

The Nine Lives of Charles – 1st Life

A full moon was casting shadows over the ground as a dank, woody, and a chemical smell filled Charles' nostrils. He dug in the dark refusing to let the pungent odors deter him. He was callous and oblivious to the ongoing traffic, hesitating only when blinded from a driver's high beams emerged, panning the graveyard.

"I can't believe you have me out here in the middle of the night. What in the world is wrong with you? Maybe I should ask what's wrong with me for coming."

"Be patient Milani. You'll smile when see what's hidden in the coffin."

"A dead body Charles, that's all, you idiot!"

"Then why are you helping me, Milani?"

"I'm watching, but why I'm here is a question I don't have an answer to."

"I'll tell you why, you're hoping what I told you was true."

"Perhaps. But you lie so much Charles. You still owe me for running off after that last job. I just want my cut of the money you stole."

"Milani, keep quiet and make sure no one sneaks up on us."

"What's wrong, Charles? Are you afraid? You know that everyone here is dead, or do you know something I don't?"

Charles stopped, looked over at Milani, and sighed. "Milani stop talking so much."

"Why, I'm not disturbing anyone. And why are you so aggravated suddenly? I should be the one upset. You ran off and left me holding the bag. I have a bounty on my head because of you."

Charles lifted his head and looked in Milani's direction long enough for her to notice he stopped digging.

"What's wrong now?"

"You Milani. You're what's wrong. Can we do this in silence."

Milani giggled. "If that would make you happy and get me out of here sooner, sure."

The dampness made it easier to dig but challenging to keep the soil from falling back into the hole. Hours passed, and Charles finally reached the coffin. Sitting back to catch his breath, he reached on the coffin's side and unhooked a latch as Milani watched.

"I thought they nailed coffins shut. That's what I always saw in the vampire movies."

"That's your problem; you watch too much television Milani."

Charles shined the flashlight from his cellphone inside, grabbed two duffle bags, and tossed them out of the ditch to Milani. Turning off the light from his phone, he turned to climb out of the hole. Milani had opened one of the bags and sat in awe.

“Oh my God Charles! How much money do you think this is?”

“It’s just shy of five million dollars, tax-free.”

“I must admit, I am glad I tagged along this time. Your past adventures were failures, but this one panned out. I can see myself on a beach, sipping a pina colada and still blue waters.”

“I bet you can.”

“Wait, this can’t be good. Whoever buried this is going to come back for it.”

“Exactly, and I did. Funny thing about money, it doesn’t care whose pocket it ends up in.”

“What’s that supposed to mean Charles?”

“Come on Milani, you know as well as I do. You had a debt, and I had a job.”

Milani pushed herself back with her hands while Charles slowly moved towards her. Charles pulled a Magnum from his back and screwed a suppressor on it, never losing sight of Milani.

“I don’t understand Charles.”

“Oh, but I think you do. You stole this money and ran off, that’s why there’s a contract on your head.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I know that, and you know that, but no one else will Milani.”

“I thought I could trust you.”

“Since when has there been honor amongst thieves? I am going to miss you. I considered taking you along, but no. However, there is a question I was told to ask before killing you.”

“What’s that, Charles?”

“What’s the meaning of the devil lives in still waters?”

Milani lowered her head briefly and looked up smiling. Lifting her hand from under her, she shot Charles twice. Charles fell. Milani walked over to him, kicked his gun away, and knelt close.

“I knew you had the money, Charles. There was never a bounty on my head. You thought you were stealing from me, I’m the one who hired you, Charles. I am the devil that lives in still waters.”

Milani grabbed the money bags, but not before kicking Charles into the open grave. Turning to leave, she smiled.

Charles was motionless. He breathed in and grabbed his shirt, opening it and rubbing his chest. He was grateful for remembering to put on his bullet-proof vest, more so that she didn't aim for his head. Milani left with all the money, unaware that Charles had survived. Now, he had the advantage.

The Nine Lives of Charles – 2nd Chances

Exasperation clothed perspiration weighed heavily on Anya. The sweet, slightly lactic liquid released tiny nuances of a tart green apple infused with slightly woody fragrances greeted her lips. She sat reluctant to sit back. The drink was incapable of hiding the stench mingled with heavy traffic fumes and burning rice nearby. The dank room held secrets of those who had come and gone before her. Reaching for her bag to pull out a cigarette, she stopped.

“You said I’d be safe; why can’t I go back home? This was to be my new start, Charles,” she said.

“You are safe, but you knew years ago that there would always be a chance that you would have to move again. I understand how you feel,” he said.

“No, you don’t! You go home every night without worrying if you’ll need to uproot the life you’ve built.”

Passing her a fresh drink, her finger softly touched his hand. A shiver rippled through his body, reminded him how dangerous she truly was. Turning away loosening his tie allowed the sweat to drip down his back under his shirt unseen. Similar to ice melting in a glass leaving a ring on the table, unnoticed, hidden. “Anya, I can only say I am sorry. There are cells awakening, and you are at the top of their hit list. The price on your head is going up each day you’re alive.”

“Really, so how much am I worth now?” she asked.

“A little over 5 million,” he said.

“That’s not impressive, it’s an insult. I made more money killing people with less status, people who were nothing compared to me.” Leaning towards him, she smiled; licking her lips, she nodded towards the bed.

“That’s never going to happen again,” he said.

“What’s wrong Charles? Are you afraid?”

“I should have always been afraid. It’s kept me alive,” he said. Traffic horns blared and the chatter of children playing off in the distance was melodious, proof that life held possibilities. Exhausted, he was previously flirting with thoughts of retirement when the call came that she had to move again. “Look, we can sit here, or we can get you out of here safe,” he said.

“В чем же безопасен Чарльз?” — спросила она.

“You know I don’t understand you. Speak English!” he said.

“О да, я забываю, что ты идиот.”

“English!”

"Fine, what do you consider safe Charles? You people can't keep anyone safe. I gave you a chance; now, we'll do things my way," she said.

Shattered glass, ice and cognac fell to the floor after hitting the edge of the table. Grunting, she walked inside and reached down picking up a shoulder bag. The life of a mercenary was in her bones, reminding her to stay prepared.

"You can leave; I can take care of myself," she said.

"You won't last a day on your own!" he said.

"You are probably the reason anyone is even looking for me. Дьявол живет в тихих водах."

"You know I don't understand you when you speak in your mother tongue," he said.

"The devil lives in still waters," she said. Walking into the bathroom and closing the door, Anya was always prepared, seldom surprised. Her bag held several passports, digital bank accounts, and burner phones. She welcomed the familiar of who she was.

"Anya, open the door so we can talk. You don't need to feel like you're alone in this," he said.

"I am alone Charles!" she said. The only way out was through the walls. Moving before Charles got an inkling of what was happening. Running water covered sounds from light taps she made on the walls. Finally, finding a weakness, Anya reached into her bag grabbing a small explosive. Without effort, she blew a hole through the wall large enough for her to fit through and not too soon. Charles tried to kick in the door, but it was too late. A grenade landed over the fence into the room leaving Charles bleeding on the floor.

Anya walked out of the hotel, to an awaiting vehicle. "I told you, Charles, the devil lives in still waters," she said. Smiling, she was one of many. Like snow melting in Russia, what once appeared dead was nothing more than dormant seeds, planted, waiting for the season to change so the unseen could break ground and spring forth. Like everything, it was just waiting for the right season and time.