

Death by Doubloons



Kathy Cretsinger



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*This book is dedicated to all the people in Shady Valley,
Tennessee.*

*A special dedication to my husband, Jerry Cretsinger. Without
you, I would be nothing.*

CHAPTER ONE



LIBERTY GARCIA

In all my twenty-four years, no one has ever tried to kill me because of my father's profession. Never have I been on the run or been afraid because of something I did not do. That's the reason I escaped to Shady Valley, Tennessee. Will this small community protect me from the unknown or will the killer find me here?

The bell on the door of the Raceway Restaurant jingles when I enter. The aroma of French fries and hamburgers wafts through the air. Not a single vacant table in sight. I should've expected this with all the trucks parked outside.

A young man looks up from his order pad. He has a nice smile and reminds me of Jack Ryan. The guy from "The Office" who gets all buff and somehow becomes a super-agent. Same dark hair. Same scruffy beard. Tall, slim build. The only difference is the waiter's eyes.

Caramel-brown. Delicious.

"There's a table in the back," he says with a smile. "Go ahead and get seated. I'll be with you in a minute."

Cautiously, I make my way toward the table. I search for anyone who might look suspicious. Am I crazy to fear everyone who looks my way? Then I hear my name.

“Liberty Garcia, what are you doing here?” A surprised Harry Greer, my boss’s husband at Smart Living, walks my way.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go,” I whisper. I close my eyes, willing my heart to slow down. Harry is a friend. I can trust him.

He slides into a chair across from me. I can never forget that handsome face. Nut-brown eyes. Short beard. A stray brown curl bobs on his forehead. My friend and boss, Daisy McQueen Greer, got the husband prize.

I work for Smart Living Enterprises as a recipe creator. Daisy Greer is the owner of the business. Her inheritance from her grandmother brought her to Shady Valley, and she fell in love with Harry Greer. When they married, she relocated the company to Shady Valley. I worked in the Miami, Florida, office, until now.

Smart Living instructs people of all ages to live healthy lives with exercise, a healthy frame of mind, and eating well. I work as a recipe creator overseeing the cooking and product development department. Besides teaching how to use our products in our stores, I have a YouTube channel with over 800,000 followers. My specialty is gluten-free living. I show you how easy it is to live a gluten-free life in a gluten world.

“Liberty, you’re pale and shaking.” Harry gazes at me. “What’s happened to you?”

I lean across the table, clenching my hands. “Someone is trying to kill me.”

“Do you know who?”

“No. I left Miami before I learned a name. I suspect it’s the person who killed my father. He wants the doubloons.”

“Doubloons?”

“They’re 22-karat gold coins minted in Spain, Peru, and

other countries. Most Spanish gallons carried them. The coins I have are rare and valuable.”

“Let’s get you out of here.”

The waiter approaches us. “What can I get for you?”

Harry speaks quietly, pinning the man with his gaze. “Matt, box up one of your Smart Living salads. We need to get out of here fast.”

The Smart Living Salad is my creation. It’s packed with protein and good veggies.

“Sure thing.” Matt quickly writes the order on his order pad. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, but if anyone asks about a Cuban woman traveling alone, you don’t know anything.”

“Gotcha.” Matt walks to the kitchen.

Should Harry have told Matt so much?

“Don’t worry,” Harry says, reading my mind—or more likely, the surprise on my face. “Matt’s trustworthy. I’ll contact Daisy and have Grace and Bruce meet us at the front security gate.” Harry’s eyes scan every table and booth in the restaurant. “I’m texting Daisy now.” He takes out his phone and punches in the message, then glances up at me. “Do you want to follow me in your car?”

I shake my head and, with trembling hands, tighten my long black hair in its ponytail. My voice trembles and I hold out my hands to show him my over-the-top jitters. “I’ve been on the road for three days. Very little sleep. Only fast food. Can I just leave my car here?” I try to slow down and keep my voice quiet and low. When I get excited, I talk too fast and choppy.

“Sure. We’ll go in my truck.”

Matt returns to the table with the salad and sets the Styrofoam container in front of us. “Here you go. Can I do anything else?”

Harry hands Matt a ten-dollar bill. “Can you move Liberty’s car to the back of the building?”

“I’d be glad to. Do you want me to bring it to you after my shift ends?”

“Yes. I’ll get you a ride back.”

“Be safe,” Matt says to me, his caramel-brown eyes showing concern.

After I unlock the door and hand the keys to Matt, Harry takes my backpack from the backseat. “Is this all you have?”

“Yes,” I nod my head. “I didn’t have time to pack more.”

He heaves it onto his shoulder. “What do you have in here? It weighs a ton.”

“It’s the gold doubloons from the last Spanish galleon my father found.”

If I weren’t so tired, nervous, and scared witless, I’d have laughed at the astonished look on Harry’s face. I guess I haven’t made it clear that I am carrying part of them with me.

He shakes his head.

“Get in my truck.” He points to a big blue extended cab.

I obey and climb into the front seat. Harry stashes my backpack behind his seat.

“We live right up the road. You’ll be safe. Remember Grace and Bruce? They’ll protect you.”

I nod, relieved that there will be familiar faces on the other end of the ride. Grace Manis and Bruce Howard are Daisy’s bodyguards and moved to Shady Valley a few months ago, before Daisy married Harry. When you’re one of the richest women in the world, you need protection.

Harry drives through a gate, and a nondescript black SUV pulls behind us. The gate closes and locks with a thud. I already feel safer. We drive up a steep gravel driveway to a blue Victorian house with white gingerbread trim. The house is set against a backdrop of lush green trees. I pinch myself to make sure I haven’t died and gone to heaven.

We park, and Grace opens my door and pulls me into a hug. “Good to see you, kid. Daisy is waiting for you in the kitchen.”

“Grace will show you the way.” Harry hands the backpack to Bruce.

Bruce, Grace’s male counterpart, stands tall and straight. Late forties or early fifties. Shaven head and swoon-worthy muscles. I’ve missed working with him in the Miami office. He’s a sweet and caring man. I want to give him a hug, but I am too frightened. I hesitate when I no longer have the backpack in my possession. After all, it’s the reason I fled for my life.

“Don’t worry. We’ll take care of you.” Harry pulls his cap off and runs his hand through his thick brown, neatly cut hair, and gives me a smile that makes me feel safe and secure. “Go on in, Liberty. We all want to hear what happened but wait for me before you start. I’ll put my truck in the garage. Be there in a minute.”

I smell the clean, fresh mountain air before I step on the porch. The rustle of trees from the top of the mountain behind the house gives me another level of serenity. Grace blocks the eye line from the road.

Grace is a motherly type but was widowed early in her twenties. She and her late husband, Joe, had no children. She’s in her early-to mid-forties and wears her blonde hair in a short cut. In her job, she’s quiet and all business, but she has the most beautiful smile. I know there’s a fun side to her.

She protected Daisy after her parents died in a boating accident. Grace’s small build makes her look weak. She isn’t. I’ve seen her flip Bruce on his back.

Grace opens the back door, and Daisy holds her arms out. I go straight into them. I need comfort and a shoulder to cry on. Home. I feel at home with Daisy. Yes, I am home.