

Chapter Twenty

Silence and darkness surrounded Carl. His head was pounding excruciatingly, with waves of nausea over the top. He couldn't move – was he in a narrow space? The atmosphere felt like he was indoors. He could make out the grime at the foot of an oak panelled wall just in front of his face in the barest glimmer of light that was available. He tried to groan but there was cloth held tightly in his mouth. He must be bound! He struggled in panic only confirming that all he could do was squirm. His ankles wouldn't separate and his wrists were tied behind his back. The effort of moving induced a shower of sparks in his vision followed by an engulfing wave of darkness.

When next Carl came to, nothing had changed. He had no idea if he had been unconscious for seconds or hours. The nausea had retreated, though it still threatened. This time he flexed his muscles against his bindings more gently. They felt like strips of rough cloth, as if ripped from a sheet, and there was some give in them. Encouraged he began to work against the slack by twisting his wrists. His shoulder objected with a sharp shower of pins and needles. He kept worrying away for what felt like minutes.

While he worked, his mind tried to piece together events. The book and the assault came back to him. They, whoever they were, had the book, so why had they kidnapped him? How had this venture reached such a perilous point so fast, he wondered? Who would pay a ransom for him? Certainly they couldn't hope to match the book's worth. He began to worry about where 'they' were. He couldn't hear any sounds of his captors. The sliver of light, that lit the room he was in, was entering from under a door – the light was artificial so it must still be night he guessed. Visibility in the room was poor and he could only make out objects a few inches from his nose – just the wall at the moment. The room was about the size of a small office though, about twice his length from door to back wall.

The straps around his wrists had loosened considerably. The cloth was not intended for this purpose and he had been able to stretch the fibres apart so that it was just loose enough he could squeeze his wrist through. In seconds his hands were free and he brought his arms around from behind. He had to suppress the desire to cry out from the pain and pleasure of movement. He sat up and quickly wished he'd moved slower as another rolling tsunami of sickness threatened to crush him. He would have to take this more slowly. He forced himself to sit and breathe regularly until the pain receded.

As he rested, he noticed a shadow pass across the light under the door, as if someone had moved across the source. He couldn't hear footsteps but someone must be in the room outside. Silence then was paramount. He reached forward and untied his legs. There was hope, he reflected, in finding his captors had been slack about confining him. Of course maybe the room was prison enough – he'd have to see. He undid the gag and removed it from his mouth. The cloth had oil stains on it, most likely from a car. He gagged at the harsh smell and threw it down, disgusted it had been in his mouth.

The need to recover and that for a speedy escape competed for his attention. For a moment he wondered if his captors had left him his mobile phone but it was gone, along with his wallet. That would have been too much to hope for. Finally Carl couldn't stand inactivity anymore. He moved himself to a crawling position and began to explore the room. Hopefully he was less likely to knock things over this way. He began at the back wall furthest from the door. There were mops and buckets in a corner, so this must be a storage cupboard. How many buildings had oak panelling in their storage closets he wondered?

He felt up and down the walls in case there was another door handle or access hatch, though without much expectation of success. It was therefore with some astonishment that he did find a small catch that when turned released a section of the panelling at the rear of one side wall. Perhaps it was just a further storage space. The light didn't penetrate into this new void so he gingerly moved his foot inside. Immediately he found a set of stone steps going up – it was a very narrow flight, like a servants' stairwell in a stately home. His captors really must be amateurs, he thought, gleefully ready to make his escape. Suddenly a call came from outside the main door,

“Luke, where are you?” The voice was refined, nasal and familiar. The man also sounded nervously excited. “Oh there you are, I've come as quickly as I can.” Cyril Hayhurst.

“Here's your book boss,” this was a younger, stronger voice, slightly cocky and uncouth. Hayhurst actually made a small sound of wonder, presumably when he saw the tome.

“What's all this about the boy?” Hayhurst tone was almost whining.

“I told you on the phone, we should top him. I don't know why you're here, it's just complicating the matter. Just let me put a bullet in him.” The man seemed angry. Carl's bile churned anew. Why would they want to kill him? His captor explained to Hayhurst,

“Look, he's the only guy who knows the book exists. If we top him, you can display it or sell it openly. If you let him go, it's almost worthless.

“I never meant this to go to murder,” you could almost feel Hayhurst had gone white. “Where is he?”

“Out cold in there. I clubbed him with a wrench. He may even be dying already from internal bleeding for all I know. Just let me finish him.”

“What would you do with the body?” Oh crap, he was buying into it.

“You don't want to know and I don't want to tell you. I can keep my mouth shut. Like I say you shouldn't be here, you're just adding evidence and torturing yourself. Piss off and let me deal with it.”

“Well, I don't know,” Hayhurst procrastinated.

Carl didn't want to wait for a decision! Time for a quick exit, he decided, and moved on to the staircase, gently closing the door behind him. He started to tip toe upwards in pitch darkness. The walls were rough stone and the steps old and uneven. They seemed to go up unendingly, surely at least two floors. Finally, they terminated at a tiny landing. Exploring the walls ahead he located another narrow doorway. Where would this open out? What if he crashed out on Hayhurst and his lackey? Inside the stairwell he had lost sound of their conversation. Surely he was well above them now?

Taking a deep breath, Carl twisted the handle and the small door opened a crack. There was nobody in sight so Carl could pause to assess the view. The opening looked out on to the balcony of a large, ornate chamber. It was a substantial area like the upper gallery of a modern church. A carved oak balustrade bordered the view to whatever was in the room below. There were three rows of seats for viewing, then behind was a substantial library area. About twenty bookcases lined the walls, filled with a mixture of historic looking tomes and modern hardbacks and bound journals. Four reading desks, each centred under a mock candelabra light fitting, suggested the area was used for study.

In daylight the place would be light and airy with skylights and rows of tall thin windows on either side wall, out over the main shaft of the room. The windows were leaded and small stained glass crests adorned the central panes. In fact, Carl realized, this building, whatever it was, was essentially just this room. The stairs he had come up hugged the outer wall and emerged through a concealed door in the oak panelling. The main egress to this area was via two large, curving, wooden staircases that dropped down to the floor below.

Carl then heard faint voices drifting up from below.

“What do you mean he's vanished?” That was Hayhurst, who apparently hadn't left yet. They must have entered the storeroom to finish him off and found he'd escaped. “Was this really where you put him?” That sounded like Hayhurst was helping his wife find her keys and Carl almost laughed. The hired hitman was none too impressed either, snapping back,

“Of course, those are the bindings. How the hell did he get out of the room? Do these cupboards have storage compartments?” That last was followed by banging on the wooden closets and the sound of a tin bucket being upset.

“Oh wait, there's a secret staircase in here I think,” volunteered Hayhurst. That dashed Carl's immediate plan of hiding in the stairwell until everyone had left. He was going to have to find another hiding place fast before they were up here. The realization renewed the leaden sickness.

“Where? Where does it go?” queried the lackey.

Carl decided to survey the main body of the room. He went down on hands and knees hoping that would make him less obvious from below and also quieter. The green carpet had surprisingly thick pile. Lying flat in an aisle between two rows of seats he peered below. It was an auditorium with a stage and more seating on the floor of the chamber. A huge candelabra hung down from the roof arches above on a thick steel cord, it's multitude of candle light-bulbs glowing brightly. On the wall behind the stage was a tapestry, though it looked fairly modern. Carl realized it was a collection of Masonic symbols including stylized masons at work, anvils and the eye and pyramid design off US dollar bills. You weren't supposed to get abducted by the Bavarian Illuminati in the twenty first century! Carl swore gently to himself.

"It goes up to the balcony. It's hard to see, let me look." Carl just caught the sight of his unlikely persecutor, Hayhurst, going through a side door. Presumably they were both now in the storeroom. Could he dash down the stairs and out of the building before they could catch him? He couldn't see the main door – it must be beneath him. What if they'd locked it? He didn't think there would be time and, in any case, they only had to see him once to stick a bullet in him.

He had to hide right now because they would be up here one way or another pretty damn soon, he pushed himself. He started to look around a bit desperately. Under a desk? Behind a bookcase? They'd find him. Finally his gaze fixed on the window ledges. They were deep and if you crouched on them you'd be invisible from below. There was also an area on the two bays closest to the balcony where, if someone crouched up against the near wall, they'd be hidden from a viewer on the balcony too. How to get out over the void to them though? There was a narrow wooden ledge trim around the wall. It was only a few inches wide and there were no hand holds. He'd have to be mad to even consider it. In the current circumstances that became an appealing feature though – his pursuers would never think he'd dare attempt it. Voices drifted up from below again

"Drat it! Maybe it was the other side?" Cyril was clearly struggling - was there still hope they couldn't find the stairwell entrance? Carl realized that he'd probably been aided by the darkness because any camouflage used to hide the handle would have been wasted on him. In the end they'd just kick in the panel though, wouldn't they? So he only had the window ledge plan between him and a bullet, and he'd better enact it fast before they came out into the main room below.

He scurried across to where the balustrade met the wall. The ledge was about four inches across to be precise, he noted. It was smooth from multiple layers of paint. He also observed that the wall was slightly curving back into the chamber as it began its rise to the roof above. The drop was a good storey and a half down onto the seats. This was suicidal.

"There you go!" Hayhurst had found the door. The guy with the gun would be pounding up the stairs in seconds. First he ordered,

“Cyril, go back out and check he doesn’t come down the stairs.”

He had to go now. He placed his foot on the balustrade and steadied himself against the wall to haul himself up. He placed his foot on the feeble ledge. His shoe’s sole slipped and he half fell down, gouging a big chunk out of his shin against the rails. He caught himself one leg either side of the barrier. The survival instinct adrenaline had overpowered his fear though and he tried again. Only in the days to come would he contemplate what that slip would have meant two steps later.

He dragged himself up again and pressed himself against the cold wall. His feet were this time more carefully positioned on the sliver of wood. Move! He started to gently slide his feet forward, first one then the other, all the while grinding his face and chest on the plaster as if he wanted to merge with it. This might work. Another few inches and another. Where was the window ledge? Don’t think, just move.

“I’m going up!” shouted the ruffian. Move, move, move! Finally his hand felt the edge of the window’s alcove and he almost threw himself round its corner. His legs flailed wildly over the drop but he grabbed the metal work at the base of the window and hauled himself in.

“I think I heard him up there,” called out Hayhurst. As long as you didn’t see me, I don’t care, thought Carl desperately. He dragged himself into a huddle, crouched in the corner, wedged between wall, window and ledge floor. His breath was gasping, close to panic. Calm! This had better work. If he was wrong and they could see part of him, he was dead, since now there was no escape.

He sat, a little ball of terror, as he heard the thug emerge on the balcony area, in truth just a few yards from his hiding position. His executioner called down,

“He’s not on the stairs. I can’t see him up here either. Did he come down?”

“No, no sign,” from Hayhurst below.

Carl watched blood streaming from his leg wound and wondered what on Earth he was doing here? He glumly imagined his own obituary; died due to ill considered adventure undertaken to take his mind off a thoughtless infidelity. Vester had barely begun a career in theoretical physics, effectively achieving nothing of note at the time of his death. Great!

Twenty heart stopping minutes passed while Hayhurst and his man searched the building in growing consternation and confusion. Every time the swearing got louder Carl started to hope a little more that he might just get away with this. He’d also realized he could spy out through the window he was up against and see a familiar street in central Winchester. So at least he hadn’t been taken too far. He’d even eaten at the kebab shop across the way. It was shut this late at night but easily visible under the street lighting.

Frustratingly, he still couldn't place the building he was in. Perhaps this whole auditorium was over some shop, hiding its function?

His persecutors had finally come to a confused stop,

"Well, he's bloody gone!" declared the tough.

"How can he have?" moaned Hayhurst petulantly.

"Bugged if I know mate! You should have let me kill him back when I first phoned. Whatever, I'm not hanging around here any longer waiting for the cops to pick me up. You have your book, so I'm out of here."

"He's probably still hiding here though," Hayhurst pleaded.

The younger man was apparently unimpressed by this thought and with a slam of the door he appeared to leave. So there was only Hayhurst now and without the gun, thought Carl, beginning to consider his options. He then realized just where he was. How was he going to get off this window ledge? He sneaked a look over the edge of the window alcove and the dizzying drop below made his head spin. He didn't much fancy trying to lean round the corner and renegotiate the ledge. Would other people show up here in the morning who he could trust to rescue him he wondered? How binding were Masonic ties?

"Geoffrey, it's Cyril," Carl was momentarily confused as to who Hayhurst was talking to. He was on the phone of course. "Yes, I know it's early. I have a problem. Luke got the book," a pause then, "yes, yes it is.. but he also kidnapped the lad. He wanted to kill him!... I didn't know what to do... but the lad's escaped and is hiding in the auditorium. We can't find him... Luke's run off." He seemed to listen for a long while. "Yes, OK I'll wait," was the conclusion.

Geoffrey. Geoffrey Montford? Had his boss been running this battery, theft and attempted murder? It was hard to imagine. Geoffrey was surely more civilized than that. Oh, but what if he knew about Carl and Georgina? Carl leaned his head back against the wall and inwardly groaned.