

Murder in a hospital throws a doctor into great peril.

The Griffon Trilogy: Part I

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Chapter VII

In the dimly lit café a few patrons milled about staring at the various pastries and desserts behind glass counters. John sat at an obscure, marble topped table toward the back. A waitress came and spoke to him in Hungarian.

"I only speak English," he said.

She stared at him blankly.

It was too late for coffee but it was the only Hungarian word he could summon.

"Kave."

She nodded, smiled faintly and left and returned shortly with a steaming cup of very strong coffee.

Thereafter a tall man, broad shouldered and burly with short black hair, a thick mustache and intense, small brown eyes, strode toward him.

"Rudolf?" John whispered, and the man swung onto a chair at his table abruptly.

"Dr. Bishop," the man muttered in the same rough voice recognizable from the phone conversation. "Did you come with anyone?"

"No."

"No one followed you?"

"No."

"No one knows where you are?"

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"Just the concierge. I had to let her know because I didn't feel safe in this meeting."

"That was stupid, doctor."

"Thanks."

"Very stupid. You can not trust the concierge."

"I don't trust you."

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“That is a shame. There is much at stake here besides your life and my life. You will have to forgive me if I am brusque with you. I need to jar your senses awake. You have stepped on the tail of the dragon and you do not know it.”

“I was beginning to get that impression on my own. Who are you anyway?”

“I can not tell you that. Besides it is not in your interest to know. Nor mine. I give you three messages. Because of your blunder this will have to be very quick.”

“Tell me. I have travelled thousands of miles for information.”

“One. I am from an underground organization at the University, a very small group of intellectuals. We are fighting what we believe to be some very dangerous technological developments or perhaps you could say the dangerous applications of these developments.”

“By your government?”

“Not really.”

“Not really? What the hell does that mean?”

“That’s all you need to know. Point number two. Dr. Hopp had two degrees, doctorates in sociology and biology. He did all his research in biology and became famous for it. That’s why Eva Bentley found him useful.”

“How did you know about her?”

“She is very important. A key player as you say.”

“Tell me more about Eva. That’s who I really want to know about.”

“Point number three. The forces in this country against which I fight know about your trip and your purpose. For them you know too much and thus now they want to kill you. Assassination is one of their strengths. Stay more than two or three days here and you are a dead man. So my last message is get out. Fast. Take the next plane out of here. Now I must leave the Angelika and so must you but separately from me.”

“You came just to warn me?”

“Yes.”

“But why do you care about me?”

Rudolf stared at him coldly.

“I would like to care about you, Dr. Bishop, but I don’t have that luxury. No. Your lawsuit situation in America is important to us. If you die then the lawsuit and your investigation dies and that would not be good for us. I am here to get you out of Hungary alive and to give you important clues to help your investigation along.”

“And what clues are that?”

Rudolf sighed wearily.

“Once again. Ferenc Hopp was a world class biologist doing research with very powerful applications and potential, and that is why Eva Bentley made him her friend.”

“She used him.”

Rudolf shrugged his shoulders as if to say what else? From beneath the table he pulled a brown, letter-sized envelope and pushed it over to John who stuffed it as best he could into his front pants pocket.

“What’s that?”

“ Take it. It will help your investigation. Now I am going. Leave five minutes after me. Goodbye.”

The large man got up and walked briskly out of the shop without looking back.

John stared after the man disbelievingly. The waitress came and brought him his check on which he laid 200 forint.

“Why should I believe this man?” he thought. Rudolf jumps into my life with threats, insinuations and without the least desire to establish his credibility. On the other hand the man’s words impressed him with their sincerity and passion. John thought about the situation a long time. The concierge would be sending the cab at 10pm, and it was now 9:20 pm. The café was pleasant and quiet. The clientele was interesting to watch, and for the moment being out of the hotel in a strange city was an exciting prospect. The greatest danger had been back in his room. He motioned the waitress over and then stood up and walked over to one of the glass counters and pointed to a delicious-looking chocolate cake creation, a piece of which the waitress soon laid before him. She added the price to his bill, and John put 600 more florint down eating slowly, hardly tasting the cake and thinking hard.

Explanations for Rudolph’s words and actions flowed through his mind. Quite simply the man could be delusional, mentally unbalanced and had managed to latch onto John to foster his delusional system coming from clearly unbalanced psychological states. Or to the contrary Rudolph was a cold and hardened criminal, somehow connected to the silverfish episode and was sent either to finish off the job himself or set John up for someone else in the streets.

10pm. The café was closing, and the workers there looked at him now and then to see if he was leaving. A cab should be coming for him sent by the concierge according to his instructions. Casually he left the café nodding thanks to his waitress. He stood out on the sidewalk waiting. Five minutes passed and then 10. After 20 minutes all hope for the cab had vanished. No matter. He would walk back to the hotel. Hell, it was only a short distance away, and the night was brisk and invigorating in this ancient, intriguing city with buildings

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and landmarks that were centuries old. The Danube lay to the east, and his hotel stood to the south and west – not too far. The walk would benefit him.

Crossing the Frankel Leo Ut at a light he noticed a car coming towards him quickly. It had a red light but raced through it toward him picking up tremendous speed with its engine whining from the strain. It was a heavy, dark sedan. The car was seconds away from obliterating his body. The driver's face appeared to him, and John stared at him with horror before adrenaline surged through his body. With one instinctive leap he jumped clear landing on the sidewalk painfully on his shoulder and then rolled away. The car jammed over the curb missing him by inches and then slammed awkwardly into the street in a burst of sparks from the under carriage which scraped against the asphalt.

John sprinted away. His shoulder ached and throbbed but he ran hard anyway. The car had screeched to a stop and now was turning around to come after him again. It turned the corner to the side street he was on just as he ducked behind some bushes. The sedan cruised slowly with men peering out of the driver's side and the passenger's side. The two men looked all around. The light of a streetlamp caught the blue glint of metal in each of the men's hands. John barely discerned the shapes of gun barrels.

The car passed. John sprinted in the opposite direction. His plan was to return to his hotel room, pack his bags, and leave immediately for the airport. He looked at his pocket map, noted his current position and the position of his hotel and plotted his return route. Good. The hotel was less than a mile away. He quickly pursued his course back to the hotel.

Just as the Matyas Templon or Matthias Church came into view, the sound of roaring engines reverberated through the street. Behind him in the distance the dark sedan stood motionless at a light.

He ran for the old, Gothic, 13th century church and ducked through the front doors and down the main aisle and sat several feet into a pew and bowed his head.

Ten minutes passed and nothing happened. Relief. On the floor embedded in stone was a plaque covered with Hungarian writing, the names of two kings and the years 1867 and 1916. The kings were crowned in this church on those dates. His eyes glanced around the altar, and then in a somewhat uncharacteristic moment John prayed. He prayed for safe passage back to the United States and then for the spirit of Eva Bentley and the spirit of Ferenc Hopp. Two human beings. Assassinated.

The silence of the church broke with the opening of the front doors that creaked into life as they swung open and then shut. Footsteps sounded on the stone floors first in the foyer and then as they made their way down the main aisle. The footsteps, slow and heavy, stopped even with his pew. John buried his

head in his arms as if deep in prayer. Silence. He turned his head and looked. The round and smiling face of a short peasant woman looked back at him. She turned and sat in the opposite pew.

John quickly got up and dashed out of the church. There was no pretense of normalcy now as he ran for all his life to the Budapest Hilton. There it stood with its fantastic Baroque architecture. He stood there surveying the hotel and the surroundings carefully. Nothing but quiet lay all around.

An explosion rocked the air. The percussion thudded against John's ears and body with a menacing violence. At about the level and location of his hotel suite orange, yellow and black flame burst from the side of the Budapest Hilton as glass and debris rained down on the ground below. After a pause people poured out of the lobby entrance yelling and screaming. Alarms rang. In the distance sirens pierced the quiet that previously had shrouded the city.

A car came racing past him and then disappeared toward the north. It was the dark sedan. The men inside took no notice of him, but instead peered single-mindedly forward.

Rudolf's warning to get out of the city blared within his head. John could only think of getting to the airport and catching the first flight out of Hungary. He didn't care which country it was going to just so long as it was leaving this Godforsaken place. His passport lay buttoned into his left back pant pocket. He felt for his wallet, which bulged from the right side. Police cars, ambulances and firetrucks began to converge on the Budapest Hilton in a garish array of flashing lights and sirens. John turned and left. The Alba Hotel wasn't too far, and he made his way there where the man at the front desk helped him to call a cab, which came in minutes. The cab driver drove like a madman talking excitedly in Hungarian during the whole trip. By his gestures and intonations John guessed he was talking about the explosion, and John felt very thankful that he couldn't understand a word of what the man was saying. John knew that as soon as the police identified the location and occupant of the blown up room they would be looking for him in a very urgent fashion. The trip to the airport normally took forty minutes at a fast pace but somehow the driver made the trip in thirty minutes. The cabbie looked to him for which airline to stop at, and through gestures and simple Hungarian words John managed to get him to stop at the main terminal.

After paying with a generous tip John walked hurriedly into the main atrium, which was relatively vacant at that hour. He walked around and scanned the list of departures for several different airlines and discovered a host of destinations none of which appealed to him. Finally there was one that left for Rome at 4am, and a ticket was purchased for that flight. In Rome he was sure he could get a

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flight to New York or even better to Baltimore. The moment came to pass through customs. There was no line.

To the customs officer he said, "I only speak English."

"Passport please."

John turned it over to the man who had some sort of printed communication before him. The official finished reading the report before turning his attention back to John.

"Have you anything to declare?"

"No."

"Why did you come to Hungary?"

"I came as a tourist."

"Where did you stay?"

John hesitated.

"Where did you stay?" the man repeated.

"The Hotel Alba."

"Have you no bags?"

John hesitated again.

"No. I mean yes. I sent them ahead of me to Rome."

The man eyed him skeptically.

"You sent your bags ahead of you? That is unusual."

"Well, you see, not for me. I like to travel light. I don't travel well in planes. You know, airsickness, and I have a fear of flying. I don't want to have to think about too many things."

The man was frowning.

"Where are you staying in Rome? Where did you send your bags?"

"Oh, nowhere special. Just to my hotel."

"Which hotel?"

"Umm, the Hilton."

"The Hilton?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know Rome had a Hilton."

"Oh, yes, a very nice one."

"You like Hiltons?"

"Well, I'm staying at one."

The man was silent for a long time. Finally he stamped John's passport.

"Can I go?"

Bored, the man nodded imperceptibly. The thought occurred to him that Rome might not actually have a Hilton. Sheepish and grateful to be free he passed through to the gates.

DOUGLAS & ANDREA MURPHY

It was 12:30 in the morning. His plane left at 4am. Until then John needed a place to hide. There was an all night bar close to his gate and he took a seat in there. Two men, obviously drunk, talked loudly a few tables away. John ordered coffee and didn't dare try to sleep until safely boarded on the plane.

Back in Maryland Katie eyed Groucho and Humphrey with pleasure but also a little bit of concern and guilt. Her friend, Megan, had come over today and in the excitement of having someone over, she had forgotten to take the dogs out. However, night had fallen and it was dark outside. Both Dr. Bishop and her mother had told her over and over not to take the dogs outside at night, but now if she didn't they might go to the bathroom in the house. Her brother was watching TV while her mom and dad were in the kitchen talking. Just this time. Just this one time. Quietly she leashed the two dogs that bounded in anticipation. Outside the street was quiet. Slowly she led her two companions along the sidewalk up the block until they had taken care of their business. Headlights approached from down the road, and soon a nearly windowless, dull white van had come up even with Katie. A man poked his head out of the window.

"Nice dogs," he said. "What're their names?"

Katie eyed him scornfully and began to walk toward her house. The van kept even with her.

"What's a matter? Cat got your tongue?"

"Nope. I don't talk to strangers. This one's Groucho and the other is Humphrey."

"Good names. Look. We're ok. Do you know Dr. John Bishop?"

Katie hesitated a minute.

"Maybe."

"Seen him around recently?"

"No. Why're you askin'?"

"Just curious. Say could you help us?"

"What kind of help?"

"We're lost. Could you tell us where the nearest gas station is?"

"Just go down that road and take a left."

"You know, that's great but I tell you I am really bad with directions. Why don't you come in here with your dogs and show us. We'll take you right back to your house."

Katie picked up her pace. Tears were forming in her eyes.

"No."

"Is that any way to help a stranger? It'll just take a minute."

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Katie started to run. The dogs galloped ahead with pleasure while the van stopped, and a man came out and ran after her. She turned into her yard to the front door but the man ran ahead and blocked the door to her house.

"I want you to turn around and come with me," he said. Katie looked at him with fear and remained motionless. The spinone started to growl and bark at the man, and soon the dalmatian barked and growled as well.

"Get rid of the dogs, and you won't get hurt."

The man started to approach her, but the dogs now barked furiously. The front light came on and the man ran. The front door opened.

"Katie, get in here. What did I tell you about walking those dogs at night? Don't ever let me catch you doing that again."

"Sorry, Mom. A man was bothering me."

"The mother's face registered shock and then alarm.

"Where darling?"

"See that van?"

The mother ran into the street as the van roared away.

"We'll see what the police have to say about this," the mother muttered furiously as she marched toward her daughter.

Together they walked inside.

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