

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“Just the person I have been wanting to see!” said the man who confronted Mark on the pavement in Victoria Street. “I have been meaning to come and see you for weeks.”

For a moment Michael did not recognise the man who was smartly dressed in a dark suit and carrying a black suitcase. “Why, hello Paul,” he said sheepishly when he realised who it was. “Someone told me that you had been asking after me. Was it Christina? I really do not remember, but it must have been weeks ago.”

“It must have been, but the delay is to our advantage. I can be far more positive now than I would have been then.”

A couple of buses swept past, scattering debris and enveloping them in dust. “Come to the park. We can talk there.”

“What have you been doing? You don't look much like the editor of a fringe newspaper. You look far more like me, a member of the establishment.”

“I am one of the establishment, one of the very core of the establishment. Pretty hush-hush, actually. You don't mind us talking?”

“No,” said Michael, puzzled. They made their way through a short maze of narrow streets, crossed Birdcage Walk and walked through St James Park to a location carefully selected by Paul.

“They won't be able to overhear us here,” he said, brushing the seat and sitting.

“They?”

“Spies and fifth columnists. They are everywhere.”

“It is secret? What you want to talk about?”

“It might not seem it, but everything is a weapon in the hands of the enemy.”

“Enemy? What enemy?”

“Not the French, this time, at least I hope not. But casual talk can cost lives. Remember that. Now, what will you do when war is declared?”

“Declared?”

“Declared, which it will be. Perhaps not tomorrow, but someday soon. Possibly very soon. What will you do?”

“I don't know. I haven't really thought about it,” said Michael, feeling slightly ashamed and defensive.

“So you might actually join up or wait until drafted?”

“Drafted?”

“Oh, yes. If it doesn't go well we expect a general mobilisation and a draft. But whatever you chose, you are likely to end up on the front line somewhere.”

“I suppose so,” said Michael. He sounded regretful, but then what was there to lose? His job was interesting, demanding and rewarding, but in the final analysis it belonged to his father, not him. He doubted whether Christina would worry much if he was at home or away fighting. She might not be concerned whether he lived or perished. It might actually suit her if he was killed, especially if he died a hero but, then, that was unlikely.

“Of course you might be able to get yourself designated as working in an essential occupation,” continued Paul. “But there is no fun or reward in that. You'd miss being near all the action.” Michael was not sure that he wanted to be near all the action.

“Now, we are putting together a couple of specialist teams who will be put out there and follow our lads as we sweep into Germany. They will be just behind the front lines, so there won't be much chance of being shot at. I need a man to head up one of them, and I think that you are that man. It means joining the Army at the rank of Major. How does that appeal to you?”

“What would these teams do?” asked Michael, wondering whether he should ask for the rank of Colonel.

“Simply look after historic buildings which may have been damaged by the action. We won't be like the Nazis and blitz and destroy everything, but some buildings are bound to get damaged, churches and cathedrals, and those sorts of things. We want to ensure that

Europe's heritage is preserved and that's where your team comes in. It will be their task to carry out urgent work to secure the building's integrity until permanent repairs are carried out."

"You mean prop it up?"

"I mean examine them, schedule repairs and arrange for all the work necessary to stop them suffering further damage or collapsing in a pile of rubbish."

"You mean propping them up?"

"It is an important job! It's no good having a war if there is nothing of quality left at the end of it."

"Why me? I don't really have the qualifications."

"Christina told me that you were something of an authority on architecture, for a start."

"I wouldn't say that."

"And then, we need people we can trust, and who deserve it. After all, what are friends for?"

"Did someone suggest me?" asked Michael becoming suspicious. It had to be his father's work. His hand had to be at the back of it. Well, this time he would say "no" and spurn his father's continuous interference. He would take his chance in the trenches, if that was what it came to.

"You won't have much to do here, you realise," continued Paul. "Not once the war effort gets under way. Most of your employees are likely to be called up and your contracts will be suspended or cancelled."

"Did someone put you up to this?"

Paul blinked. "You really won't have much of a business to manage. Far better to be helping your country."

"I am not going to answer you until you tell me who it was who suggested my name."

"Well, actually, if anyone put me on to the prospect of offering this job to you, and the job is real enough, not one just fabricated for one of the boys, it was your wife."

"Christina?"

"I met her at some function and was telling her what I now do at the Ministry - not in any detail, you understand - and mentioned the team by way of an example. She thought it would suit you and lobbied very hard for you. I got the impression she thought you might enlist or do something equally silly if the decision was left up to you."

"Christina?" said Michael thoughtfully.

"So, are you interested? I dare say there is no end of chaps who would be if you are not."

"Yes," said Michael softly. "I am interested."

"Good! I thought you'd come through. I'll get someone to get in touch with you at the appropriate time."

"You really think that this is going to happen? That there will be another war?"

"Absolutely no doubt of it!" Paul exclaimed, and was gone, striding purposely off in the direction of Whitehall. Michael watched his figure until it disappeared up some distant steps, wondering what he had let himself in for. Now he could do little more than just wait to see.

Mark had begun to lose track of time as day after day passed by, weeks merged into months, and no word came from Rebecca. True to their word, Rebecca's parents took him into the family as if he were their own. At first he felt grateful, comfortable and pleased, but as time passed he became more self-conscious and uncomfortable as he felt that his presence was an imposition on a business that did not appear to be doing very well. It was a slack time of year, they would say. Mark wondered whether there was any other kind of time of year.

He took to helping out in the hotel, but it was so meticulously maintained and run that he found it hard to find things that he could offer to do. Frequently, when he had thought of, or noticed, something that might fit the bill, he was met with a polite but firm refusal. "You must let me pay," he would say. "I have the money." They would not listen. Rebecca would

never forgive them if they took a penny off of him.

So, he wandered around Arcadia, visited the diner where he became quite well known and talked about, or drove the family car out into the country where he would sit and contemplate the view and wonder just how much longer he could stay out there. What if she never returned? Her parents were confident that she would. He expected that Shaun's parents had been confident that he would return. No doubt they had waited, just like Rebecca's, reassuring one another. Mark reached a crisis point when the time came for his visa to be renewed. He thought that would determine everything but, to his surprise, it was extended without question.

And then, towards the end of the summer, as the towns-folk took to looking north and whispering about, a message came from Rebecca. It was brief but reassuring. It was delivered by a man in a broad jacket, wearing a trilby, and driving a large Buick. And it consisted only of the words "not long now".

Two further weeks passed before another message came. This one was positive. It was an address and a simple appeal for her to be collected. There was something approaching pandemonium at the hotel. Once the euphoria had settled, Rebecca's father declared that he did not know where the place was or how to get to it. When a map was produced, and they found that the address was some two hundred miles to the Southwest, a minor dispute broke out as to who should go and fetch her. Joe suggested he should go on his own. Martha declared that it should be all three of them. And then, after much debate and soul-searching, during which Mark began to wonder whether anyone would ever go and rescue her, Martha suddenly suggested that he, Mark, should go, and alone. "I couldn't," Mark said.

"Yes you could," Martha insisted. "Come on Joe, back me on this! There's no reason why Mark shouldn't go and it will be a wonderful surprise for her! She is almost certainly not aware that you are over here to see her. I think it would be fabulous for you to go. I only wish I could be there to see her face."

"So you should be," said Mark.

It was on a clear, Autumn morning when Mark set out in the family car, armed with instructions as to the route to take. He was to drive across the State line to Decora, then right across Iowa, beyond Des Moines. Rebecca was living on a farm a little way out of a place called Griswold. He stopped at a gas station after he had passed through Griswold and asked for directions.

"That's the old Johnson place," said the wrinkled attendant, sucking on a dead pipe and exposing a row of uneven teeth when he smiled. "Reckon no-one's been out thar in a while."

"Is it hard to find?"

"Nope. It's up a track some four miles on - on your left. You can't miss it."

Mark thought he could miss it, given half a chance. The four miles were the longest he ever drove. Several times he thought that he must have passed it, except he was confident that he had passed no tracks on the left. When at last he did come to one, he swung over the wheel and took it. The surface was pot-holed and dusty and the car lurched from side to side, becoming consumed in its own cloud every time he eased his foot from the throttle in an attempt to make the journey more comfortable, or reduce the risk of breaking a spring on Rebecca's parents' car. As the track turned one way, then the other, and took him further and further from the road, and he began to wonder if he was in the wrong place. His view across the open countryside was unimpaired and he could see no sign of any habitation. Then quite suddenly he passed over a shallow bluff and there, set in a broad depression, was a number of what appeared to be semi-derelict buildings. Other than a wind pump which lazily edged its vanes around searching for the slightest breeze, he could see no sign of life, not even a wisp of smoke from the blackened and crippled chimney.

He stopped the car and stepped out, shielding his eyes against the early afternoon sun as he looked around. Somewhere a door creaked and a pair of birds fluttered into the air in response. An insect buzzed past his ear and hovered overhead. "Very nice," he thought, "but not what I am looking for. I have the wrong place." He had opened the car door and was about to get in when a soft voice called to him. It was a shock and for a moment he was afraid

to look around to see where it had come from, but there she was, emerging from a dark slit that had opened up in the side of a barn. "Rebecca!" he gasped.

Perhaps had he had time to think about it and prepare, he would have greeted her reservedly, but she was in his arms before he knew it. Instinctively, it felt right. "Thank goodness I have found you at last!"

"I am sorry," she murmured, clinging tightly on to him. "There is so much to tell you. So much has happened since we last saw each other. Thank God you survived. I prayed and prayed that you might."

"Madrid has fallen," he said, "but we can talk of that later. For the moment I just want to hold you and look at you. We are safe here, aren't we?"

"We are safe. And there is worse - have you heard the news?" she asked anxiously.

"No? I am a little out of touch with everything that is going on. I think it is the easy life in Arcadia."

"Then I will not tell you, not yet at least. I will not spoil this moment. Come into the house."

The interior of the house belied its external appearance. It was spacious, comfortably and well furnished, and well provisioned. Mark sat on a settee and Rebecca hovered above him, offering all manner of refreshment. "I don't really understand any of this," he said, looking around.

"I will tell you all about it later," said Rebecca disappearing into the kitchen. "In some ways it will be a bit of a wrench to leave here. It has got everything you could imagine and far more than anyone could reasonably want! Except the person I most wanted to be with, until today that is. You have had breakfast?"

"It is a little late for breakfast," laughed Mark.

"Is it? You tend to lose your sense of time here. How about lunch, then? I normally just eat when I am hungry. I cannot imagine what it has done for my figure! Let me fix us something."

Later, as they sat in the shade of the verandah and listened to the creak of the wind pump, Rebecca sighed. "I am finding it difficult to realise that it is all over," she said, smiling. "Now, where shall I begin my account?"

"Back in Spain, when we last saw each other. I am sorry about the news of your husband."

Rebecca nodded but did not comment. "Some days after you had left I received a message that confirmed his death. He had been executed as a spy simply because he worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It may be that Peter was gathering information, I do not know, but if he was, it would not have been for the FBI. However, my informant said that I also was being sought by the Spanish authorities and advised me to flee the Country. I do not know which side was after him, possibly both. I do not even know which side killed him. I must admit that I gathered up what ever I could, sent Maria home, and high-tailed it to the border."

"The house had been ransacked when I eventually got there," said Mark.

"So you did go back! My goodness, that was very risky. I expected them to wreck the place when they found it and not me."

"And the pottery? The items I painted? You buried them, all of them?"

"Every piece except for one bowl and that I brought back with me. How did you find it?"

"I saw the mound of freshly disturbed earth. I had to know what was interred there, although I was terrified of what I might find."

"I am sorry. It seemed a sensible thing to do at the time. I had Maria dig a hole and we placed the pieces in it. I figured that when the troops or whoever came, they would assume that it was a grave and leave it undisturbed. There would be nothing unusual about there being someone buried there, just another *fiambre*. I also thought that there was a remote chance that you might return and discover it and realise that I was alive. I could think of no other way of leaving a sign. I expect that it is all still there."

"If it is, I won't be in a hurry to go back and look! I must admit, although I am now

ashamed to have thought it, that I did, for an awful moment, think it might be your grave. Then I told myself it really could be anyone and resolved to believe that you had escaped. And when I found the crockery and realised that it had been carefully stacked and placed there, I resolved that I must find you, come what may. And I have stuck to that resolution even though it has taken me, what, some two years to do it.”

“I am glad that you did,” Rebecca said, stacking one plate upon another.

“The tragedy of it all is that it is still going on. They reckon that there are as many as a couple of hundred thousand people in prison and that several hundred are executed each and every day. I still remember what you said about the war, and about my being there.”

“It is all dreadful,” Rebecca whispered. “I am glad that you decided to come out of there.”

“So am I.”

“Where was I?” she said suddenly. “I mentioned that Peter worked for the FBI. He may have been engaged out there by other of the American intelligence services, but if he was no one has been prepared to tell me. Clearly the Spanish thought he was. And before he disappeared he gave me the name of a contact that I was supposed to go to if I was in trouble and needed to leave quickly. They got me out. I went to London, half hoping that I might bump into you whilst I was there, but it is a big place, bigger than I thought it would be. It's not at all like in Arcadia where everyone knows everyone else. Then I came home.”

“I probably was not in London when you were there as I went from Spain to France before I returned home. But you haven't explained why you went into hiding.”

“It all came as quite a shock, really. A couple of men came from the FBI to see me. They said that they had information that indicated that political activists from Europe had entered the country with what amounts to a death list and that my name was on it. They did not tell me who these people were nor who they worked for, only that I should go into hiding and that, in view of Peter's service, they would provide a safe house for me if I wanted to use one. I didn't believe them, of course, but on reflection I thought - what the hell? I asked for how long. They said for as long as it takes to trace the activists and expel them. So I talked it over with Momma and Poppa. I was there when I saw your letter and I wrote to you. I had no idea that it would take this long!”

“And there's absolutely no danger now?”

“Not according to the FBI. They say that they caught all of them and they have been deported. They do not think they will try again. And what's a little danger in your life, anyway? I can go home.”

“And I have come to fetch you. I must confess that I have been waiting for this moment, seeing you again, for such a long time.”

Rebecca smiled and lowered her head. “And me, too,” she said softly. “I always hoped you would seek me out and find me, even if you had to come all this far to do so. I cannot say how wonderful it is to see you.”

“Not that it looked promising at first.”

“How's that?”

“Well, the first time I ever saw you, you were stalking across the garden brandishing a baseball bat!”

“Oh, yes! I didn't know who you were. And, your leg? Does it still trouble you?”

“I have a scar and the occasional twinge, but I would say that you did a pretty good job.”

“I haven't even begun yet,” she whispered.

“You asked me if I had heard the news,” he said later as Rebecca was in the bedroom, gathering together the final items for packing.

“There's war in Europe,” she called. “Your people have declared war on Germany.”

“Oh, Lord. I suppose everyone expected it. It wasn't so much a question of whether Hitler would stop, just whether we would back down again. What will America do?”

“Officially, as a Nation? Nothing. As in nature, there are far more doves here than hawks. We will stay out.”

“Until?”

“It is over. Some zealots will go over privately and fight but it is viewed as a limited European conflict. Let Europe sort it out, they say.”

“And your people are not prepared to fight Fascism. Don't they know what it means.”

Rebecca smiled sympathetically. “Oh, Mark, how little you understand of American life. For a start there's a strong pro-German lobby here, just as there is a strong pro-Irish lobby. They think that Hitler is just about to save Europe from being overrun by communists, and the Americans fear communism far more than anything else. No, we won't become involved.” She placed her suitcases by the door and looked around. “To tell the frank and honest truth, there are those here that think that Britain and France do not stand a chance, not now that Russia has signed a non-aggression pact with Germany.”

“Haven't they heard of the Maginot Line?”

“What's that?” asked Rebecca smiling.

“I find all this hard to believe,” said Mark, sadly. “God knows where it will all end.”

“What is more important to me right now, is what it means for you, Mark. What will you do?”

“I will have to go home.”

“Oh!” she said, sounding disappointed. “I had started to hope that now that we have found each other we would be able to spend some time together. It seems dreadful to think that we could be parted again so soon.”

“Will you come back with me?”

“Back to England?”

“Yes!”

“What? On a holiday?”

“No. I didn't come half way around the world to talk you into a holiday. If you haven't already found another husband, and I dare say that you have had plenty of offers - .”

“Not here, I haven't!”

“Will you be my wife?” It seemed to Mark that this was the greatest question man could ask of woman. He had never asked Natacha although he had frequently sat in his studio, addressed her canvas, and practised. He had varied the words and their order. He had decorated his speech with adverbs and adjectives and little platitudes. And he had rehearsed the same speech as he crossed the Atlantic, refining in his room in the hotel whilst he waited for Rebecca to make contact. Yet on no occasion had he ever considered that he would ask so direct a question.

“What?” said Rebecca, standing rock still between her cases by the door. “And be widowed again? Oh, I am sorry,” she added softly and crossed to him, placing an arm around his neck. “I didn't mean that. You hardly know me. You only saw the few weeks we spent together in Spain and its a known fact that every patient falls in love with his nurse. And you have had this sad loss. Are you sure that you are not out here asking me this on the rebound? I feel that you are rushing things more than a little.”

The seeds of desperation were sown inside him. She was going to say “no”. She was saying “no”. Although she had not used the word, she was going to say “no”. He had come all this distance to be turned down! “Things have not worked out the way I thought they might,” he said slowly. “I hadn't banked on having to wait so long before seeing you, nor having to return home so soon after seeing you. I had hoped that we might have more time together before I said anything, but we are not going to get it. Time and the world are against us, Rebecca,” he added passionately. “And I do not believe that America will be able to stay out of the conflict once it starts. Sooner or later you'll be dragged in and when you are, the Atlantic will become unsafe. We will then be separated, me in England or France, and you here.”

“You would fight?”

“I remember every word you said to me in Spain, and you were right. I had no business fighting in someone else's war, but this one will not be someone else's war. This is my country's war. I will have to go and offer my services, if they will take me with my leg.”

“I thought you said it is all right,” she said sternly. “You could always stay here.”

“No I couldn't. You know that. Nor do I think you would expect me to, really.”

“Perhaps not. I suppose I feel like you, that we no sooner find one another when we are to be parted again.”

“Then come with me! If I go back alone, we may never see each other again.”

Rebecca suddenly brightened. “Well, if this isn't the darnest proposal I have ever heard!” she exclaimed.

“Will you?”

“I am not sure that I am the person you think me to be, and I am not sure whether you can, as a non-national, marry me here.”

“We can get married on the ship, the way they do in films. The captain can do it as soon as we are in International waters.”

“I thought you were a Catholic?”

“Rebecca! I would marry you what ever my religion.”

“It does sound attractive, to be married on the high seas.”

“Will you then?”

She broke away from his embrace and walked to the door. “Drive me home, Mark, before the sun sets on us both. Let me think about this on the way, and we can talk some more. It must be a four hour trip. That should give us all the time we need.”