

After the Twilight
By
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Chapter One

Like two lovers building to a climax of fiery passion, the engines of the massive 747 jet revved and then roared in preparation for the long journey that lay ahead. Fear knotted Mandy Buchanan's insides and she grasped the arms of the seat as the pilot's voice came over the loudspeaker. Take offs made her nervous; landings, too. It wasn't that she didn't have faith in the captain or his crew, or how far modern aircraft technology had come since 1969. Plane crashes were rare and only horrible stories one read about in the morning paper.

Still, she sighed and wished the journey were over and not just beginning as she listened to the captain: *"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain McKnight of Pan Am flight number three-thirty. My crew and I would like to welcome you on your flight to West Africa, and we should be ready for take off in just a few minutes. We'll be landing in Dakar, Senegal, in approximately fourteen hours, and you will be able to disembark the aircraft for sixty minutes prior to our departure to Freetown, Sierra Leone. Our final destination will be Lagos, Nigeria."*

The seat belt and no smoking signs switched on over the seat in front of her and she laid her head back. She wondered what was going the pilot's mind as he held the throttle and the fate of a few hundred people in the palm of his hand. Was he afraid, even slightly? Or was he disinterested, bored, after making so many flights? She took a breath and held it as the jet climbed upwards.

She let out her breath when she felt her ears pop and stared out the small window as the jet passed through white, billowy, clouds. Seconds later, the earth appeared below and everything looked like a jigsaw puzzle with patches of green, brown and blue. The signs clicked off and she mechanically unclasped her belt.

"Don't like to fly, huh?"

She turned to the young woman sitting in the aisle seat in her row. "Was I that obvious?"

"White knuckles," she said, pointing to Mandy's hand. "Since this is going to be a long flight, why don't we get the introductions out of the way? I'm Sara Mann."

She extended her hand and Mandy took it while studying her face. In fashion with the look of the sixties, Sara's straight auburn hair was severely parted in the middle and hung carelessly past her shoulders. Her square, beige-tinted spectacles, long aquiline nose, and face filled with freckles left her with an arresting face, but not a classically beautiful one. Her smile was warm though, and Mandy smiled as she shook her hand.

"Amanda Buchanan. Mandy."

"Where are you stationed? Freetown or Lagos? You are in the Peace Corps, aren't you?"

Mandy nodded. "Freetown."

"Me, too. I'm going to teach secondary school English."

"Sounds challenging. I'm going over as a secretary," said Mandy and saw Sara's brow wrinkle.

"Secretary? Are you staff then?"

Her question was one that Mandy had been prepared for in Washington when she first joined the Peace Corps. A volunteer secretary was actually a little of both staff and volunteer. Without luxury and with very little money, she would live as simply as the Sierra Leoneans, but she would work for and with Peace Corps staff members.

"I'm a volunteer just like you with no extra privileges. When I've not working for the staff, I hope to be teaching secretarial skills to the Sierra Leonean women."

"Ah, phasing out your own job. That's typical of the mentality in Washington. Why pay for a volunteer when you can get the work done for even less money by the nationals?"

"Isn't that our goal? To educate the nationals to do our jobs?"

Sara shrugged. "I suppose, but I'll never see that happen with my job. There will always be American English teachers in West Africa with never enough of us to go around."

Mandy laid her head back on the seat and turned towards the window. The sky, deep blue as far as she could see, would turn black in a few hours and then golden still later as a new day arrived.

"Why'd you join?"

She turned back to Sara. "To make a difference. Change the world a little and help people less fortunate than I."

Sara rolled her eyes. "You'll never survive with that *Don Quixote* way of thinking."

"Why'd you join?"

"In protest to the Vietnam War of course," she said, a smug look on her face, and Mandy looked away. "Did I say something wrong? I automatically assume everyone's a pacifist like me. Sorry."

Mandy turned her body towards the window. "Think I'll try and get some sleep." *Vietnam*, she thought bitterly to herself, and closed her eyes. *That damned war! Was there no escaping from it? Even on a plane bound for Africa? Why did the war always return to torment me?*

Two years ago, the Vietnam War had meant nothing to her, though it had begun to be discussed in too many American households not to be ignored. Parents whispered late at night in bed, careful their eldest sons didn't hear the tremble in their voices. Colleges grew swollen with young men who sought a temporary reprieve from the iron fist of the Armed Forces in what was known as "*the draft*." Some of those same eldest sons terrified their families when they embraced the draft with vigor eager to leave home and wear Marine dress blues or Army camouflage as their fathers had done in World War II and their

grandfathers in World War I. It was tradition, a sense of honor, responsibility, perhaps a little of all three. They longed to make their families proud of them, yet many discovered the truth too late: the thin cloth of a uniform was only a catalyst to fame and glory and not the certainty of attainment.

Young women grew silent when the war was discussed with pangs of guilt as they slept in their comfortable, safe beds while their brothers or friends slept in foxholes. Some grew sullen and withdrawn living each day in fear that the men they loved might never return to them, and if they did miraculously return, surely different than before they left.

Yes, the Vietnam War was forcing too many American lives to radically change, and America, not prepared or willing to easily make the change, grew tense and angry.

But for Mandy Buchanan, nineteen and the only child of Geoffrey and Eileen Buchanan, Vietnam had not meant anything to her at first. She had no brothers marching off to war, nor any sweetheart to tearfully say goodbye to. Vietnam and the changes it inflicted on American lives had moved down the line of families and had skipped over the Buchanan household.

Now, as Mandy glanced over again at Sara buried in a thick book, she smiled when she saw that her glasses had slipped to the tip of her nose. She was glad she had met someone on the flight for at least now she knew one other person to begin her new life in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Freetown. How she loved the sound of that word! A place where people are free and where she, too, would be free from Vietnam and the memories that still hurt. Two years ago, she didn't have a care and her life had been happy—but that night in September changed everything and as she closed her eyes, the memory of that night came to her easily as it always had. It was a Friday evening and her mother was impatiently honking the horn of the family Impala.

"Hurry up, Mandy!" said Eileen, after waiting nearly ten minutes. "I'm leaving without you."

Eileen looked over her shoulder at the shopping bag filled with potato chips, pretzels and soft drinks and knew her friends would be impatient if she arrived late. Although they all attempted to remain on a faithful diet, once the contents of the shopping bag was laid out on the table and the cards ceremoniously shuffled and dealt, any thought of dieting evaporated with the crunch of the first chip.

Tonight, it was Mimi Foster's turn to host the Friday night card party and Eileen knew Mandy enjoyed visiting the Foster household the most. A few weeks earlier, she had met Mimi's seventeen-year-old daughter, Karen, and they had telephoned each other every night since.

Unlike Mandy, Karen was free-spirited and refused to listen to any figure of authority. It didn't seem to bother her when Mimi restricted her to her room because she would simply open her bedroom window and climb down using the thick branches of a nearby tree. She had been suspended from school a few times for smoking, but that, too, didn't faze her. She was determined to live her life the way she wanted to.

"Here I am," said Mandy, jumping into the car.

"It's about time. What took you so long?"

Eileen quickly pulled out of the driveway.

"Dad. I asked him how his day was and he kept telling me that the Communists are going to take over the world if we're not careful. I couldn't walk away from him."

Eileen sighed, knowing it was difficult to get away from Geoffrey once he had your attention. A quiet but opinionated man, he preferred the solitude of books and news commentaries to the clamor of friends. She glanced over at her daughter and smiled. Mandy was certainly turning into a beauty having inherited the best features of both she and Geoffrey. Soon there would be dozens of young men who would notice what she already saw blossoming in her shy, awkward daughter.

Although Mandy had a few close friends in high school, she preferred solitude, like Geoffrey, and it had alarmed Eileen. She always dreamed her daughter would be the most sought after, popular girl in school, much like she had been, but she had been disappointed when Mandy chose to fade into the crowd.

"You look nice tonight, dear."

"Karen says I should wear my hair down. She says guys love long hair on a girl."

"Give it time. Boys will notice you."

"I wish I had a boyfriend like Karen has."

Eileen reached across the front seat and patted her knee. "You'll have plenty of boyfriends. They just haven't discovered how pretty you are yet."

"You're just saying that because you're my mother."

"Karen tries too hard to look older than she is and all the makeup she wears makes her look cheap. Your beauty is natural and that's the best kind."

Her mother was right about one thing, Mandy thought silently. Makeup was greasy and she hated the feel of it on her skin. Even the mascara wand was difficult to control and she wound up poking it into her eyes as she struggled to brush it against her lashes. Karen had given her some lime green eye shadow to enhance her large, emerald eyes, but she saved it and only wore it when she saw Karen.

"How was work today?"

"Carlson gave me so much dictation that I could barely get it finished on time. I think it'll get worse as his campaign heats up."

At thirty-four, Mandy's boss, John Carlson, was definitely on the way up the political ladder having easily captured a second four-year term as Bakersfield's youngest mayor. Mandy landed the job as junior secretary right out of high school when Teresa, Carlson's assistant, interviewed and hired her immediately. Teresa needed someone she could trust and rely on and admired Mandy's determination to begin work right after graduation instead of enjoying a leisurely summer vacation. Working on Carlson's last campaign had been exciting and Mandy screamed with delight when he had won by a landslide vote.

"Maybe you should ask him for a raise," said Eileen.

“Mom, you know as well as I do that it’s a civil service job and raises are only given once a year. I’ll just have to make do with the seventy-five dollars a week I earn till my review comes up.”

Eileen pulled into Mimi’s driveway and Mandy jumped out of the car and ran to the front door.

“Hi, Mrs. Foster,” she said, breezing past Mimi.

“Karen’s upstairs,” said Mimi, smiling. She liked Mandy and hoped she’d be a good influence on Karen. Lately, she was losing control of her daughter and wasn’t exactly sure what to do about it.

“I wish Karen was more like Mandy,” commented Mimi two nights ago while on the telephone with Eileen.

“What was the argument about this time?”

“Her older brother, Alex.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot you have a son, Mimi.”

“He’s home on leave from boot camp. Left about eight weeks ago.”

“Army?”

“No, Marine Corps.”

“It must have been hard to see him go.”

“Ever since his father died, Alex has been the man of the house. He could have gone on to college, but he got a job right after high school to help me pay the bills.”

“Was he drafted?”

“No, he enlisted.”

Mimi remembered how shocked she had been when he showed her his orders and she burst out crying. He told her he was sorry he had upset her, but he wanted to travel, see the world, and be on his own. What he didn’t tell her was now he could finally get away from her. He’d make sure most of his service pay was sent to her to help out with the bills because he loved her. But he had to escape, and the Marine Corps had been a way for him to do just that.

Mimi told Eileen that he looked so grown up when she had met him at the train station. Dressed in his starched, evenly pressed, tan uniform, she was proud of him as she watched him walk up to her. Trim and tall after the rigorous boot camp training, he appeared more muscular than she had remembered, and although his hair had been shaved, the front had grown in and waved attractively across his forehead. His large brown eyes twinkled when he saw her and the deep dimple in his chin, magnified by the Marine order to be closely shaven at all times, added mischief to the boyish charm of his face.

While Mimi helped Eileen unpack her bundle, Mandy ran through the dining room and then past the dark living room lit only by the light of a blaring television. She stood at the foot of the stairs and was about to climb them when a voice called out in back of her.

“Hey, slow down! She’s still in the shower.”

She spun around and edged closer to a figure lying on the sofa. A light switched on and she watched as the stranger took a long swallow from a can of beer.

“She’s been in there for half an hour and ought to be shriveled up like an old prune by now.” He studied her for a moment and then stood up. “Hi, I’m Alex.”

He was the handsomest man she had ever seen and she felt her cheeks grow hot under the scrutiny of his gaze. She swallowed. “Umm--I’m Mandy, Eileen Buchanan’s daughter.”

He grinned. “Ah, yes, the card game. My mother tells me this has become a Friday night ritual.”

She found the courage to smile back at him. “They take their game very seriously.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that for a moment!” he said and laughed. Then staring once again deeply into her eyes, he said softly, “I think I heard the bathroom door open.”

“Oh, thanks,” she said, wishing he hadn’t dismissed her so quickly.

“I’m heading out to a movie with some friends. Maybe I’ll catch you later when I get back.”

He turned away and she climbed the stairs and entered Karen’s bedroom.

“Hey, your hair looks fabulous like that,” said Karen. “Much better than that silly ponytail you always wear.”

“Thanks. I even put on eye shadow. See?”

Karen glanced over and snorted. “There is hope for you after all. It’s about time you started listening to me. I was wearing makeup at thirteen, but you were probably still playing with dolls.”

Mandy looked away, hurt by her remark.

“I’m sorry,” said Karen, sighing. “My brother seems to bring out the bitchiness in me.”

“I met him downstairs. He seemed nice.”

“Alex is an asshole.” She sat down in front of her vanity mirror and began brushing her hair.

“What makes you say that?”

Spying Mandy’s reflection in the mirror, she scowled. “Has dear, sweet Alex got you fooled, too? Don’t get any ideas about flirting with my brother. He’s got plenty of girlfriends that give a guy what he really wants. Sex.”

There, thought Karen as she watched Mandy turn dark crimson. *That will shut her up. Alex is probably still a virgin, but why should I encourage her? She’s my friend, not his.*

“I’m going out with Barry tomorrow night,” she said, changing the subject.

Mandy met her gaze. “Barry’s adorable.”

“Yeah, I know. We’ll probably park at the marina again.”

Last week, Karen had confided that she had finally gone all the way with Barry in the back seat of his father’s car. She told Mandy that it hurt the first time and that Barry had come in a matter of seconds, but that later, when they tried it again, it felt wonderful. The only bad thing that had happened was that Barry sulked all the way home when she lectured him on the correct way to French kiss.

“You’re lucky to have Barry.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it, stupid. You’ve got to give in to a guy. That’s all they’re after. Didn’t you have a date once? A couple of months ago?”

Mandy lowered her eyes again, embarrassed by her lack of social life. She had not dated up until the senior prom and had asked a boy to take her at her mother’s urging. She had a dreadful time and couldn’t wait to get home. Once she began working, she briefly dated a young accountant in the Tax Department, but lately she noticed he had been avoiding her in the halls.

“At least you’re beginning to take some of my advice about how you look,” said Karen, pinning up her hair.

She stared at Karen’s reflection in the mirror and marveled at her ability to make herself more attractive than she actually was. Her mother had been right about another thing in the car: Karen’s nose was much too large for her face and no amount of makeup could fix that. Touching her nose lightly, Mandy was thankful hers was small and upturned. Karen’s dull brown hair when not stiff and sprayed lay limp and stringy, while Mandy’s was full, wavy and naturally blonde. Although she usually tied it back carelessly in a braid or ponytail, she was glad she had let it wave softly around her face tonight and that Alex had seen it that way.

“How about some music? This new Stones album is terrific,” said Karen, switching on the stereo.

The following evening, the phone rang and Mandy answered it.

“Doing anything tonight?” asked Karen.

“No. Why?”

She sighed. “For some strange reason, my brother wants to tag along on my date with Barry. He asked me to call you.”

Mandy straightened in her chair and her pulse began to race. She had hoped to see Alex when he returned from the movies, but at one o’clock the card game had broken up and he hadn’t arrived home. She had fallen asleep dreaming about him, wondering if she would ever see him again.

“Are you still there? Do you want to go or not? I haven’t got all night for this bullshit.”

“Yes!”

“I figure we’ll go to the drive in and that way I can be alone in the back seat with Barry.”

“What time?”

“In about an hour. The movie starts at eight and it’s almost seven now. Be ready.”

“Okay,” said Mandy, but Karen had already hung up.

Looking down at her rumpled blouse and old jeans, she jumped up and ran through the house.

“Who was that? Where are you going?” asked Eileen, following her upstairs.

“Karen’s brother, Alex, wants to take me out!” She kicked off her sneakers and began to strip off her clothes.

Eileen watched as Mandy pulled the shower curtain closed and when steam filled the room, she slowly closed the bathroom door and stood in the hall.

She knew one day Mandy would become interested in a boy and had wanted her to date. But Mimi's son, Alex, was different. He was, after all, a Marine, and the Marine Corps promised to turn boys into men. Eileen shuddered as she descended the stairs to find Geoffrey.

Alex came to the door at seven-thirty and shook Geoffrey's hand. Eileen was polite, but as she watched them drive off together, that same uneasy feeling crept over her. She didn't like the way Mandy looked at Alex when he introduced himself to Geoffrey, or the way he put his arm around Mandy's waist when he walked her to the car.

Once parked at the drive-in, Alex reached over and pulled Mandy close to him in the front seat. She nestled her head in the crook of his arm and with her cheek so near to his chest, she could feel and hear his heartbeat. The musky scent of his cologne filled her nostrils and as her thigh brushed against his, a tingle ran through her entire body.

"There, that's better," he said, brushing his lips tenderly against her forehead.

"Do you mind, Alex? We'd like to see the movie," said Karen from the backseat.

"Since when?"

"Very funny!"

He turned his attention back to Mandy. "I forgot to tell you how pretty you look tonight."

She was thrilled he noticed and glad she had chosen a soft, pink, long-sleeved jersey blouse and white denim jeans. Adding a tint of pink rouge for color to her cheeks and a pale shade of pink lipstick, she also was glad the mascara went on smoothly tonight, adding length and fullness to her lashes. Her freshly scrubbed hair fell loose around her face and she had been pleased with her reflection in the mirror before Alex arrived to pick her up.

He cupped her chin and brought her face up to his. "You're more than pretty. You're beautiful."

His lips brushed against hers and her body stiffened, but then a warm, sweet sensation ran through her, and when he kissed her again, this time harder and longer than before, her heart began to pound in her chest. His lips were on her cheek now, then on her neck, but then suddenly he pulled away.

"Sorry," he said, slightly out of breath. "I got carried away."

There was a sharp rap at the window and Karen and Barry quickly sat up. Alex rolled down the window and a security guard shone a flashlight into the front seat.

"Hey, buddy, you're leaking anti-freeze all over the parking lot. Looks like you busted a hose."

Alex jumped out of the car, looked underneath, and then lifted the hood. He slammed it shut, said something to the guard, and got back into the car. "I've got to get the car to a station before we lose any more anti-freeze," he said, replacing the speaker on the pole next to the car.

"What about the movie?"

“Listen, Karen, we either leave now or wind up walking home,” he said, starting up the car.

At a nearby service station, the mechanic on duty installed a new hose and replaced the lost anti-freeze. Mandy watched as Alex paid the mechanic and recalled the sweetness of his kisses. She longed for him to kiss her again.

“Where to now?”

“Home. I think we’d better call it a night.”

“Then you’d better take her home first. She lives the closest,” said Karen.

He slipped his arm around Mandy. “I didn’t say anything about taking Mandy home. Just you and Barry.”

When he pulled in front of Barry’s house, Karen jumped out and slammed the door. “I’ll walk home!”

Peering into the window, Barry shrugged. “Thanks, anyway, for the ride.”

Alex pulled away from the curb. “Hope you’re not too disappointed about missing the movie. Let’s take a drive and try to salvage the evening.”

He slipped his arm around her again and as they drove, Mandy thought about his kisses and the warm feeling that had taken over her body. It was new and exciting and she wanted more. They drove to the marina and a few cars were scattered in the parking lot. He turned off the engine and shifted in his seat to get closer to her.

“I like it here,” he said, staring off into the distance at the boats parked in the slips. “It’s peaceful and a good place to think. I used to fish here when I was small.”

“It’s lovely,” she said, boldly laying her head back to rest on his arm.

He looked down and his eyes were twinkling. “Not as lovely as you are, Mandy.”

When he kissed her this time, his mouth was hungry, and his tongue parted her lips to explore the inside of her mouth. It felt strange to her, yet extraordinary, and so did his hand on her breast. As he gently massaged the nipple, she let go of her guard and a fire began to burn in the pit of her stomach.

His lips pushed her hair away from her neck and she heard him whisper in her ear, “You make me feel so good. I want to make love to you.”

Remembering what Karen had told her yesterday about all his girlfriends, she straightened in the seat and pushed him away.

“What’s wrong?”

“Your sister told me about all the other girls you go out with. I’m not experienced like them. Take me home, please.”

He hesitated, studying the frown on her face, and then he burst out laughing. “I’m sorry,” he said, seeing the surprised look on her face. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you. My sister made that stuff up about me. The last date I had was at least a year ago and I don’t even remember her name. And as far as being experienced, I like you the way you are. You’re perfect, Mandy.”

“Do you really mean that?” she asked, hoping he was telling her the truth.

Everything was happening so fast and he was saying such wonderful things to her. He had said she was perfect, and it was like a dream, yet here she was sitting so close to this handsome stranger.

“Now that I’ve found you, Mandy Buchanan, I’m never letting you go.”