He smiled and turned his head to the windows of the room where the rain was drumming against the glass. Lechaim acknowledged the Cardinal's observation with a smile of his own. Cardinal Tsana then gestured to the fare on the table, "Calamaretti and abbacchio!" He smiled again as he saw bewilderment on Lechaim's face and quickly explained. "Baby squid and young lamb roasted with rosemary. The vegetable preparations, you will no doubt recognize!"

There was just an edge of sarcasm in his voice that was not lost on Lechaim.

Intellectually, the Cardinal had decided that he was the Captain's superior. For one the Captain spoke only English. Why, the Cardinal wondered, are most English people so ignorant when it comes to languages other than their own. They seemed to think that everyone should speak English for their benefit but made little effort to learn other languages themselves. He, himself, could speak English, German, of course, Italian, and French and had a fair knowledge of Russian.

Lechaim, on the other hand, could not help but admire the Cardinal's command of the English language and said as much.

"Your English is excellent, your Eminence. He never felt comfortable addressing church dignitaries but felt he owed the other man the respect his office demanded.

"As a young man I spent some time in England before the war!"

Lechaim presumed he meant the Second World War which would put the Cardinal's age at well over seventy. Yet the man before him looked in his late fifties. The man's figure was still trim and he must have been impressive in his youth. Some three or four inches shorter than Lechaim, the Cardinal's grey hair, thinning at the temples, high cheek boned face, and youthful skin seemed at odds with his calling. His well cut expensive grey suit, white shirt, light blue tie, and black patent leather shoes detracted even more from the stereotypical image of a Cardinal.

The Cardinal was also taking stock of his man. This was the famous Captain Lewis that the newspapers had made so much of. Perhaps his intellect left a lot to be desired but as a former soldier himself, the Cardinal was impressed by the man's deeds. The Captain, by reputation alone, was the most formidable of adversaries. Yet, his eyes seemed to belie the killer behind them for there were shades of compassion there. It was a failing the Cardinal could recognize in most men. It would be quite pointless, he knew, to try and recruit a man like this. Such men were full of fanciful ideas like morality and honour and therefore mentally deficient.

"And how did you find the Monsignor?" the Cardinal asked as he began eating.

“He doesn’t seem all that well, your Eminence!” Lechaim replied as he too began to eat. The food, he found, was quite delicious.

“No, we’ve been concerned about him! My doctor tells me that he is still somewhat delusional.”

“Really! I didn’t know that, your Eminence!”

“Yes, paranoid a lot of the time.”

“About what, your Eminence?” Lechaim asked.

“Everything really! He seems to think, for instance, that we’re trying to harm him instead of nursing him back to health!”

Lechaim was silent for a moment. What the monsignor had told him earlier was along the same lines.

“Would you like some wine, Captain?”

“Yes, thank you, your Eminence!”

“Any particular kind?”

“Lechaim smiled as he replied, “Whatever you think is appropriate, your Eminence!” He had thrown a little sarcasm back at the epicure on the other side of the table, who smiled in return, but there was a dark glint behind the eyes.

“A bottle of Italian red would be appropriate, I think. After all, when in Rome!” the Cardinal said as he rang a little bell that had been placed on the table.

Lechaim was surprised at Cardinal Tsana’s lack of ceremony. He was also surprised at the man that came out in response to the Cardinal’s summons. Of average height, the man was dressed in a green servant’s attire, had a shock of grey hair, was beetle-browed, somewhat sullen in appearance, and appeared mute.

“A bottle of ‘Barbera d’Alba’ please!” the Cardinal requested and then turned back to Lechaim. “A red wine of the

Barbera grape grown in the district of Alba in the Piedmont region. I think it will be to your liking!"

"Thank you! I'm sure it will be, your Eminence!"

The servant soon shuffled in again with the bottle in his hand. Uncorking it in front of Lechaim, he pored a little and Lechaim went through the ritual of giving it his approval. He was not a connoisseur of either wine or food for that matter so it was a pointless exercise, but he went through the motions. The shuffling man then pored him a full glass of the red and stood behind him as if waiting for approval. The Cardinal nodded to the man as Lechaim put the glass of wine to his lips.

"Christ!" Lechaim uttered as the needle penetrate deep into his back, and he started to rise, but fell to the floor instead.

Neither of the other two men spoke as they got up. The Cardinal went over and locked the door while the shuffling man placed the hypodermic on the table and searched Lechaim's pockets. Emptying the contents onto the table next to the hypodermic, the man then undressed Lechaim and when he was completely naked, carefully scrutinized his body and every garment he had been wearing. Satisfied, he then turned his attention to the items on the table.

The Cardinal pointed to the packet of cigarettes that Lechaim had been carrying in one of his pockets and the man nodded. Seconds later he handed the wireless microphone that it contained to the Cardinal who appraised it and handed it back. The shuffling man then gathered up the items from the table including the hypodermic he had plunged into Lechaim's back, the discarded clothes, and the wireless microphone, before departing, unlocking and then relocking the door after him.

The Cardinal, who had returned to his chair, then spoke to Lechaim who lay naked before him on the floor.

“Really, Captain Lewis! You’re picking up some nasty habits! ! Since when did you start smoking?”

The dossier on Lechaim Lewis had been thorough, Cardinal Tsana would have accepted nothing less. “The SAS are not in our league, Captain! I would have thought Ireland should have taught you that.” As he spoke the Cardinal could not help but admire the magnificent physique of the man lying there. His eyes were drawn to Lechaim’s thigh where he had been branded. Sure enough, once again, the information he had received was completely accurate. The Captain did indeed have the tetragrammaton seared into his flesh and the numbers that he had interpreted for the Pope as meaning the ‘WORD OF GOD’. They were, in reality, he knew, just a series of random numbers and no more.

To Lechaim who was still conscious but incapable of moving, the Cardinal’s words seemed far away. The skeletal-muscle-relaxant drug belonging to the alkaloid family of organic compounds, Doctor Nieuwhof had injected him with, was doing its work.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m dressed this way!” the Cardinal added. “The fact of the matter is that I am flying to Salzburg in a few hours. By then you will be floating around in the ether somewhere, but that’s life!”

“Remarkably effective, Doctor Nieuwhof! I must congratulate you!” Cardinal Tsana said to the shuffling man who had just come back into the room, and was in the process of locking the door.

“Tubocurarine!” Doctor Nieuwhof explained as he walked over to him. “It is the active constituent of curare.”

“Isn’t that what the South American Indians use as a poison for their arrows?”

“Yes, indeed! The drug, Tubocurarine, is now used in anesthesia to produce the necessary level of muscle relaxation. Paralysis lasts for about twenty minutes, although some muscle weakness remains for a few hours afterwards.”

The Cardinal, somewhat alarmed at this news quickly responded. “You mean it wears off!”

“Oh yes!” Doctor Nieuwhof replied and smiled at the Cardinal’s concern. “Don’t worry, apart from paralyzing the patient, the drug also paralyzes the patient’s respiratory system. When it’s used medically, the patient needs artificial ventilation to enable him to breathe. You will note that the Captain is no longer breathing!”

With that Doctor Nieuwhof leaned over the naked body and checked Lechaim’s vital signs. Getting up again with a grunt, he said, with the air of a man that takes a great deal of pleasure in his work, “The Captain will be giving you no more trouble in this world!”

“Sehr gut! Sehr gut!”, the Cardinal exclaimed.

The doctor had noted the Cardinal’s switch to his native tongue, German. During the Second World war, when working in the Dutch resistance, Doctor Nieuwhof had routinely killed Krauts, and now he was working for them. It was a strange world, indeed, he thought, but if his employers were willing to support his mistress, whisky, he really did not care what nationality they were.

“The wireless mike indicates that he has an accomplice nearby!” the doctor remarked.

“Yes!” the Cardinal agreed. It will undoubtedly be Captain Wright, Cardinal Tsana thought, but he kept his

conclusion to himself. Doctor Nieuwhof's position was such that he was not privy to any information other than was deemed necessary. "I'll have my men search the grounds and maintain tight security for the next few days!"

"How do you want me to dispose of him?" the doctor asked as he pointed to Lechaim lying on the floor.

"The usual way, the oven in the cellar! Tonight, when the servants have gone to bed, get rid of him!"

As he was speaking, Cardinal Tsana was reminded of how useful ovens had been in the concentration camp at Dachau during the war. They were still serving him well even today. Doctor Nieuwhof had used the cellar oven before for disposal purposes so the Cardinal knew that he did not have to show the doctor where it was.

"Will he be all right in here until then?" the doctor asked.

"Yes, no one but I has a key to the room, but, to be on the safe side until the servants leave, we'll hide him behind the bookcase."

With that the Cardinal got up from his chair and went over to one of the walls containing a large bookcase. He felt for the release mechanism at the back of it and the bookcase swung away from the wall. The Cardinal and the Doctor were not capable of lifting Lechaim's body and they would have considered such a task beneath them anyway. No matter, his men were at hand and he summoned two of them by means of an internal phone situated on the wall to one side. The two men that appeared dragged the heavy naked body across the floor and placed it in the small alcove that the bookcase had been concealing, then the pair disappeared again as quickly as they came.

Doctor Nieuwhof checked the body again to make sure and then stepped back.

“That should do it!” the Cardinal exclaimed as the bookcase swung back.

“Do you want me to take care of the Monsignor while I’m here?” Doctor Nieuwhof asked.

Cardinal Tsana considered for a moment. It was true that Monsignor Cronin had at long last divulged where the financial report was. Despite whispering its whereabouts into the Captain’s ear earlier, the highly sophisticated and sensitive miniaturized microphones in the bedframe had picked up everything that the monsignor had said. Still, Cardinal Tsana thought, it might be wise to keep the monsignor alive for a few more days just in case. It would seem that the financial report had been entrusted to a firm of solicitors in Rome who had been instructed to return it to the Monsignor personally at such time as he requested its return. Relying entirely on John Devlin, who was currently residing in another part of the Villa, to play the part of the Monsignor might be a mistake. He was after all a clumsy oaf who hadn’t yet been able to master the Monsignor’s voice. No, better safe than sorry, he decided. The stakes were too high to take any risk.

“Not yet!” he replied. “We’ll keep him alive for a little longer!”

He would also need to consult with Oscar Bar first before having the monsignor “put down”. The Cardinal was not only a careful man but he was also a German. Therefore, by his very nature, second opinions on matters of such importance were always sought from superiors. It was the German way.

“No extra charge!” the doctor replied with a smile but seeing that the Cardinal was adamant, he didn’t push the point.

“You’ll be returning to Salzburg yourself when you’ve finished up here?” the Cardinal enquired.

As he spoke his eyes took in the doctor who was twenty years younger than he, but looked older with his flabby frame, tired skin covered with small spider-like vascular lesions, puffy eyes, and foul breath. It was a puzzle to the Cardinal how such an uncouth man had ever been employed by Oscar Bar. It could only be for his expertise in killing, he concluded.

“In a few days, perhaps, “ Nieuwhof answered. “I have some matters I have to take care of in Rome first.”

As he said it, the doctor thought with relish of the alcoholic binge he was about to embark on. Deep within, the largest and heaviest organ in his body started to groan at the prospect of more punishment. The size of a large watermelon, it was already scarred from working overtime but the doctor had never spared it before so why should his liver expect mercy now.

The men left the room and went their separate ways. The afternoon faded to evening, and darkness descended.

Chapter 47

A LIGHT BECKONED but it took him some time to become orientated. Where was he? What had happened? Then he remembered! He found that he was unable to stand up because the alcove was too small but it didn't matter because the bookcase was swung open and he crawled out. The light he had seen was from the moonlight bathing the room in which he found himself. The lunar light streaming through the large leaded panes of the windows provided him with sufficient light to see the inert figure stretched out on the floor. Instinctively, he bunched himself and then relaxed as he recognised the man lying there. Bending down, he saw that Monsignor Michael Cronin was clad in just his pyjamas, Lechaim checked his pulse – strong enough! Must be drugged, Lechaim concluded but what was he doing lying on the floor? Who had put him there?

It suddenly dawned on Lechaim as he felt the breeze from the open windows playing on his body that he was naked and he tried to think. However, he found it difficult because he felt dizzy and there seemed to be no strength in his body. They had obviously given him something but what?

Whatever, he had to get the Monsignor out of there! Under normal circumstances he would have lifted the Monsignor easily. Now he struggled to put the priest over his shoulder. The house was deathly silent as Lechaim carried the Monsignor out onto the patio skirting the house! It was strange, he thought, that there was no security in evidence. It all seemed so easy! He wasn't about to linger and find out why though. Quickly, he made his way through the gardens but began to tire long before he found the road skirting the estate. What was wrong with him, he wondered? He had never felt this tired or

weak before. With every step he was becoming more and more dislocated until he was functioning purely on instinct. He started down the road skirting the estate knowing that he could not continue for too much longer.

Some distance away, on that same road, an old man, sitting in the back of a car, was listening to a married couple arguing. "I tell you it's this way!" Giovanni insisted

"I tell you its not!" Luisa said defiantly.

The old man smiled and glanced out at the darkened countryside but his mind was far away with the fish off the coast of his homeland. He swayed on the deck of the fishing boat as it chugged back into its home port in the Algarve. Never again, he knew, would he work in the blue waters and catch the mighty tuna. Strong hands were needed for that and his were gnarled from age and weathering, and so too, for that matter, was his body.

"What do you think, grandpa? Is this the way home?" Giovanni asked.

"Leave him be and let him sleep!" Luisa replied and then turning to the old man in the back, she asked, "Are you all right, grandpa?"

He smiled in acknowledgment and patted the black Labrador dog that was lying next to him with its snout in his lap. Luisa smiled in return and then turned back satisfied.

"See! We passed that church this morning!" Giovanni insisted as he pointed to the building that flashed by on his right side

"For goodness sake!" Luisa retorted angrily. "Give it a rest!" She was tired and wanted to get home by the shortest route possible. Giovanni, she knew from past experience, had a penchant for getting lost.

Her sharp response caused him concern. The baby was due in a few weeks and he wanted to keep her happy. Yet, she was as stubborn as he and they both hated admitting they were wrong!

There was a period of quite while they both brooded.

He eventually broke the silence, changing the subject to pacify her. “What did you make of those lights in the sky earlier on?”

“Weird!” she replied. “UFO’s perhaps?”

“Could be!” Giovanni agreed.

“What do you think grandpa?”

There he goes again, she sighed, asking the old man what he thought. He was a nice old man, but he was, after all her great grandfather, being over ninety and very feeble minded. Did Giovanni really expect to get a sensible answer out of him.

The old man smiled benignly and didn’t answer. He found that it was best that way.

Luisa smiled at the old man again and asked, “All right, grandpa?”

This standard question was her only real acknowledgment of him these days.

He nodded and smiled back again, his standard response to such a banal question, before turning his attention once again to the blackness outside. He too had wondered at the strange lights in the night sky which he saw well enough for, despite his age, he still had perfect eyesight. Most thought it remarkable but he knew the truth.

The lights that had darted to and throw in the night sky earlier reminded him of a time long ago when the sun had danced. His mind went back, as it often did, to his youth when

another remarkable phenomena had occurred. He had not seen it himself but his good friend had described it to him.

“What’s happening, Manuel?”

“The sun!.....The sun is spinning!”

“Rommy was acting very odd earlier! Do you think he’s all right?” Luisa asked as she glanced back at the dog lying content with its head burrowed in the old man’s lap.

The dog’s ears pricked up at the sound of its name and it raised its head briefly.

Giovanni had noticed it also. Romulus, who was always so playful, had been trembling and kept nuzzling up to them as if he were afraid to be alone. Ever since they saw the lights, in fact.

“He seems all right now! I expect he’s eaten something that didn’t agree with him!” Giovanni replied.

Then again, Giovanni thought, the birds were not acting as they normally did either. The old man had brought some bread with him, as he always did, to feed the local birdlife but, for once, they were no birds to be seen. Her voice interrupted his contemplation.

“Slow down! You’ll have an accident. You have a family now to consider!”

He looked lovingly at his pregnant wife as he said, “Sorry!” and slowed the car down till it was barely moving along!”

“Not that slow you fool!” she laughed and slapped him on the arm in fun.

“Stop!” the old man in the back yelled out, his voice demanding and forceful. Giovanni reacted immediately, slamming his foot on the foot brake and the car slithered to a

stop. The dog fell forward banging its head on the back of Giovanni's seat and then started barking furiously.

"There!" the old man cried pointing ahead.

They looked and saw the reason for the old man's excitement, a naked man walking along the road carrying someone in his arms.

Giovanni's heart raced as he realized that if the old man had not warned him when he did, he would have certainly hit the man. Thank God, he thought, for the old man's wonderful eyes.

"Quite, Rommy!" Giovanni ordered and the dog let out a few more barks in protest and then just growled. The old man's soothing touch on it gave the animal the reassurance it needed and it settled again beside him.

"Be careful!" Luisa warned as her husband released the brakes and drove slowly up to the man walking ahead. Giovanni could see that he was a big man and very muscular. Giovanni had once seen Michelangelo's "David" in Florence and this man could have posed for it. Stopping the car, he put it into neutral and got out.

"Are you all right?" he asked hesitantly for he could see that the man was staggering. Big as the man was, he did not seem to pose a threat, Giovanni decided.

The man turned towards him and spoke but Giovanni did not understand him, because he spoke in a foreign language. Giovanni spoke but the man didn't understand Italian or, at least, didn't appear to do so. As Giovanni was trying to think of some way to make himself understood, the other, who was clearly exhausted, placed the man he had in his arms down on the grass verge at the side of the road. Giovanni watched as the man then lowered himself wearily to the ground.

Giovanni cautiously made his way over to the two men lying on the grass. They both appeared to be unconscious and he wondered what he should do. He knew it would be impossible to lift the large man into the car by himself. Luiza could not help because of her condition and the old man could not help himself, let alone Giovanni.

Luisa got out of the car but hung back, a little afraid. She had been watching the big man, and could not help but admire the perfection of his body. She could see the Saint Christopher medal hanging around the big man's neck, and she was reassured by it. It was comforting, somehow, to know that he was a Christian because it seemed to make him less threatening to her.

"What are you going to do?" she asked her husband.

"Better cover them up, I guess! Then I'll phone for an ambulance!" Giovanni replied as he went to the back of the car and opened the boot. Finding two blankets he always kept there for their many forays into the countryside, he returned. The older man, he noted, was still breathing but the big man did not appear to be. Giovanni bent over him and placed his hand on the man's forehead and found that his skin was cold. It reminded Giovanni of the way his grandmother had felt when he kissed her good-bye as she lay in her coffin.

Satisfying himself that he had done all he could, Giovanni decided to drive down the road in search of a telephone. He glanced at the old man in the back of his car who now had his eyes closed and was laying with his head back on the seat, Romulus' head buried once again in his lap.

Giovanni patted the old man on the knee affectionately. "Thank you, grandpa!" he muttered.

The old man was never complaining and in his more lucid moments had captivated Giovanni with tales of his life in Portugal. Now, the old man had probably saved him from hitting the two men on the road.

The old man opened his eyes at that moment and looked at him.

“What’s that granddad?” he asked leaning closer as the old man started to mumble something!”

“Her message was for all mankind!” he whispered and then he closed his eyes again and his sigh was audible.

“You rest granddad! You’ve had a busy day!”

The old man could not hear him however. For that matter, he would never hear Giovanni again. His journey done, he was returning to the house in Portugal where his sweet mother, Maria, and his good friend, Manuel Braga were waiting for him.

Lying at the side of the road, Lechaim’s journey was also nearing its end. He could hear a familiar drumming in his ears, soft at first, then becoming louder until it could no longer be ignored. It took his muddled brain a while to work out what it was - the sound a horse makes when it’s being ridden at a steady gallop. He opened his eyes but all he could see at first was a kaleidoscope of colours before him, while every now and then an image filtered through. A doctor bending over his bed, his mother crying, nurses, a hospital. Then he saw her with her arms outstretched and her red hair blowing about her face. Those green eyes of hers were full of the love she bore him. She was speaking to him now, that soft lilting voice of hers carrying on the wind, but he could not hear.

“Sinead” he whispered.

“Yes, darling! I’m here!”

Then his spirit, no longer earthbound, was soaring up and up, and the stars filled his eyes. She clung to him and he knew he had the world in his arms - he was home.

Chapter 48

JOHN DEVLIN WHO had been drinking heavily all day and had finally succumbed at twilight, woke with a start. For a moment he thought he was back in Manila, then he remembered bitterly that he was still in the Villa dEste. The money he had been offered to be there was beginning to seem less important as the days had unfolded and tedium set in. Voice lessons, the lack of females, and serious, sombre men were beginning to take their toll.

As he lay there in the semi-darkness contemplating his lot, he heard the curtains rustle and felt a gust of wind play over his face. The moonlight filtering through a gap in the curtains cast eerie shapes on the floor and his imagination began to take over. He listened intently and thought he could hear someone breathing, ever so faintly. Was there someone in the room with him, he wondered?

“Who’s there?” he growled but only silence greeted him.

Getting to his feet, he was about to walk over to the window and shut it when he heard a scraping noise.

“Who’s there, I said?” he asked again but with far less conviction in his voice this time.

Someone chuckled in the darkness and he became rooted to the spot as something rose from the armchair in one corner and came towards him. He wanted to run but his feet were made of lead. Then it was before him and he went to scream as he smelt the foul breath on his face, but he could not because the talons that gripped his throat had crushed his voice box. Then his brain exploded with the pain as his chest was ripped apart and his body flayed by razor sharp claws.

At that moment in another part of the Villa, Doctor Nieuwhof, accompanied by two guards, made his way to the room where the body of Lechaim was being kept. The two men that escorted him could smell the alcohol on his breath and were disgusted by it. They were part of Oscar Bar's new schutzstaffel, the original corp being founded in 1925 by Adolf Hitler as a small black-uniformed bodyguard. Oscar Bar's new SS no longer wore the black uniforms that would have aroused suspicion but were instead dressed in grey uniforms with 'Bar Security Services' insignias to mask their real intent. One of the auxiliary services that the holding company, Bar Industries, provided was surveillance and security for private enterprise; another infiltration method Oscar Bar employed with ever increasing success.

The members of this elite body prided themselves on their fitness and physical prowess, so the doctor's obvious bodily degeneration was repugnant to the big burly men that now watched him as he swung the bookcase back.

The doctor himself was oblivious to their contempt. After all, they were there merely to carry the body down to the cellar and merited no more consideration than one gives any servants.

The room was cold and the doctor shivered as he stepped forward.

Both men removed the straps of their Heckler and Koch USP .45 pistols, with their snap-on lasers and lights, from their shoulders and placed the weapons on the table. They would only get in the way when they carried the body down.

"He's gone!" Nieuwhof exclaimed and he stood back. Both men checked for themselves but there was no body.

"Get everybody up! The body has been removed. Search everywhere! Someone's penetrated our security!"

“Well! Move yourselves!” the doctor urged as the two men stood looking at him. “There’s no time to lose!”

They ran from the room leaving the doctor alone. Reaching for the wall phone, he waited for a response at the other end.

“Rubin! Security has been breached! The Captain’s body is missing! Get your men up and keep your eyes peeled.! Anything showing up on camera?”

The doctor listened but it was not the answer he wanted. “Okay! If something does, let me know immediately! I’ll be here in the Bishop’s study.”

He then replaced the phone and walked over to the door, locked it, and turned around.

“Uhh! “ he exclaimed in fear as he saw him standing there. “ But you, re dead!”

“Am I?” The other man said and gave a little laugh which sent a wave of fear through the doctor. ”But then I could have told you that!”

The doctor did not hear him, however, because his eyes were fixed on what the other was holding in one of his hands, the blood dripping from it onto the carpet.

The man approached and held it up to Doctor Nieuwhof’s face.

“John Devlin was always a heartless man, don’t you think!”

Two men, guns drawn, part of the group searching the house for intruders, were walking by the study door when the screaming began.

”Christ! What’s that?” one exclaimed as they looked towards the door. They tried opening it but found it locked.

Others appeared in the hallway and then the screaming stopped and there was a heavy silence.

They stood aside as a man pushed his way through.

“What’s going on!” Rubin demanded. Then he remembered that Doctor Nieuhof was in the study. “Well!” he said turning to one of the men. “Do you need an invitation? Shoot the fucking lock off!”

“Shit” a man behind him exclaimed and Rubin, turning around, saw that he was staring down.

When he looked down on the floor he saw the reason for the man’s consternation. A heavy flow of blood was seeping under the door, staining the thick white carpet red as it did so.

Chapter 49

TONY WRIGHT'S RECEIVER had gone dead at twenty minutes to two that afternoon. It could, of course, have been a malfunction but he had to assume the worst. His fears had been realized shortly after when the security around the estate suddenly intensified, and he had only just managed to make his escape.

Now, on his return under cover of darkness, he patrolled the perimeter and reluctantly concluded that it would be impossible to penetrate the estate without being observed. The surveillance equipment in evidence and the many security guards with dogs had negated even his considerable skills. Further, there was a full moon to complicate things even more.

Regaining his position in the small copse of trees that had been his vantage point that afternoon he looked at his watch which showed that in less than an hour, it would be midnight. Crouching down, he felt that he had little choice but to contact SAS headquarters in England for further instructions. In his heart he knew though that there was little anyone could do to help Lechaim. The estate was Church property and, further, it was situated on foreign soil so the SAS, other than covertly, would not be able to assist.

Frustrated, after hours of waiting, he had just decided to break cover when he saw the Villa illuminate as lights starting coming on everywhere. Could it be that the building was being searched? If so, it might well mean that they were searching for Lechaim which meant that he was still alive. Some minutes passed by and then the sound of gunfire cut the air. Suddenly the building was thrown into darkness and Tony brought his night glasses to his eyes to see what was going on. The

blackened windows of the building were being lit up in places by flashes as muzzles discharged, and he could hear the familiar sound of the automatics as they spat staccato and prolonged bursts. Lights started to appear again in some windows but were immediately extinguished as the battle raged within.

From where he was located, Tony Wright knew that he could do nothing to intervene. His trusty SIG-Sauer P226 pistol would be no match for such firepower. It left him with little choice but to wait out the drama. It ate at him though that he was powerless to help his friend, who, he guessed, was at the heart of the fire storm. Dogs could be heard barking and men shouting as the struggle raged for ten or so minutes before the Villa and its surrounds fell silent.

Hesitating no longer, Tony drew his gun and ran down to, and then along the electrified fence to the main entrance. Security guards at the gate were no longer in evidence and he started in, the sound of police sirens in the distance warning him that he did not have much time. Then he pulled up as he saw a figure coming towards him out of the swirling ground mist.

“Lechaim! Are you all right?” Tony asked anxiously when the men met. Lechaim was completely naked, his body covered in blood from head to foot.

Lechaim seemed to Tony’s ears, oddly detached as he replied. “Yes! Why shouldn’t I be?”

“What have you got there?” Tony asked as his attention turned to the two plastic bags Lechaim was carrying in each hand.

“Just some souvenirs of the newly departed!”

Tony reeled back in horror as Lechaim opened one for him, exposing its contents.

Chapter 50

THE VALLEY ITSELF like the many others that had been furrowed in this part of the country had over the centuries served as a passageway through the Alps leading to the east and southeast of Europe, and even, in the case of medieval pilgrims and crusaders, to the Holy Land. Amidst lofty peaks, deep within the valley, Bar Computer Industries lay snugly nestled this particular morning in a deep blanket of snow. Ten miles away in the city of Saltzbug, the capital of Salzburg Bundesland in north-central Austria, there had been no falls of snow in the last few days whilst here in the valley it had been falling continuously. The forests of spruce, larch, and beech, below the tree line on the mountain slopes were grateful, however, that the blizzard had finally relented for they were tired of bowing under the weight of their white canopies. Now, the sun had broken through and the white wet carpet glistened as it began to melt, be it ever so slowly.

Oscar Bar looked out of his office window at the curve of the valley set among some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the world, but his mind was elsewhere. The events that had taken place at the Villa dEste in Tivoli in the last forty-eight hours were his prime concern. He knew, of course, that Captain Lewis was still alive, and was the one responsible for the mayhem although his SAS contact had not been able to obtain any other information yet. Twenty-two employees of Bar Security Services in Italy had been killed before the rest, like the servants and clerics that had been resident at the Villa, had run away. By all accounts, it had been a massacre of even larger proportions than the abbey attack in Ireland last year and the same man was once again involved. How could that be, he

wondered. His men had been highly trained and were armed with the latest weapons, yet one man had slaughtered them. Of course, as far as the world was concerned it had been an attack by a group of Middle East terrorists, possibly Palestinian. They were always good scapegoats for attacks of this order. The Italian police would have to be persuaded but this should not present a problem. After all the organization had people in high places in Italy as it did elsewhere in the world. No, the main concern at this time was the elimination of Captain Lewis, Captain Wright and Monsignor Cronin before they could expose Cardinal Tsana and the rest of the organisation.

The muffled roar of an avalanche in the distance distracted Oscar Bar but the noise lasted only a few seconds. The German designers of the largely underground complex he had erected for his grand design had assured him that avalanches would pose no danger. *“Too far away from the main slopes, Herr Director! Anyway, avalanches do not go up hill.”*

The glint of something on the far slope caught his eye and he made out the tiny figure of a skier farther down the valley. What some people will do for enjoyment, he mused as he turned away from the window and walked over to the executive leather chair set behind a large highly polished cedar desk. The desk itself was bare except for a small desk calendar and his Filofax which was placed to one side. On the side return the monitor of his lap top computer was bursting with stars indicating that his screen saver was in operation. Placing his hand on the mouse, the screen once more displayed the spreadsheet he had been working on. The financial data that he had previously entered beckoned, but his mind kept wandering back to Captain Lewis.

Not far away Captain Anthony Wright had worries of his own as he stood training his binoculars on the factory complex below. He shifted his gaze to the man approaching on skis and stepped out from behind the spruce tree waving his arm to attract the skier's attention.

"There you are!" Major John Carter exclaimed as he puffed up the last few feet. "God, I'm getting out of condition!"

Both men were dressed alike in close-fitting, heavy boots of leather held firmly by bindings, with ski pants and tops to protect them from the cold, over which they wore white camouflage suits.

"Too much time behind a desk!" Tony replied as he turned off his direction beacon and shook the other man's hand. "I'm surprised the Colonel sent you!"

The Major removed his skis and stood them upright in the snow next to Tony's as he replied.

"When you said that you had information that couldn't be transmitted in case of interception, the Colonel thought he'd better send me just to be on the safe side!"

Tony nodded his agreement. Who better than the Colonel's close friend and confidant, he thought. He then raised his binoculars back to his eyes and directed his attention once more on the works below.

"And what is this vital information that you have?"

"It's to do with Cardinal Tsana and a man named Oscar Bar. That's his factory below!"

"What about them?"

Lechaim didn't give me all the details but it seems that this Oscar Bar has some sort of plan to cause chaos to the computer systems of the world sometime in the future and the Cardinal is somehow tied in!"

"It all seems rather fantastic! How did Lechaim learn of this!"

"He wouldn't say!" Tony said as he lowered his binoculars. "One thing is for certain though! Cardinal Tsana is bad news! He tried to kill Lechaim at the Villa. What's more, those armed security guards surrounding the Villa suggest that the Cardinal is linked to something pretty big!"

"Twenty-two less security men now!" the Major said. "Lechaim's body count is going up!"

"Hmm, quite!" Tony muttered as he raised his glasses again."

"Are you sure it's quite safe around here? I heard an avalanche on the way up."

"No! It's bloody dangerous but we've little choice, I'm afraid!" Tony responded with a smile on his face. Danger always gave him that extra edge.

"You should have been here when the blizzard was blowing!"

The conditions only reinforced Tony's hatred of the cold and instilled in him a constant longing for warmer climates.

"And where is Lechaim now?" the Major asked

"Lechaim is about to pay Herr Bar a visit!"

"Has he taken leave of his senses?"

"Probably!" Tony replied and he was only half joking. Certainly the man that had emerged from the Villa forty-eight hours before was not the same Lechaim Lewis that he had known all these years. Whilst nothing had changed in his physical appearance, he did not act or react as Lechaim use to, and his friend of old would never have shown the same callous disrespect for the dead. It seemed so unnecessary and out of character. The old Lechaim would certainly have told him

everything that had taken place at the villa. Could it be that his friend was suffering some form of breakdown, trauma, stress perhaps. Yet, it seemed so improbable, knowing Lechaim as he did.

“What has he done with Monsignor Cronin?”

“Beats me! Refuses to say!”

Major Carter considered Tony’s words for a moment.

“There he is!” Tony exclaimed, “Here! see for yourself!”

The Major took the glasses and watched as a taxi made its way along the road below. Sure enough, when it stopped before the gates of the factory and a man got out, the Major could see that it was Lechaim.

“It’s Lechaim all right!” Major Carter said as he handed the glasses back.

Tony put the glasses to his eyes and watched as Lechaim walked towards the main gates while the taxi made its way painfully back along the recently ploughed road.

“Crazy!” the major said.

“There might be some logic in what he’s doing! If this man, Oscar Bar, has nothing to fear then he will allow Lechaim to leave freely. If he has got something to hide, then Lechaim will know about it soon enough!”

“And whose idea was that!”

Tony grinned. “Who do you think!”

Below, the security guard at the gate, one of Oscar Bar’s elite, stared in amazement at the tall man walking towards him, not because of his appearance, but because of the way he was inappropriately dressed for the conditions. Although it was freezing the man wore only a pair of beige slacks, a pair of brown leather shoes, and a blue open neck shirt. What a

dumbkauf, he thought, as he greeted the stranger, noting the package that the man carried.

“What can I do for you, sir!” the young guard said.

In German the man said, “I would like to see Herr Oscar Bar please!”

“Do you have an appointment, sir?” the guard replied in German.

“No, but I think he’ll see me. Just tell him the Captain’s here, there’s a good fellow”

The man looked familiar but he wasn’t sure. He was German, of course. His German was too good to be otherwise.

“If you wait one moment, sir, I’ll see whether Herr Bar will see you! Oh! And by the way, sir, that package will have to go through our surveillance system!”

“Expecting trouble?” the tall man asked and then added, as he saw the guard stiffen, “Don’t worry, nothing will show up, I can assure you!”

The guard took the package off Lechaim and went into his box where he rang Oscar Bar’s secretary’s who put him through.

Oscar Barr was pondering the spreadsheet on his computer when his internal phone rang.

“Yes!”

“Captain Who?”

The guard on the other end paused for a moment and then poked his head out of his box and said, “Mr Barr wants to know your name please!”

“Oh! Captain Lewis will do!”

When the guard spoke down the phone again, he heard Oscar Barr reply, “Wait a moment!”

Oscar Bar placed his hand over the mouthpiece - he needed time to think. He knew, of course, that Captain Lewis was still alive. He also knew about the destruction at the Villa, hence Cardinal Tsana's reason for returning home so quickly. His SAS contact had fully briefed him about such by telephone the night before. What was the Captain doing here now? How did the Captain know of the connection between him and the Cardinal. Had he followed the Cardinal here? Was that it? If so, what did he want? These and other questions were racing around in his head. He knew there was only one way to find out so he spoke into the mouthpiece again.

"Have the Captain shown to my office, would you please!"

He then rang internal security. "I want a surveillance team with armed men in place immediately!"

Some ten minutes later Oscar Bar used his internal phone again.

"Please ask Captain Lewis to come in, Helga!"

He recognized the man that entered at once. It was indeed the legendary Captain Lewis, even more impressive in the flesh. His heart was thumping as he walked forward with his hand outstretched to greet the man.

"Oscar Bar!"

"I know who you are!" the other man replied coldly. Ignoring Oscar Barr's outstretched hand, his visitor walked over to the window and promptly sat down in a chair situated there, the package on his lap.

Extraordinary, Oscar Bar thought. What impertinence, but before he could object the man in the chair spoke again, "The scenery is beautiful, is it not Herr Bar!"

These English were indeed a peculiar lot, Oscar Bar decided and then he realized with a shock that the man was speaking in fluent German. But how could that be! Captain Lewis was not bilingual as far as he was aware. Oscar Bar decided to ignore the other man's rudeness and be as cordial as he could.

"Your German is remarkably good!"

"I speak all languages, Herr Bar!"

Ridiculous man, Oscar Bar thought and what arrogance. He, Oscar Bar, would show this fool what being multilingual meant for he could speak some eight languages. He said in French, "And what is it you want of me?"

The man in perfect French replied, "Your death of course!" Had he heard right, Oscar Bar wondered.

In Cantonese, he asked, "Why!"

In perfect Cantonese, the man said, "Like your father, you are evil and must be stopped, but more than that, you have corrupted the house of the Lord!"

This man whom he had read so much about was a lunatic, but then again how did he know about his father. Only three people in the world knew that he was the son of Adolf Hitler.

In Russian, Oscar Bar asked, "And what do you know about my father?"

The man in the chair pointed out the window at the distant peaks and replied in perfect Russian, "Over there in Berchtesgaden, on the Obersalzberg, 1,640 feet above the town your father had a chalet along with Hermann Goring, Martin Bormann, and a few other Nazi leaders!"

"Ridiculous!"

"Your father lived there in his private retreat on top of the mountain, his so called 'Eagle's Nest' which is now a teahouse.

It seems rather appropriate, don't you think? About the teahouse, I mean!"

Oscar Bar was no longer offended or amused, he was now afraid. Tugging at the silk red handkerchief in his breast pocket, he gave the signal and glanced at one of the security cameras in the room as he did so. The three men in the next room that had been observing them both on their screens had been waiting for just such a signal, and they burst into the office with their guns at the ready.

"My, my, Herr Bar. Such hospitality!" his visitor said.

Oscar Bar could afford to relax now that he had protection. The Captain knew who he was so he would never leave here alive but who else knew? He would have to find out if he could. Meanwhile, he would have to amuse this madman a little further in order to gleam as much information as he could.

"I'm afraid, Captain, you seem to have me confused with someone else!"

"I think not! You're Oscar Bar and you intend to create a new world order by destroying the old with your 'Paris Virus' and your 'Apollo 2000' Computer! Rather good, I thought, that pointed reference to Greek mythology."

The sweat broke out on Oscar Bar forehead and he could feel the dampness beneath his armpits!"

"But, but how do you know all this?"

"It is my business to know these things!"

"But you're just a Captain in the British army, what would you know!"

"I'm no Captain, Herr Bar!" and the man gave a laugh that made Oscar Bar's blood run cold. "Ah, but you have me confused with Captain Lewis, is that it?"

For one of the very few times in his life Oscar Bar was at a loss for words and could only stare at the man that smiled at him from his chair by the window.

The man kept smiling as he then said, "I see that we do not have the pleasure of Cardinal Tsana's company! Another day perhaps!"

Oscar Bar was now envying the Cardinal who had been visiting the previous day and would be arriving back in Rome at just about this time.

"Oh! but I was almost forgetting! Doctor Nieuwhof sends his regrets! He was required elsewhere you won't be seeing him again! "

"Doctor Nieuwhof!" Oscar Bar could only echo.

"But he's here in the flesh so to speak! Here's a little token of his appreciation!" With that the man got up and walked across to Oscar Bar's desk and placed the package there. Then he returned to his chair by the window.

"What's that?"

"Why, a small token of the Doctor's esteem!"

"Has it been through a metal detector?" Oscar asked turning to one of the security guards in the room.

"Yes, Herr Bar!" he replied.

"Open it then!"

The guard wished he had kept his mouth shut as he took out his Swiss army knife and cut the tape around the package. The brown paper fell away to reveal a white cardboard box underneath. Raising the lid slowly, he lifted the clear white plastic bag out and immediately dropped it, springing back in alarm.

Meanwhile, on the slope above the two men waited patiently. Lechaim had refused to wear a wire so they had no way of knowing what was going on below.

“When do you expect him to come out!” the Major asked although he knew the question was a little pointless.

“Who know!” Tony replied.

The Major then said without thinking, “All this fuss over a financial report!”

Tony lowered his glasses and stood staring at Major Carter. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“The Monsignor’s financial report! Didn’t Lechaim mention it to you?”

Tony’s hand closed over the butt of his pistol.

“Don’t try it, Tony! I’m not as good as you with this but I’m pretty good all the same.

“I see you still prefer the old Browning High Power!” Tony said trying not to sound surprised as he stared down the barrel of the Major’s gun.

“It’s served me well enough in the past. Saw little reason to change now!”

Lechaim had mentioned the Monsignor’s financial report to Tony but no one else on their side knew about it yet.

“I never told headquarters about the financial report. I gather you’re working for the other side?”

“Something like that! Silly slip of mine, that, I must be getting old!”

“Money?”

“Money!” the major confirmed. “My wife has expensive taste!”

Tony had only met the major's wife the one time and that was at their wedding. He had not liked her then and he had even more reason to dislike her now.

"Are you going to kill me!"

"Something like that!"

"I see!" Tony replied looking for a way out but he knew there was none. The major was as equally adept as he and was aware of all the tricks. So it has come to this, at last, Tony thought as he stared at the Major - that lonely death in a foreign field.

Below in the valley, a drama was also being played out in Oscar Bar's office.

Through the plastic bag lying on the floor the men could see what looked like the inner tube of a large ball marinated in blood and what looked like....

Oscar Bar's eyes widened as he exclaimed fearfully. "What is it?"

"The good doctor had been abusing his liver for years so I decided to take it back!" Then his countenance changed and the man sitting in the chair no longer smiled. "I threw in John Devlin's eyes and heart for good measure. If thy eye offend thee, pluck it out!"

Oscar Bar paled as he gaped in horror mingled with fascination at the doctor's liver finally freed from its years of maltreatment, the heart and the pair of abandoned eyeballs that John Devlin had once misused.

None of them could quite believe what was happening - it was inhuman, barbaric, pitiless. The three security men in the room were now as apprehensive as Oscar Bar and their hands tightened around their weapons. Madmen, they knew, were

unpredictable and someone could be hurt - it could be one of them.

The man spoke again. "I thought you would like these mementoos, so to speak!"

"Who are you?" Oscar Bar asked in a voice that he could barely control.

"I am death!" the man laughed.

Oscar Bar laughed back in a show of bravado, exclaiming "You're quite mad, Captain!"

The man in the chair chuckled, "Do you really think so?"

The sound of gunfire echoing along the valley startled them and they forgot the man in the chair for a moment as they turned to look out the large glass windows of Oscar Bar's office to the snow covered slopes beyond.

"You!" Oscar Bar ordered one of them. "Go and find out what those shots were!"

Before the man could respond, however, they all heard it - faint at first like rolling thunder in the distance.

"What's that?" one of the security men asked.

"It's an avalanche!" Oscar Bar replied. He had heard many in the valley and he was not concerned.

"If ye shall say unto the mountain, be thou removed and be thou cast down, it shall be done if your faith be strong enough," the man in the chair rasped and they turned to look at him. He stood up and they all drew back in fear. Walking to the centre of the room, the man turned and pointed to the panaramic view of the countryside that the windows afforded. In a voice without emotion, he declared, "So it is written, so it shall be!" They turned to look out once more and saw what he was pointing to - a tidal wave of snow descending down the valley towards them.

The noise of the belching Browning High Power pistol as Major Carter shot Tony Wright between the eyes, blowing the back of his head out, had been enough to put the mass in motion. The great weight of snow that had fallen in the past days began to gain momentum as it picked up rocks and earth, grinding everything as it went. The avalanche was all consuming as it rolled down the mountain side, ripping out trees, crushing and burying everything in its path including the body of Tony Wright. It devoured Major Carter merely as an afterthought.

His laughter filled their ears now and they turned as one to confront him. His mouth was stretched wide as he stood there taunting them. At that moment, it seemed to the men in the room that he was death personified. The roaring mingled with the noise of cracking glass and splintered wood was pounding in their ears but they could not hear it. Even while death was enfolding them all, they poured bullets into their nemesis until the snow overwhelmed them, and he that was death carried them away.

The young guard on the gate had been the first to witness the mountain of snow hurling across the valley and he was the first in the complex to die. The white death tore over the electrified fences and descended on the outbuildings and administrative offices. Chewing and spitting out everything in its way, it swept aside the brick and concrete structures, exploding the sea of glass, before it cantered on without pausing until finally spent, it came to rest. Beneath its thick shroud of white, the underground laboratories and workshops, with their hundreds of workers specializing in everything to do with the manufacture of computer based technology, lay buried, entombed without hope.

Days later a rescue worker peering through a sheet of ice beneath his feet came across the body of Oscar Bar which had miraculously escaped being crushed. The dead fish eyes peering back through the ice window seemed to be in denial. Indelibly printed in the dead brain cells of that frozen corpse were the last thoughts Oscar Bar's brain ever registered.

"Too far away from the main slopes, Herr Director! Anyway, avalanches do not go up hill."

As the rescue worker went to get the equipment to remove the ice man, an expert in his field, standing close by, was offering an opinion to his colleague .

"I believe it was a combination of a wet and dry avalanche!"

"Impossible!" his colleague answered.

They both knew, of course, the difference between the two. Their lecture at the University they had attended years before when they were students together had been succinct enough.

"The wet snow avalanche is perhaps the most dangerous because of its great weight, heavy texture, and tendency to solidify as soon as it stops moving. The dry type, however, is also dangerous because its entraining of great amounts of air makes it act like a fluid; this kind of avalanche may flow up the opposite side of a narrow valley."

Oscar Bar's German designers knew of this when they designed the complex for Oscar Barr. However, they were certain that German knows how and ingenuity could overcome such problems. Such is the folly of human kind.

Chapter 51

CARDINAL TSANA ROSE from his chair, “If that is all Inspector?”

“For now, your Eminence!” the Inspector answered as he too rose taking his cue from the Cardinal. “I’ll let you know as soon as something develops!”

“I would appreciate that!” the Cardinal replied as he accompanied the policeman to the door. When he was alone again, he returned to his chair, a winged, green leather antique that had been around longer than the cardinal had. It had been built for comfort and wore the test of time well.

The room he was in acted as his office and it was also the room where he received people. The adjoining one served as his living quarters when he worked late. Both rooms were lavishly appointed with ornate plastered ceilings from which crystal chandeliers were suspended. The walls of this, his office, were draped in fine tapestries, and works of art bedecked the shiny wooden panelling. A thick expensive Italian carpet covered most of the floor and the bare boards that were exposed at the carpet’s edges were highly polished. The fire that burned in the white ornate fireplace at one end of the room was at this moment trying valiantly to warm the large interior but it was only partly successful. The Cardinal drew his chair closer to the hearth and basked in the warmth of the flames. It was warm enough outside in the sun but it was still winter and he needed to get the chill of the Austrian Alps out of his bones

Settling back in the chair, he thought long and hard about the events that had taken place at the Villa in his absence. The scene there had been described to him by the inspector as one of carnage. Quite beyond belief, he had been told. Among the

dead, were Monsignor Cronin and Doctor Nieuwhof, both men having been ripped apart. The inspector had questioned him relentlessly about the type of security the Cardinal had on his estate. Had he been expecting trouble? If not, why was he using armed men with the latest weapons at their disposal? Was the Cardinal aware that he had violated a number of by-laws by using such force? And so it went on but the Cardinal was not unduly concerned by the inspector's interrogation. The organization could hush it up as it always did. No, the thing that vexed him the most was the fate of Monsignor Cronin for, unlike the inspector who had no idea that Michael Cronin's look-alike was also staying at the Villa, the Cardinal knew that the supposed body of Michael Cronin could, in fact, be that of John Devlin. After all the men were identical in appearance. All the bodies found at the Villa had been identified which meant that either Cronin or Devlin had escaped. That was the only logical explanation. If John Devlin had survived, then he would be easy enough to deal with, but, on the other hand, if the Monsignor were the one that escaped, then he was a real threat to the future of the organisation.

There was something else that troubled the Cardinal even more. Why was Captain Lewis still alive? If Doctor Nieuwhof had done his work well then surely Captain Lewis should be dead. After all, the doctor was supposed to be an expert in such matters so what went wrong. If the destruction at the Villa were not proof enough that Captain Lewis still lived, for it bore all the marks of his handiwork, Oscar Bar's contact in the SAS had supplied the final confirmation. Was Captain Lewis a mortal man or was he something else? The Cardinal held no belief in the hereafter or all religious dogma he was constantly

bombarded with. Yet, there was something about Captain Lewis' ability to survive that was becoming unnerving.

He suddenly realized how tired he was. Although it was only three-thirty in the afternoon, it had already been a long day. His flight from Austria, the happenings at the Villa, his confrontation with the inspector, had wearied him and he found he could hardly keep his eyes open. He gave in to his weariness and closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the fire flow over him like a soothing balm.

The deafening roar of German armour as it rolled by in the mud drowned out the cries coming from the burning church.

"One tried to escape, sir!"

Steiner looked at the girl the corporal had hold of by the scruff of the neck. She was a peasant girl of ten or so years with terrified eyes, and a coarse ugly face that seemed to fit most of the people in the district.

"Throw her back then!"

The corporal looked at him for approval. "Would it be all right if I ..?"

He knew what the soldier wanted for it was written on his face and the bulge in his trousers was a further indicator.

It was good to give his men a morsel or two from time to time. It kept them interested, so to speak.

"Yes, very well!" he said and waved the pair away. He then watched with cool detachment as the soldier took the girl over to the side of the road. A ring of soldiers started to gather as the corporal ripped the girl's undergarments off and undid his fly. Steiner could not see much of what was going on because the men around the pair obscured his view but from the grunts and cries of frustration it appeared that the corporal

was not having much success entering her hairless belly. The girl's screams were lost among the crowd of chanting and jeering men as they mocked the ineffectual soldier, until, suddenly, a piercing cry carried to him on the wind as the corporal finally gained entry. The men's jeering turned to cheering as the corporal plunged in and out, grunting noises emanating from his lips as he took her over and over.

Steiner smiled and turned away. Another victory for the Wehrmacht, but then there had been plenty of those already. This scorched earth policy of the Russians, however, was beginning to have its effects. His men were hungry and their morale was low which was why he had staged this church outing for them. He glanced towards the building now and watched the sparkes from its burning roof shoot into the air, noting casually that the cries from inside had now ceased.

God! But it was cold! The Russian Steppes were inhospitable at the best of times, but in winter they were fit only for Russians, he decided as he drew nearer the flames. Lost in the warmth, the playful laughter behind him brought him back to earth and he turned once more. A number of his men were now pulling the girl around like dogs fighting over a bone. It was too cold to expose flesh for very long in this weather and the bundle they were fighting over, Steiner saw, was beginning to freeze. Her skin was turning blue and his men would soon find her offerings below the waist less than appetizing. One way or the other, it was of no concern to him.

Turning back to face the church, he moved even closer to make the most of the heat while it lasted. Soon, he knew, they would all have to move up the road to Leningrad and the fire would then be but a pleasant memory.

"Come on, old chap! Wake up! You're having a dream!"

He slowly opened his eyes as he felt the hand on his knee and then leapt out of his chair when he saw who it was.

“You!” he exclaimed.”

The other man smiled pleasantly. “Yes, me!” he replied

“The poison? How..”

“Ah, Niewuhof’s little treat you mean! Foul stuff! Didn’t like it one bit!”

Steiner could only stare in amazement.

“You seem at a loss for words, Steiner! It’s not like you at all!”

“Why do you call me that?” he asked when he finally found his voice.

“Because you are Wolfgang Steiner, are you not? Incidentally, weren’t you dreaming of your glory days on the Russian front, just then?”

“But,” he stammered, “how did you know that?”

The tall blond man who stood before him came nearer and the Cardinal shrank back against the wall. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that his desk was within reach and he made a lunge for it. The other man did not try to stop him even while he fumbled with the drawers. Instead, the tall man smiled and watched in admusement as Steiner searched for his gun.

“Bottom drawer, I believe!” the other man said.

Steiner found the bottom drawer locked, then he remembered that he had locked it himself, and he began fumbling in his pockets for the keys while the other man looked on in amusement.

“You are in a state, Steiner! Calm yourself.”

Steiner could not find his keys, however, and started to panic wildly.

“Are these them?” the other man asked and threw a bunch of keys through the air.

They landed at Steiner’s feet and he picked them up greedily. With relief, Steiner found the P228 Beretta 9mm handgun sitting where he had left it and brought it out.

“Safety catch! Remember your training please!”

Steiner relaxed a little as he took off the safety catch.

“How did you escape from the Villa, Captain Lewis!”

Captain Lewis!” the other man inquired. “No, I’m afraid not! You’ve got me mixed up with someone else!”

Steiner was puzzled by the Captain’s confidence and his strange behaviour.

“By the way, that weapon’s useless! It won’t fire!”

“You’re mad, Captain!”

My! my! the impression I leave on people! Herr Oscar Bar and his associates thought that I was mad as well, but I’m inclined to believe that it was they who were so! Still, it’s rather disrespectful to speak ill of the dead, don’t you think!”

“Dead?”

“Oh, did I not mention. Mother earth decided to swallow up Oscar and his mad dream of world conquest, much the same way that his father was swallowed up by Mother Russia, those terrible winters and all that! But then I needn’t tell you about Russia! You are an expert on that score aren’t you! Or at least in burning Russian churches with people in them!”

The Cardinal was stung by the man’s words. He seemed to know everything, the Cardinal thought. Then the room began to tremble and he clutched at the table for support but it too was bouncing wildly. It lasted for only a few seconds but it terrified him.

“What was that?” he gasped.

‘Mother nature is still upset, I’m afraid!’

The Cardinal had all he could stand and he squeezed the trigger but nothing happened.

“Safety catch!” the other man exclaimed as if trying to help.

The Cardinal did not need to be reminded. He had already taken it off once. Taking it off again, it flicked back to the off position of its own accord.

“You’re wasting your time. It won’t work I’m afraid! Watch!”

The man pointed to the chair the Cardinal had been sleeping in minutes before. It began to rise slowly into the air and then soared around the room as if radio controlled while the man directed it with his finger. Finally, he dropped his finger as if bored with the demonstration and it crashed back to the floor on the spot it had originally been, where it spun around to face them.

“Who are you?” Steiner asked in a quavering voice.

“I am the evil that exists in the hearts of men’s. In reality I am but one instrument of the Almighty. But one sword to smite the wicked!

“But I am a Cardinal of Rome! You dare to threaten me?”

“The man laughed as he replied, “Why not? After all you dare to insult the Church by claiming to be a part of it, do you not? By so doing, you insult the Almighty!” He paused before he spoke again.

“Is it not strange that the name ‘Lechaim’ can be rearranged to spell ‘Michael’, and is it not strange that the name ‘Tsana’ can be rearranged to spell ‘Satan’“

Steiner was stunned for it had never occurred to him despite his own fascination with figures and numbers.

“Yes, it is surprising that you never saw the obvious before your very eyes, but your obsession with certain numbers made you myopic, I fear?”

The man was reading his mind, Steiner realized and he cringed.

The man moved nearer still until the Cardinal could feel the other's breath on his face – it was foul. Tsana was paralysed with fear and his limbs wouldn't function even though his instincts were telling him to run.

The man held up his hand before Steiner who watched transfixed as the nails on the man's fingers grew into long talons. Steiner's eyes widened in horror as the man's face changed into a screaming skull from which maggots pored forth, then Steiner felt the talons ripping into his chest and he screamed and kept on screaming.

“Let no man affront God!” the skull roared as the Cardinal's heart was torn out. Holding the still beating hollow muscular organ with its trailing severed arteries and veins up to heaven, the spectre cried aloud,

“So perish all that offend Almighty God!”

Steiner couldn't take his eyes off his pulsating bloody organ that the other held in his hand and watched in horror as it was devoured before his eyes.

“Your Eminence!” the voice said insistently in his ear.

“Your Eminence!” the voice persisted and he was suddenly awake!

His man servant, Francesco, was tugging at his sleeve.

“What is it?” Cardinal Tsana asked as he realized where he was. The sweat was running off his body and he shuddered as he remembered the nightmare.

“The Holy Father is dead, your Eminence!” the other man said. “The Holy Father is dead!” Francesco was crying as he added, “I thought you should know right away!”

Chapter 52

ITS MEDIEVAL AND renaissance boundary walls basked beneath a February sky that was blue unlike its northern counterpart that was still in a deep depression. Within this enclave of Rome, situated on the west bank of the Tiber River, the self-satisfied inhabitants of the ecclesiastical State went about their work as usual, be it secular or sacred. This miniature nation had every reason to be smug about their city within a city. After all, it contained within its walls its own telephone system, post office, radio station, an army of more than one hundred Swiss Guards, its own banking system and coinage, and a pharmacy to mention just a few. It detractors might argue that it still had to import such things as food and supplies, water, electricity, and gas, but so what. Where else would one find a State with no income tax, and no restriction on the import and export of funds?

The wealth within to any observer was self evident and undeniable. Although its cultural life had declined since the Renaissance when the Popes had been among the foremost patrons of the arts, it could still boast some of the world's greatest works of art. Why else would critics, artists, and countless tourist flock to its museums, or come to see the frescoes by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, the frescoes by Pinturicchio in the Borgia Apartment or Raphael's rooms.

If all this grandiloquence seemed at odds with its spiritual aspirations, its supporters would argue that the Holy Father could hardly be expected to live in a hovel. Like most societies, few, if any, could see the dissipation that was slowly but surely eating away at the very core of Peter's rock.

Within this bastion of the Church the pall of gloom that had settled of late was slowly but surely lifting as one Pope was laid to rest and another accepted in his place. In his private chambers the newly elected pontiff, Pope Symeon the First, was about to hold a private audience for those that had orchestrated his election, namely the Cardinals that were part of his inner clique.

“Good afternoon, your Holiness!” Cardinal Andretti said as he greeted the Pope and the others followed suit.”

“Please, gentlemen, relax!” Pope Symeon replied laughingly. We can cut the formalities among ourselves! Now, to things that matter!” He paused before continuing, “All in all, gentlemen, I think things have worked out very well”

Very well indeed!” Cardinal Fitz agreed rubbing his hands together in his customary way when he was pleased with himself. Only Cardinal Andretti, the one true priest among them, felt troubled. Despite his longing for the good life and all it entailed, the conspiracy they had entered into in order to elect Pope Symeon, formerly Cardinal Tsana, who was, in reality Wolfgang Steiner, seemed to be mocking God somehow. Cardinal Andretti could not put out of his mind that some dreadful divine retribution was about to befall them for this affront.

“Cheer up, Andretti!” Pope Symeon said as he saw the gloom on the man’s face. You should be elated. This is the moment we’ve all been waiting for! Nothing and nobody can stop us now!”

Cardinal Andretti was still not convinced. The morning had started badly for him when his closest companion, Obadiah, had suddenly gone berserk and attacked him. The cat’s claw marks on his face and arms were ample proof of the animal’s

aggression. It had then taken off and couldn't be found anywhere.

As if he needed reminding, Cardinal Fitz chose that moment to ask, "What happened to your face?"

Cardinal Fitz had been late for their meeting and therefore missed Andretti's earlier explanation for his appearance. It now appeared that he would have to explain it all again.

"His cat decided that he didn't like his master!" Cardinal Desmond chuckled as he interposed on Andretti's behalf.

"My cat attacked me!" Cardinal Andretti elaborated in an aggrieved tone. "I don't know what came over it!"

"It seems to be a day for odd happenings!" Cardinal Simons said.

"How so?" Cardinal Fitz asked.

"Walking across St. Peter's Square this morning, I noticed something very strange!"

"And what was that?" Pope Symeon enquired, his curiosity aroused with the rest.

"There were no pigeons about!" Cardinal Simons replied.

"Impossible!" Cardinal Desmond retorted.

"No! He's right, now I come to think about it!" Andretti exclaimed. "I too walked across the square and I saw none either."

"Enough of this!" Pope Symeon said. "We have far more important matters to discuss!"

He looked around at his colleagues as he continued. "Monsignor Cronin has surfaced at last! Apparently, he's returned to Ireland."

"Ireland?" Cardinal Andretti exclaimed.

"No Matter!" Pope Symeon explained. "He can't touch us now and he knows it. We have the power, he is nothing! His

report is in our hands and it has been destroyed.” Pope Symeon smiled as he recalled how easy it had been to extract the document from the firm of solicitors entrusted with it once he, the Pope, had explained that the Monsignor was not of sound mind. After all, who were they to doubt a Pope or deny his request for them to hand over the package the Monsignor had left in their care.

“One curious thing though!” Pope Symeon added. “It seems that my predecessor on his death bed made the Monsignor a Cardinal!”

“Ridiculous!” Father Fitz explained. “There’s no precedent!”

“A Pope makes his own precedents!” Cardinal Andretti remarked.

“Andretti’s right!” Pope Symeon said. “That is why I cannot rescind it.” Seeing the concern on their faces, he sought to reassure them.

“Have no fear, gentlemen, Michael Cronin will be taken care of once and for all, and this time there will be no Captain Lewis around to protect him.

“Ah! Captain Lewis!” Cardinal Desmond sighed. “What a man! Are you certain he’s dead?”

“He was last seen entering the premises of Barr Industries in Austria. No one came out of there alive!” Pope Symeon responded.

“Remember! Andretti interjected. “The man has nine lives!”

“Had nine lives!” Pope Symeon reminded him.

Still, Andretti was right enough about the Captain’s durability, Pope Symeon thought. The man had proved impossible to kill and it finally took a mountain of snow to do

the job for them. He had never been able to understand why Doctor Nieuwhof's poison hadn't killed him. The fact that he had been sighted in Austria and had been positively identified by the taxi driver that had driven him to Bar Industries was proof enough that he had been in the complex when the avalanche hit. However, no one, not even Captain Lewis, could possibly survive the avalanche that wiped out Oscar Barr and all that worked in his valley complex. No, undoubtedly the Captain was dead, the Pope decided, buried under the snow in Austria. As for the loss of Oscar Barr and his organization, what at first had seemed a major setback had been offset by his election as Pope. Now, he had unlimited scope and power and the wealth of the Church at his disposal to rebuild. The organization would be re-established, bigger and stronger than before, and he, Pope Symeon, would be its new leader. How apt, he thought to choose to be called Pope Symeon. The Church's first disciple had been a man named Simon and now he, Pope Symeon would complete the cycle.

"Can we turn the lights on please?" Cardinal Simons asked making everyone suddenly aware of how dark it had become outside.

"Certainly! Please do!" Pope Symeon said.

"It's black as night out there!" Cardinal Simons remarked, somewhat exageratingly, as he got to his feet and went over to switch on the lights.

“That’s better!” he said as the lights came on.

“Must be a storm on the way!” Cardinal Andretti muttered as Cardinal Simons rejoined the others at the long table in the middle of the room.

“Anyone for a drink?” Cardinal Desmond asked.

“Good idea!” Pope Symeon agreed. “Andretti! Could you phone for some drinks please!”

Cardinal Andretti got up and went over to the wall phone.

“Dead!” he exclaimed after trying vainly to get a response.

Cardinal Simons had a try. “He’s right! The phone’s not working! I’ll go and see what the problem is!”

While the others chatted among themselves, Cardinal Simons made his way to the large wooden double doors at the entrance to the room and tried them.

“They’re locked!” he said in surprise as he turned to the others.

“Bang on them!” Pope Symeon suggested. “Some fool outside has inadvertently locked us in!”

Cardinal Simon’s knocking was to no avail, however, and he soon began calling to attract someone’s attention.

“Where are the guards?” Cardinal Fitz wanted to know.

Where indeed, Pope Symeon wondered. The Swiss guards never left their post when they were on duty. Why, therefore, didn’t they respond?

“Christ!” Cardinal Simons exclaimed as the room was suddenly plunged into darkness. “That’s all we need, a power blackout!”

His blasphemy was lost on his colleagues who were uttering curses of their own as they sat at the conference table in the gloom. The room lit up as lightning flashed outside

followed moments later by the crash of thunder which reverberated through the seven hills of Rome like the hammer of Thor. The rain, not to be outdone, started to beat a steady ratta tat tat against the window panes, then it increased its tempo to a crescendo.

Cardinal Andretti rose from his seat at the table and went over to the window where he stood looking out at the driving rain and dark angry sky, the storm making him feel uneasy. In the Bible it mentioned that a storm such as this had developed at the moment Christ was crucified. Was this sudden tempest, he wondered, a sign of God's anger? After all he, along with the others, had committed the worst sin of all by conniving to have Pope Symeon, formerly Cardinal Tsana, elected to the highest office in the Church. The other men in the room, he knew, were Godless so the elements outside held no fears for them, but he, despite his sins, was a believer, and felt certain that there was a price to pay for their rapacity.

The other men in the room decided to follow Andretti's lead by joining him at the window, where they collectively stared in awe at the pyrotechnics that exploded above their heads. The angry dark sky, lit up intermittently as streaks of lightning flashed now and then in the distance. As they stood watching, the rain ceased its assault and the sun broke through the overcast casting a strange and unusual light over the city.

They gazed for some time, transfixed like moths around a flame, at the yellowish aura that seemed to permeate everywhere giving the buildings an eerie foreboding look.

"That's strange!" Cardinal Desmond suddenly exclaimed. "Look at the sun! It appears to be dancing!"

"An illusion!" Pope Symeon said.

“I think not!” Cardinal Andretti interjected as the sun began to dart in and out of the cloud cover.

“Most curious!” Cardinal Desmond said.

The sun’s dance continued for some time before it finally disappeared and they and the city were left in complete darkness for any semblance of daylight had departed with the sun.

It was Cardinal Desmond who first noticed it. “Look! There’s not a single light anywhere!” he remarked.

“Queer!” Cardinal Simons remarked. “You would think someone somewhere would have lit candles or something! Isn’t that what people do when there’s a power blackout?”

“Speaking of candles!” Pope Symeon said. “There are some in the cabinet!”

He left them for a moment and they heard him rumaging somewhere in the room.

“Ah! Here they are!” his voice came from the darkness and then he was back with them.

Cardinal Simons, the smoker among them, took out his lighter and lit the two long tapering candles set in candle holders that the pope held in his hands. Cardinals, Simons and Fitz took one each and they tried the doors once again. To their astonishment they opened easily.

“Guards! Guards! Pope Symeon yelled along the passage but the place was deserted and only his voice echoed back. The light from their candles flickered on the walls casting sinister shapes and all at once the passage seemed threatening and full of danger.

“I don’t like this!” Cardinal Andretti exclaimed in a frightened voice. They were all nervous now and the tension among them was marked.

“I’ll see if I can find someone!” Cardinal Simons said, somewhat boldly the others thought, and with that he went off, candle in hand down the corridor, before they thought to stop him. The others weren’t certain whether they should follow until the Cardinal had disappeared down the stairs they lay at the other end of the corridor.

“We’ll all go!” Pope Symeon quickly decided and they started after Cardinal Simons.

“Cardinal Simons! Wait!” Andretti cried out as they hurried their steps but there was only silence.

“Cardinal Simons!” Pope Symeon called out in support of Andretti but only their voices echoed back.

“Where is he?” Cardinal Desmond asked when they reached the bottom of the stairs.

They froze in their tracks as a piercing scream echoed through the shrouded building followed by a more stifled one. They all bunched together, their adrenalins pumping as they weighed the perils of going further.

“Quickly,!” Pope Symeon gasped as he started back up the stairs. They followed him in scrambling fashion up the stairs and along the passage until they reached the sanctuary of the room they had recently left. Coughing, wheezing, panting, they locked themselves inside by swinging over the long iron bolts on the doors. That’s when they noticed that someone was missing. “Where’s Cardinal Desmond?”, Pope Symeon asked.

“I thought he was with us!” Cardinal Fitz managed to squeeze out of his laboured lungs.

“This isn’t happening!” Andretti cried.

“Shut up!” Pope Symeon ordered. “I need time to think!”

“Think about what?” Andretti shrieked. “We’re dead men!”

Cardinal Fitz stepped forward, took the candlestick from Andretti's hand, set the flickering tallow on the table, and then slapped Andretti hard across the face. The Cardinal went over backwards and lay on the floor whimpering.

"You miserable weaking, Andretti! Get some balls!"

The others were surprised by Cardinal Fitz's brutality. Whilst he could be coarse in manner, he was normally a placid man and nothing seemed to faze him. Certainly, they had never seen him lose his temper before and his language had always been temperate until now.

However, they had little time to consider Cardinal Fitz's behaviour as someone or something began pounding on the doors they had just locked.

The men in the room without exception were afraid now but they had no where to run. The pounding stopped as quickly as it had begun and there was silence broken only by their heavy breathing .

"Who there?" the Pope cried through the wood. "Who's there, I say!"

"Who were you expecting?" a voice somewhere in the blackness behind them asked and they all spun around.

Someone was sitting at the far end of the table.

"It can't be!" the Pope gasped. "You're dead!"

The man ignored him but instead addressed himself to someone else.

"So we meet again!"

"It seems so!" Cardinal Fitz said.

"You've been busy!"

"Time waits for no man!"

"Man? I think not!"

“What is this foolishness?” Pope Symeon asked now that he had recovered his poise. He was still trying to fathom out how the Captain had survived the avalanche and further how he had entered the room without them seeing him. He was also puzzled by Cardinal Fitz’s familiarity with the Captain. Turning to Cardinal Fitz, he enquired sharply, “You know this man?”

Before Cardinal Fitz could reply, the man answered for him.

“Of course he knows me. We are old adversaries.” He paused for a moment. “Your colleague here is known by many names! He has many alias. Your familiar with one of course, that of Cardinal Fitz and before that, Martin Bormann, and before that! Well I could go on and on!”

Cardinal Fitz did not responded but his eyes glinted and a smile played around his lips.

“Martin Bormann!” Pope Symeon gasped. “Don’t be so ridiculous! I met Martin Bormann years ago! Cardinal Fitz is certainly not he! Besides Bormann would be over a hundred by now!”

“Plastic surgery! “But then you should know all about plastic surgery, Steiner. The late Doctor Wanke performed some on you just before you killed him or is your memory failing you?”

Pope Symeon paled when he heard this because the man before him had no way of knowing about his past or the part Doctor Wanke played in it.

“As for his age, yes, he’s certainly over one hundred! But then Cardinal Fitz is ageless. Isn’t that so, Cardinal?”

The Cardinal still said nothing.

Yes, gentlemen this,” he said pointing to Cardinal Fitz, “was formerly Martin Bormann, one of the most powerful party

leaders in Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler's closest lieutenant. Martin, in fact was the man behind the late Oscar Barr, who we all know was Hitler's bastard child. In fact it was Martin that nurtured the child when he was young. Isn't that so, Martin?"

Pope Symeon was still disbelieving. He remembered Bormann well. Indeed, how could he forget for Bormann had been a powerful influence in Nazi Germany. Hitler himself had appointed Bormann to fill the post of head of the party chancellery, succeeding Hess after the latter had made his quixotic flight to Scotland. Bormann thus became head of the administrative machinery of the Nazi Party, and through much intrigue, party infighting, and his shrewd manipulation of Hitler's weaknesses and eccentricities, he became a shadowy but extremely powerful presence in the Third Reich. He had controlled all acts of legislation and all party promotions and appointments, and he had a broad influence on domestic policy questions concerning internal security. Further, he controlled the personal access of others to Hitler and drew up the Führer's schedule and appointments calendar, insulating him from the independent counsel of his subordinates. Bormann had always been a rigid and unbending guardian of Nazi orthodoxy. He was also a major advocate of the persecution and extermination of Jews and Slavs, and he played a significant role in expanding the German slave labour program. He had disappeared from sight shortly after the death of Hitler, and it was presumed that he was either dead or in hiding. At war's end he had been indicted along with other Nazi leaders, on charges of war crimes and was found guilty and sentenced to death in absentia by the International Military Tribunal at Nuernberg. Rumours had circulated since that Bormann had escaped and was living in South America, possibly Paraguay. However, early in 1973 a

Berlin forensic expert established "with near certainty" that one of two skeletons unearthed during construction in West Berlin in December 1972 was that of Bormann, and on April 11, 1973, West German authorities had officially declared him dead. If this then were Martin Bormann, the world had indeed been deceived for a very long time.

The man was speaking again. "Don't you see, gentlemen! You have all been played like puppets. But then that's your strong point, isn't it?" he said, addressing himself to Cardinal Fitz this time.

The voice that answered was guttural, harsh, unyielding. "So it has come at last! But this time I will prevail for my power is strong. Man has made it so!"

"Yes, you are powerful now but are you powerful enough?"

"We shall see! We shall see! " he snarled back. "The plain of Esdraelon it will be then?"

The man sitting at the table answered, "Yes, the plain of Esdraelon it will be!"

Cardinal Fitz then turned on his heels and walked over to the doors, which swung open of their own accord, and then he was gone.

The Pope and Cardinal Andretti, the only ones left stared after him in disbelief. When they turned back to the man at the table they found the room empty.

Their hearts were pounding as they looked at one another with haunted eyes. It was certain now they were going to die. The only question remaining was when and how?

"What's that?" Andretti cried out as he snatched the candle from the table and held it up as he pointed down the corridor.

In the blackness they could make out a vapour like mist eddying across the floor as it made its approach.

“The door!” Pope Symeon exclaimed. “Shut the door!”

Andretti dropped the candle in his haste to comply, both men slamming the doors and sliding over the bolts.

“Listen!” Andretti gasped as they became aware of a drumming noise outside the doors, soft at first, but becoming more insistent. “It sounds like..”

“Like a horse!” Pope Symeon said.

“Yes! That’s it, like a horse!” Cardinal Andretti agreed.

“The sound stopped suddenly and there was complete silence, both men alone now with only their fear for company.

Pain started to tear at Andretti’s lower body and the smell of burning flesh assailed his nostrils. Looking down he saw that his cassock was on fire and the flesh he could smell was his. The candle he had dropped in his haste to close the doors had set his clothes alight. He tried to douse the flames with his hands but it was no use, and he started running around and around, screaming, his body stiffening, his skin turning to leather, and then peeling as the flames sought uncooked meat. The pain was unbearable and seemingly never ending, the flames reaching his face, burning the flesh from his ears, his nose, his lips and then his head. His hair ignited into a ball of flame and his eyes roasted in their sockets, the brain melting in his skull as he burned alive. Death finally provided the release the blackened carcass craved.

After what had seemed an eternity to the man watching, the fireball that was once Andretti became silent, the flames crackling and spluttering as they devoured him until there was no flesh left to burn. Strangely enough, nothing around the body caught fire, its sole intent seeming to be with Cardinal Andretti

or what remained of the smoking heap in the middle of the floor.

In the minutes that it took Andretti to die, Pope Symeon found himself unable to move or act. Fear can do that to a man. He had seen people burn before and it had not troubled him then but this was something different, because this was, he knew, a foretaste of the fate that awaited him. He found that he could not control the trembling in his limbs as fear coursed through his body. Petrified, he stood there, his faculties paralysed by the events that he was witnessing. The light from Andretti's body eventually faded as the flames flickered out and the room became dark again.

That was when the cries began. From the shadows he heard these echoes of a time long past, in an inhospitable place deep in the snow filled steppes of Russia. The cries he heard were of the people he had burned alive in that church all those years ago. Putting his hands to his ears, he shouted out, "Go away! Go away! You're not real! You're not real!"

A reddish light started to pour in through the windows and he made his way unsteadily to one of them and peered out. There was a ball of fire in the sky that seemed to be getting larger and larger. At once he felt a small hand grasp his but no one was there and he let out a startled cry and tried to pull away. It was no use, however, because the grip, was vice-like. The girl's voice that started whispering in his ear was very young, yet her words were unwavering,

"A man has been born that is marked with the 'Word of God'. The Church being corrupted, this man has united with Michael to do battle with the forces of darkness for the future of mankind. If good triumphs then the Church will rise again stronger than before, and peace will reign upon the earth. But

if evil succeeds, the world will lapse into a new and terrible dark age. Satan will lead millions of souls to damnation and the whole world to eternal ruin."

Then he felt the hand no more and she was gone.

Wolfgang Steiner, stripped of any pretence now, stood rooted to the ground, his chest tight, his breathing restricted, waiting as all men must who are about to be executed. At the far end of the room something was happening. The wall there appeared to be shimmering like a mirage and numbers started forming on it. Blurred at first, they gradually became more distinct until he could read them clearly. The numbers were 6724 78 374, but even as he watched, they changed their shape again, forming into words that read, 'WORD OF GOD'."

"Steiner", a guttural voice uttered demandingly somewhere in the darkness.

Steiner screamed out as he backed away, "What do you want?"

"I want you!"

"Who are you?" Steiner rasped.

"I am Death!" was the harsh reply.

The sound of laughter came from a corner of the room behind him and he spun around. His eyes strained as he strove to see what confronted him. The gloom lifted and he saw at once what it was. The thing, for it could only be called that, was surrounded by a purple aura, its eyes blood red, its claws extended. As he stared at it in terror and disbelief, it began to move towards him clicking its talons as it did so.

The sky outside seemed to be on fire now and despite his fear he turned to look out. For a fleeting moment he was young again. The Polish countryside outside the concentration camp lay before his eyes, his vision of the future assured.

The young girl's voice whispered in his ear once again,
“*Fire from the sky will destroy Peter's rock.*”

Chapter 53

THE CHOKING DUST tore at him as he struggled along the track, an arm extended across his face to keep the grime out of his eyes and nose. With every step he could feel himself getting weaker as he fought to breathe. At last he could go no farther and sank to his knees, then forward onto his face. Stretching out with his hands in a final gesture of defiance, he touched something solid lying on the ground ahead. Straining his fingers, he reached forward and grasped it. The dust storm vanished immediately and the sun poured its warming rays over his body. Power such as he had never known before swept through him generating his whole being with energy and he stood up with the object in his hand. He knew now that he was ready, and he held it high in a salute to the Almighty. The blade of the golden sword coruscated in the sun as he acknowledged the heavens.

He felt someone's hand on his shoulder and turned. His friend stood there holding the bridles of two horses, one red in colour and the other white. The two of them, he saw, were dressed exactly alike, with breastplates of burnished gold, leather tunics and robes with golden freizes, with one notable exception. The outfit he wore was red whilst his companion's was white just like their horses. The swords they carried were also identical, being made of pure gold with jewelled ornate handles.

"Come!" his friend said. "The end days are at hand!"

"Yes, I know!" Lechaim replied.

Lechaim sheathed his sword, then they mounted, and started their horses along the road. As they rode, Lechaim could see that they were passing through the valley he knew so well.

It wasn't long before they reached the fork where the roads divided.

"What is this place?"

"This is called Har Megiddo and that below," his friend said pointing down the valley to the country beyond, "is the plain of Esdraelon".

"Does this crossroad have any significance?" Lechaim asked curiously.

His friend looked at him for a moment before replying.

"It is the divide between good and evil! In life everyone has a choice to make! Each person must choose a road, one leading to enlightenment and one to eternal damnation. You see freewill is both a gift and a curse, a double-edged sword, for it allows all to determine their destiny in your world and the next. Therefore, a person best choose wisely for there is no going back!"

Lechaim thought for a while and then asked, "Do I need to make a choice? Do I need to choose the road that we take now?"

"You have already chosen. You chose well! Our course is already set!"

"I see!" Lechaim said. "But why me? Why now?"

"Because you are pure of heart and represent the best in man. Those that we oppose embody the worst. Why now? Because mankind itself has reached this crossroad, this juncture between good and evil. We go to do battle now on behalf of those that seek the light. Our purpose this day is not to win the battle but rather not to lose it, for the final battle is yet to come"

His friend then smiled gently and added, “Fear not! Good must always triumph over evil in the end. It is an immutable law that one far greater than us has decreed.”

Pointing to the plain that lay before them, he then said, “But come! They wait for us down there!”

“How many of them are there?”

“They are beyond counting!”

“Are we enough?”

“We are now!” his friend replied as he looked back and Lechaim did the same. In the distance he saw two riders approaching rapidly. It wasn’t long before they drew near enough so that Lechaim could see them clearly. They wore the same garb he and his friend wore except that they too were dressed in different colours, one wearing all black and the other an ashen hue. Their horses were coloured likewise. The two riders soon reined up before them, their horses snorting, their flanks covered in tides of sweat. Lechaim found himself looking in a mirrow for all four men had the same face. Somehow, this did not surprise him. The rider dressed in ashen grinned, and, as he did so, his face changed, becoming the one that Lechaim had looked upon many times in his nightmares, a flayed skull that crawled with maggots. This time however, Lechaim was not afraid because he knew who he was.

In the distance dust clouds could be seen rising from the plain of Esdraelon as the mighty army confronting them jostled for position. A trumpet sounded and its call to arms echoed though the valley. All four riders drew their swords from their scabbards and held them aloft in salutation. The four horsemen, their course set, spurred their horses forward at the gallop, to do battle and death rode with them. The air soon filled with the sound of dying men as they spilled their blood on the plain of

Esdraelon, that lies before Har Megiddo, that place known to us all as ARMEGEDDON.

EPILOGUE

THE METALLIC CLANG as something fell to the floor at the end of the ward made the Filipino nurse jump. Setting her pen down, she got up from her desk and walked quickly along the ward. She soon found the offender, a drip-bottle stand with drip attached that was lying innocently on the chequerboard black and white linoleum. Setting it upright by the side of the bed, she glanced at the patient and then exclaimed aloud, “Mother of God!”

In the shadowiness of the small light above his bed, she could see that his eyes were open and he was staring at her. She unhooked the life support system that had been feeding him with all the essential elements to keep him alive, before she asked in that soothing tone she had practiced over many years.

“Can you speak?”

He did not say anything for what seemed like an eternity so she tried again, “Can you hear me, Captain Lewis?” she said shaking him gently by the shoulder.

“Yes!” he said in a low horse voice, the bewilderment showing in his eyes. “Where am I?”

“You’re in hospital, Captain.” She replied, studying the handsome man before her. “You’ve been hurt!” Looking into his eyes, she went on, “You’ve been away for a long time, Captain....You’re back now.”

Squeezing his hand, she said, “I won’t be long. I’m just going to get the doctor.”

He lay back on his pillow and then remembered. He had been having a strange dream. There were four of them pitted against thousands but they had been invincible. Then the dream faded from his mind as dreams do and he remembered the lane and the stocky Irishman he had been speaking to, the one warming himself before the burning tree. Everything seemed so vague and muddled in his mind. What had the nurse said, “you’re in hospital”. Had he been injured? What of the others? His head spun with a thousand questions as he waited for the nurse to return.

The nurse meanwhile had located Doctor Grogan in the canteen but he took some convincing. Finally, when he did return with her, the doctor went quickly to his patient’s side.

“Remarkable! Remarkable!” he muttered as he checked Lechaim’s eyes and heart.

Although the patient he was examining had been comatosed for nearly two years, the doctor had never ceased to be amazed that the man’s body had kept in good shape. The wasting of muscles and muscle groups were always a major concern in such cases. The nursing staff had done all they could to minimized any atrophy by exercising the limbs and by turning the body but still, the doctor thought, it was incredible all the same. For a man that had been brain dead for so long, the captain looked remarkably alive.

Sitting on the bed, the doctor turned to the nurse, “We’ll give him a full examination in the morning” Turning back to the patient, he said, “Well, Captain! we’re glad to have you back with us. You had us worried there for a while!”

That was not the half of it, the doctor thought. The man in the bed had only been kept on life support at his mother’s insistence. In this particular instance, a mother’s love and

instinct had proved correct. Then, to compound matters, some weeks ago, someone had accidentally turned his life support off, and it had been left off for twenty minutes. They were still trying to find out who had been so careless, indeed reckless. Just how much brain damage had been done on top of whatever had already occurred, was still not apparent, but they would find that out in the next few days.

Strange to relate that it was the only time in two years that the man in the bed had shown any signs of life. He had uttered just one word, “Sinead” or at least Sister De Los Angeles claimed that he had. The Doctor however had been sceptical, that is until now.

“Can you remember your name, Captain?” the doctor asked. “Your name?”

The man looked at him blankly for a few seconds and then recognition dawned in his eyes.

“Hoarsely, he answered, “I’m Lechaim Lewis!”

“Your full name, Captain!”

“Lechaim Francis Michael Lewis!”

“That’s right, Captain. Well done! Now, you rest! I’ll see you again in the morning!” He didn’t quite get his name right, the doctor thought. The doctor had no idea where the name ‘Michael’ had come from but he was satisfied enough.

The nurse accompanied the doctor back down the ward.

“We’ll give him a full examination in the morning, but for now, just keep your eye on him!”

“Certainly, Doctor!”

When he left, the nurse returned to the man in the bed and sat with him for a while. She saw him looking at the black armband on her sleeve.

“We’re all wearing them!”

He looked tired so she then said, "Look! I'll be here if you need me. Just press the buzzer!"

Walking back to the small office in the corner where she had been writing up her notes earlier, she made a telephone call. It was the middle of the night, but she knew the young woman would want to be informed at once.

"Your man's awake!" she said down the mouthpiece when her party finally answered.

"Yes, about ten minutes ago!"

The person at the other end spoke and she responded. "Now?"

She paused for a moment and then said, "All right, seeing it's you, I guess no one will object."

Putting down the telephone she smiled to herself. The young woman she had been speaking to would be tired. Sudden fame and the pressures that come with such would have been very taxing for her. Sister De Los Angeles reached into the bottom drawer of her desk where old newspapers were kept and pulled out a pile. She placed them on the desk top and began thumbing through them. The first one was four weeks old. How could she forget that day that would live in her memory and many others around the world forever. She fingered the black arm she wore as she read the headline,

'WORLD IN MOURNING' - *The city of Rome lies in ruin today due to a natural disaster beyond precedent in human history.*

Pope Simeon and many of the hierarchy in the Catholic church are among those that perished when a meteorite with an approximate weight of 100,000 tons exploded yesterday upon hitting the earth's

atmosphere. The force of the explosion roughly equivalent to a 10-megaton atomic bomb occurred at an altitude approximately 8 kilometres above the earth. The resulting shock-wave flattened everything below it for 1000 square kilometers, destroying countless buildings and homes. Its epicentre was directly above the Vatican resulting in the complete destruction of Rome. No crater has been found, and aside from some microscopic nodules extracted from the soil, no recognizable fragments of the object remain.

She didn't bother to read on because she had already read about it a hundred times before. She thought fleetingly of the newly elected Pope that had been killed and the many thousands that had died with him. She cast the paper aside for it was not the one she was looking for. Searching through others she found what she wanted, a recent edition which had a photograph of the girl. The headline read, "IRISH CARDINAL ELECTED POPE" She read on while she thought about the girl that was on her way and the man in the bed. Without fail, the girl she had spoken to on the phone had come to visit the patient unfailingly for nearly two years. That was love if anything was, Sister De Los Angeles decided. Mind you, the man was handsome enough and she herself had taken quite a fancy to him. Many a night she had sat by his side regaling him with stories of her life in the Phillipines even though she knew he couldn't hear her. She had read somewhere that talking to a person that was in a coma helped but it was only a theory. Anyway, he had come through so, perhaps, she had helped a little.

It was dawn when the girl entered the ward with her eyes glowing.

“He’s waiting for you!” the nurse said smiling at the young woman’s eagerness.

She tried not to run in her excitement but she couldn’t help herself.

He was asleep when she found him so she sat down on the chair by his bed and waited. Looking upon the face that she had come to know so well, she reached across and pushed his shorn blond hair back exposing the wound he had suffered to his head. It had completely healed and only a small blemish to the skin gave any hint of the trauma he had suffered. Softly, lovingly, she then ran her finger along the scar on his cheek which, she mused, made him look a little like a pirate. It did not spoil his good looks however, she decided. Not that it would have mattered to her anyway for she had been in love with him for a very long time. Pressing her lips to his, she gave him a gentle kiss and studied his face for a moment longer, then she took his hand in hers and held it there. A priest walked in to give Holy Communion, it being Sunday, the day priests prowl to administer succour to the faithful and find those that need converting.

Slowly, the priest began to work his way down the ward and she nodded to him when he drew near. The pressure on her hand made her look back at the man lying before her. Seeing that he was awake, she smiled that wonderful smile of hers and he responded in kind.

Lechaim saw the beautiful girl before him and tried to think who she was. Somehow, her face was so familiar, but he could not place it.

“Hello, and who might you be?” he said in a raspish voice.

“Your guardian angel, of course!” and her green eyes danced in merriment. His ‘Saint Christopher’ caught her eye. She had often sat with him and prayed while holding the medal and it had come to mean so much to her. It was only a cheap old thing and she often wondered how he had come by it. Certainly, he hadn’t been wearing it the night he was wounded. She suspected deep down that Sister De Los Angeles had put it there. But why was the word, “Leo” inscribed on the back of it? Now, seeing it hanging around his neck, she thought to ask, “Do you want to take holy communion? The priest’s here!”

The priest was now at the bed next to his and she could hear him begin another prayer, “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...*”

“Holy communion?” he echoed still a little disorientated.

She didn’t pursue the matter further but instead rose and went over to the window where she wound up the blinds. Gazing out at the city of Belfast, she exclaimed, “Look, darling! It’s morning and the sun has come up.”

“I’m sorry!” he said not quite catching what she said. “What did you say?”

She mentally kicked herself for betraying her feelings so openly. After all, she hardly knew the man. What would he think?

“I said, it’s morning and it’s a beautiful sunny day!” the girl exclaimed as her red hair flashed in the sunlight.

The priest droned on next to them, “*He restoreth my soul, and he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness...*”

She went back to her chair by his bed and looked into his brown eyes. It’s a funny thing, she thought, she could have sworn his eyes were blue the night he was carried into the house.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...”

Taking his hand again, she paused for a few seconds and then said,

“Welcome back, Lechaim. I’m Sinead Cronin!”

“Sinead?” he repeated.

Seeing the bewilderment on his face, she explained “It’s an Irish name!” Then she remembered what Pope Michael had once told her

“My Uncle told me that in Hebrew, it means Gift of God!”

As he looked into her eyes, the fragment of a forgotten dream lingered in his head for just a moment. The horseman was waving to him and then the image was gone forever.

She smiled and he smiled back. With absolute certainty, Lechaim knew then that the woman before him would fill his days until the end of his life. She was, indeed, a Gift from heaven.

The priest finished his prayer, *“...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

..Amen..

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The novel you have just read is a work of fiction based on fact. It is certainly not meant as an attack on the Catholic Church or religion in general. Unfortunately, however, it is a fact that many of the wrongs committed in this world are done in the name of one religion or another. To the thinking man it seems obvious that no one body or race can have a monopoly on God for we are all surely created equal. Further, no one knows the truth of it for we are not privy to the mind of God. How foolish and arrogant therefore are those who claim to know the truth?

As for the Third Secret is it fact or fiction? On 26th June 2000, the Vatican released the Third Secret, said to have been revealed at the Cova da Iria-Fatima, on 13th July 1917. The following are excerpts from The Message of Fatima as published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

“I write in obedience to you, my God, who command me to do so through his Excellency the Bishop of Leiria and through your Most Holy Mother and mine.

After the two parts which I have already explained, at the left of Our Lady and a little above, we saw an Angel with a flaming sword in his left hand; flashing, it gave out flames that looked as though they would set the world on fire; but they died out in contact with the splendour that Our Lady radiated towards him from her right hand: pointing to the earth with his right hand, the Angel cried out in a loud voice: ‘Penance, Penance, Penance!’. And we saw in an immense light that is God: ‘something similar to how people appear in a mirror when they

pass in front of it' a Bishop dressed in White 'we had the impression that it was the Holy Father'. Other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious going up a steep mountain, at the top of which there was a big Cross of rough-hewn trunks as of a cork-tree with the bark; before reaching there the Holy Father passed through a big city half in ruins and half trembling with halting step, afflicted with pain and sorrow, he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met on his way; having reached the top of the mountain, on his knees at the foot of the big Cross he was killed by a group of soldiers who fired bullets and arrows at him, and in the same way there died one after another the other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious, and various lay people of different ranks and positions. Beneath the two arms of the Cross there were two Angels each with a crystal aspersorium in his hand, in which they gathered up the blood of the Martyrs and with it sprinkled the souls that were making their way to God."

The following comments are quoted from "The Fatima News":

"This revelation by the Vatican of the long-suppressed "Third Secret of Fatima" has sparked a controversy that is now rocking the Catholic Church.

For more than 40 years, the Third Secret (the final part of a message by the Blessed Virgin Mary to three Portuguese shepherd children during Her apparitions in the early 1900's) has been kept under lock and key.

Despite promises that it would be revealed to the world in 1960, the Secret, consisting of approximately 25 lines on a single sheet of paper, was suddenly suppressed in that year and Catholics were told it would probably remain under seal forever.

The four-page document released by the Vatican on June 26, which it claims is the Third Secret, has only renewed the Third Secret controversy. It is not the single sheet of paper containing words of the Virgin Mary which everyone had expected and to which the Vatican itself had referred in 1960.

The Vatican's interpretation of the text released on 26th June is that it refers to the assassination attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II in 1981 and other events entirely in the past. Many have asked why, if this is so, the Vatican continued to suppress the Secret for nearly 20 years after the assassination attempt.

Many Catholic publications and secular journals have already expressed skepticism about the Vatican's claim that this is the authentic text of the long-awaited Third Secret. There has also been much criticism of the Vatican's official interpretation of the document.

The Vatican has offered no explanation for its long suppression of this seemingly innocuous document, which contains none of the criticism of Church policies or its leadership that it was expected to contain. “

Did something not of this world occur in Portugal during 1917 or has the world been deceived by three children with fanciful

imaginations? The so called Third Secret released by the Vatican is so insipid as to lead us to the conclusion that the latter is so. However, before condemning the children, we should remember the miracle of the sun. Such was witnessed by thousands of people and did occur as predicted. Therefore, before we sit in judgement we should question our capacity to judge or our right to decree what is possible and what is not, what can and cannot be? We, after all, have experience of this world, not the next.

At the end of the day we can only wonder whether the story of Third Secret is still unfolding, and whether there are more chapters to be written?