

SCORPION'S

A JACK RENO NOVEL

STING



Sometimes prison is so much simpler



MARTIN A. NALITZ JR.



Jack Reno thought life would be less complicated when he left prison. Things are okay until he meets a man offering him the same kind of shady dealings that got him locked up. He learns his sentence may have been part of an elaborate conspiracy, gets on the wrong side of some prison muscle, and meets a woman who could be trouble. Throw in an ex-wife getting remarried and it's clear - sometimes prison just seems simpler.

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Martin Nalitz

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My Uncle Bob had once told me that if you put two scorpions together in a jar they would immediately kill each other. But, if you put three of them in there they would all live together. Uncle Bob wasn't a biologist, botanist, scientist, or any kind of "ist". He was, in fact, a legendary car salesman, in Pittsburgh, PA, and along with that, in his words, "a commentator on the human condition, a modern-day philosopher, a contemporary Aristotle..." You get the point.

This particular observation always came to mind when the subject of ex-wives came up, because I have three of them. I had been in situations where two of them were together, and it was just a matter of time before everyone got stung.

On the other hand, I had once been in a setting with all three of them, and everything had been fine. They'd all been able to put their differences aside and unite against the common enemy, me.

The reason I was thinking about scorpions and ex-wives, no I won't make the obvious joke, is that I was thinking about tropical vacation spots. See, I hadn't ever been smart enough to avoid marriage, and I hadn't been smart enough to avoid seven years in prison for securities fraud,-another story-but one thing I had known is you just don't take one future ex-wife to a tropical paradise that you had taken another future ex-wife to. Great way to get stung.

My first ex-wife, Kim, and I had shared the Cayman Islands. Fantastic spot-lots of beach, and a popular offshore banking site.

Number two, Lisa, had picked out our spot-Belize. Beautiful little country just south of Mexico. Known for its seclusion, beaches, outstanding exchange rates, and offshore banking.

Kat, or Sheryl, ex number three was determined that we wouldn't even fly over the Caymans or Belize. That's why she chose Costa Rica for our getaway place.

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Beautiful lush jungles, (yes, jungles, not rain forests) beaches, and offshore banking are the selling points.

I have to mention the offshore banking, because being a recovering white collar criminal, everybody assumes that was my interest. Not so. Honest.

Anyway by the end of my third marriage I was running out of hemisphere.

Then, in a moment of weakness, an endearingly treacherous young lady named Julie Hayes persuaded me to join her for some late autumn Olympics on Sapphire Beach, St. Thomas. I had just made her millions which got her out of some serious trouble, made her the sole owner of one of the most successful financial companies in the land, and did I mention made her millions? The way I pulled this off was, I hate to say it, definitely shady, bordering on crooked, and if you wanted to stretch a point, possibly criminal. It might also send me back to prison, so she probably figured she owed me.

As a tropical paradise St. Thomas ran circles around everyplace else I'd been. After one day. I was thinking of moving there, and by the second day I had my own stool at the swim-up bar.

Unfortunately, Julie and I didn't survive the beach. We never yelled at each other, we never fought, we just lost interest. After four days we were pretty much going different directions all day, and after six days she announced she was heading back to Denver to look after her new financial empire.

I recognized, all too clearly, the restlessness that would now dominate her life. I'd tried to tell her-she thought she owned a big company and a lot of money. What she didn't realize was, she had it backwards-the company and the money owned her.

The villa she had gotten on Sapphire Beach with her ill-gotten gains was rented for another eleven days, and it was really her idea that I stay. I was on "administrative leave" at work, so there was no rush to get back, and shortly after I returned I was scheduled for a parole hearing that might put me back in prison, so I might as well enjoy myself.

No matter what else has been said about me, I am a gentleman. So the morning she left I rode to the airport with Julie, in a quaint, open-air taxi that used to be a Ford pickup truck. We held hands and looked in different directions, neither

speaking. When we'd met a few months ago, we'd never run out of things to say, and if there was a silence it was very comfortable. This silence was so tense, our cabdriver, Elvis, was looking back nervously in the mirror.

Sapphire Beach is on the extreme southeast corner of St. Thomas; the airport is at the extreme southwest corner. It's a tiny island, only eleven miles long, but it still takes a little time to get there. The drive takes forever if nobody is speaking.

When we arrived at the airport we both got out of the cab.

"It's okay," she said, "I can get my stuff."

"Can't I even say good-bye?" I asked her.

She just patted my arm, gave me a quick kiss on the lips and walked away. People were watching her, I thought because of the tension, but it may have been something else. She looked more stunning than ever—deeply tanned, long shapely legs set off by her Caribbean-blue sundress, which also set off her Caribbean-blue eyes, and shoulder-length blonde hair. I knew we were through and I was still watching her.

Just before she went in to the terminal she turned and waved.

"We'll always have Made-off," I said, a reference to the upscale yuppie gin mill Julie and I had frequented in Denver.

Then she was gone.

While I pondered my choice of exit lines Elvis, our cabdriver, came over and put his arm on my shoulder. He had to reach up because though we both weighted about one hundred and eighty five pounds, I was six feet two inches and he was about five feet four inches.

"It's okay mon," he said. "Lots women on dis island like to meet you. I help."

He was steering me back to the cab while he spoke. Getting in the car I said, "Elvis, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Not original, but as exit lines go, a classic.

Assistant District Attorney Cathy Rankin was almost through with her argument. “So, Your Honor, while the people are aware that the Presentence Investigation done on Mr. Bell recommends probation, we ask for harsher measures, so that something more serious doesn’t happen in the future.”

She paused; she was a full-figured woman, bordering just on the fun side of plump, but her gray dress and jacket, with a thin pin stripe, along with her heels made everything look just a little stretched.

After a second she simply said, “Thank you.” Then, fighting back a smile, she sat down.

Judge Henry Cassidy also paused, seeming to read something. In reality this was the moment he liked best. This was the scariest moment most defendants would go through in their entire lives, waiting to be sentenced, and Judge Cassidy liked it.

John Bell was forty three years old, divorced, with two children, ages ten and eight. The PSI said he was active in their lives, and they were both there, along with his ex-wife and what looked like his parents. Fifteen years earlier he’d had his only other brush with the law, a DUI, and that’s what made him perfect.

Judge Cassidy cleared his throat, putting the most compassionate look possible on his face as he looked down at Bell.

“Thank you, Ms. Rankin,” Cassidy started. “Mr. Bell, I want you to understand that I have two roles here. One is to make sure that justice is served on behalf of the people of this state, and to make sure they are protected. But the other role is to make sure that you have the best opportunity to move past this and become a productive member of society.”

Bell smiled, and nodded, hopefully. Cassidy continued, “Mr. Bell, you are charged with two counts of vehicular assault, each carrying a sentencing range from

probation to six years in the Department of Corrections. On count one, it is the ruling of this court that you will serve a sentence of five years in the DOC.”

All color left Bell’s face, and his ex-wife gasped.

“On count two, it is the ruling of this court that you will serve an additional five years, DOC, to run consecutively to count one. This court is in recess.”

The judge banged his gavel and hurried to his chambers. Behind him the entire Bell family cried as a deputy moved forward to put handcuffs on John. ADA Rankin would normally say something to the victim at this point, but she was by herself. There didn’t seem to be any victims.

Six months earlier John Bell had gone out with his two best friends, Steve and Sean, to celebrate a raise he’d gotten. They went to a local bar in the small mountain town where they lived. John didn’t drink that night; as he aged he lost interest. Since he wasn’t drinking he volunteered to drive.

As they drove down the sloping driveway from the bar sometime after midnight, somebody spilled a drink in the backseat and as he turned to look, Bell realized, too late, he’d shot down across the two-lane road, and rolled the small Subaru down a steep embankment on the other side of the road.

Bell woke up twenty hours later in a hospital with his right arm in a cast and his head throbbing. Steve suffered a dislocated hip; Sean had a broken arm, but they had been released from the hospital.

One month later Steve got a certified letter from the district attorney’s office telling him he was the victim in a case of vehicular assault the state was filing against John Bell. There was also a restraining order prohibiting Bell from having contact with him or coming within two hundred feet of him.

Steve called the DA and explained that not only was John Bell his friend, they were also roommates, and neither he nor Sean had ever considered filing charges. The polite lady said it didn’t really matter; the state was pushing the case.

At the same time two sheriff’s deputies went to the store where John Bell sold plumbing supplies and arrested him on two charges of Vehicular Assault. He spent

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the night in jail, but bonded out the next day, convinced everything would be straightened out.

Five months later his court-appointed attorney had convinced him to take a deal, otherwise ADA Rankin stood ready to file four additional counts against him, each one of which he would have to fight and beat.

Bell's attorney assured him that the real danger was to fight and lose. Then the state would always throw the book at you. Cooperation was the path to leniency, so John Bell cooperated right into a ten year prison sentence.

Within minutes of pronouncing sentence on John Bell, Judge Cassidy was in his chambers and on the internet. He went to a restricted website, and through a series of commands and passwords known only to a few people, found himself updating what looked like a scoreboard.

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I didn't stay in St. Thomas the whole time I could have. After eight days I jumped on a flight out and beat a late season tropical storm by two days. Tropical Storm Lisa, of all things. It's no coincidence that these big storms are always named after somebody's ex-wife.

Regardless of the storm and drama with Julie, I decided that St. Thomas was my new tropical getaway. As long as I didn't go back to prison.

When I got home I figured after being gone almost two weeks my voice mail would be loaded. I had one message, left three hours earlier by Ruth.

Ruth was my boss; she's an attorney and managing partner of Meyers-Thromberg in Denver. Prior to that she had worked in the public defender's office trying to keep miscreants out of jail.

Then she worked in the DA's office, trying to put the same miscreants in jail. That's how we met-I was one of those miscreants. She was so successful in my case the state decided I should go away for twenty years. (Really)

After seven years she pulled some strings and got me an early parole so I could go to work for her. Officially, I was a paralegal; in actuality I was an ambulance chaser, a runner, finding guys in prison that had gotten hosed so bad that not only could their case be overturned, but Ruth could fleece the state of some revenue.

It had worked perfectly. From my point of view we had gotten a handful of men out of prison that shouldn't have been there. From Ruth's point of view, we had taken money from the state or the offender's attorney each time. Plus, lest I forget, I got out of prison early.

Ruth's message informed me that we had a meeting with a client in two days, and she thought my particular skills, or life experience would be valuable there.

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Nothing about my upcoming parole hearing. The one that could send me back to prison.

If I was being honest, I was half hoping Julie Hayes had left me a message or two. She hadn't. It occurred to me that she might have called over and over, but been too embarrassed or distraught to leave a message. I checked caller ID and the last call I had before Ruth's was from me, checking for messages two days before I left St. Thomas. I'd have to start calling my house every day in case anybody else checked my caller ID.

Julie wasn't going to call. She was hot and rich. She had the hot part when I met her, and as I said before, I bent some laws to help her with the rich part.

So now, while she was out, who knows where, doing God knows what, being hot and rich, I was sitting home considering calling myself to make it look like I had friends. Like my Uncle Bob used to say, "Life isn't about avoiding the storms, it's learning to dance in the rain." It had rained on me a lot the last few years, and didn't look like it was clearing up anytime soon.

In one of our last conversations Julie told me I made her think of a Pat Benatar song, "Fire and Ice"-*"You come on like a flame, then you turn a cold shoulder."*

She didn't know this, but she was the second woman to compare our break-up to a Pat Benatar song. Coincidentally, all my ex-wives not only had a "break-up" song, but a "getting together" song.

Kim loved the song "Moon River"; called it the most romantic song ever written, our song. After a few years together she'd gone Benatar, "Love is a Battlefield."

When we first met, Lisa said that in her opinion, Mariah Carey sang the song "Vision of Love" to us every time she did it. By the end of our marriage she cut her long blonde hair real short, dyed it black, and sang Joan Jett's "I Hate Myself for Loving You", whenever I walked into the room. Truthfully, she said it was every time she thought of me; I just wasn't there all those times.

Kat, the third wife, beat them both. Our wedding song was "Music of the Night", from Phantom of the Opera. By the time we divorced, she said the song she couldn't

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get out of her head when she thought of me was a Weird Al Yankovic song. I was never certain of the title, but I sure heard the chorus enough—*“I’d rather lick ten thousand razor blades with my tongue, than spend one more minute with you.”*

I can’t say I brought out the best in my wives in all areas, but at least they all grew and stretched themselves musically.



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