

Love's Hurricanes

By Don Noel

Chapter 1

FRIDAY

Will

“This damnable affliction, Will! I can't remember: Have I told you about Chessie's plan? She wants to take me away.”

Shaking off a slightly sunburned torpor, Will sits up in his rattan chair. Propping his sunglasses into the tangle of his blond hair, he looks into the shadows of the house to see if Dad's wife has made her appearance yet. Chessie, who is decidedly not Will's mother. No sign of her yet. Save for Dad's black-and-tan Yorkie curled contentedly at his feet and her gaudy green parrot half-dozing on its perch, they are alone on the sprawling flagstone patio.

“What plan?” Looking again toward the bedroom wing, he lowers his voice. “Take you where?”

Dad, sunk into his white Adirondack chair, wears a blue-striped seersucker suit – tailored years ago to accommodate that massive chest, yet still easily buttoned at the waist -- and tieless blue shirt. He looks every bit Maximilian Montague, formerly of New York City; it is an outfit he has worn for sundowners, ignoring any persisting afternoon heat, for as long as Will can remember.

He himself is in sensible shorts and a white polo shirt that emphasize a rangy frame. He avoids crossing his legs, because he lay down for a short sunbath on the beach this afternoon and fell asleep. They are high enough on the promontory that they look down at a shimmering blood-red ribbon that stretches across a calm sea to where that sun now sinks into the horizon.

Sailor's delight, another perfect Jamaican day to follow; no hint of bad weather. But a different kind of storm brewing?

"She thinks I could get better care in Miami."

"Dad, is there something I don't know about? Something new?"

"No, no, I'm healthy as a horse, except for, y'know, the eyesight."

Dad's cataracts have been thickening, Will knows, but that can easily and safely be remedied here on the island. "Then what's the problem?"

"It's this Alzheimer's thing. She's found some place in Florida for . . . for people like me."

Take Dad away from his treasured Si Chaud? The hideaway hammered out of a raw headland four decades ago, a showpiece that two generations of visitors have called Max Montague's miracle? Worse, take Si Chaud away from Dad's heirs? Unthinkable. "And sell this place?" Will manages.

"I guess so. I can't handle the finances any more, y'know, but I suppose most of our money is sunk here. I guess she'd have to sell it."

"Dad, that's crazy! Toookie and K-Bird give you better care right here than you'd ever get somewhere else."

"I think so too. I want to end my days here. Not soon, either, by the way. Built this place, y'know, for my family but for m'self, too. My refuge from the madding world."

Dad's refuge? Yes, but Will's, too. A place where time stands still, where he can retreat into his own projects, as he has today. "We all love the place, Dad." He hesitates, then adds, "It's your legacy."

"I love Chessie, truly do, but she can't have her way on this."

"Of course not."

“Most of the time she gets her way because I can’t stop her. Can’t keep my mind fixed.”

That’s an understatement, Will thinks. Dad has seemed more remote than last summer, more fixed on the days when he was a Madison Avenue titan and Will felt like an inconvenience. This evening, though, he’s focused, the old blue eyes kindled under bushy white eyebrows. A muscle pulses in the taut jaw. “You’ve got to find a way to let me stay here!”

“I will. I promise.” Promises, Will thinks, are easy; this is going to take work. He’ll have to find out more. “You’ve got to stay here. We can’t let your tropical haven slip away from us. From you, I mean.”

“Good,” Dad sighs. His shoulders slump, the jaw slackens. “Glad you’ve come. How was the flight? Pity you couldn’t have shared a ride from the airport with a client we’re expecting.”

The moment has slipped away. The imagined visit of advertising clients is a recurring fantasy; Dad has forgotten already that his younger son arrived last night for a long weekend.

“Avast, mates!” the parrot squawks. “Hello, Chessie!”

“Hello, *Horacio*. Hello, Max.” She comes to his chair, leans in from behind to nuzzle, rumples his thick white hair coquettishly and reaches around to give him a kiss.

“Thank you, m’love. I’ll take another of those, please.”

She sits on the arm of the chair for a long reciprocal kiss, then stands again. “Lovely sunset. Has Will gotten your rum-and-ginger? Good. I’ll pour my *albariño* and join you.”

“No, please take my chair,” Will says. He stands, looking down at her. “I’ll get your wine.” The little bar is just inside the house; from that vantage, they look the perfect couple. She wears loose, filmy slacks, not quite black enough to be opaque, and a pastel blouse that clings to a still-shapely figure. Francesca. She must have been ravishing two decades ago, Will thinks, when Dad abandoned Mom for a woman ten years younger.

As an eight-year-old living with his mother after the divorce, he resented Chessie more than did his decade-older siblings. Even if grudgingly, Will thinks, give her credit: She waited patiently for acceptance, never suggesting even after Mom's death that she be called by any maternal name. Just as well: His real second mother has always been Tookie, their tireless cook-housekeeper.

He pours himself a glass of her wine too. Spanish, of course, greenish yellow; she accepts hers and holds it up to find its golden tinges in the setting sun. There can't be a manicurist down here, but her hands are perfect, the nails emerald green. "*Salud*, Will! Have you found time today for your project? I have a book of Spanish tales whose simplicity might be helpful."

He has been translating classic children's fables into Latin, and finding it harder than teaching Virgil and Ovid to high schoolers. It is only here, without the distractions of fatherhood, householding and earning a living, that he can concentrate and make real progress. Someone else's *Winnie Ille Pu* has been his only good model. "I'd love to have a look, thanks. Maybe tomorrow afternoon?"

"I'll bring them."

"Maybe you can read a few aloud." Dad seems to have caught up with the conversation. "I love to hear you read Spanish, m'dear. The loving tongue."

"I'll bring a poem especially for you, *vida mia*."

In such a scene of domestic bliss, the threatened move to Miami seems imaginary. Will allows himself a moment of hope: Losing Si Chaud might be another figment of Dad's addled mind. When Tookie's bell summons them to dinner; Dad offers his arm in that gallant way of his; Chessie lets him lead her to the dining room and hold her chair. It's the most handsome room in the house, Will has always thought, furnished as a proper dining room might be on Fifth

Avenue, damask linens and sparkling glassware -- but with huge glass doors onto a patio that at this moment glows in the last of the sunset. Tookie and Miss Angelina, the current second maid, stand heads down at the kitchen door, waiting for grace before serving.

“Que el Señor bendice estos alimentos para que comamos.” Chessie crosses herself, the diamond on her hand catching the light.

“Amen,” Will says.

“Amen,” echoes Dad.

“Will, tell us more about Marnie and the children,” asks Chessie over Tookie’s peppery pumpkin soup. She seems genuinely interested. It is one of her gifts. His kids like her, and call her Grandma; he doesn’t feel it right to discourage them. “You said last night that they’re visiting her parents. Anything special?”

He tries to scrutinize her. She doesn’t look or act any different. If she’s scheming to dismantle this paradise, she disguises it well. “They want to take them to a corn maze, which is a big thing in Ohio.” It is a three-day school weekend. The kids were here last summer, and now it is Marnie’s folks’ turn. He always misses Marnie, but leaving her with those bundles of demanding energy is sometimes a relief. “I wanted to look in on Dad and you, and do a little writing.”

“Have you heard from Josh lately?”

She asks it with what seems to him contrived innocence; she knows that the two brothers, with ten years’ difference, aren’t close. Josh comes down often, Sis tells him, because he has a mistress in the village, but Will would never say that. If Dad wants to imagine Josh’s visits a sign of filial devotion, no point in disabusing him. “I should ask you,” he replies. “Down pretty regularly, isn’t he?”

“*Es verdad.*” She turns to Dad. Drawing him back into the conversation? Will wonders. Or underlining his frailty? “He was here last month, wasn’t it, darling?”

“Can’t keep track of time like that, y’know. He brought me some crisp apples, though, so it must have been fall. Not much difference in seasons here. What month is it now?”

“October, Dad.”

“Then it was September. Can’t grow apples here. Not cold enough. Josh brings a few when they’re in season. I love ‘em.”

“I tried, too. Granny Smith’s, your favorite. But mine were taken away at the airport.” He hadn’t declared them on the immigration form, but when the customs agent asked if he had any foodstuff, he couldn’t bring himself to lie. Josh, he thinks, wouldn’t have been so scrupulous. “And tell me, Dad, how’s Sis? She phones frequently, doesn’t she?”

“Liz seems fine. Called just few weeks ago. Tells me about her kids. Can’t remember their names just now. My other grands, y’know.”

“She calls every Sunday,” Chessie breaks in. “Your father knows that when I go to Mass in Black River and Tookie goes to church here, Liz will call.” She rings the bell, held high in that manicured hand, that they’re ready for the fish.

Miss Angelina appears to clear the soup dishes, and Tookie herself brings on a handsome platter of snapper in her signature peanut sauce. Chessie serves with graceful ease, dismissing Miss Angelina with a wave of her hand and letting Will hand Dad his plate, even though it’s a long reach with only three of them at the table. She serves another plate for Will, and hands it to him with a gracious-hostess smile.

“Chessie, you must get bored, just you and Dad here alone.” Probing, but trying to sound casual, he returns her smile in a way he hopes suggests friendly teasing. “You’re a city girl at heart.”

“Not at all. Max bought us a very good videotape player that brings the city to us.”

“Amazing technology,” says Dad. “A whole movie on a thing the size of a paperback, big as life on the TV screen. I wish I had that account; I’d turn my wordsmiths loose on it.”

“He’s fond of the oldies,” says Chessie. “*Gone with the Wind; From Here to Eternity*. Right, dear?”

Will doesn’t wait for Dad’s response. “Sounds a little boring to me.”

“No, no. We found a service that mails us six at a time, as soon as they’re available.”

“*The English Patient*,” says Dad. “Great scenery, desert fighting, defusing mines. And *Evita*. I remember her.” He lets his fork rest on his plate, his chin tilted up as though seeing Eva Peron in his mind’s eye. “Introduced to her at some soirée in New York. I was a young man. Hoped to snag the Argentina account. No luck. Lovely lady, but hard as nails.”

“Max dozes sometimes, but seems to wake up for the best parts, don’t you, darling?”

“And you, Chessie?” Will asks. “I remember your going to private screenings of the latest films. Someplace in New York, with wine and cheese before the cinema?”

“You have a good memory. It was at Max’s club. Wasn’t it, *cariño*?”

“It was,” says Dad. “Great place to chat up clients. But the last movie I remember was right here, a few nights ago. *Titanic*. Superb. If I’d known it was being filmed, I’d have persuaded them to have the men light up Jamaican cigars while the women and children headed for the lifeboats.”

These incessant reminders of Dad's glory days in advertising can be wearing; Will doesn't know if Max ever had the Jamaican cigar account. On the other hand, hearing him brag about his exploits, imagined or real, is a small price to pay for time spent here in Jamaica. He decides to take the bull by the horns. "Chessie, Dad tells me you're thinking of taking him to Florida."

Bad timing: At that moment, Tookie comes into the dining room. Chessie's face freezes. Tookie seems not to notice. "Another Red Stripe, Marse Will?"

"Thank you, yes."

"That sounds like a good idea," starts Dad. "I'll have . . ."

Chessie cuts him off. "You know that will get you up in the middle of the night."

"You're right, dear. No thanks, Tookie." He turns to Will. "Try to limit myself these days, y'know?"

"One rum at sundowners," Chessie says, "and one beer at dinner." Will recognizes the tone as one he might use with a recalcitrant teen-ager.

"I drank harder when I was your age," Dad says. "I seem to remember some terrific nightclubs in Miami."

Tookie retreats. Chessie waits until the kitchen door swings shut. "He's always enjoyed Florida. Haven't you, *cariño*?"

Dad is apparently still savoring memories; his smile is serene. "We had a condo there. Maybe still do? Haven't been there in years."

"We do, love." She turns to Will. "Yes, we think a change of venue might be good; a different level of care."

“That’s hard to believe. He’s well taken care of right here. Aren’t you, Dad?”

“Everyone looks out for me, y’know. Can’t complain at all.”

“It isn’t safe. He wanders,” Chessie says. “Don’t you, dear?”

“Well, I do get confused now and then. But my little dog always gets me home.”

Will presses the point: “So you don’t want to move to Florida?” He tries to make it as much statement as question.

“Max doesn’t always recall details of our plans,” Chessie interrupts. “Do you, *vida mia?*” She rings the bell, ignoring the few bites of fish still on Will’s plate.

“Loved that condo,” says Dad, still smiling. “View of the city, lit up at night.”

Miss Angelina comes to clear the dishes. “We can talk later, Will,” says Chessie.



Halfway down the long driveway, tucked among head-high bougainvillea, is a stone bench that Dad commissioned years ago. As a nine-year-old, Will went there to be consoled by Tookie in the first year after Mom’s death. When she looked up from cooking to see his face clouded, she would raise an eyebrow, nod her chin toward the drive, and wait for him to wink that he would meet her here. “It’s gonna be *irie*, Marse Will; gonna be okay,” she would say when she came, and give him a hug.

“Wonderful fish! Thank you,” he says tonight as they get up from dinner, and gives her a raised eyebrow and nod. She winks that she has recognized the code. He excuses himself from the repeat showing of *Titanic* that Chessie promises Dad, and goes out to sit in the sheltered garden inland behind the house. When he sees Miss Angelina start down the driveway to the village, he lets her get well past the bench, then walks there to wait.

Despite the lingering heat of the day, the stone is as cool as he remembers it from those early years. The moon, just past full in the eastern sky, touches the grey in Tookie's hair as she arrives. The years have thickened her, but not nearly as much as most Jamaican women. Her dark face is still softly handsome, motherly. It is she who needs consoling tonight, though, as she confirms Dad's fears.

"It's true, Marse Will. She fergits it's me that collects the mail. Envelopes began comin' a few months ago."

From the pocket of her skirt she hands him a list of laboriously penciled names; he tilts the paper to catch the moonlight. Mercy Nursing Center. West Gables Long Term Care Center. Saint Eustace Nursing Center. All in Miami. Memorial Long-Term Care Center. Coral Reef Nursing Center.

Tookie breaks in. "Seems that saint one is what Miss Francesca's picked. How do you say it?"

Will looks back up. "Saint Eustace," he says for her carefully. "Why do you say so?"

"The others have stopped comin', an' there's somethin' most ever' week from Saint . . . Saint You-stus. She's written to them a coupla times, too. Telephoned them, when she didn't know I was listenin'." The anguish shows in her face. "Marse Will, it just isn't right!"

He glances up the driveway toward the house. "We should keep our voices down."

"Yes. But we got to find a way to keep you' daddy here."

"And keep this place in the family, right? What would you do if she sold it? And I couldn't come visit you?"

“I’d miss you, child. But mostly I worry that it will kill him to take him away. We got to stop that.”

“I’m going to try, Tookie.” He turns on the bench to take her in his arms. She is nearly as tall as he is, her body strong but soft too, fragrant of snapper and dish soap. “I’m going to try.”

She hugs him hard, and he feels the moistness of her eyes on his neck. “Bless you, Marse Will. You go on back to the house now.”

“You going to be all right, Tookie?”

“Don’t yu’ worry. I’m just gonna sit here a few, so anyone that’s up and about won’t see us together.”