

MAY 11, 1963

STAR WEEKLY NOVEL  
FIRST PUBLICATION ANYWHERE

JOHN WOOD



*Before anyone could do anything,  
Franca had raced from the villa. We  
could only watch—fearful of what  
she would do. We dared not fire.*

by KENNETH ROYCE PART TWO

# THE ANGRY ISLAND

**SYNOPSIS OF PART ONE** David Lawrence's presence on the island of Ustico, near Sicily, was due to a long trail of events. For several years, working as a British agent, along with his job with an industrial equipment firm, David had co-operated on missions with Jim Penso, a hard ruthless man, but a good agent. After the death of their adopted daughter, David had neglected his wife Susie, not realizing in the excitement of his work that she too needed an outlet for her sorrow. Jim Penso had taken advantage of her need for understanding and sympathy, and though Susie broke off their affair, the guilt, added to her low mental

condition, caused her to commit suicide. David blamed Penso (as well as himself) and on their next assignment together in Lebanon, traveling across snow-piled mountains, he angrily challenged Penso, and Penso's indifferent attitude toward the matter resulted in David attacking him. Later Penso slipped down one of the cliffs and David had no choice but to leave his seemingly lifeless body to get help from the nearest village. Penso's body was never recovered. Saddened by events, David gave up espionage work and decided to take a holiday on the island of Ustico, which Susie had often mentioned. It was volcanic

and stark, but offered peace and distraction. At the hotel, David met the lovely Franca, who showed him around the famous island grottoes. One, in which a villa had been built, intrigued David but he found it was forbidden territory, and his old instincts and curiosity were aroused. Franca told him her uncle Angelo, a kingpin among gangsters, was in exile there, and when later David was summoned to meet him, he sensed a mystery surrounding Angelo and the grotto. At the hotel also, he met an American, Burbank, whom he quickly assessed as being something other than the ordinary tourist he portrayed. David, knowing the inaccessibility of the grotto entrance by sea, tried to find a land entrance among the hills and rocks above it, and saw Burbank there also. David was chased away by Michele, Angelo's gunman, before he could investigate further, and subsequently was made well aware that his presence on the island was undesirable. David made a temporary retreat to Sicily overnight, learning while there from an American agent, Kennedy, of the American consulate, that Burbank's badly burned body had been found that morning near Palermo. David agreed to help Kennedy. They returned stealthily by launch to the island that night, and found the land entrance to the grotto—a chimney-like shaft. An earth tremor indirectly saved them from discovery by springing the alarm system, and David identified the voices of Angelo, Michele, and their boatman Primo, there was a fourth man whom David could not see, but whose voice seemed familiar. After arranging to again meet Kennedy, David returned the next night to discover that the fourth man was Jim Penso. He could hardly believe it, but knew if it was Penso and Penso was on assignment, then his loyalties must be to Penso, not Kennedy. The next day to avoid meeting Kennedy, and to consult a doctor as to how Jim Penso could have survived, David went to Sicily. Coming out of the doctor's office, David is picked up by the gunman Michele. Now read on . . .

## chapter 6

I SLIPPED out of the pew and like a shadow, Michele followed me. On reaching the porch, Michele turned, his single hand came up to cross himself as he faced the altar. Then we were both standing in brilliant sunlight and Michele was wearing his habitual grin as he looked sideways at me. "I suppose you often come to the church of the Santa Maria" I asked scathingly.

"Often, signor."

"Religion is a peculiar mixture with your profession, isn't it, Michele?"

Michele appeared puzzled. "Why, signor? I carry a gun for one man instead of an army; for a friend who stands by me instead of a government I detest. My faith and my loyalties are quite clear, signor. I am not the hypocrite. God does not find me two-faced."

An endless argument could have resulted from this. Michele believed in his world, had known no other. I could also see his point.

We were still standing outside the church, neither of us making any effort to move. "You weren't on the boat," I said. "Where did you pick me up? At the docks here?"

"I came over in the launch. Meeting you was chance."

I gave him a dry smile for that. "I thought you weren't two-faced," I said.

Michele smiled back, his blue eyes full of merriment. "Nor am I, signor. But you would not expect me to serve two masters."

"So you've come to take me back," I suggested.

"There is not a boat until tomorrow, signor."

I laughed at Michele's strange diplomacy. "It's good of you to offer, Michele. I accept."

This surprised him. I was delighted to see the sudden suspicion cloud his face. I had already decided that it was imperative for me to see Penso, so my return to Ustica was necessary. Whatever Michele's motive for wanting me back, go back I must.

Before reaching the docks, I went into a post office, telephoned my friend, Frank Linton, told him that I would not yet be able to see him, that I was going back to Ustica and with whom and whose launch it was. I then told Michele what I had done without mentioning Frank's name, in case he had planned an accident on the way back.

Michele made no effort to hide his contempt, although he laced it with laughter. "You do me

little credit, Signor Lawrence. Nor, for that matter, yourself. I am not even armed."

We sat together on the broad leather stern seat of the big launch on the way to Ustica, but we spoke little. I needed the time to think and was grateful for it. The feeling of being scrutinized when Angelo had taken me to his grotto was now explained. Penso had wanted to take stock of the new arrival. What was not clear was why he had promptly tried to edge me off the island, unless he feared I might run into and recognize him, giving away whatever game he was playing. I had to see him because he might need warning. Burbank needed explaining, and Kennedy was intent on identifying Penso. For the time being at any rate, this set me against Kennedy. I would have to face him, and somehow fob him off until I had the story from Penso.

The flash of the lighthouse came up.

"Where are you taking me, Michele?" I had turned to the big figure beside me.

"Back to the hotel."

"Don't bother with that. Take me to Angelo. I want to speak to him."

"But does he with you, signor? Back to the hotel. It is too late for Angelo."

I wasn't sure how he meant it, but I did like the way he said it. Surely Jim Penso did not think I was trying to sabotage him. Come to think of it, he might; from his point of view I had left him to die in the Lebanese hills. To press Michele would be hopeless. He was acting under orders.

Dinner was not yet over when I reached the hotel, so after a quick wash I went into the dining-room. I thought I might as well meet Kennedy early and have done with it. He was not there.

Afterwards, I went out on to the terrace. I nodded to a few familiar faces. Then I thought to hell with Kennedy, I was under no obligation to him, so I walked the length of the terrace and headed towards Franca's villa.

Passing a line of fishermen's cottages, the tang of fish strong in the night air, I could hear someone trying to overtake me. I stopped and waited, my back against a cottage wall, and recognized his outline as he cautiously approached.

"Are you following me, Chad?" I asked him from the shadows.

Kennedy gave no sign of being startled. He eased his pace and swung over towards me. "So there you are. No. I was not following you. I was trying to catch you. Where are you going, anyway?"

"Careful, Chad, you're out of line."

"Like you were this morning when you weren't on hand as arranged."

"Did we arrange something? I don't remember."

"Listen, Limey. You'll try to make a monkey out of me just once too often. You're forgetting that a countryman of mine has been murdered."

"Indeed I'm not. You're perhaps forgetting that it's damn all to do with me. Let's terminate this now."

Unexpectedly Kennedy apologized. It could have been genuine or calculated. With such a man it was impossible to gauge.

"Look, Dave," he said. "We seem to rub each other the wrong way. It's probably my fault. I've been hanging around all day waiting for you to show up, and I haven't the time to waste. So I'm irritable. I'm sorry. What say you go to your room and I'll follow you there. We can have a quiet talk."

That was part of his cleverness. His conciliatory tone made my position difficult. To back out now, after his apology, would only make him suspicious, which I wanted to avoid. I would simply have to try to match him.

Moving away from the wall, I said, "All right. Do you know my room number?"

He smiled lopsidedly. "I haven't been completely idle," he rejoined.

"In that case, you can bring your own bottle. I'm temporarily out of stock." I left him standing there and started the trudge back to the hotel, wondering how best to deceive a person so astute: not only astute but suspicious to begin with, and very much trained to catch the lie. One night I was helping him, the next I was baulking him. Chad Kennedy was not going to be too pleased. I could only hope that Kennedy would find that Penso was not his man; that he had followed a dead line. I must see Penso quickly; whatever I thought of Penso, if he was on a mission he would expect my support.

I went to my room. I then checked to ensure that the gun was still on top of the wardrobe where I had returned it after the second grotto trip; it

was still loaded, the magazine still full. There was a knock on the door, discreet, secretive. As I called out "Enter," I thought Kennedy had followed a little too quickly on my heels. Franca came into the room, closed the door and stood with her back to it. As I saw her, I knew that my face was giving me away.

For seconds we stared at each other. From my point of view she could call at any time and be most welcome — except at this particular moment. If Kennedy came in now it would immediately link us, and that was the last thing I wanted.

I thought Franca might be fond of me, as had I grown fond of her. But our relationship as yet had no depth. To forget that she had lived here or in Sicily for years, that her roots were very deep, and that she was the niece of Angelo Morasco, would be the rashest type of folly. She stood wavering, uncertain of what to say.

"I—I saw you come in," she eventually said. "I wanted to apologize."

It was a night of apologies. I did not know what to do. How does one eject a woman who has come to make peace, and with whom one wants to be at peace? She stood there, simply clad in a plain white silk sleeveless dress, her jet hair tied very loosely at the back of her neck, still visible either side of it. A simple, lovely portrait with deep pleading eyes which were already hurt because I had shown only dismay at seeing her.

Hoping my smile appeared less forced than it felt, I moved towards her and took her arm. "You've nothing to apologize for, Franca. We'll go to the bar and bury the hatchet."

Franca placed her hand over mine and I could feel her resistance.

"No. I want to speak to you alone, not in front of others."

There was nothing more I could do if I wanted to retain her friendship. She moved further into the room, then sat on the edge of the bed. I stayed near the door, keeping a ready ear for Kennedy's footsteps.

"I was horrid to you last night, but I thought it was for the best. I was worried for you," Franca explained.

"Why worry for me, Franca? I'm a stranger here, a new boy."

"Is concern so rational, David? Does one have to know a person for a set period of time? Are you not pleased that I worry?"

"Yes. Of course I am." I smiled at her, and this time I found no difficulty. "It's merely that I don't want to divide your loyalties. I think you were afraid for me, but I think too, that you were concerned for Angelo. That's probably why you lost your temper. You were torn for quite different reasons."

"You are wrong. My loyalties were not torn. They go too far back to be disrupted."

I was not quite clear what Franca meant by that. She had confirmed my own view about her family ties, but there was something I did not understand.

There was a knock at the door and my heart froze. I chose to ignore it. More loudly, for the benefit of Kennedy outside, I said, "Anyway, it was nice of you to worry on my account. It means a good deal to me."

The knock was repeated. I could not ignore it again. Opening the door a fraction, I prepared to give Kennedy a quick danger signal. A maid waited politely outside and I bravely opened the door while I could feel the flush of relief in my face. The maid handed me a letter with an English stamp on it. I noticed my name in a handwriting I recognized and which nearly demented me. I heard the maid's words in a complete daze, which I struggled to shake off.

"The letter was put in the wrong box, signor. It was returned to the desk this evening. I was told to bring it straight round."

Thanking the maid I closed the door. Hastily I crammed the letter into my pocket, not daring to touch it again, scared because the ghosts were walking, and two in as many days was too much for me.

"Are you all right, David?"

Franca was by my side, and I guessed I was visibly shaken. I had received an enormous shock.

"It's the sun," I gasped. "I've been too long in it and I'm not used to it."

Franca tried to make me sit down, but I insisted I felt better standing. I had to stay near the door. Obviously concerned, she again sat on the edge of the bed. Expecting some expression of anxiety from her, I was more than surprised when

she asked, "Did you go to the grotto?"

She had shaken me, but at least it forced me back to the present. "The grotto?" I answered innocently. "When?"

Franca smiled, just a faint puckering of the corners of her lips.

"You were not dressed in dark clothes for nothing last night. And I imagine you do not carry a gun for a walk to the village."

"Oh, yes. The gun," I said weakly. Had Angelo sent her to sound me? Weighing one thing against another, I decided on taking a risk. I had to get back to the grotto to see Penso—this might be the way.

"You know too much," I accused. "Yes, I did."

Franca was staring steadily at me. At first she did not believe me, but as her features tautened and she lost a little color, I saw that she did. Franca was startled. Then she asked, "Did you see what you went to see?"

"I did."

"Don't keep saying that, David. Tell me about it."

I leaned against the door jamb, tired of standing but still with half an ear open for Kennedy. "There's nothing I can tell you that you don't already know. You know perfectly well who is there."

Biting her lower lip, Franca showed her agitation. Her fingers started intertwining; long, lovely fingers portraying turmoil.

"Did you see—him," she managed hoarsely.

"Yes, I saw him. And I don't know what the fuss is about. Had I been permitted to see him from the outset, there would have been no trouble." I kept her waiting while I pulled out my cigars. As she gratefully accepted one, Franca could not keep her fingers steady. She looked up at me over the flame, her eyes wide, imploring. At least I had removed any suspicion falling on Kennedy, even if he now walked in. He had not been on the island last night.

"The man is an old colleague of mine," I said. "I don't know why he is here, but if he thinks my presence will embarrass him, I can only say that I'm here merely by chance. I might even be able to help him."

For a moment I thought Franca was about to faint.

"Now what have I said?" I stood back, giving her time.

"They might have killed you." It was a whisper.

Was she really so concerned for me or shattered by my admission of what I had seen?

"But they did not," I said. "And they will never know I was there unless you tell them."

"Do you expect me to?" Franca snapped. But I could see she was still jolted.

"That's beside the point. The fact is I want you to. Whatever name you know him by, the man with Angelo is Jim Penso. I must speak to him, and you can arrange it."

With great dignity Franca stood up. She was wan, but quite controlled. "I'll think about it, David. It is not easy, as you well know. Perhaps your friend will not want to speak to you."

"I didn't say he was a friend," I emphasized. "He was a colleague."

"I'll see what I can do." Franca moved towards the door, tall, slim, upright and full of qualms.

I helped her along the short passage to the exterior flagstones. Escorting her to the foot of the steps, we stopped at the bottom in silence. Franca then turned down my suggestion to see her home, and I was not sorry, for I was anxious about Kennedy.

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Rushing up to my room, I tore the letter from my pocket. Having recognized the writing, I had quickly put it out of sight to preserve my own sanity. The writing was Susie's all right. It was addressed to me at Shepherd's Hotel, Cairo, and the postmark was 15 months old. The address had been lightly lined through in pencil, and in the lower left-hand corner in small writing was the Ustica address. The broken flap had been stuck down with a strip of cello-paper. There was one line on it, written in pencil with no signature.

"When you get rid of the dame, come to room 63."

So Kennedy had come along and had heard Franca and me talking. That was my first thought. My second was slower and more vicious as it grew. I began to tremble with rage. My shock on receiving the envelope, without time to properly examine it, had been a very real and nasty one. This time Kennedy had gone much too far.

Kennedy was sitting in a wicker chair beside

his bed and opposite the door. On a small bedside table was a bottle of whiskey and two glasses, one of them half full. Through my mist of anger, I saw his hand continue to reach out, closing round the glass which was raised to a point below his lips. Above the glass, his cool blue eyes surveyed me mockingly, steady and clear.

"Cheers," he said, and sipped his drink, holding it before him when he had had enough.

His calculated action did not reduce my anger, but it warned me of the danger of releasing it. I had felt like this when I had struck Penso that day, and what turmoil that had started. With difficulty I controlled myself.

"When did you search my room?" I snarled. I could hear the barely controlled tremor in my own voice.

Kennedy offered a frosty smile.

"My dear, David. You did not expect me to be completely idle while you were missing, did you?"

His pseudo-English accent was well done, but overdone in the sense he intended. Kennedy was out to raffle me, and he had started off extremely well.

To give myself time to simmer, I crossed towards him, took the bottle and poured myself a drink in the second glass.

"All right," I acquiesced. "Why did you?"

"Checking up on you, naturally. Habit dies hard," he said. "Now let's get down to it."

"Wait a moment." I stopped him as he uncrossed his legs and was about to question me. "I'm not all that forgiving. How many of my wife's letters did you take?"

"I didn't take any."

"But you took an envelope, anyway."

"Sure I did. I thought it might be of use, and it was. But no letters. When I pussy-footed along to your room and heard a dame's voice, I saw my use for it."

Just how much had Kennedy heard. If he had heard me telling Franca about Jim Penso, then all this was an act to allay me. The possibility was appalling.

He must have seen something of my anguish, for he said, "Don't worry. I did my best to listen, but could only hear voices, not words. Your love life is nothing to me. I sent the note in that envelope to stir you up, to loosen your tongue. It might have worked."

It was all too disarming. "It stirred me all right. I don't know what you expected to find out about me. You must be horribly disappointed. But you did stir me." I eyed him coldly. "It comes as a great shock to receive a letter from the dead."

I had never expected to see Kennedy embarrassed. His change of expression was too spontaneous to be anything but genuine. His tough, experienced face broke down, and his determined lips groped for the right words. During those few seconds, he revealed something of himself and lessened my anger against him. At the same time I realized that I had to keep him and Penso apart, whatever it was that was drawing them together as enemies. I could only hope again that Jim Penso would give me the answers.

"Forget it," I said gruffly. "Start your interrogation."

I waited a little anxiously for from this point I would be doing a good deal of lying.

First he recharged our glasses, then he said, "I still don't know your angle in all this. I want



British author KENNETH ROYCE says he is a comparatively new boy in this line, even though he used to write stories in exercise books at school and sell them to the other boys! So far he has had six books published, written in the spare time he has as director of a London travel agency.

to know who's in the grotto. Sometimes I think you're a layman, sometimes not. You volunteered to help. Yet you knew I'd be over on the first boat, and you were not here. I think I have the right to ask why."

"I question your right," I said. "But I'll tell you anyway. Last night I went to the grotto again. Curiosity compelled me, and there was little else to do. I went early. I spent a good deal of time down there watching and listening. I saw all three of them; Angelo, Michele and Primo. There was no one else."

Kennedy was quite still. Nothing in his features portrayed suspicion. Yet I could feel it emanating from him. In some peculiar way we were attuned.

"Yet you heard a fourth voice when we went together."

"I did. And I did again last night."

He looked across at me, puzzled now, so I continued, "You must have noticed the odd acoustics in the grotto. It's that simple. From certain positions in the grotto a voice changes timbre, sounds like someone completely different."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I tested it several times until I was in no doubt. When they are walking around near the grotto entrance their voices change. As they approach the bar the tones return to normal." The acoustics in the grotto are peculiar. That was true enough. I almost began to believe my own story.

"So you then left the island." Kennedy was still suspicious.

"What I did then is hardly your business. The grotto held nothing more for me. I had to go to Palermo, so I went on the boat you came over on."

"You took a great deal of trouble avoiding me, didn't you?"

"A great deal. I had no intention of being delayed by you. For my money, the grotto information could wait."

"Are you employing me or something?"

"I still want to know why."

It would have been a mistake to offer excuses about something I had made clear was a private matter. I had to play it through to satisfy him. "We have several expressions in England which really amount to the same thing. They are delightfully explicit, if rude. To use one of the mildest, go jump in the lake."

"I know them. We have them, too. I only hope for your sake you're not clamming up on me."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," I said. "Tomorrow night I'll go back to the grotto with you. That should satisfy you."

"Tonight would satisfy me more."

At least I had expected that. "It's far too late if you expect them all still to be up." This, of course, was true.

"All right." His tone was completely non-committal. "Immediately after dinner tomorrow. We'd better scratch up an acquaintance at breakfast."

I left him still sitting in the wicker chair, his eyes cool. I don't know how much of what I had told him he accepted, if any. I would have to get to the grotto as soon as possible. That meant now. I hoped Kennedy would not have the same idea.

## chapter 7

THERE was no light showing from Franca's villa as I approached. By now it was almost midnight. I rapped on her door, and shortly a dim light crept through the living-room windows. Her voice called softly: "Who is it?"

"It's David. I'm sorry, but I must speak to you."

She opened up and I went in.

Franca's hair was loose and she was without make-up. It made me realize how little she required. Bare ankles peeped below the hem of a silk, belted housecoat. She did not look as if she had been sleeping.

"You are beautiful," I said as we entered the drawing-room.

I did not see her face as I spoke for she was drawing the curtains. To the windows she said, "Thank you. Have you come to make love to me?" Her question was so matter-of-fact that it would have removed any such idea from my mind. At the same time, she made me face my own subdued thoughts about her. But this was not the time.

"I'm sorry about this," I said. "I must get into the grotto tonight, openly. And you did say you would help me."

Franca sat down, and she eyed me almost abstractly.

"You're a strange man," she continued. "Most of the time you are unaware of me as a woman. I am perhaps someone of use to you. Then when you find that use, you come and tell me I am beautiful."

"The two have no connection. I meant what I said sincerely."

"I know you did. That's what makes you strange. What have women done to you to frighten you, David?"

"Perhaps it's what I've done to them. You don't really know me, do you, Franca?"

"You're making it difficult for me to get to know you."

I looked away from her because I was finding her curiosity disconcerting. The soft light was play-

ing havoc with my nerves. This was not what I had come for. I tried looking at her again, at her depths, and realized that what she had said of me was equally true of herself. I knew very little about her.

"Franca," I began to explain. "You are Angelo's niece. At one time I thought Angelo and I would finish on opposite sides. Had that been the case, I would not have asked your help. Now it's different, and I do. Will you please help me?"

"You think I might have betrayed you to him?" "I think you would have been forced into a position of taking sides. I imagine you owe him a great deal in spite of what he is."

Franca lost her composure. Her fingers moved along the hem of her housecoat. She no longer looked at me. Then she spread her hands upwards. "Everything I have he has provided. This villa, everything. He has taken great care of me."

I thought I heard her sob and quickly looked across at her. But when she raised her eyes she was quietly smiling.

"So," she said. "Now you want me to take you to Angelo because you no longer have a quarrel with him. All right. I will take you. Give me a few moments to dress."

I became convinced that Franca, too, had her problems, and that they were far deeper than mine. Perhaps it was in the way that she silently walked beside me, or in her fierce grip of my hand when she stumbled. An unspoken, unrecognizable communication had passed between us which left me groping, for I became convinced that it was immensely important. At last I was thinking beyond myself.

We took it carefully down the slope to the chimney. Franca needed little help from me, as she clambered around the boulders. Without hesitation, Franca sat on the rim of the chimney and in the torchlight I could see her right foot depressing on the top steel rung. She was sounding off the alarm in a series of signals by tapping the rung. I missed the sequence because it was half performed before I realized what she was at. And she was very quick.

"It should be safe now." Franca turned round and lowered herself into the chimney. I kept the torch on her until she was a good way down, then I followed.

I still had a little way to go when Franca reached bottom. Looking down at her, I wondered at the sudden brilliance of my torch before I realized that there must be lights on in the passage. So there was a reception committee waiting. I had expected nothing else, but wondered what sort of signal Franca had given them. It was far too late to consider my trust of her. Taking the rungs more rapidly, I dropped the last few feet. On one side of the passage stood Angelo, and on the other side was Michele. Both men held guns.

Angelo stopped beside me, his gun held expertly out of reach. "Follow Michele, Signor Lawrence. He will lead you to the grotto. You may make your explanations there."

As I saw Angelo's impassive face, his bleak, non-committal watchfulness, I could not resist saying, "I know the way, I've been before."

Angelo did not change expression, but his silence conveyed something that made my belly crawl. It had been a mistake to boast, particularly at his expense.

We reached the grotto. The lights diffused out of their crevices, giving a warm if peculiar glow, but the bar lights were off. The table was cleared, from which I concluded that they had all retired.

There was a noticeable chill at this hour. The light reflected off the sea in a cold, remote sort of way. Primo was not in sight, though I suspected he was close by and there was no sign of Jim Penso.

Franca gave Angelo a brief signal in my direction. She then went to the bar and sat on a stool facing us. She was grave and a little pale.

"Explain, Signor Lawrence," demanded Angelo. His voice had an almost inaudible quietness which I found most disturbing. Angelo was handling the type of situation he had handled a hundred times before. Michele was the faithful, waiting servant, ready to squeeze the trigger at a nod from his master. To be in the hands of men like these was a chilling experience, because I never doubted for one second that all initiative was with them, and that they were used to holding it.

"Before I explain, is there some way of blocking the chimney at the bottom?"

"Is someone following you?"

"No, but I did find it easy to get in last night. Someone else might find the same."

Angelo nodded to Michele, who put his gun in his waistband and went to a recess behind the bar from which Primo appeared. Together they lifted a circular spiked grid, and headed towards the passage.

"So," said Angelo. "You came down last night. I hope you know what you are saying. Your life is already in the balance."

"Listen to him, Angelo. I would not have brought him had I not considered it important to you." Franca's voice drifted with the echoes from the direction of the bar.

Angelo did not turn, nor did his features change. "I am listening," he said.

I turned slightly to half-face Franca, and Angelo turned with me. He was now less in the shadow. For a man of sixtyish, his physique was excellent.

"I came down," I said, "out of sheer curiosity. Life doesn't mean so much to me that I have to plead with you, Angelo." I had started off meaning it, but had ended startled by the sudden awareness that it was no longer true. I was no longer sure of myself. "I watched you all, and then I saw Jim Penso. I know him. I thought he was dead. But because I know him, it became important to talk to him. For his sake, not mine."

"You should choose your friends more wisely, my dear." Angelo looked levelly at me. "You are too late, Signor Lawrence. He has gone, and I cannot afford to have you telling people that he was ever here."

Would he shoot me with Franca here? I began to feel very lonely standing there.

There were sounds from behind me, then Michele and Primo reappeared. Well, at least I had kept Kennedy out of the way. Even if he came down the chimney, the grid would stop him and he would be too far away to hear our voices.

I noticed Franca moving closer, and I could see that she was deeply perturbed. "Let him go, Angelo." She spoke quite severely without pleading.

I saw an odd flash of emotion deep in Angelo's eyes. It was the only time I had seen positive expression in them, but it was sufficient for me to realize that he was very fond of his niece. It could make no difference. Almost in a tone of regret, he said, "I dare not, my dear. I cannot afford to trust a man whose curiosity compels him to intrude on another's privacy. There is more to Signor Lawrence than meets the eye."

"I assure you there is not." I protested. "I came in good faith to help you and Jim Penso."

From the direction of the villa a familiar voice said:

"It's all right, Angelo. I'll speak to him." And Jim Penso stepped from a rock cleft on a ledge projecting from the chunky entrance wall. Jumping lightly down on to the shelf, he approached us quite slowly with all his old assurance, master of the situation. From the first second of his appearance it was quite clear that he was in fact the master. Angelo and Michele were awaiting his instructions. I had not expected Angelo to be subservient to anyone, yet I was witnessing it. One thing was clear; among these three men there was no sign of dissension; they were a unit and, I thought, a uniquely powerful and deadly one.

Penso approached me, a languid smile barely visible. His eyes were full of quiet mockery and not a little of his usual arrogance. His dark good looks had not diminished, but he appeared tired and was thinner than I recalled. What did intrigue me was the extent of his tan, as if he had not been cooped up in the grotto.

So here he was, Jim Penso, who had occupied a tiny part of my life yet had influenced it more than anyone: a man who carried trouble with him because he was that sort of man, and because his job invariably led him to it. But he was immensely capable of dealing with trouble and had always survived.

He held out his hand while the others watched in silence. It was as strong as when first I had met him.

"Hello, David," he said, as if we had just risen after a night out together.

Time had not changed my reaction to him: I was merely calmer about it than I would have expected. I could almost feel his repressed energy reaching out to engulf me. Jim Penso was an impossible man to ignore. The others were watching him, not me.

"I thought you were dead," I said. "I made the mistake of trusting in the absence of a heart-

beat instead of the presence of an unquenchable spirit."

Penso smiled and nodded and turned to Angelo. "Could we be left alone for a few minutes, my friend?"

His tone surprised me. The old Penso would have made his wishes more to the point. There was obviously a high mutual regard between the two men.

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Their retreating footsteps sounded like a small army coming from all directions. With just the two of us left I felt like one of earth's last survivors, so eerie and lonely was it in the vast cavern with its odd rock formations.

"Let's have a drink." Penso moved towards the bar. "So you thought I was dead," he observed, as if it was news to him.

I told him what had happened after his fall. He had remained behind the bar, and we faced each other across it like a publican and the first evening customer.

"Didn't Cummings tell you I had survived?"

"No. When I reported you dead, he seemed almost unconcerned. Told me to forget about it."

"By then he must have known I was alive. It might have suited him to leave you with your own thoughts on it. In fact, I wouldn't put it past him to have generally encouraged the idea that I was dead."

"Because of something else he had in line for you?"

"Yes. It was the biggest job I had ever tackled." Penso dipped his swizzle-stick in his drink and turned it. "I was not alone on it, and it's by no means finished even now."

"Before you go on," I said. "What happened after your fall? Where did you go to?" I could have said the words for him, but I wanted to be sure. Expecting his look of surprise and faint disdain, I also bore his slight contempt.

"We were on a mission, weren't we? When I came to, I went on to the pass as arranged."

This was the old Jim Penso, so damned logical and so completely inhuman. He was right, and it did not help to know it. He would have left me, in reversed positions. Had the mission failed, as I thought it had, that failure would have been mine.

"I did what I thought was best for you," I explained coldly. "And not because I liked you."

"Your priorities were wrong, David. They always were."

I could not face going back over the old ground again. My past dislike of him was quickly welling up. "We had better drop it," I said. "Let's leave it that you're a damned fine agent, and that I was a bloody poor one."

Penso gave me a queer look. "In your own line you are a good agent. The field work was my job." Then he said rather strangely, "You said was."

I stared blankly at him, wondering why his lids were down, before comprehending. "I jagged it in," I explained. "Resigned."

"What are you doing here, then?" His voice was loaded with suspicion and it was typical of him to make no attempt to hide it.

"Why? Do you think I've been sent to keep an eye on you?"

His lids were almost fully closed, and I knew I had riled him.

"I'm here on holiday," I told him, "purely and simply. It was recommended to me by someone we—both knew. Curiosity dies hard when probing is part of one's nature, and has formed part of one's job. It was evident that there was some sort of mystery here. In the course of probing it, some peculiar things happened. An American named Burbank was murdered, and I was forced off the island by some appalling hotel service."

Penso laughed. "I heard someone was making enquiries about the grotto, so arranged with Angelo to bring him here. I did not expect to see you. I reasoned that if Cummings had sent you, he would have warned me. If you were here by accident, then I had to avoid you because I could not risk recognition. Again, with Angelo's influence, I made things difficult for you at the hotel. I was not really surprised when I heard that you had returned."

"And Burbank?"

"If I knew of a Burbank connected with what I'm on, I think you know I wouldn't tell you. Not unless you were assigned to me. But I'll tell you this much, because I suspect you have another reason for asking."

Jim Penso swallowed half his drink, then, with elbows on the bar, hands clasped, he faced me. "There was an American nosing around here. Dark-

haired, with gray running abundantly through it. Does that fit Burbank?" When I nodded, he continued. "The day Michele prevented you from poking around the chimney, he was up there too."

"So Michele told you about me?"

Penso half smiled. "Did you expect him not to? It was another reason for getting you off the island. I could not understand what you were up to. You were becoming an embarrassment. Anyway, while Michele was herding you away, this other fellow was actually climbing down the chimney in broad daylight. When he reached the bottom Angelo let him have it with a gun butt. After Michele returned, he and Primo took the American to Palermo in the launch. He was swilled with liquor and dumped near the docks."

"And that's all that happened to him?"

Wearily Penso raised his glass. Before drinking, he said, "That's all I told them to do. They're being paid a fat fee for keeping me here and for doing what I want. They would not disobey me. And there would be no point. What happened to him?"

I told him briefly.

"How did you find out?" he asked casually, reaching for the bottle of Campari.

"Burbank and I had had a drink together. He told me he worked at the American Embassy in Palermo. The day Michele shot at me I had seen Burbank. Then he disappeared. When I went to Palermo I looked him up. They told me what had happened, even thought for a time that I was implicated. When I eventually discovered you hiding here I had to speak to you. I can even help you by allaying future Burbanks."

"You might at that." Penso made a move towards my glass, but I shook my head. He eyed me steadily, and he was worried, which was something new in my experience of him. "David," he said. "I can only tell you so much. Palermo is a N.A.T.O. base and there is far more going on there at the moment than meets the eye. The place is crawling with agents, most of them unfriendly. I'm biding my time here until a particular moment. Those agents who belong to countries supposedly friendly are operating independently, without liaison. It sounds stupid, but unfortunately there is good reason: Just now there is no trust. So they find themselves chasing their tails and their own allies. Whoever fixed Burbank seized an opportunity because we had left him open to reprisal from half a dozen different sources. There are far too many of us about. It's almost like an agents' war. One hears of one holed up somewhere, and off one goes nose to the ground."

I had run into three, including Penso, during my own brief visit to the island. "Why don't the top men organize themselves?" I suggested reasonably.

Penso grimaced. "How much of a picture do we chaps ever get? We live in a world of mystery. However, I know sufficient to tell you that in this they have their reasons. Good reasons."

I was amazed to observe that Penso's face was damp. The veins at his temples were pulsing as if to remind me of the occasion when I had found no pulse. With incredible vehemence he said, "But I'll win this. My God I will. I'll beat the bastards, the lot of them."

And watching him I did not doubt it.

"Keep your ear to the ground," he demanded. "If any more fools come round, head them off and let me know."

"It's all right, Jim. I'll help." I was almost sorry for him, but he killed it instantly as he half smiled and said, "Now if Franca was keeping me company, I could bear the wait better."

From someone else it might have been interpreted as a coarse but jocular remark, and really harmless. From Penso it was a genuinely callous observation; a real desire.

Keeping my voice controlled, I said, "You have Angelo's loyalty, I've no doubt of that because he's that sort of man. Whatever its cause, I imagine that if Angelo makes a bargain, he keeps to it. Just the same, I wouldn't test him too severely if I were you. He's fond of Franca."

Penso gave a strange little shrug, then came round to my side of the bar. "You haven't had much of that," he said, indicating my drink.

"How long will you be holed up here?" I asked, ignoring his observation.

"I'm waiting for a signal. A few days at the most." Coming up beside me, he looked out towards the darkened sea. He seemed to be listening to it.

"You'll have to stay the night, David. Primo can take Franca and you back in the morning." He suddenly grinned at me, a friendly, boyish,

involuntary action. Perhaps he was like this before he turned sour and became a highly efficient machine. "So we work together once again. I must tell Cummings when I see him."

So that night I stayed in the villa. A certain amount of rearrangement was necessary, and I was given a blanket and a pillow for the couch in the living-room.

I was glad when we broke up. For some time I sat smoking on the edge of the couch. Slipping off my shoes, I lifted my legs on to the couch and half lay, half sat with a hand supporting my neck. Quite idly and without thought, I took in the detail of the room. Armchairs, bookcase packed tight with books, a glass display cabinet full of bottles and glasses, occasional tables. The walls were bare. In one corner was a radio; in another was a tall instrument on a three-wheeled chromium stand with a plastic hood over it. It looked like a hair dryer.

Had there not been a hood over it, I would not have bothered. As it was my ridiculous curiosity compelled me to ease my tired body off the couch and in stockinged feet I padded over to the corner. Pulling at the tape binding the hood to the stem of the instrument, I lifted it up. I smiled to myself.

It was a sun-ray lamp; one of the type that carried ultra-violet and infra-red. Turning out the light I went back to my couch and pulled the blanket over me. I was desperately tired, too tired to go over the evening's events. Which turned out to be a pity. But at that time I could absorb only two things; I had to help Penso whether I liked it or not, and tomorrow I would have to face Kennedy and his eternal suspicion.

I fell asleep chuckling over the fact that Jim Penso was so cooped up that he had to use a sun lamp to obtain his tan. Yet he was wise. In a sun-soaked country no one is more conspicuous than the pallid visitor not yet golden brown. But Penso was always clever, blast him.

## chapter 8

**B**EFORE Franca and I left in the launch early the following morning, a cheerfulness had crept into the others, which I was relieved to see. Michele had found his grin again, even suggested that he would show me Etna if Angelo could spare him for a night. It would be a pity to visit Sicily and not see the 10,000 feet active volcano, so I loosely accepted.

The noise and speed of the short journey precluded conversation, so Franca and I sat with the already warming air rushing past our faces, making a horse's tail of Franca's hair in the slip wind. If I was in the mood to relish it, it was doubtful if Franca was. She kept her face to the wind, her eyes screwed and her thoughts carefully hidden behind a serious face. I could not understand her mood. My visit to Penso had not been terribly revealing, but it had confirmed my suspicions.

We arrived at the landing stage and it was already so warm that I slipped off my sweater.

There were a few people about. I ordered breakfast and we sat at the less popular far end of the terrace. Kennedy appeared at the other end in swim trunks. He did not even glance in our direction, but I had no doubt that he had seen us.

"What's wrong, Franca? Has something happened?"

She eyed me coolly, as if trying to make up her mind. "Have you wondered why your friend is staying with Angelo?" she asked woodenly.

"I've told you he is not my friend. Yes, he told me."

"I mean with Angelo in particular. I don't know what your friend is paying him, but whatever it is, Angela has no need of the money."

"What are you trying to say?"

The breakfast arrived before Franca could explain. I had to wait until the croissants were crumbs on her plate and she had poured the second cup of coffee. Even then she still toyed with her problem.

"How long have you known Jim Penso, David?"

"Oh, I don't know. About two years — three, maybe."

Franca carefully wiped her lips with the table napkin.

"I have known him for many years. He used to come often to the island."

This jolted me, but when I considered it, I saw no reason why it should. Yet I felt it was important.

Franca braced herself and gazed steadily at me, but it was an effort. When she spoke I had the impression that she was relating something distasteful to her memory but which she thought I should know.

"He was once quite gay," she said. "And very human." Then, at a seeming tangent, she added, "I used to share my villa with another girl. About my own age. We almost grew up as sisters, and in a sense we were. She was Angelo's daughter, Maria."

I had an uneasy insight of what was coming, but I dared not speak.

"She had a beautiful body, David, and she was gay, lively and completely irresponsible. Jim Penso was very much in love with her. Angelo did not mind. He liked Penso, and in many ways they were similar."

"For a long time Maria and Jim Penso courted together. It was understood that they would marry. Until he actually asked her. Maria laughed in his face and told him he would never have sufficient money to keep her. Just that. She could be terribly cruel. There was no other man. She had had her fun and it was over. In Italy we take these things seriously. Maria had disgraced Angelo's name—"

Seeing my puzzled frown, Franca interrupted herself. "Oh, yes," she said. "Even a gangster has his pride, and none more than Angelo. It was a long time before we saw Jim Penso again. When we did, he was a changed man; a man who had made work his god because he dare not give his mind time to dwell on what might have been. In the meantime Maria had married a wealthy businessman. They live in Rome and have three children."

I waited while I mulled over the story. "Are you telling me, then, that Angelo is harboring Penso because of a conscience; some obligation he feels he must show; some loyalty to a friend who has been let down by his own family?"

"That is what I am telling you. I—like you, David. I think you should know that what binds Angelo to Jim Penso is something far less flexible than money. Such a bond will not be easily broken."

"I don't understand you, my dear. I've no wish to break it."

Franca made a move to go. "I'm sure you don't. But if the occasion arises when you do, just bear in mind what I have told you."

I extracted no more from her. I took her back to her villa, but it was a strangely subdued journey, our minds on entirely different channels. It seemed that the Franca I had first met had disappeared for ever. At her door, she stopped, apparently in no hurry to go inside. Then she smiled at me a little wistfully; if there was concern in her gaze, there was also pleasure. "When you were away yesterday they announced the dance."

"The dance?" I enquired.

"Just once in a while we have a dance in the night club by the hotel. A band comes over from Palermo. It is tonight, and there will be fireworks. Are you going?"

The nightclub was a grotto deep in the rock beside the hotel. I had not been in it. "If you'll partner me, I'll go."

"I'll join you for dinner. Thank you for inviting me." Franca laughed at my surprise, then entered her villa.

I was in no hurry to get back. I was happy about taking Franca to the dance, but I wished I knew more about her. She had given me some sort of oblique warning that meant nothing to me. I still thought that basically she had Angelo's interests at heart, and therefore I suppose I was still wary of her.

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Collecting my key, I went up to my room, unlocked the door and went in. About to close the door behind me, someone pushed me in the back and I went sprawling across the bed. As I landed, I heard the door close.

Pulling myself up, I turned to see Kennedy by the door. My first reaction was that his heavy brogues were incongruous with his bare, hairy legs and bathrobe. He had his hands deep in the pockets of his robe, and by the position of one of them I guessed he was holding a gun.

I don't like being pushed, particularly in the back. I don't relish the idea of being shot either.

I did not like his mood.

I was too far from him to attempt the foolhardy, and I imagined that had been the object of his push. Instead of rushing him I sat on the edge of the bed and swore at him. He was unmoved.

"Just what are you playing at, Lawrence? If I have to beat the truth out of you I will."

My glance strayed to his pocket. "I reckon you wouldn't be fussy about what you used to do it with, either. How did you get in without a key?"

"I don't need keys, and no, I wouldn't be fussy

about what I used. I'd use anything at all on a dirty two-timer."

"Is that what I am?" I knew it would annoy him, so I rolled on to my back, hands across my stomach, head on pillow.

Kennedy stood with his feet apart, hands still in his pockets, and silently watched me for several seconds. He was tough, but also very clever. He would not have come here out of anger.

"That was quite a good story about the acoustics," he said. "I noticed their peculiarity myself. I didn't believe you then. I don't now." Kennedy scratched his ear. "I saw you last night," he continued. "With the girl. You must have enjoyed the rungs. Me, I had to climb down. There was a grid at the bottom. Suddenly they had decided to use a grid. After you had entered."

"I suggested they put it there," I admitted casually. "I didn't think you had believed me either, because you're a disbelieving type. I thought you'd follow."

I had scored a point, and I saw his uncertainty. "Why shut me out?"

"They don't know about you, if that's what's worrying you. I told them I had been down before, how easy it was, that's why they put up the grid. What I went for is not connected in any way with our little jaunt together. It may seem so. It is not." A mixture of truth and lies. I am ashamed to admit that I was beginning to enjoy myself. I was feeling very confident, because I knew he could not break down my story.

Kennedy's face crinkled into a grin. He shook his head and chuckled. "She's a nice looking dame," he said. He came over, still chuckling, and sat on the edge of the bed, his back half turned to me. I did not really see the movement, but I have often reconstructed it since. The stiffened edge of his hand crashed under my nose. The pain was so excruciating that my whole body arched off the bed in a belated reflex action to ease the unbearable pressure under my nose which I was certain he had broken.

My mind became a mass of swollen wooliness through which a throbbing pain continued to pound. By the time I feebly grasped at retaliation, I could only see a screened haze of shape through the tears which had spurted to my eyes. I peered out to see Kennedy now sitting on the end of the bed, his gun directed at my chest. He showed no pity, and wore the bleak expression of his kind in moments like this. Climbing off the bed, I went to the washbasin and did something about the blood streaming from my nose. When I had stemmed the flow, I wiped my face with a towel.

"What made you stop?" I gibed. "You're going soft."

"Unconscious men cannot talk, Lawrence. Now listen to me. The reason I don't knock your brains out here and now is because of the rumpus it will cause, nothing more. As you well know, lives have been lost, others are in the balance, including yours. You are not the person I want, but the moment I find you are protecting him, then within minutes of that time I will kill you."

Kennedy unwound himself, and slowly backed to the door. He had meant every word.

After he had gone, I bathed my face. My nose was still very sore and my head still muzzy. Well, if Kennedy had known what he was talking about, I certainly did not. To my knowledge, only Burbank had been killed. It looked as though Penso was right. Something was going on down here, with too many agents confusing the issues simply because there was no co-operation at the top and not a little distrust. It would have helped to know what the issue was, but I did not expect Penso or Kennedy to enlighten me on that. I knew the game, and I knew the rules. I wondered if Kennedy suspected it was a British agent Angelo was sheltering.

Pulling up a chair I stood on it to scan the wardrobe top. There was rough wood and dust and nothing else. I had not expected to find the gun, of course. Nevertheless, I felt naked without it, because I strongly believed that I would need it. But I could not blame Kennedy for taking it back. So far as he was concerned I was now clearly the enemy.

I had no idea what he would do. I could only try to watch him and keep him out of Penso's way. Penso was a good agent; so was Kennedy. For the task of protecting one and misleading the other, I had only myself to blame. By so doing, perhaps I was really protecting them both, and that seemed satisfying, but subsequently proved that I was nowhere near as good as I thought I was.

Franca took my mind off things. Whatever had

been troubling her had gone, or had been put aside. We met for dinner and did not discuss anyone on the island but ourselves. The sight of her alone was sufficient to distract me. Evidently a dance on the island was something to be grasped at. As she came along the terrace I stopped her at arm's length. That others were watching did not concern me. Heads could turn and fill with envy. Her jade green dress swirled about her knees; it fitted closely emphasizing her tiny waist, and the shoe-string straps contrasted with her splendidly beautiful shoulders. She looked lovely and mature and beautifully composed.

To hell with everything, I thought. Franca was with me and very much a woman, and I cursed my stupidity in being so slow to acknowledge it. For the first time, I accepted her as she was, without thought of implications, loyalties or anything else. I was proud to be with her—and happy, too.

After dinner, we stepped to the night club entrance. The entrance was a natural cavity in the rock face. Against one wall concrete steps descended sharply to the club some 20 feet below. If Ustica abounded with grottos, the islanders certainly knew how to make use of them. The dance floor was solid rock, levelled and polished, smooth under the feet.

We followed the rope guide fixed at the side of the steps, threaded our way through the dancers and found a table in a deep cleft. It was not secluded, but offered just a modicum of privacy. We danced and laughed and drank, finally joining in with another group near us. The stage artists were excellent. There were some fine voices, and Sicilian melody is a brand I could never tire of.

So we enjoyed ourselves. I saw Kennedy come down the steps alone. Most tables were already occupied. He saw but ignored us. I hoped he would turn away, and he did. Quite slowly he ascended without another glance down.

During one of the intervals, a shout went up that the fireworks were about to start, and everyone scrambled towards the steps. There was plenty of good-natured jostling, but there was no real rush. Near the top the crowd thickened, waiting to get through the grotto mouth into the air. I was holding the rope guide on the edge of the steps with one hand and Franca's arm with the other. We moved upward slowly. We were near the top when amidst a burst of laughter and cheering those at the rear pushed forward. I could feel the pressure from behind, but it was controlled and there was no danger. Franca and I looked at one another and laughed. In that instant I unequivocally accepted just how much I wanted to be with her. Another surge forward and someone whipped my feet from under me.

I went hurtling under the rope, over the side of the steps. Franca screamed as I let go of her arm, and she was carried up with the crowd. I grabbed at the steps, but my hands merely slipped over the concrete, leaving some of my flesh behind. Someone was pushed forward on to one of my clutching hands, and, while the pain was excruciating, it checked my momentum just sufficiently for me to throw out my other hand and grasp at the base of one of the stanchions supporting the rope guide.

The foot lifted from my hand and my body spun round. I saw the boulders gyrate immediately below me, and I hung on grimly for my life. The hand that had been stamped on was useless. Franca screamed again, and a great silence followed from the crowd. Then it was over. Dozens of eager hands were grasping at my arms until once again I was standing among them.

Franca, who had been carried several steps beyond the point of the accident, fought her way down towards me. Her anguish was worth the moment. People were hustling about us, kind, concerned people, but I laughed it off with an effort. I did not want an inquest. From then on, Franca clung to me as if she feared I would run away. I could understand the incident upsetting her but her fear went far deeper than that. Her fear embraced the future, and I could see it in the surreptitious glances she cast as we left the grotto.

Her immediate concern on reaching the terrace was for my crushed hand. She wanted to take me off and attend to it. But although it burned with the slow pulsing pain of fingers caught in a door, I was able to move it and no bones were broken. Easing my hand in my trousers pocket, I put my other arm round her waist and led her towards the low wall of the terrace. People were already lining it, and we had to move towards the far end before we found an empty space.

There was great merriment as the fireworks were let off, the mirror of sea providing a duplicate performance. Along the edge of the landing space great batches of roman candles were ignited at once until the whole sea front was a mass of brilliant light. Among the excited faces peering over the parapet I saw Kennedy.

I saw Franca's childlike interest gather, so I chose the moment to reflect a little on my own. It had been no accident the way my legs had been knocked from under me; it had been a carefully executed, vigorous sweep of someone else's leg. Whose? A few days ago I would not have been so concerned. As I looked at Franca's animated face beside me I faced the fact that now I was greatly concerned.

I made myself take an interest in the fireworks. I wondered if Angelo and Michele were in one of the boats illuminated by the constant colored flashes on the sea. They would not be allowed in the hotel. Anyway, their job was to guard Jim Penso, and they had no further quarrel with me, because I was endeavoring to do the same.

Taking Franca home after midnight was like taking my first girl out. I had shut myself out too long. Life continued whether or not I liked it. There was nothing I could do about the past, whatever my distaste for my part in it. But I could try to do something about the future.

At the villa I kissed her. I had meant it to be a gentle, sweet affair, but it did not finish like that. I had reckoned without Franca and the releasing of my own bottled emotions. When danger threatens, and I think we both knew that it did, passion is apt to run riot.

I had never doubted that Franca could be warm-blooded. What did surprise me was the discovery that I was not the cold fish I had imagined. But none of this was really important. What mattered was the gentle strength of her in my arms, her endearments, and the indescribable pleasure of simply holding her body to mine and knowing that she was as happy as I.

I would not forget this night. As I made my way back to the hotel later, there were no lights and the moon had disappeared. The quiet darkness and the early morning chill brought back reality of a different kind. I hoped that nothing would be spoiled between Franca and me. Had I tried to pinpoint my sudden depression I might possibly have solved my problems and saved some lives. As it was my mind by-passed the implications because too much had happened to grasp it all and segregate it for analysis. Much was also unknown to me.

I reached my room without seeing anyone; I had not expected to. Whoever had tried to kill me wanted natural causes or misadventure.

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A constant rapping on my door awoke me.

Sleep was becoming as elusive as Kennedy's thoughts. I opened the door, and the receptionist thrust an envelope into my hand, then rushed off. Inside was a short note from Angelo.

"I can spare Michele until tomorrow night but no longer. Angelo."

I did not understand it. So I washed, shaved, dressed and went down to the lobby. The clerk who had delivered the note looked up when I asked him from whom he received it. He stared blankly, then remembered.

"I forget to tell you, signor. He is out beyond the terrace, near the church. You will know him."

I set off to the village square. Michele was standing outside the church doors. I almost missed him at first. I had to look twice. He wore a white linen suit with a white tropical trilby. His shoes were white buckskin; his shirt of the finest silk, with a pale buff tie and matching handkerchief in his breast pocket. His empty sleeve had been tucked neatly into a pocket. Michele was a different person, immaculate.

His grin was the same. It spread across his face, almost removing his new air of respectability.

"What the devil are you doing dressed up like that? You look as if you're going to Palermo on business."

"To Palermo, si, signor. On business, no."

Michele's hand half rose to scratch his head, then he remembered he was wearing a hat. He hesitated, shrugged, took off his hat and scratched. It destroyed an illusion and brought back flesh and blood.

"What's the note mean?" I asked.

"Mean?" Michele was hurt. "We are going to Etna, signor. We arranged."

I had forgotten about it. There had been no definite arrangement, but English habits were cumbersome here, and unnecessary. He had called to take me. Well, why not? I suddenly found reasons why not. Penso did not know about Kennedy as far as I was aware. I hadn't told him because I had hoped to talk the American out of his interest in the grotto. And I wanted no trouble between them. Which still left Kennedy loose. There was Franca. I did not like the idea of pushing off for the day without informing her.

Thinking quickly, I decided to go. If Kennedy's misguided diligence led him to trouble while I was away, well, it was up to him. I somehow felt I was letting Jim Penso down by not keeping an eye on Kennedy, but it was practically unavoidable. Anyway, if I refused, Michele would get suspicious. I wanted to avoid that. It was a bad decision all round.

"Look. I haven't had breakfast yet," I said to Michele. "While I'm having it and packing some pyjamas, will you go along to Franca and explain? Ask her if she can come. I'll meet you at the landing stage."

I hurried back to the hotel, thinking the break would do me good, and during it I might develop a better perspective. I suspected, too, that Angelo was keen for Michele to have a break.

The launch was lying off by the time I reached the landing stage. Primo saw me coming down the steps and swung the craft in. I jumped aboard as she came alongside, and Michele steadied me as I swayed. My small grip I threw down in front of the stern locker beside a suitcase I supposed was Michele's.

I had been disappointed not to see Franca in the launch, but not really surprised. Women liked preparation. Also, I suspected that if we were to go out together she would not want Michele hovering around. Not after last night. And for that matter, nor would I. Michele told me she would see me tomorrow.

Primo dropped us off by the docks in Palermo. A car was waiting on the road, with a chauffeur who greeted Michele effusively, and we drove off to the Alitalia office to drop our bags. We were flying to Catania that evening, where we would stay the night. In the morning we would go up Etna, and then return. When I inquired about the air tickets, Michele waved it aside.

"I have the tickets, signor. Angelo can well afford to pay, and he misjudged you. He owes you something."

For a 35-minute flight it was not worth arguing about.

There was time to spare before our flight, and Michele was a good companion and guide. We lunched, we rode about town, and in the evening the car was there to drive us to the airport. Not for Angelo's guest the long drive in an airline coach.

It was dusk by the time the D.C.6B took off. We climbed rapidly above the sometimes barren, sometimes fertile, Sicilian hills. Full darkness overtook us during the short journey. Michele touched me on the shoulder and pointed to the window. Looking out, I saw the red, spewing lava of Etna flowing, like an inflamed choking tongue protruding from its roaring mouth. The mountain itself was no darker than the night and indiscernible, making the slow, treacle movement of scorching destruction more awe-inspiring, as if it came from the sky itself. We began to descend, leaving Hell above us.

A big Lagonda was waiting at the airport. Angelo had evidently forgotten nothing, although to him it would be routine. Again Michele knew the driver, but sat with me in the back, very much the overlord.

The car stopped outside the hotel and Michele put his hand on my arm a little sheepishly. The driver had half turned towards us, his expression hopeful. "Signor," said Michele hesitantly. "Guido and I are old friends. It is a long time since we met. Signor Lawrence, will I fail in my duty to you if I talk to him for a little while?"

From Michele's pleading eyes I turned to the driver's uncertain eagerness. The boys wanted a night out together. Apart from not wanting to stop them, an evening on my own would suit me well.

I grinned and nodded and reached for my grip at my feet. "I'm turning in early. What time do we start tomorrow?"

"At half-past 7, signor. It's a long climb and we have to get back to Ustica. The car will be here then."

It was an early start, but as it was costing me nothing, I could hardly complain. "Give me your case, Michele. I'll take it in for you."

"No, no, signor." He was grinning widely at me and I heard Guido chuckle. "There are things I might want, you understand." He gave me a sly wink, which I vaguely understood. They were off for a night on the town.

I stepped out, while a uniformed hotel porter came to hold the door. When I turned to say farewell to Michele, he had disappeared. Then I saw him bending down as if searching for something on the car floor. I followed the porter to the hotel foyer.

After Ustica, the freshness of a big modern hotel was ersatz. This night I should miss that brown hunk of unkempt volcanic rock alone with its sea bed and absence of petrol fumes and mechanical noise.

I signed in and was taken up to the fourth floor. Angelo had prepared the unnecessary luxury of a suite for the single night. I was not complaining.

After a short stroll round the centre of the city, I turned in. I was in bed, reaching out to turn off the light when my stomach scurried in panic. Someone had walked over my grave. The sudden sick apprehension was so quick that I afterwards wondered if it had really been there. As I crept down in bed I wondered what had caused it. But all I achieved was a sour taste in my mouth and a frantically searching mind.

## chapter 9

BY morning the feeling had gone. But not the impression it had left. Whatever had made me nervous had no roots in anything I could pinpoint. The only thing left for me to do was to keep my eyes open and my wits sharp.

At exactly 25 minutes past 7 I was down in the foyer with my grip. At that time there was only a sleepy night receptionist and a hall porter.

Outside, the morning was still crisp, the sky misting with heat yet to come. The Lagonda was by the curb. I waved aside the porter who hurried after me for Michele was not in the car and I wanted to wait for him before getting in. Guido gave me a slightly guilty look and a tired, careless salute as if his arm was older than his body. He climbed out of the car and came over to me.

"I'll wait for Michele."

Guido rubbed his long nose. He was embarrassed. "We have to pick Michele up, signor."

"Why, where's he gone?" I had no intention of moving without Michele.

A sly look crept into Guido's eyes. "Michele did not come back to the hotel, signor. He—was invited to a house a little further along."

So Michele had stayed the night with a woman.

"Then you'd better go and fetch him."

"I can do, signor. But it's on our way; just a few minutes from here."

It sounded reasonable. I kept my eyes open and climbed in. A few minutes away, in a quiet, respectable side street, I saw Michele by the curb with his suitcase, talking to the driver of a Fiat. The Lagonda pulled up behind it. The next thing I knew Guido and Michele were arguing violently, with the other driver casting the odd spanner. I climbed out.

"What's the matter?"

Michele grinned with an "everything's under control," gesture.

"I decided we should use the smaller car, Signor Lawrence. Guido objects, but he will do as I say."

Guido scowled and spat into the gutter. The other driver, a dark-haired, shirt-sleeved youth with a week's fluff on his chin, stood nodding in agreement.

"Why a smaller car?"

"There are a lot of bends on the Etna road, and it is narrow. It is better to have the smaller car."

I couldn't argue, because I did not know the Etna road.

Michele went to the Lagonda and pulled out my grip, loading it into the boot of the Fiat with his own case. That seemed to be that.

We drove out on to the coast road, and the Mediterranean stretched out like litmus with the early morning sun streaking it with alkali. I missed the extra comfort of the Lagonda, but the Fiat moved in and out of the early traffic and it obviously had a souped-up engine.

Etna reared black in the morning light, dwarfing all around it. What seemed a long time later, we bore inland and began to climb.

There was soon evidence of lava; great areas

of it in grotesque shapes. On the lower slopes, there was plenty of growth. And then, surprisingly, we were passing through vineyards, rich and full.

Michele explained, for he saw my confusion. "The finest grapes in Sicily are grown on the lower lava belts." He pursed his lips. "Beautiful wine."

Looking at him I noticed his white suit was still immaculate, his creases perfect. His hat was lying on the seat between us. He picked it up and put it on, pulling down the brim. I wondered why Michele had been so vehement about changing vehicles.

Climbing as we were, twisting and winding our way upwards, was like negotiating some nightmare slag-heap. A disturbing possibility occurred to me.

"But Etna's in eruption now."

"Si." Michele nodded casually. "On the other side. It will not harm you." Seeing that he had not convinced me, he added, "Etna is gigantic. There are good roads, as you see. And near the summit there is an hotel and a cable-car."

Toni the driver took a hairpin bend too fast, and I was thrown against Michele. I was sitting on his armless side and his shoulder holster pressed into my arm. Until then, I had not known that he was carrying a gun. Was he expecting an attack on me?

Michele glanced obliquely at me. He smiled. "I hope my gun did not bruise you, Signor Lawrence. I always carry it in Sicily. Here I have old friends, and enemies."

Sitting beside me, so close in the small car, Michele looked huge. I was used to his rugged grin and crinkly hair, and at times it was easy to forget that he was a gunman. But that was exactly what he was, and his proximity on a lonely road, with barren lava waste all around us, at the next corner and the next, instilled into me the truth. It was a belatedly sombre thought. I still liked him, but as I made a covert study of his hardened profile, I was also afraid of him. He was prepared for something. Perhaps he conveyed it by being too relaxed.

We were now progressing through utter desolation. The dry lava beds lay thick and black and brittle wherever we looked. I knew that a climb from sea level to some 10,000 feet must entail an area of considerable size, but I had not expected this. An undulating sea of blackness stretched endlessly to the sky on either side of us. There was no beauty in it, but a spirit of some kind embraced its coarse ugliness and I could feel it. The sun was bright but the air was chill and a wind blew tiny spirals of dust before it eddied away.

Etna was complete master up here, for one's eyes could absorb nothing else. This barren immensity gave an impression of enormous power; reminding one of the rumbling, scalding destruction and death lying beneath its grim, harsh outlines.

Our climb became more gradual then we flattened out and the road ran along the lip of a series of hillocks and deep basins, some almost valleys. We passed the hotel, a big one standing by the roadside as if it had been mislaid. A little farther on was the cable-car leading to the summit, below which on the farther side the red-hot earth was disgorging. There was no one about; a world of devastation. Cruising on for a while, we eventually pulled up round the side of a gray conical-shaped mass. The hotel was lost to view. We were alone. We climbed out.

At once I noticed the thin sharpness of the air. Although the sky was quite clear, with the sun a highly polished gold plate, it was crisp at this altitude. Ahead of us ranged the hills and the valleys of a dead world. Old craters were numerous, lying in basins or mounted on blunt pinnacles. In and around them was a strange beauty, cold yet fascinating. Pastel shades of dull pinks, blues and yellows blended into the crater mounds and along their lips. The three of us stood there a little awed. I imagined it to be a miniature of the moon. It stretched wherever we looked, a hard, formidable waste of cold lava which suddenly dropped from view where the sky met it, giving the impression that to walk to its edge was to fall off the world. A few small narrow paths snaked in and out and over the harsh undulations which time and trippers had made.

Without removing his gaze from the bleak desolation facing us, Michele said, "There are about 250 craters such as these." And with those words he had summed up something of the enormity of Etna.

Toni stayed by the car while Michele and I followed a foot-impressed path down into a basin with a pursed-lipped crater at its centre. As we braced our feet against the steep descent, we could

see down past the jagged rim and into the crater itself.

"How deep are they?" I asked, surprised at my sudden shortness of breath.

We halted in front of the crater, both a little breathless after the climb down. Michele was looking straight ahead. He said, "They vary, signor. Perhaps about 60 feet."

I knew then that Michele intended to kill me. As he had spoken, his eyes had betrayed a momentary tinge of regret. Had I looked at him a second later I would have missed it. He did not really want to do it, but he would do it thoroughly just the same. I think he liked me, but that would not stop him. It came to me as a great shock. But this was not the moment to consider motives.

Instead of flying to escape my mind immediately anchored on Franca. It was a hell of a time to realize what she meant to me. For one reason or another I had been reluctant to dwell too much on her. Now that it seemed I could not have her anyway, I had no excuse for holding back, and everything in me seized eagerly at the truth. How I wished I had told her how I felt—how I really felt, I mean. If she felt the same way, she must, at this moment, have stirred inside, such was the intensity of my sudden yearning. Well, at least I had experienced this moment. Something had fled away from me for ever, and something more wonderful, infinitely more endurable, had taken its place. I would never be able to tell her. This I would regret to the last moment. Yet I was damned glad she was not here.

Michele was speaking to me. I just caught the tail end of it.

"... all right, Signor Lawrence?"

I almost laughed. It was so typical of the man to ask if I was all right just before making certain that I was not. I wondered how much he had seen in my face.

The cry of self-preservation was creeping in, and all the better for its delay. For it warned me not to run now. Toni was on the ridge above us, his shirt flapping in the breeze. It occurred to me that Michele would want me further from the road before putting a bullet through me and pushing me into one of the 250 craters. A body could lie in one of them for ever without being found.

I told him the thin air had probably robbed my brain of oxygen, and he seemed satisfied. We climbed up the other side of the basin, then followed a narrow track along a ridge between two craters. Eventually the path went straight up a black hillock like a Roman road. We went up slowly. Reaching the top, we could see for miles. The hotel stood out like a model well below us and a good distance away. Toni and the Fiat were still visible. Toni opened the car door. I saw him reach inside the car, taking something out and put it in his pocket.

Michele gently propelled me down the other side of the hillock. At its foot, on level ground, was another, low-rimmed crater. Michele stepped from the path, and led me over the black crumbling cinders towards it. He was slightly ahead of me, for the time was not yet. Quickly I looked around. We were completely alone. Toni and the hotel had gone from sight. We were surrounded by sombre dunes and loose covered dells. Amazingly, the odd stunted shrub sprouted; one had small bluish flowers.

Michele was careless to be so over-confident. I hit him on the base of his neck with my closed fist; I hit him hard. He crumpled to his knees in front of me. Then he keeled over, his legs drawn up.

I reached down for his gun. I had never doubted Michele's toughness, but I had evidently misjudged its extent. He was dazed when he should have been unconscious; his eyes glassy when they should have closed. His big hand came over and grasped my wrist, pulling me forward. When I raised my left hand to hit him again, he jerked me down, and I went sprawling flat on my face over his legs. The inbred training of the gutters worked for him. As I rolled away he kicked me in the back, just missing my spine. As it was, I was half paralyzed.

It was agony to crawl to my knees. But I had to, and quick. Still on all fours, I looked back. Michele was coming round. In a half-comprehending sort of way, his sight wavered toward me. By this time I was up. I was coming back at him when I saw his hand move toward the inside of his jacket. Behind the glaze of his eyes, I could see him battling for full control of himself.

Michele with a gun in his hand meant that I had seconds to live. I fled because I hadn't the time to reach him again.

In rarefied air at 10,000 feet, my lungs verged on collapse. My heart thumped out like an ancient pump, protesting at every stride. My legs would not operate as they should; my blood lacked the oxygen it craved.

I had not heeded direction. Now as I halted, my mouth wide open, my lungs rasping for air, I could feel and hear the tremendous thudding inside my chest. It became more ponderous until I was certain it would stop altogether. My mind was woolly and I was quite dazed. There was no time to rest. I started forward again. Apart from being on top of a volcano, I had no idea where I was. The direction of the hotel was but a vague guess, because my course had been erratic. Up and down lava hills and skirting craters, I might now be anywhere.

I was suddenly lonely in this unusual wilderness with so many similar landmarks that there might as well be none. I wanted to sink down and rest, but I knew I could not. To prove it, Michele lumbered in view. He had selected a high point and almost at once he located me. It was no comfort to know that if he ran his lungs would rasp as mine did, for he had the means in his one big hand of shortening our distance by at least 40 yards.

Seeing him steady himself, I immediately stumbled on, zigzagging aimlessly. I didn't hear the shot. Something hit the shoulder padding of my jacket and spun me round. Even then I had the sense to keep moving. To hit an awkwardly moving target at that range was fantastic shooting. It did nothing for my waning reserves, nor did the knowledge that he had a silencer. My main hope had been that shots might bring someone from the hotel.

Finally I had to stop. I crawled behind the torn ridge of a crater and waited for my painful gasps to subside. If only I knew which way to head for the hotel.

Again Michele was in view. He was moving quickly, but he was not running. He had no need. All he had to do was plod on and wait for me to wear myself out. Had I carried a gun myself, I would have used it by now, as Michele well knew. I cursed Kennedy then for taking back his gun. Unreasonably I cursed him solidly from lips still gasping at air.

The rim I was crouched behind was hard to my touch. Its edges were jagged and torn. All the time Michele remained on high ground, I could peer between the serrations and keep him in view. The danger would arise when he came lower. He must have realized this, for he started walking down the slope, scanning as he came.

My breathing was easier but my back was still painful where he had kicked me. Michele gradually disappeared from view as he descended. I heard nothing. For a big man he trod very lightly. He was playing a game he knew.

I could have backed carefully away. I even considered it. Then I realized that I could go on like that for only so long. Unless I reached the hotel I had no chance. Finally I decided to risk staying and then back-track.

The crater rim where I crouched was somewhat lower than the far side. Near me was a section like a slice cut from a cake. Moving noiselessly, I reached it. Placing a foot in its base and holding the lava walls on either side, I levered myself up but remained crouched. My footing wasn't too safe, and there was space for only one foot. Steadying myself, I peered down.

The sight did nothing for my nerves. The drop was not sheer. But it was a long way down to the yellowish brown uneven floor below. The walls sloped down at an acute angle to some 65 feet below. On the bed of the crater were lumps of solidified lava like grotesque rocks. I had hoped to find some sort of ledge on which to kneel. There was nothing so convenient.

What there was, however, was a small rough hollow just beside the V in which I was standing. Experimentally I swung my other leg inside the crater, grimly hanging on to the one wall of the V with both hands. The hollow was too shallow and curved to take my weight, but it did afford a rough, very temporary foothold. Most of my weight was still on my foot in the crutch of the V.

By so suspending myself, all my body except part of one leg and a foot was hidden behind the crater wall. I improved my comfort by moving my right hand to the top of the crater rim, leaving my left hand clutching the side of the V.

I hung there, wondering for how long I could keep it up and listening intently for any sound of Michele. If he saw me now, I might just as well

let go and get it over with. This was no brave thought of mine but an increasingly resigned one. I was so exhausted, so full of despair, that I deluded myself into forgetting how sweet life was when it came to the point of dying.

By putting extra pressure on my left foot, I was able to ease my body slightly to one side and look out. I could see the dark brittle stretches ahead of me before they climbed high to the next hillock. There was no beauty in it now. Michele had selected his place of execution with extreme care. No one would find a body in one of Etna's craters. No one would even try.

I almost missed Michele. His broad back passed a few feet from me. For a moment he stood still, gun in hand, his head slowly turning.

Breathlessly I drew back, hoping to God that he would not see my foot. Time was endless before I ventured to peer again. The strain on my arms and legs verged on the unbearable. I simply could not stay suspended there any longer. Calling on my last reserves, I looked out again.

Michele was some distance away, climbing up the incline. Hold on just a little longer, I told myself. Seconds only. Wait till he's over the rise.

Gritting my teeth, I clung there, strength almost gone and the sweat of weakness and fear streaming down me. I followed Michele's retreating figure, the glare of the sun on his back forming a haze. Taking my gaze from him, I followed the route ahead of him, willing him to go faster. My sight wandered up the slope to its summit, where Toni was standing grinning down at me. His gun arm was rising even before I saw him.

## chapter 10

MICHELE must have known Toni was there, but he had his head lowered against the climb. He could not have seen Toni's gun come up, or he himself would have wheeled and fired. When Toni fired, Michele did spin round. He spun too quickly, and even while I heard the bullet smack into the lava, I saw him slip. But Toni wanted the glory, quickly, before Michele recovered. He fired again. The bullet chipped under the fingers of my left hand. I lost my grip and I knew I was going down.

Literally, I clung to life. As I started to slip down, I flung both hands above my head and tried to suction on to the pumice stone roughness of the lava. Keeping my body flat against the wall, my head forward and sideways, my toes digging away to break my momentum, I began the long drop.

Whatever I did, I was bound to gather momentum. All I could hope for was to check my pace sufficiently to save myself.

I was dropping much too fast for comfort. Digging in my hands I tried to check my pace with every bump and hollow I passed. The rough surface of the lava was tearing my skin from my hands, and the friction was searing through them. Suddenly I was grasping at air and there was nothing under my body. I landed with a tremendous thud on the bottom, and my knees came up under my chin, blacking me out completely for a few seconds.

Fighting back the darkness, I stopped the sky hurtling round the crater rim and drew it back into focus. The rim was a long, hopeless distance from me. After sliding down the crater wall I had dropped only the last 10 feet, where the wall hollowed round the base. In an instant, I rolled under the protection of the hollow, and in so doing drank in the relief that my body was unbroken. But how it hurt.

The recess in the wall ran right round the crater, formed, no doubt, by some quirk of the original blast. It hid the sky from me; and me from searching eyes. Michele's voice came down like a sibilant whisper in an echo chamber.

"I don't see him anywhere."

I could imagine them leaning over, searching the depths, wondering what had happened to me. Toni answered, "It is wide at the bottom. He must have rolled under a ledge."

"Are you sure you hit him?" Michele again, full of suspicion and contempt. He had not fired the shot. But Toni was out to establish himself.

"Of course I hit him. You saw him fall. I hit him in the chest. Anyway, he's down there. And there is no way up."

Some time later, Michele answered him; a thoughtful, ponderous observation. "Yes," he said. "Yes, he's down there. The fall could kill him." Michele suddenly made up his mind. "He's probably dead. If he isn't, he's wounded. Either way,

he can't get out. Come, it is safe to leave him, dead or alive."

Lying there, I silently agreed with him. Even allowing for the slight incline, I could never scale the walls. Taking no chances I remained still, but the voices at least had gone. Only now, as I began to look around me, did I realize that I was holding my hands out, slightly cupped, in front of my face. The pain returned with the absence of sound. The sight of my hands turned me sick. Flesh had been rasped away. The finger nails I had left were torn stumps. My clothes were tattered rags.

I waited another half hour, then crawled out from the ledge. The jagged round blue of sky was empty of craning heads. They had gone.

By the careful use of lacerated fingertips, I eased my cigarets and lighter from my trousers' pocket. It was a painful operation. Even holding the lighted cigaret between my fingers called for extreme delicacy of manoeuvre.

I could now understand a good deal. Only my room had been reserved at the hotel in Catania. Michele had stayed elsewhere so that he could not be identified with me. He had hidden his face away from the porter by searching for something on the floor of the car. The original car had been substituted because the hotel staff had seen me in it. The driver could say he dropped me anywhere. No one could refute him. This would suggest I had gone my own strange way much to Michele's disgust. I would not be found again.

All this made sense. What did not, was why Angelo had instructed Michele to kill me. It had been a carefully laid plan. In some way Angelo was crossing Jim Penso, and I didn't like that one bit. Not because of Penso, but because of what he represented. Angelo was double-crossing and Penso had to know of it. Penso must be permitted to finish his task.

With my hands held well away from my body, I explored the unscalable walls of my crater prison. My condition depressed me. Penso would have to fight for himself while I died the slow death down here.

If the world above the rim was desolation, then the crater itself was an entrance to Hell. I had no food or water. My hands could become gangrenous unless attended, and I had no means of escape. The claustrophobic effect of the bare ugliness of the pit was itself increasingly unnerving. The hope of discovery was so remote that I was fast approaching the brink of utter despair.

I shouted. Whereas Michele's voice had carried clearly from the top, it seemed to me that mine was being muffled from the bottom. Yet it was my only hope. I shouted until I could hear the stark desperation in my voice. When I heard my own rising hysteria, I forced myself to stop for sanity's sake.

While the day went past, my pains eased a little, or more likely I was learning to live with them. At one stage during the day, the sun was directly overhead, and I crawled into the hollow. I dozed. What woke me was the rumbling of Etna herself. With my ear to the ground I could hear her stirring, deep inside like an upset stomach.

The day brought oppressive, trapped heat, the evening acute chill. With the sun gone the night air came creeping in, thin and iced at this altitude. I began to shiver uncontrollably. I clambered into the hollow and curled up like a frightened dog trying to get warmth into my body. My tongue and throat were swollen with shouting and dryness. I had reached the bottom, and resented only the agonizing time death was taking to claim me. In the darkness of the crater, I mumbled a prayer without any feeling of hope. Perhaps I was seeking absolution.

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I saw reflected light and decided my mind was going. When it came again, I scrambled out from the hollow like an animal, on all fours. I shouted with all my power, but all I managed was a feeble groan which made me despair more than anything else that day. Staring up, I saw the rim full of stars, then the light again. It was torchlight, flashing directly over the crater, reflecting on its walls.

I shouted again, not caring if I tore my throat with the effort. Then the unbelievable happened. A torch shone down on me. I was in the centre of its beam, staring up with tattered hands protecting my eyes, like an actor in the dying moments of a tragedy, the spotlight full upon me while I made my plea.

The rest I am not entirely clear about. A hazy impression of lights, ropes, friendly voices and helping hands remains with me, will always remain with me. The Etna hotel people who rescued me were

wonderful. The police with them were awkward, but only because I was.

A man had phoned the police in Catania and related such a convincing story of an Englishman falling down a crater that they were left with no option but to follow it up. The unknown caller had given weight to it by giving my name and the hotel at which I had stayed the night. The police had checked, and sent a car up quickly. By the time they found me they had been searching for over two hours.

At Catania the police took me to hospital where I was examined and my hands treated. Dawn was breaking by the time I was taken back to the police station. To tell them the full story was impossible without revealing Penso's whereabouts. I did not want the police at the grotto. There were also other reasons. So I told them I had got a lift in a car to the Etna hotel, where I had intended staying the night. I gave them a description of the driver which could have fitted half Sicily. Where was my baggage? I'd only one small grip which I had left in the car boot, having forgotten it. Instead of checking in straight away, I had gone exploring. Foolishly, I had climbed the crater lip to get a better view, and had fallen down. Had I told anyone I was going to Etna? Several people. I could only imagine one of them had played a practical joke on the police by phoning them; a joke which turned out to be highly fortuitous.

The police did not believe my story. Nor did I expect them to. It was a thin, ridiculous story, but I stuck to it. There was nothing they could do. Having committed no crime, they reluctantly let me go.

It was now mid-morning. I had already had breakfast at the police station. All I wanted to do was to get back to Ustica to settle a few things quickly.

I cashed some very tatty traveller's cheques, bought myself a cheap drill suit and shirt, and caught the flight back to Palermo. I slept all the way over to Ustica in the hired launch, waking up in time to tell the pilot to drop me at the small fisherman's jetty in the harbor. Paying him off, I set out for Franca's villa.

Hoping she was in, I rapped lightly on the door. Franca opened it and stood staring wide-eyed at me. She glanced down at my bandaged hands. I saw the blood leave her face, and thought she was going to faint. Instead, she was suddenly in my arms, holding me with incredible strength and murmuring softly in Italian. On reflection, they were the most wonderful moments of my life. A crisis had severed all restraint between us. After some time, she carefully took my hand and we walked into the drawing-room like young lovers.

We were both breathless and a little mystified, but we recognized what had passed between us. I told her what had happened to me. While I told her, I was disturbed by the increasing depth of her expression. She shivered from feet to head, clasping her arms tightly about her. Then she said feelingly, "Had I known you were going, I would have stopped you."

"But I told Michele to tell you. To ask you to come."

Franca's brows rose in an arch of contempt. "He never told me, or even called. Michele will act only for Angelo. When I learned you had gone I was frantic. Up to then I was hurt, but I thought you had wandered off on whatever it is that links you with Penso. It wasn't until late yesterday that I discovered Michele was also missing. Then I began to guess."

Gazing at her, I recognized the tremendous strain Franca had suffered during the last day. I waited for her to continue.

"I knew it would be useless seeing Angelo, and if he saw my despair he would hold me until it was over. Then I remembered when I took you to see Jim Penso. Angelo had suggested they should take you to Etna. I know their minds. I could see what they had done."

"From the weather station I phoned a friend in Catania, telling him what to say to the police. I had no hope, David."

Franca slowly shook her head and the tears began to flow. She gazed across at me. She sobbed. "This is wonderful. So wonderful to see you again."

I didn't go across to her. Just then I don't think she wanted me to. Franca cried quietly into a thread of handkerchief and slowly she recovered her poise.

"Can you deliver a note to Jim Penso for me? Without Angelo seeing it?" I asked.

Franca was wary. "Have you found out why he is there?"

"Sufficient for my needs. Why? Do you know?"

Franca shook her head. Her lids were red-rimmed, but her eyes were now clear. "No. I have no idea. It is all very secret. I can deliver your note. But I think you should get off the island."

"I'm safer here, Franca. Angelo is a planner. He does not like bodies on his doorstep. As long as I don't provide them with another opportunity for an accident, as on the hotel grotto steps, I'll be reasonably safe. Do you know why Angelo wants to kill me?"

"No." It was long drawn out, like a long sigh. "I have racked my brains. I can think of no reason." And then, thoughtfully, "But there is something I can do to prevent him trying again."

Again that expression in her eyes which both baffled and frightened me. I said briskly, "Give me paper and pen." With great difficulty I wrote my note to Penso, sealed it and gave it to Franca, who said she could not deliver it until the next morning.

"Well, at least I'll be safe in my room tonight." I observed. "They don't know I'm back."

Franca came across, walked round to the back of my chair, put her arms round my neck and her face against mine. Very gently she lifted one of my bandaged hands and held it lightly.

"Do you imagine, caro mio, that having found you again I am going to let you leave me?"

★ ★ ★

I had to return to my room some time: the rest of my gear was there. I went in the morning, while Franca was gone to the chimney entrance of the grotto to take the note. She had insisted on going alone.

Franca and I had lunch together at her villa. In the meantime I'd seen nothing of Kennedy, but as I had kept clear of the hotel's public rooms this was not so surprising. After lunch, Franca insisted that I catch up on well-needed sleep, and as she had cleaning to do in the villa, we agreed that I would go back to my room and we would meet for dinner.

An insistent tapping on the door awoke me. Before answering it I was surprised to find that I had slept for three hours. I opened the door. A maid gave me a smile and an envelope and went away. Tearing the envelope, I took out a note from Jim Penso.

"David:

Thank God you told me. Maddeningly for you, it is not what it seems. I am not being betrayed by Angelo, or by Michele. The suggestion that Michele should take you to Etna was mine, but I am shattered by what followed. Angelo is to blame, but not in the way you must think. In all fairness to you, I think it's time I opened up and gave you the rest of the story. I have only until tomorrow to wait.

Primo is waiting in the launch to bring you here. Both Angelo and Michele will be here, but I can promise you that neither will touch you. Whatever else you think of me, and I'm not blind to it, you know my integrity. You need not come. If you don't, I will understand. If you would rather we met outside the grotto, I will try to meet you, but with obvious reservations. Scribble a note and give it to Primo if you would rather do that.

Otherwise, let things ride as they are. I'll just have to explain some other time if we meet again by chance elsewhere.

Jim.

P.S. If you do decide to come, 10 minutes should do it. Primo can run you straight back."

Having read it, I scanned it. He had used the old code. The note had not been written under duress, and the all-clear sign was there.

Go to the grotto, or forget it all? I was incapable of forgetting. I trusted Penso's integrity to his cause, and his ability, but I did not like the idea of going. I called myself a fool, but it made no difference. I would have to go.

The sun was a blood-orange perched on the sea rim by the time I reached the landing stage. Primo had seen me coming and started to bring the launch in. The concrete trembled while I stood there, and in amazement I saw a long crack snake across it. Primo felt it, and held the launch off while it tossed about on the disturbed sea. The tremor was not so bad as on the night with Kennedy, but

it was an uncomfortable sensation. After a while the sea calmed and Primo came close enough for me to jump into the stern of the launch.

The launch performed its surf-skid into the grotto entrance, and I saw Jim Penso walking across the shelf towards us. I saw that the strain on his face had deepened considerably since last we had met.

Penso led the way across the shelf and up the steps to the villa.

Angelo and Michele were seated on the settee in the drawing-room. They remained seated as I entered. Angelo eyed me impassively, gave me a faint nod of recognition. Michele was back in his blue hooped jersey and grinned widely, as if the attempt to kill me was one huge joke. He waved his hand at me. I sat down in a chair opposite the two of them. Jim Penso pulled up a chair near the door and straddled it. Nobody offered me a drink, but it was explanations I needed, not drink.

"Well," I demanded. "What went wrong?"

Penso was gripping the chair-back with both hands. I saw his grip tighten and his gaze shift to the floor. His lids came drooping down in the way I knew so well, and my whole body vibrated. It did not creep up on me gradually, but suddenly it was there, with a sickness at the back of my throat. Moreover, it came before I saw Angelo and Michele make slight movements which conjured guns into their capable hands. With the insight came shock, arising from a belated percipience. I still had to know the answer. "What went wrong?" I repeated. I was intensely angry with myself for my stupidity. I did not want to hear it, yet I must hear it. I had to know.

Jim Penso's lids half opened and he was looking at me quizzically, as if we had only just met. "What went wrong, David, was that you returned from the dead." He smiled in a twisted sort of way. My mind was reeling, because I could not believe my ears or make sense out of it. I heard Penso speaking again, and I fought for concentration, so that I would miss no word that might offer a clue.

"That evens it up, David. You had thought I was dead, and last night I was congratulating myself that you were."

"I hope you know what you're saying." My voice was much better. Inside, I still churned, the nausea rising alarmingly. I hoped I could hold out.

Penso shrugged resignedly, as if weary of the affair.

"I'm sorry, David. I tried to make it painless for you. A quick bullet." He pointed to my bandages. "I underestimated you. But then, working with me you always had my protection. It's difficult to assess how a man might react on his own."

I thought I was going mad. This was Jim Penso speaking to me. No friend, but a staunch colleague. Whatever we thought of each other, we had a bond. And then I remembered the bond Franca had told me existed between Angelo and Penso. Which went deeper? "For God's sake." I burst out. "What the hell are you playing at? What harm have I done you?"

Penso shook his head slowly. "David," he said. "I don't want to prolong this. You've done me no harm. But you happened to be here. You recognized me. That was sufficient. I cannot afford for anyone to know I am here or have been here. Apart from my friends." He nodded his head, indicating Angelo and Michele, who were both watching with alertness but disinterest. They wanted it over with.

"But why?" I shouted.

Jim Penso stood up. He put his hands in his pockets and looked down at me with detached regret. "David, I'm afraid you'll die in ignorance. I can tell you nothing. You'll simply die."

## chapter 11

**E**VEN now I believe Jim Penso was genuinely sorry. I think he had some kind of regard for me, but what form it took in his tortured mind I shall never know. Then his voice changed and it was the Penso I understood well; ruthless, single-minded, efficient.

"I have reason to believe that there is someone else on this island looking for me. I have a good idea who it is, but I don't want corpses all over the place. I have to be sure. You know who it is, David. You'd better tell me."

I sat staring at him, confused and sick at heart. If only I understood. But I knew that Penso would not tell me. I knew he would make no threats.

He would simply get on with whatever it was he had to do and that would be an end of it. And of me.

"I'm waiting, David."

Fighting off some of my numbness, I stared up at him. "Go to hell," I said.

It was typical of Penso that he did not waste further time. He shrugged. "All right." Such was his understanding with Angelo that he did not even glance across at the semi-retired gangster. Angelo and Michele stepped toward me. Had I rushed them it would have ended quickly for me. I didn't want to go out without knowing why. The same attitude had landed me exactly where I stood.

Penso left the room and returned with Primo. Between them they carried something like a giant ironing board. They assembled it in the middle of the room and I saw the arm and ankle straps dangling down. When Primo left, Penso turned to me. "Strip down to your underpants," he ordered. "You can do it yourself or we'll do it."

I undressed, not knowing what was to happen, but not much caring for the possibilities.

"Lie down on this." Penso indicated the thick, solid board with the indifference of a doctor to his patient. I hesitated. Once strapped, I was finished. The slightest attempt at running for it and I was finished. Raising myself on to the board, I lay flat. Michele and Angelo strapped my ankles and wrists. Penso went to a corner of the room and took the hood off the sun lamp, which he then wheeled forward. I now knew what had happened to Burbank. The immensity of his burns, his sightlessness, were explained. It was to happen to me. The thought that I could have forced them to shoot me made me feel sick.

Jim Penso came forward to stand over me. His dark glasses hung around his neck like a sweat rag. He nodded to the lamp hood.

"You know about these things, David." Penso was now eyeing me, his core as hard as the rock about him. Penso seeing a job through whatever the cost. I thought bitterly. His steady eyes were as impartial as the bulbs in the lamp. "You will slowly burn and blister to death. Your sight will go. Now who else on this island knows about me?"

That I was to die anyway was no comfort. To die slowly, agonizingly, under the violet light which would not immediately reveal its damage on my body, was a horrifying prospect. Yet I could not utter Kennedy's name. I considered it, almost said it, but that single noun would not form in my mouth.

As soon as the bulb flickered and threw its pale light, I closed my eyes tight. Uncannily, there was no feeling of warmth, and I knew there would not be. I knew also that it would take a minute or so to come to full strength.

Behind closed lids, when the mind is awake, time can be eternal. There were people about me, menacing silent people, watching and waiting. All I had to do was shout a name to stop the dread building up in me. I began to wonder just how long I could lie silent, knowing that beyond the darkness of my sight my body was frying.

I said as steadily as I could, "Why not tell me now, Jim? The reason for all this? I'm a goner anyway. You've nothing to lose."

Silence. All I could hear was the thumping of the generator. It was all part of the game, of course; to unnerve me, to make me tell them. I think that one of the strongest motives for my reticence was the forlorn hope that Kennedy would follow after and destroy these people as they had destroyed Burbank, and were now destroying me.

I was entering the beginning of the danger period. I had considered throwing myself sideways and overturning the narrow, collapsible table. If I did, they would simply pull me upright again, so I elected not to prolong the agony.

Suddenly, someone must have jarred the table, for it shook under me. Then came a much more violent shudder, lasting for a few seconds. I heard an exclamation, followed by the movement of a chair and footsteps. Somewhere below me the earth was trying to release power. It came again. This time the table rattled on its legs. The temptation to open my eyes to see what was happening was almost overwhelming. I kept them closed as the tremor increased. Something fell. I heard a shout. Thunder rumbled elsewhere in the grotto, then developed into an enormous explosion as if an ammunition dump had blown up.

The door crashed open; excited voices were racing away from me. The table was still shaking. Throwing myself sideways, the table came with me. Landing on the floor still strapped to the table

knocked the wind out of me, but it could have been worse. Keeping my face averted from the lamp, I carefully opened my eyes. The total darkness sent panic streaming through me. My God, I thought, I'm blind; it's too late. Strapped and blinded, and practically naked, with the villa quivering like a jelly under me, I almost wept with despair. Panting and cursing, I lay there intermittently praying that it would soon end.

A movement of my head brought the pale blur of window into view. Then, deriding my half-deranged mind, a star twinkled at me. Excited, I tried to calm myself. I listened. The floor was steadying. After the explosion it was now unnaturally quiet. Not even the generator—my God, the generator had stopped. That explained the darkness. Above me loomed the extinguished lamp. A dead, predatory, chromium monster. I realized, too, that I was alone. The others must have rushed to the source of the explosion.

I strained at the straps like a maniac. I was covered in sweat. The straps were as strong as ever, but where they had been nailed to the board there was now a little play. From now on I used my senses. My right hand being the least painful, I gripped the edge of the board, then lifted my arm, using it as a lever. I thought the strap was going to sever my wrist, but I kept going until eventually the leather came away. I had one hand free, with a strap still round it. Seconds from then I was out of the door.

The grit of lava dust bit into the soles of my bare feet, which at any other time would have made me yelp. Reaching the shelf I tried to penetrate the blackness of the grotto. Some way ahead, across the harbor basin, I saw the reflection of distant lights, coming from the passage leading to the chimney. I had no time to feel surprised, and vaguely reflected that I would have expected the generator to be checked first. I located the launch.

Climbing over the gunwale, my feet stepped straight into ankle-deep water. Unable to see a thing, it was impossible to judge whether the launch was damaged, or whether the tremor had disturbed the sea sufficiently to come pounding in. I'd rather drown than stay here, so I quickly sought a paddle.

The launch was rearing a little. It required no imagination to guess what it would be like on the open sea. Casting off, I started to paddle.

For guidance, I had the dull outline of the grotto entrance, filled with the black, phosphorous-capped mass of heaving sea above which hung the contrasting tranquility of the stars. Seeing the cascading surf beyond the entrance, I waited until the last moment before switching on the engine. I knew little about launches. But I knew how to start and stop one, and that was my only concern.

I probably did all the wrong things. At times the launch almost stood on her stern, and at others I thought she might capsize. All the time I made headway, and I had never felt so free in my life.

★ ★ ★

The salt sprayed on to my body, already pounded by an artificial sun, but none of this worried me. I felt that nothing could worry me any more. Sobriety had to set in, and it did half-way back to the hotel. For his own safety Penso would have to risk coming after me. I wanted Franca out of it, but she was already in, and, moreover, placed in an insufferable position. Then the glow of anger drove out the chill from my exposed body as what Penso had tried to do to me came back with agonizing clarity. Seeing the hotel lights, I swung in. Gritting my teeth, I swore that Jim Penso and I were by no means finished with each other.

The landing-stage vaguely stood out. I saw the spume at its base and knew that I had not the ability to bring the launch in safely. There was no time to consider consequences. I slowed, swung her right round so that she faced the open sea, opened her throttles, then dived overboard. I struck out rapidly for the deserted bathing platform, snarling at every wave attempting to impede me.

Evidently the severe tremor had shaken the place to life.

The hotel guests were standing in straggled groups on the terrace outside the bar and talking animatedly. Some were leaning over the terrace wall, peering below as if from the sea came the source of danger. A crisis had drawn them together as old friends.

I ran past them, dripping water. The odd, puzzled stare was cast at me, but in the main they were too concerned about the tremor. By now I had forgotten what time I had arranged to meet Franca. My watch was back in the grotto, but I suspected that I was far too late. I hoped she would

understand, but I could not see her yet.

Bursting into Kennedy's room, I was surprised to find it empty. The water formed a pool on the floor around my feet. I began to shiver. Running up to my own room, I found the key in the lock and, when I entered, the light was on. Had Franca been searching for me? Drying off, I put on fresh clothes, slacks and sweater and stout shoes, then went back to Kennedy's room.

A search for Kennedy's extra gun proved fruitless. There was nothing in his room that an ordinary tourist would not normally have. Almost it was too ordinary. Lying on his bed, I smoked his cigars, and I waited. I was deeply sorry that I could not put Franca's mind at rest, but it would never be at rest until this issue was settled one way or the other.

More than an hour passed. I waited while my impatience grew with my loathing of Penso and the edges of my temper were revealed even to myself.

The door crashed open and Kennedy stood there, his gun sweeping the room. He relaxed all too slowly for my liking, and he did not put his gun away. "Oh, it's you," he grunted.

Climbing upright I faced him, and he must have seen my tenseness, for his expression changed to a subtle wariness.

"Just why do you want Jim Penso?" I demanded.

My tone warned him not to hedge, but he still wasn't sure of me. He stood there, hard-faced and blue-eyed, assessing the change in me. "So we're opening up," he said noncommittally. "All right. Say your piece."

I told him about Etna and my more recent escape. Now I could see his deep interest, for he made no attempt to hide it. His eyes were screwed and bright in their folds.

"How come you know about Penso?" he asked sharply.

I wasn't prepared to tell him that. He could draw his own conclusions. "I knew him some time ago. Our being here together is mere chance." Yet it was no chance. The one mistake I had known Penso to make was recommending the island to Susie. He had not anticipated her death nor my seeking a refuge following it. Even Penso could not predict everything.

Kennedy nodded. I think he understood that Penso and I must have worked together. He confirmed it by saying, "If you were still active, you'd know why I want him. You would also be a marked man. Blown, in fact." He watched me closely for reaction, and he appeared satisfied. "O.K., David. You know what I'm talking about. I'm gonna take a chance on you."

I tossed him one of his own cigars and he lit it.

"Penso," he said, "was one of the British agents of a NATO team working in Berlin. Some of the finest agents in the business were on that job. British, French, German, American. You won't expect me to give details, but it was one of the biggest combined intelligence operations ever tackled. A good deal of trust from all sides was put into it. They perished. All of them. They may be dead, they may be elsewhere, but they'll never operate again. That's for sure. At the same time a number of other agents were blown. Russian intelligence had a field day and then some. The magnitude of the failure can be judged by the fact that the Berlin wall followed right on its heels. It need never have happened.

"Some time later we picked up one of the opposition. It was learned that our boys had been sold down the river by Penso. The wires hummed, things started moving. Only a few weeks ago, the grapevine had it that someone like Penso was seen in the Republic of San Marino. One of our boys gave us the lead. Penso was elusive. He still is. I think he made a mistake in rubbing out Bob Burbank. We weren't all that sure he had come down here.

"Well, that's your boy. The dirtiest kind of rat who had sold out for money; not even an ideal. The damage he's done will take years to mend, not to mention the wasted lives."

The dedicated Penso a traitor. I could not believe it. Yet I had to believe it, because it was the only possible reason for his wanting me dead. Some time later I was bound to comment, perhaps to Cummings, that I had seen him here.

Shakily I sat on the edge of the bed. Where had his dedication lain? Awaiting the one grand slam for making money? Being so good at his job until he was entrusted with a mission which could produce funds for him? I had an image of a girl

laughing in his face after Penso had just proposed to her; taunting him because he had not the money she craved. His tremendous love for her had become a nightmare of constant torture until one day he had said to himself, "This will never happen again; not over money." And he had then laid his plans, waiting only the opportunity. Was that what had happened to Penso?

Whatever his motive, men had died because of it and others were probably still in peril. It was no easier to believe, but I had to accept it. "I want that gun back," I said.

"I'll look after Penso," Kennedy retorted. Looking wearily up at him I saw his slight change of attitude. "Let's not argue about it, Chad." Standing up, I held my hand out. "If you don't trust me now, you never will. For personal reasons I cannot now attempt to explain, Jim Penso is mine."

Kennedy studied me for perhaps five seconds, then removed from his pocket the gun he had previously lent to me. He handed it over. I found it difficult to hold. To grip it made me wince. "How do you propose we get in?" he asked.

"We'll have to try removing the grid from the bottom of the chimney."

"There isn't a chimney."

I looked across at him in surprise. "I'm not with you."

"I blew it up," he said easily. "I couldn't watch both exits at once. I figured Penso was awaiting a particular boat out of Naples. We're on the Palermo approaches. He gets aboard before reaching Palermo and finishes up in the Far East, or South America or somewhere. That would mean using the grotto entrance. To simplify my task, I blew up the chimney with packs of ammonol rammed in with gun-cotton, slow fuses and detonators. I've just come back from there."

So that was the explosion. That was why they had all hurried off toward the chimney. I started to laugh. He had inadvertently saved my life. To remind me that the explosion alone had not doused the grotto lights, the earth shivered under our feet.

"The island is angry," commented Kennedy. "And little wonder. You said that Angelo's launch is on its way up the Med. Have they another boat, I wonder?"

"Yes. They have another boat. Not so powerful, but good enough."

Kennedy was blocking my view of the door. Franca's cool voice had startled me. As Kennedy wheeled round, I caught a glimpse of her over his shoulder. She came slowly into the room, wearing jeans and a dark green polo-necked sweater. Her black hair was tied back with a green band, making her face narrower, more drawn.

"I should have come to you first," I explained. There was no reproach in Franca's expression.

"I understand why you didn't. I've been listening. When you didn't return for dinner I was dreadfully worried. I was about to go to the chimney when I saw Mr. Kennedy returning. I followed. I knew there were things you would hold back from me, so I stifled my impulse and I listened."

Putting my arm round her, I said quietly, "We've got to go back darling; Chad and I. We've got to stop others from being killed, and there is a matter of justice."

Franca nodded. "I understand." But her dark eyes were hard bright, burning with an emotion impossible to identify. "I'll take you in by boat," she said.

Kennedy was immediately interested, but I had to stop this quickly. "You don't realize," I protested. "Angelo—"

"You will not get in without me." Franca snapped. I had not seen her look like this before. She was determined, but there was much more than that emanating from her. Her features were rock hard.

Kennedy chipped in, "You mean you drive, lady, and we lie down in the boat. I like that."

I shook Franca by the arm. "You don't know what you're saying. We may have to shoot your uncle. If we ever get the chance. All the odds are against us, my dear. Please stay. I beg you."

I don't think she heard me. Something obsessed her, and I didn't like the glassy brightness of her eyes. Franca broke away from me, and Kennedy and I followed her like obedient dogs. Kennedy had called Franca "lady." The ridiculous thought occurred to me that they had not yet been introduced.

★ ★ ★

Alongside the small harbor jetty a few small craft lay moored, bobbing against their coiled rope buffers on a sea now constantly restless. A glance

at Franca as she climbed aboard a good-sized launch was enough to convince me that a full-sized storm would not have stopped her. For the moment she was alien to all but the dreadful, dark thoughts which were relentlessly edging her forward. And under Franca's spell we climbed aboard.

Under the cold light of the stars Kennedy and I faced each other in the launch. There were four men in the grotto, and death was their business. We had to get in, locate and finish them. What hope had we? I was deeply afraid for Franca because I loved her. I saw her cast off, reverse out, swing the launch expertly round, but her movements were mechanical. Away from the harbor the launch rode badly on a choppy sea without a set rhythm. There was no time then to consider the roughness of the passage. Franca stood like a misplaced figurehead at the wheel. I called to her, but her mind was racing ahead of the waves. Gripping the low rail, I pulled myself forward until I was standing beside her watching the occasional spray trickle down her too-still features. Shouting, I grasped her shoulder, pulling her round. She started dumbly at me, not really seeing me. I shook her fiercely, almost overbalancing us both. Recognition came slowly. For a little while life came back to her face. She gave me one embracing look which told me what I wanted to know; then she said, "It will be all right, David." The next moment she was a statue again.

I left her to it, knowing that something had to work from her system whether or not I liked it. Kennedy was trying to maintain balance by kneeling near the stern. He had found a tattered oilskin in the locker which had probably been used as a cover for the well of the boat. Together we opened the stiffened creases until we had it roughly laid out. We then crawled under it, keeping close together near the port gunwale. Lying flat, I pulled myself forward, then lifted the edge of the oilskin to peer out. Franca's bound hair was a flying horse-tail, jet black and magnificent. Her classic features were a pale blob against the night.

We heeled over in a long arc. Sea cascaded over us. We could hear it driving against the oilskin and it came trickling along the deck in crazy runnels. The launch shot toward the grotto entrance as it straightened up.

Suddenly we were on calm water with the screws reversing, straining to check our forward movement. Under the oilskin, our heads on the deck, we could feel the launch vibrating. The engine noise cut out. The launch lurched as Franca stepped ashore. We heard Michele's voice, then Franca's emphatic demand to see Angelo. The peculiar acoustics juggled with their footsteps, then silence.

I gave Kennedy a nudge. I knew the grotto, he did not. Slowly I raised the tip of the oilskin like a visor. Lifting my head, I peered above gunwale level. Evidently the dynamo was still broken, for three pressure lamps had been set out. The light from them was quite good, but in a cavern so large there were several dark areas. Seeing no one, I quickly tapped Kennedy's shoulder.

Guns in hands, we climbed ashore. The bar offered cover of a sort, so I led Kennedy towards it. In the launch I had explained roughly the layout of the grotto. We were treading extremely lightly. In normal circumstances our movements would have been soundless. As it was, the super-sensitive microphonic effect of this strange underground hideaway sent shuffling whispers in and out of rock crevices like scuttling rats.

From one of the dark patches stepped Primo, wiping his hands on an oily cloth. I guessed he had been working on the plant. He had heard our movement, but had obviously expected it to be one of his friends. His gun was almost in his hand before he dropped dead on to the grotto shelf. The roar of our own guns was like a barrage of artillery fire.

Whispering urgently to Kennedy, I sped toward the base of the steps leading to the villa, flattening myself against the rock face beside them. Kennedy dived behind the bar. The silence following the thunderous, repetitive noise was far worse to endure. At the sound of shots, I had expected Penso, Angelo and Michele to come running out into our cross-fire. It was too late to be reminded that they were old campaigners, experts at this sort of thing. Now I began to worry about Franca being with them. When I realized that I was waiting to try to kill a man whom I had trusted, reality faded into the dark depressions about me. Yet when I thought of the comrades he had betrayed, of the enormous damage he had done to mutual trust among the NATO nations, of the painstaking years of work destroyed in the Western intelligence systems, I

had to fight with myself to prevent a crazy desire to dash up the steps to the villa. As it was, I took a step forward. That and the shudder suddenly shaking the grotto saved my life. The bullet chipped the stone where I had stood and went screaming off in agony.

Spinning round, I flattened at the same time. Michele was on a ledge high above me. I had not known of this route from the villa. Had I done so I would hardly have stood with my back to it. I fired awkwardly without aiming, and the roar joined the existing echoes. I was having difficulty holding the gun, and my shot was hopelessly out. Michele even grinned as he levelled his gun. I sweated while I took another wild aim, knowing that Michele would not miss. He was still grinning when Kennedy's shot hit him in the stomach.

Michele still clasped his gun in his hand across his belly, and I could see that he intended to use it. How he must have prayed for a second hand just then. More carefully, I aimed and fired. He staggered, his grin now a grimace of agony, and fell forward over the edge on to the shelf.

Rushing forward to where he lay prone, face down, I quickly grabbed the gun he was still holding. I could hear him straining for breath. I should have put a bullet into the back of his head to save him from suffering more. But I had not the courage. All I felt then was that simple, deadly Michele lay dying because of a traitor named Penso. Michele at least had been honest to what he represented.

Spontaneously I put out a hand and ruffled the fair curls of Michele's head. He gave up the struggle while I was still touching him.

Now I had two guns. Racing across the shelf toward the steps, the ground was suddenly pulled from under me. I fell flat on my face. One of my guns slid away from me. Hurling myself at it, I prevented it from dropping into the water. A terrifying sound rent the grotto as if the devil himself was tearing the rock apart. A crack appeared in the rock face like giant forked lightning. At the same time the whole grotto shook as if in a palsy. The sea around the entrance suddenly came to the boil with steam hissing toward the roof.

One of the pressure lamps overturned, broke and exploded. It was no more than a match flare compared with what came out of the sea. I was lying near the launch. The entrance was some 60 feet from me. The sea erupted with an explosion that brought the roof of the entrance crashing into its hot embrace. Red-hot lava came spewing up like a gigantic firework display. I ran back to the bar, feeling the scalding water cascading down on my head and back.

Kennedy pulled me under as I rounded the bar. "Drink that," he said, handing me a half-emptied bottle of scotch. "Why? Do you think I need it?" How that man could get under my skin. I glared at him as he said reasonably, "Yeah. I think you need it."

Flinging the bottle angrily against the wall, I snarled at him, "Don't confuse my anger against Penso with another emotion. I'm going up the steps to the villa."

"You're mad," he said. "They'll pick you off."

"I'm mad all right. Franca's up there." At the end of the bar I peered round. The eruption was still sending up its fire and brimstone. The whole grotto was filling with heat and steam. The sea seemed to have partially solidified to a heaving red and black mass. I turned round to Kennedy, who was still neat and tidy.

"I'm going up," I said. "You can pick them off picking me off."

"All right," Kennedy checked his gun. He shrugged. "You sure hate the guy."

"I hate him all right. I suppose I always have. One day I'll tell you about it."

I ran across the shelf which was being splashed by hot sea and fragments of lava. The vapor whirled about my body, stifling me and cutting visibility. It also muffled sound. Reaching the steps, I began to climb them.

Catching a glimpse of Angelo in front of the villa through the mist I flattened against the wall as he fired. That was the thing about Angelo and Michele; they took on a job to protect Penso, and my word, they did it. Franca had been right about the bond between them.

The steam lifted slightly. Angelo saw me before I saw him, and he fired again. My right wrist was shattered by the bullet.

The shot threw me back. I heard Kennedy behind me, but before anyone could do anything, Franca had raced from the villa, a gun in her hand.

We dared not fire for she was standing directly behind Angelo. Leaning breathlessly against the rock, I sat on the steps watching her, fearful of what she would do. This was her point of no return. Even the growing pain in my wrist became only a painful throb as I watched.

Angelo heard Franca coming and hesitated. He was kneeling down with his back to the villa. Then, ignoring her, he was about to fire when Franca's small foot sent him sprawling. Rolling on to his back, he looked up at her in hurt surprise. He must have seen something in her face that we could not see, for his expression changed to horror. He was scrambling to his feet when then the first bullet struck him. Falling back, he raised an arm in protest. His bleak stare had crumpled for the last time. Standing over him, Franca emptied her gun into her uncle.

I was too shocked to move. Penso must still be about, but there was no sign of him. Franca collapsed into a sobbing heap and that at last put life back into me. Kennedy raced ahead of me up the steps. I wanted to go to Franca's shaking form, but could not with Penso still about.

Kennedy and I had one of our moments of pure understanding. We dropped straight into a street-fighting routine for searching the villa. Penso was not in it. We came out. Franca was still sobbing near Angelo. It was too much for me. I went across to her and pulled her to her feet. She taloned on to me as if I was her last touch with sanity. At that moment perhaps I was.

"He killed my father," she sobbed. Gently pulling her head back, I saw her swollen eyes, the tears flooding from them chasing down her face and over her trembling lips. "It's all right," I murmured. "It's all right."

She pointed to the dead Angelo. "He is not my real uncle. He did not think I could remember the day he sent his man to kill my father, who had collected me from school."

I held her gently. "Don't worry, darling. It's over. He died as he lived."

Franca was not listening. All she wanted to do was to unburden a grief she had kept since childhood. "When he took care of me I knew that one day I would kill him for what he'd done."

"Why did he care for you?" I whispered.

"Because he was not all bad, and because he was disappointed with his own daughter." Gripping me with the strength of fear, Franca's eyes looked up at me, pleading understanding. "David, I could not let him destroy you as he did my father. Please, please understand."

I understood well enough; the torture this girl must have endured over the years, seeing the better side of Angelo, his affection for her, but never forgetting, never forgiving what he had done. I held her to me, tenderly and with a love the depth of which I had never known. Gradually her trembling quietened. When she suddenly broke from me, remembering that she had seen me shot, I knew she was breaking free. She fussed over my wrist, bandaging it with my own handkerchief.

Through the wreaths of vapor over Franca's head, I saw Penso. He was at the rear of the harbor, making for the passage to the chimney. While Angelo was holding us up, he must have escaped by the route Michele had used to creep up behind me. There was fair cover up there, and Penso was crouched down, moving slowly. Where was Kennedy? Telling Franca to get back into the villa, I shouted a message to Kennedy wherever he was.

Penso looked back at me, rose and fired. He was a good distance away, but it was close. I didn't fire back. At that range a shot fired with a ban-

daged left hand would have encouraged him to come into the open and take his time over shooting me. The sound of another shot multiplied around the grotto, and I saw rock fly near Penso's face. Penso looked towards the passage entrance, then scurried for fresh cover the other side of the harbor. Kennedy must have dashed straight down the steps to the chimney, while I was with Franca, and have been coming back when I shouted.

Calling out to Franca to stay where she was, I ran down the steps. The shelf was open, without cover, so I ran low and hard for the bar. I could see Kennedy emerging, and held up my hand to restrain him. Penso would get him as he came out.

I could not see Penso, but I roughly knew his position behind the huddle of rocks across the harbor. Behind Penso the eruption still roared, pouring out its molten mess into the sea. The lava was creeping up the shallow harbor, heating the sea, filling it at its shallowest; a creeping red carpet of destruction, blackening as the sea soaked it and hissed its displeasure.

Penso moved. I just saw his hairline for a fraction. He was adjusting his position to get a better shot at Kennedy when he emerged. Incensed, stupidly heedless of the danger, I rushed from behind the bar and ran down the shelf side of the harbor with an army of footfalls pounding with me.

Penso raised his head from behind a rock, wondering what I was doing. On a level with him, I could now see most of his body. Lying flat, my right wrist agonizing, I raised my left hand, carefully aimed and fired. I don't know where the shot went.

Penso laughed at me. Keeping well down, hidden from Kennedy's sight, he approached the edge of the harbor, across which we faced each other. Steam rose between us as the water boiled and was filled with the swelling mass of volcanic matter. He raised his gun. On the edge of my vision, I saw Kennedy emerge from the passage. If I could keep Penso there just a little longer, Kennedy would have his chance. Blindly I emptied what remained of my magazine at the crouching figure opposite. Cordite mingled with the pungent taste of sulphur which was filling the cavern. Helplessly I saw Penso aim. He laughed and made some gibe I did not hear. I sweated and waited for the impact, for I had nothing left to offer.

Kennedy's agile movements must have reached Penso's hearing, for he lost his sneer and pressed the trigger. The noise of the shot joined the swelling crescendo of the volcano and mingled with a scream. In the second it took me to realize I was not hit, I scanned the far side. The rock base on which Penso was standing had cracked like a mirror and was tilting towards the harbor. Penso was screaming as he tried to maintain balance. The rock broke away and Penso fell forward into the fiery mess that had once been clear placid water. It must have been like falling into a lake of red-hot cinders.

I shouted to Kennedy to get back, then raced up the steps for Franca. Later, Kennedy and I made her wait under the vastly widened chimney where Angelo had seen to it that a temporary rope had been fastened to the first undamaged rung halfway up. The two of us returned to the main grotto. It was like returning to hell. We disposed of Angelo, Michele and Primo so that there would be no repercussions or questions. They had perished in a volcanic eruption.

Then without a word between us, we rejoined Franca. Putting my arm about her I began to believe once again that freshness, and spring, and the loveliness of purity, really existed beyond the fiery terror we had left behind us.

★ ★ ★

Kennedy did not come to the wedding. He made formal excuses, but I suspected that he was on an assignment at the time. Much later, he stayed some weeks with Franca and me in the countryside of Buckinghamshire. It has a greener, more gentle type of beauty than Ustica, which is still thriving. The island has settled again, having had its fling. The strange thing about Kennedy and me is that on the rare occasions we meet, we still manage to rub each other the wrong way. Yet there is something between us which both of us acknowledge and understand. Anyway, Franca is a wonderful peacemaker.

The tendons in my right wrist are still stiff. While I was learning to write left-handed I had the odd sensation that Michele was laughing down at me.

— THE END —

(Published in book form by Cassell & Co. Ltd.)

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