

Chapter Nineteen

The effusive German in the hotel restaurant was actually a friend of America. He got up from his table and came to ours. "I am so sorry about the terrible disaster in your Texas. It is quite shocking. I wish to express my condolences to an American, to you."

I was puzzled and said, "I'm sorry, Herr..."

"It is Goebbels. Ludwig Goebbels. No relation to my country's most famous liar, thank God. And this is my wife, Helga."

"Well, you have the best of me. I'm at a loss. You say a disaster?"

"Oh, I thought you must have heard. It seems a terrorist bomber killed many people at some sort of a political conference in Houston, Texas. Several of your national legislators died, is what I heard."

I didn't know what to say. Bitsy blanched as she asked, "Did you catch any of the names? I know some people who were supposed to be at that conference."

The German shook his head in the negative.

She turned to me as she stood. "It was the Conservative Action Committee. Chet Bascomb was to be there. Darwin Linden was to be a speaker. Let's go back to the room. Maybe we can get more from CNN."

Chet Bascomb was Bitsy's congressman. She had worked on his campaign every time he ran. They were good friends. I said, "Sure. Let's go." To the German, I said, "Thank you for your consideration. We're going to the room, perhaps to call home."

Believe it or not, Herr Goebbels stood, bowed slightly and clicked his heels together. "Good night, Herr Travis."

Only later did I wonder how he knew my name.

Back in the room, we turned on the TV and punched in the number on the remote for CNN. It was the big story.

The reporter ticked off a list of familiar names. We knew, or knew of, most of them. Bascomb, his wife and daughter were among the dead. Bitsy picked up the phone and said, "I'm going to call Margaret Beauchamp." I nodded

Margaret was one of her closest friends. I heard only Bitsy's end of the conversation. It was not good. Her free hand went to her forehead and then wiped tears from her eyes. Finally, she lowered the receiver to its cradle and turned to me. "It's true. They're all dead. Jenny Creighton and Marge Howie were there, too. They are missing and presumed dead. Oh God, Duncan, what a horror. I am so angry. If I could, I would kill the sons of bitches who did this myself."

I pulled her close and held her for what seemed a long time. It was perhaps only five minutes, but long enough for the unexpected to take place. In that time I felt a bond was forged, cemented in a shared hatred. Finally she said, "Let's get out of here. I want to go down to the beach. I want to walk for a while."

We went to the lobby, and on a hunch, I asked if I had any messages. The clerk, an officious older black man, checked my box.

Without speaking, he handed me a folded piece of paper. On it was written, "Have a nice day. Your pal, Joe."

I tucked it into my pocket. Bitsy asked, "Business or pleasure?"

“Both, I suppose. A guy I know wishing me a good day. We’re not great friends. It’s his way of letting me know he resents me being here while he has to work. Nothing really serious. He’s just a jerk.”

We passed the bar and exited onto the veranda. The moon was full, hanging low over the horizon like an old illuminated Gulf Oil sign. Bright moonlight was glistening in dancing diamonds on the surface of the sea, cutting a jiggle path across the surf just a hundred yards away. A scent of flowers was in the air. The day’s heat lingered. I felt it down to my bones, and it was first-rate. I have never been a fan of cold weather. When the time would come to bug out of this current life, it would be to a southern clime. The warmer the better.

The path to the beach was bordered by cactus thickets and native palms. Low trees which appeared to be mahogany held small orchids. We passed a small swampy inlet, with several buttonwood trees. Though I didn’t see it, Bitsy said she saw a blue iguana scampering through the brush.

On the beach, we trudged through the loose sand until we came to where it was hard packed by the water and the walking became easier. I wasn’t surprised when Bitsy took my hand. We strolled that way for a few minutes before she stopped. I noticed that she had begun to weep again.

She looked at me and said, “This is all so painful. Those dear people. They deserved so much more from life than to be murdered by some fanatic...”

I said, “I know. I’m mad as hell. And I...” I stopped before I said too much.

Finally, she said, “Duncan, tell me the truth. Why are we really here?”

So here came the big choice. Lie and write her off. Tell the truth and in all likelihood, write her off anyway. I turned to her and looked into her very inner eye. I knew that the day I would make my escape from all this, I was going to live out my life in loneliness. But maybe I wouldn't have to.

In nearly everyone can be found a desire to have a companion, and if we are lucky, a love. Odysseus had Penelope, Mark Antony had Cleo, Romeo tried to have Juliet and, of course, Pierre Curie lucked out when he snared Marie. Two out these examples ended in tragedy, but fifty percent is not too bad.

We were alone on this stretch of the shore. A weathered, gray log was nearby. I pointed to it and said, "Let's sit for a while. I want to discuss something with you."

She cocked her head curiously and looked at me. "Something serious?"

"Deadly serious."

As we sat, she said, "Go ahead."

"What are your plans for your life, Bitsy?"

She forced a half smile. "Why, Duncan, is this a proposal?"

"Well, not exactly in the way you might expect. If it were, it would require from you more than just a declaration of love and fidelity. It would be almost like a blood oath. Oh, hell, that's not what I mean. I want...need to tell you something which would require that you promise never to reveal it ... ever."

She hesitated. "I'm not sure I could make a promise like that until I knew what we were talking about."

"I understand."

We sat and watched the phosphorescent waves roll in, hissing across the sand and then receding. Where the water had been, small holes appeared, spurting out tiny jets of liquid before the next wave covered them up. A small piece of Styrofoam came and went in the ebb and flow, white against the dark sea, jarring the harmony of the all-natural beauty. Finally, I said what my heart could no longer suppress. I bit down hard on my teeth to keep them from betraying my nervousness with chattering. “Bitsy, it appears I have fallen in love with you.”

After what seemed an interminable time had passed, she said, “Well, I’ll be damned. I didn’t think I would ever be able to pry that out of you. I...I love you too, you old coot.”

She touched my cheek and turned my head toward her. She leaned in and kissed me on the lips. “I hope you didn’t think I would go to the Caymans with just anybody, Duncan. The reason I asked you out to the theater last week and then agreed to this trip was because I had decided to make a last ditch effort to ensnare you with my charms. And now I’m going to acknowledge that life is too short for B.S. I do want to be with you, and I doubt that there is anything you could tell me that would dissuade me from that. So, yes, I promise to keep your confidences. Is that bold enough?”

“Yes, it’s the perfect answer.”

“Are you in trouble, Duncan? Is that why you brought a gun with you on this trip? Is that what you want to say?”

“It’s not that. At least, it’s not anything I can’t resolve. I only brought all this up because I felt that we might have a future together and if that were to be the case, there are things you would have to know.”

“Go on.”

Well, says I to me, here we go.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, Bitsy, this is it. This is what I do. It’s the real reason why I have been traveling so much of late. In this world there are criminals who are beyond the pale, men and women so cruel and malevolent that the world would be infinitely better off without them. I know who many of them are. In one way or another, some have managed to escape justice and, I believe, pose a real threat to decent people everywhere. I stop them before they can kill, rape or molest again.”

Her brow furrowed slightly as she began to ask, “But how...?”

There are soft words for what I have done, like ‘eliminate,’ or ‘eradicate’. I opted to tell it without an implied apologetic phrase. I raised my hand slightly and said softly, “I kill them.”

Her mouth made an ‘O’, but she said nothing. For the next hour and a half I unloaded. I spent a lot of time on the rationale behind my actions. I didn’t discuss all of my hits in detail, nor did I talk about the thrill in my gut that living so close to the edge had aroused. And then I told her about my meetings with Grant and Waldrip and the arrangement that I had with them. I also told her that I knew that someday I would have to call it quits. I said that this new phase of my life, this arrangement with Grant, would lead to the end of the killing. And probably soon. Finally, I said, “These are things I can’t undo. I have no regrets, but would have if it caused you to change your mind about me.”

She was silent for a moment, shaking her head slightly. Then she said, “Dear God, Duncan, I can’t believe it’s really you saying this. You’ve always been such a gentle man, or at least that’s what I thought. That’s what makes it so hard for me to reconcile

what you've told me with who I thought you were. I do remember Wilma Cordery and what happened to her. I was a high school kid when that man killed her and drowned her granddaughter in the toilet and, I, like everyone else, was outraged. When they caught him, my Dad said he could actually pull the switch on the bastard if they gave him the death penalty. And now you tell me that, figuratively speaking, you did."

We sat silently for several minutes. Finally she let out an audible sigh and took my hand. She said, "Let's go back to the hotel. I've got to think."

Bitsy went to the door of my room and entered with me. "I don't want to be alone. I'm going to stay with you."

In the room we got ready for bed. I laid down and pulled a single cover over me. She slid across under the sheet and nestled her head on my shoulder. She said, "Duncan, if I go with you to wherever it is you are going, I can't do what you do. Well, I suppose if our lives depended on it I could, but only then. Do you understand?"

I answered, "Yes. I wouldn't expect you to."

She said, "And when we are through with the forced assignments, you will really hang up your guns?"

"I promise."

She asked, "Did you ever see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*?"

"Sure. One of my favorite movies."

"Well, if you recall, Katherine Ross agreed to go to Bolivia with them because she was twenty-six, a school teacher in a Podunk town and was bored to tears. She wanted spice in her life. I have more reasons to go with you than she had to hang with those two cowboys."

“Does that mean I’m better looking than Robert Redford?”

She smiled, “What do you think?”

“Probably not.”

“Duncan, I’ll go with you to the end of the road, wherever it takes us. I’ve had a great life, but never a thrilling one. And I can understand why you wanted to do the things you have done. I believe many people would do the same things if they just had the nerve.” Then, deadly seriously, she continued, “Duncan, I’ll help in non-lethal ways. I’ll watch your back. And who knows, maybe this son of a bitch Alfred Said is the one who arranged to kill our friends. ”

So we would become partners in a great life and death con game.

“Okay. Your life is going to be turned topsy-turvy. When we’re through, we’ll have to vanish like a couple of wisps of old smoke up a chimney, to a new time and place where I hope we will live an extraordinarily comfortable existence.”

She squeezed my hand. “It’s okay, partner. Let’s shake on it. I’m in.”

I pulled her close. “You’ve got a lot to learn. But first, I’ve got a job for you.”

She smiled and kissed me. “That’s easy.” I had meant that she would have to study the Said file. But perhaps pleasure before business might be a better idea.

I held her long enough to realize that I wouldn’t need Viagra.

We made love like it would be the last time for either one of us. As it turned out, it wasn’t the last time ever. And neither was the next one an hour later. I was certain of one thing. I wasn’t going to give this up for anything.

Perhaps it was the exhilaration we both felt, or the softness of the bed, but we both fell asleep smiling. The sun was rising when Bitsy woke and jostled me awake.

“This tropical air is working wonders for me. I feel as good as if I had just had sex.” She giggled at her own joke.

“Sure,” I said. “It must be the air. It makes everything really swell.” That set us both off, and we laughed like teenagers.

“So what do we do now, Duncan?”

“I’ve been thinking that over. Why don’t we do something really wild ... like getting married?”

She paused before replying, her eyes tearing up. She said, softly, “I do.”

I kissed her with fervor. Lots of fervor. “I’ll call Alfred the Bell Captain right now to see what we need to do to get hitched in the Caymans.”

Bitsy jumped out of bed and spontaneously clapped her hands. “I’ll need a new dress. I didn’t bring anything that will do. And I’m not going to get married in shorts or slacks!”

“And you’ll have one, with a ten-foot train if you want it.”

“That’s a bit much, but I think a hat would be a nice touch. Yes, a white, broad-brimmed straw with a bold red band.” She grabbed me and kissed me again. “Oh, Duncan, what a life we are going to lead. I do love you.”

I rang for Alfred and asked him what two Americans would require to get married in the Caymans.

“Ah, Mr. Travis, the tropical love bug has bitten you, yes? It is fortunate you have called me. By coincidence, my sister, Elena, is the foremost wedding arranger on Grand Cayman. I will have her call you in just a few minutes.”

“Thanks, Alfred. Somehow I knew you would have the answer.” I suspected that it wouldn’t have made any difference what the question might have been, good old Al would have had a solution.

Ten minutes later, Elena was on the line. She told me that we would need to procure a license from Deputy General’s office in George Town. The official would need the name of the person who would perform the ceremony. As she gave it to me, I wrote down the name of Judge Lawrence Blasingame, a local Justice of the Peace, whom Elena said would recite the vows. She also would make arrangements for the use of a ‘delightful little gazebo’ located on the end of the hotel’s fishing pier. Champagne and a small cake would be made available. Her \$500 fee would include everything, except the license. I would have to pay for that myself when we picked it up. She suggested we catch the minibus to George Town this morning and have the ceremony at sunset later today.

I relayed all this to Bitsy. I had also obtained the address of the best couture boutique in Georgetown. It also had occurred to me that if I opened an account at the Benjamin Private Bank, Joe Waldrop would know about it before the ink was dry on the signature card. But if Bitsy made the transaction, they might not pick up on it.

“Let’s get some clothes on. As much as I enjoy looking at you like this, the hotel restaurant will probably require that we dress for breakfast.”

We dressed slowly, watching each other. In a way, seeing her slip into her clothes was almost as sensual as seeing her take them off.

Then I put my forefinger upright across my mouth in the international sign for ‘shush.’ I pointed to the patio door and took her hand. We stepped outside. The air was

heavy, enveloping us in its moist scents. A band of darkness hung on the northwestern horizon, presaging a rainy front on its way.

I spoke quietly. “After breakfast we will hop on the minibus. After we get our marriage license, we’ll catch a cab. You get out at Dorothea’s Boutique in George Town. When you are through shopping, catch a minibus back to the hotel. Wait fifteen minutes and then get on another bus back to George Town. Go to the Benjamin Private Bank on Edward Street, across from the post office, and open an account. I’ll give you a check for fifty thousand. Open it in both our names. Pick up a signature card for me to sign and mail in later. Tell them you want a pass-through account and that we will be sending large sums of money which they are to immediately forward by wire to another account. Tell them that the routing instructions will come with each deposit. Inform them as well that they should take three percent of all future deposits as their fee for sending the money along to its next stop. When you are through, catch a cab and come back here. Got it?”

She appeared thoughtful for a moment before saying, “Yes. And to start this partnership off right, I’ll put fifty thousand of my money in as well.”

I was going to protest, and then thought better of it. It would be best to have both of us invested in this joint venture. “Okay, that’s a deal.” And it was.

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