

Chapter 22

The following evening, Dee calls the Hill couple. Sandra answers; “This is Dee Mullins. I know where both of you live. You should be here within fifteen minutes. Here's my business address.”

Dee gives the address; “We're on our way.”

They arrive at the office within 15 minutes. They're wide eyed and pumped.

“It's showtime. We have your first cleaning job. Let's see how both of you do.”

Sandra asks; “What's the address. We'll follow you in our car.”

Edward responds; “No. Both of you ride in the truck with us.”

Ryan asks; “Why? We know our way around. What if we refuse?”

“Both of you can leave right now. A person or persons will be in touch soon.”

Both of them look shocked and scared; “We didn't mean it that way. We bought a new car a few weeks before we lost our jobs.”

Sandra continues; “We don't want to leave it outside in this shitty neighborhood because it probably won't be here when we get back.”

Dee looks as serious as a heart attack; “Empty out your pockets. You empty out your purse.”

Both ask why.

“Both of you are dangerously close to having bad things happen.”

They both empty all their belongings onto the desk.

Dee scans the items before she tells Edward; “They're clear.”

“Of course we're clear. Did you think Sandra or me were going to do something stupid?”

“Because you wanted the address and have your car, we thought you were going to stop on the way and make a phone call to the police. They would be waiting and that would cause a bad situation for us.”

“We're not stupid, but how did you figure out we're not planning something that stupid?”

“You don't have any change for a phone booth and you don't have any police phone numbers on either of you.”

“What if we did?”

“Neither of you would leave here alive. We take betrayal seriously.”

“Ryan, bring your car around back. You can park inside where it'll be safe. Sandra, follow Edward to the back. Our truck is there. I'll lock up; we need to get going.”

In the rear of the building, Edward shows Sandra what to load into the truck. It's all the basic supplies with exceptions. Only one blanket for the body, and little in the way of cleaning supplies.

They drive to a small bungalow about 10 minutes away. The back door is unlocked. When they enter, a man is lying on the floor with what looks like a bloody tee shirt. There's a bloody knife on the floor.

With an excited voice; “He's been stabbed! Is he dead?”

Dee bends over and checks for a pulse; “Yeah, he's dead alright. Roll him in the carpet, wipe any fingerprints off the knife and leave it on the floor. Then let's get the hell out of here before someone calls the police.”

Sandra lays the blanket on the floor while Edward and Ryan roll the body. Then she cleans the knife.

Ryan asks; “I thought there is always someone to pay us before we remove the body.”

“This was prepaid. His wife paid us in advance. We only had to wait for her to call.”

While on their way to the truck, Edward tells them; “We always treat the departed with respect. In other words, don't mistreat the body by throwing it.”

They gently load the body and it's off to the funeral parlor.

When they arrive at the backdoor, it's business as usual. Cousin James is there with a gurney where they offload the body.

Sandra asks; “What happens now?”

James has a serious look on his face; “We're obviously no going to embalm the body. We're going to cremate it.”

Sandra looks surprised; “We? As in us?”

“Naturally. You need a job. I'm offering you a full time job working for me. Are you in or out?”

“I'm in. I'll put him in the crematory furnace to prove my conviction. I really need this job.”

“Good. Welcome to the business. We also do legitimate wakes and funerals also.”

Turning to Dee; “Is there anything you want to add?”

“Yes. The cleanup crew always empties the pockets of the departed. They give me any personal effects that may identify the deceased. Any money found is split between the crew.”

Ryan is all smiles; “I'll search him.”

He goes over and removes two dollars and fifty cents from the man's pockets; “That's it? Two fifty?”

Come honey, I'll give you a hand putting the body in the furnace.”

Before the new couple could start moving the body; “Sometimes there's wands of cash, sometimes nothing. Now I need both of you to stand by the far fall.”

When they reached their destination, Edward tells them; “There is no victim. This was a test. ... Albert, you can get up now.”

Their former employee Albert sits up while smiling; “I want my money back.”

The Hall's have nervous smiles as Albert continues; “By the way, tell DeMille I'm ready for my audition.”

Edward tells him; “I don't think Mister DeMille will take my call so don't get your hopes up.”

“Good evening Dee, how was my performance?”

“I can't give you an award, but Eddy will give you the usual seventy five dollars we promised and I'll throw in an extra twenty five.”

“Wow! You two are great. I promised Eloise a night on the town if she played along with us. She thinks it's a prank. She also came up with the idea of using corn syrup and red food coloring as fake blood.”

Dee tells Sandra and Ryan; “Albert used to work for us a few years ago. He decided he made enough money and left us on friendly terms. We still call on him for non-business help from time to time.”

“What do you call on him for if not business?”

“Albert is a master carpenter and great at building maintenance.”

Cousin James asks; “Is anyone up for a cold beer?”

Everyone is relieved and welcomes the cold beer.

Albert exits the gurney; “I need to wash this sticky stuff off. Eddy, did you remember to bring me another shirt?”

Edward hands Albert a package; “Since we're both the same size, I bought you a couple of new shirts and some tee shirts. You know where the bathroom is. We'll keep the beer cold for you.”

The Hall's are looking at Dee and Edward with questionable looks on their faces When Sandra asks; “Did we pass the test?”

Dee smiles; “Yes you did. Keep the money we gave you earlier; you earned it. You will meet the rest of the crew soon. For now, let's have a beer or two and then go home.”

Edward hands Cousin James \$100. He asks; “What's this for?”

“For dragging your butt out on a evening where nothing is happening and for the beer.”

“Dee, like I told you before, you married one hell of a man. I really like this guy.”

Sandra asks; “Are you two really married?”

“Yes we are although not legally. We've been married for a few years now.”

“How is it? I mean you being married to a white guy.”

“In a word, wonderful. We treat each other as equals because we are.”

“That's good to hear; but I meant you being black and he's white.”

Dee smiles; “Because our marriage is illegal in Missouri and many other states, we don't advertise. Our first marriage or joining ceremony was performed by a minister, right here in the parlor.

Last year, when we went to Hawaii, we had a Polynesian wedding performed by an island priest with musicians and dancers.

If the bigotry ever ends, Edward and I will be able to walk hand in hand and kiss in public.”

Ryan asks Edward; “So, did we pass your tests?”

“Yes. This is what we do and you know what we pay. The only drawback on this line of work is you never know when the phone is going to ring.”

Dee ads; “We'll give you a ride back to the shop so you can get your car. Stop of the way home and buy yourselves some adult beverages.”

Edward also ads; “I don't need to tell either of you, this occupation is not for anyone to know about except us.”

After the court probate, Dee sells Herbert's house. When that sale was complete, she turned her attention to her ownership of the funeral parlor and graveyard.