

Grit
&
Lust©

A Blazing! Adventures
Serial-

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Chapter four

DECEIVED VICTORY

I was glad when the plane finally landed and we taxied to her assigned spot. We unloaded the plane and within a half of an hour were in a Taxi, and within an hour I was back at my hotel.

La Nueva Opera, bar and restaurant

"Drink?" I asked her.

"Perhaps later, I need to call Hernan and tell him we're back."

"There's a phone inside," I said. "It's all the rage now to actually put them in hotels so you can talk to people."

She laughed, "Ok, Ok but just for a phone call and one drink." She asked the cabby to wait for her.

"Hello, Hernan, this is Connie. I have someone that wants to speak to you," she handed me the phone.

"Hey buddy, I have the items. Do you want me to bring them to you?"

"Did you find both of them?"

"Yep, in a church. Do you want me to bring them to you?" I repeated.

"No, no stay where you are. I'll come around as soon as I can. After I shake the people watching me I'll... Let's say in two hours. Let me talk to Connie please." I could only hear her side of the conversation.

"Yes, sure. Uh-huh I understand. Yes I'll meet you back here in two hours. Exactly. Goodbye."

"So did he say anything else worth repeating?"

"No, nothing you didn't already know. He wants me to come back to meet with the both of you. So I have to go and get cleaned up. See you back here in a bit." She

kissed me on the cheek. Hardly what I expected unless she was my sister. As she disappeared out of the door I headed up to my room. The locks on the safe were still there. I opened it and checked the contents. The box was still there. Then, carefully, I opened the valise and examined the painting. It was a wonderful old style painting, still in relatively good shape for its age, and where it had been hidden. It gave me the shivers just to hold it, it was beautiful. The Icon was different. I hadn't seen it before and it was carved, painted, and had gold and silver inlaid on wood. It was magnificent, but it didn't give me the tingle that I expected out of it. I laid it on the bed, staring at it. Then unpacking my valise, I removed the second Icon from my jeans I had wrapped up around it. I never even got it unwrapped before that familiar tingle set in. I put it on the bed, side by side with the other one. There was no comparison with the first one. My God, I thought to myself, this is the real deal. I now possessed the original Icon and a copy made by Cabrera, and no one knew except me.

"Well," I said aloud, "this is a whole new turn of events." Pat didn't expect two of them let alone the original. And I wasn't going to give it to him either. I still didn't trust him to let me go with valuable antiques from Mexico. I rolled it up in some towels and put it in the safe with Blackbeard's box.

I got cleaned up and after an hour I went downstairs to have a few toddies and meet with Pat and Connie. Pat was there first, all smiles, shaking my hand like it was a well pump he had to start.

"Is that them?" he asked pointing to the canvas sack in my hand.

"Yep." Speaking in Spanish, he ordered a round. The drinks were plopped down in front of us before I could finish the one I ordered just before he had arrived. "Let Connie arrive, then we'll retreat to a more private area upstairs." She arrived twenty minutes later looking as beautiful as she always had. Hernan greeted her with a more than friendly hug. Rattling off more Spanish, two waiters ushered us up to the second floor and a small room with a balcony off of to the side. Another round of drinks came up in a matter of minutes, along with some chips, salsa and taquitos. Two large curtains were drawn closed, shutting us off from the main room and anyone's view. Hernan pulled over another small table to set the canvas bag on. Like a kid in a candy store he

greedily tore into the bag. First, he pulled out the long tube. With the touch of a surgeon he delicately pulled the painting out of the leather tube.

"Oh... this is marvelous, a beautiful piece. It looks to be one of his mid-career pieces. See the small brush strokes here and here," he pointed them out to Connie and I. He studied it for at least fifteen minutes, smiling broadly the whole time. Putting it back, he carefully pulled open the other leather pouch, with even more care than the painting. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"I have been looking for this for a very long time," he said softly, more to himself than us. I thought about telling him about the other one for a few seconds, but decided again not to until I was safe state side with the painting in hand. He put the Icon on the other table, propping it up so he could look at it from time to time.

"Here's to you, Rusty, and Connie, my dear, for bringing back some irreplaceable antiques to the Mexican people." Dizzy with joy I don't think he realized what he had said. We toasted, clinking glasses and laughing a little.

"Tomorrow or the next day Connie will take you to home to the U.S. Whatever you want, my old friend."

"What I would like is a piece of paper, with your authority and signature, stating it's OK to have the art."

"Done and done," with that, he pulled an envelope and a letter out of his jacket pocket, handing it to me. The letter was in English and Spanish. It stated very basically that I (Rusty Grant) was the owner of any Mexican pieces of art in my possession and that the Mexican government had no claim to them. Signed by him and dated on official government stationery.

"Is that satisfactory, Rusty?"

"Perfect," I said, putting the letter in my own pocket. We toasted until we ran out of toasts and daylight.

"Well, all of us are pretty tired," Patrido said. He carefully put the Icon in another bag he had brought with him. Would you like a lift home, Connie?"

"Sure," she said. Smiling at me warmly she said, "I'll see you tomorrow huh, about ten?" I nodded my head as I packed the painting in its leather tube and placed it

back into the canvas bag. Pat left with his arm around Connie. I sure would be glad to get back to the states, this was getting too confusing down here. I returned to the room and carefully put the painting where no one would find it. Then I returned to the bar to have a few nightcaps. The bartender refused to charge me, stating that the night had been paid for. I only wanted a few nightcaps. So I finished three and was asleep almost before my head hit the pillow, after all it had been a very long day.

The shower beat down on my back and the hot water cleared my head as I stood under the gentle stream. I got dressed and headed back down to the restaurant for breakfast. By the time I had finished and packed my things, Connie was knocking at my door. I opened it to see the girl I remembered the most, the pilot in levis and a khaki shirt. The only difference was that she was wearing a small gold winged pen that I assume the pilots were required to wear in Mexico. We made small cordial talk on the way to her plane, it was a lot different than just a few days ago. The plane was already gassed up and near the runway. We drove out to the plane in her Jeep, at least I guessed it was hers. We loaded the plane up with my very full valise and the canvas sack. Blackbeard's box was thoroughly wrapped, and taped inside of a cardboard box I got from the restaurant.

By mid-afternoon we were at Monterey. Connie wanted to stop and refuel the plane, just in case, she said. While she was doing that, I called us a taxi and it arrived shortly after they fuel truck topped off the tank. After lunch we were on our way again, north across the border towards San Antonio, Texas. The humming of the engine and the full meal with a couple of toddies made me drowsy and, after an hour, I found myself nodding off in the plane.

My eyes jolted wide open as alarm buzzers and bells went off, and the plane bucked and coughed.

"What, what is it?" I yelled to Connie, forgetting I had my head set and mike on.

"It's that God damn fuel I just bought. I thought that truck tank looked old. We're not going to make it to San Antonio, there's a little field near Carrizo Springs, we'll have to set her down." The plane coughed and sputtered some more and threatened to stall out.

"Come on, baby," she coaxed. "There it is." It was nothing more than a dirt strip with wind socks at both ends and, in the distance some miles up the road, I could see several white buildings.

"Here we go." The tricycle gear touched down gently and smoothly, bumping just a few times. She braked gently nearing the end of the runway on the dirt pad then deftly swung the plane around. She turned several levers and pushed several buttons and the engine purred to a stop.

"Well, let's go see the damage," she said. "Chock the wheels for me will you?" I was out of the plane pulling the chocks out of the backseat when I heard the familiar click of a gun being cocked. I stared down the muzzle of her Beretta.

"Now, let's make this as easy as we can, I don't want to hurt you," she said. I eyed my bag. "It won't do you any good, I've got all your bullets, including the other clip. So take your bag out and put it on the edge of the runway." I slowly did as she told me. "Take the cardboard box as well, it has nothing to do with us, even though my Dad wanted me to take it too."

"Dad?" I said.

"Yes, Dad."

"You mean your Father is Hernan? I thought your name was Heath."

"It was, my maiden name is Patrigo. My husband was killed ten years ago when he plowed into the side of a mountain in his Cessna while working for Dad." I just shook my head.

"Take the package out, Rusty, and leave the painting." I put the cardboard box along side my valise.

"I'll drop a small bag for you after I get off the ground." I couldn't believe that I fell for the old 'my plane is broken' trick. I wanted to ring her neck, but knew she

had the upper hand this time.

"Now, back away," she said. If she ever had any feelings towards me I sure didn't see it. She slammed the door shut, locking it, and started up the plane. I opened my bag anyway but found all of my ammunition gone as she had said. The Viking was in the air in a few moments. It circled the field a few times and then with a streamer attached, she threw a small bag out of the pilot's side window. It landed in the black brush some thirty five feet from me. Inside was a box of forty fives and my extra clip, and loose rounds. A small note was folded up with what appeared to be a wad of hundred dollar bills. It was just a pittance of what they would get for the painting they had stolen from me.

The note began:

Rusty, It has been a long time, since I felt about someone like I feel about you, but I owed it to my Dad. This was part of the bargain to get the plane. It was a hard bargain like I said. Enclosed with the note is four thousand U.S. dollars. I had to renegotiate the deal once we had the painting and icon in hand. Part of the new deal was that I take you northern Mexico and strand you a long ways from anywhere. I couldn't do that. A few miles north of where I landed is a small village, from there you can get home. I know it's hardly what you expected and I hope some day to make this up to you. Love Connie.

The plane disappeared over the hills and back towards Mexico as I finished reading her note. I dug around in my valise for a moment and un-wrapped the Icon.

"I certainly won't make this up to them." I smiled in my victory as I loaded up my forty five and holstered the weapon reassuringly back at my side. Picking up my bag and box, I headed north to the small town of Crystal City.

Several days later I was in Savanna at the Hyatt Regency Hotel I had stayed in many times before. The staff was polite and took good care of me while I was there. The views were spectacular along the riverfront from the restaurant and the rooms. And they had safes in each room, and they had a plethora of Bourbon. I had already

talked with Arnold Leadman at the Brooklyn Museum about the Icon, not indicating it was the original, but implying it might be one of the copies. He estimated the value in the millions, and that the Museum would be interested in the purchase depending on the price and authenticity. My other option was selling it through Christys, which would net me quite a bit more than that. But for now, I was here to visit an old friend at the North Carolina Maritime Museum, one of the leading specialists in Blackbeard relics and antiques. He was trustworthy and, unlike Hernan, wouldn't screw me over for a dime.

I first met him when he got into the museum business. Before that he had been in the port business, working for the Port Authority as a harbor master. He was a bit of a pirate to most people, including a patch over his one bad eye, but a true expert in museum handling, staffing, and acquisitions. He had won the land for the Museum in a poker game where he had beat his opponent with three jacks. His real name was Charles R. O'Neil, but went by TJ after the three cards he held to win the land.

It was about three thirty when I checked into the Regency. It was good to be some place I knew and felt comfortable in. Tammy was at the front desk and asked me flirtingly how long I was going to stay.

"I don't know yet, might be a few days, or a week."

"Well, you still have my number, don't you?"

"Sure I do," I said. To myself I thought, I don't have a clue. "If I can't find it I'll know where you are."

"Just in case," she said, grabbing my hand, and wrote her number with her pen. "You going to meet with a... a... The handsome one with the eye patch?"

"TJ."

"That's right, would you like me to call him for you?"

"Sure, but would you give me a half an hour and then ring my room?"

"Anything for you," she said, chewing on the end of her pen playfully.

"Tammy," a voice called, through the open door behind her.

"Just a minute, Bob." She looked at me and mouthed the words 'call me', and winked. I smiled broadly back at her just before she spun and left the counter. I took

my keys and used the elevator to go up to the third floor. The room was gorgeous like all of them, with an extraordinary view. I unpacked the Icon and box, carefully putting both of them into the safe, taking the key and adding my own padlock. I unpacked and took a quick shower before the phone call. Right at thirty minutes, the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Rusty, you old dog, what are you doing in town?"

"I've got something I need to have you see and evaluate for me."

"Well, I was going to be off to Barbados tomorrow."

"I'll make it worth your while. Besides, you're gonna' want to see this." There was a pause on the other end of the phone.

"Tell me you didn't find it."

"Oh, but I did. It took a little digging, but it was there."

"I'll be at the Regency in forty five minutes, all right? What room?"

"Meet you at the bar and I'll buy you a drink."

"Hell, in that case, I'll be over in half an hour."

"Good, see you then." We both hung up and a half hour later were talking and laughing about old times over a stiff bourbon drink and a Cutty Scotch. It was good to be back with someone I basically trusted.

"So, where did you find it?"

"Quintana Roo."

"That far south, eh'? Well the suspense is killing me, can I see it?" I pointed to the box on the floor, at the same time ordering another round. He carefully opened up the cardboard box. Like a true curator, he treated the eighty cent box like a treasure.

"It's inside," I said.

"I know, I know, just being careful." Then, with the dexterity of a raccoon searching under a rock for a crayfish, he pulled it out and set it gently on the table.

"Wow, look at the aging on the wood." He ran his finger down the side and over the top. Three hinges set the back, holding one side of the lid down and a big lock inset in the front.

"At first I thought it was a three lock box with the hinge placement, but there's

only one in the front."

"Blackbeard wouldn't have used a three lock box for what he had. It looks to be right. Hold it, what is this?" He pulled a small loop out of his pocket and looked at the top of the lock, tipping the box up slightly. He scratched it with his fingernail.

"Well, will you look at that." He turned the box towards me and pointed to the three small letters. "O. A. R. It's the name of his ship, the Queen Ann's Revenge. Oh, I gotta' see what's inside here. Tomorrow?"

"What about your trip?"

"Ahhhh... I'll go after, this is far too important, and besides, you said you'd make it worth my while. And I'm sure it's not just dinner and a few scotches."

"Nope that's just a bonus, plus you get to see me." We both laughed and had a delightful dinner. It was the first time I let my guard down with someone for a long time. With Connie I had let my guard down a little bit, and I was sorry for it. I knew better. But with TJ, no harm, no foul. When I finally made it back to my room I was giddy with the booze and happy meeting with an old friend.

North Carolina Maritime Museum

I was at the Museum at about ten. TJ met me there at the rear entrance. He set up a camera to videograph the opening of the box. Placing my hard won box on the table, Charles first photographed all sides of the box with a thirty-five millimeter.

"This involves a very old key, but I might have one that works." He rummaged through the drawers, coming up with a small box of keys.

"I'm not saying that any of these might work, but it's worth a look." He tried several of the keys until he found a style that worked, it looked vaguely familiar. He tried all the keys that he had in a series, but none fit.

"Well, we'll have to pick it, unless you have a key." he said laughingly.

"I do..." I said, "But it's so unlikely that..." I fished in my pocket for the key

from the pouch I found at La Quemada. It was in my coin pocket. "That can't be the right one." I handed it to TJ. Like the others, he carefully inserted it in the hole being careful not to scratch it. The key amazingly fit, it turned, and we heard two audible clicks.

TJ looked over at me and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Slowly, TJ opened Blackbeard's box, gently folding and opening the lid back, resting it gently against the table.

A low extended "Holy shit" came from TJ.

"That can't be," I whispered. "That just can't be."

The End

A large, stylized, light gray letter 'B' graphic, positioned centrally below the text. The letter is rendered in a classic serif font with a slightly shadowed or 3D effect, giving it a prominent presence on the page.