

Chapter Thirty-one

The same evening we heard from Waldrip, I called my daughter, Elizabeth, at her home in Brooklyn. She's a freelance writer, primarily writing copy for websites. She's quite good at it and is much in demand. Her life is another proof that things often don't work out the way we think they will. From an early age she had wanted to be an artist. To that end, she auditioned to attend the Arts Magnet High School in Dallas, and was accepted. Later, she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from North Texas State University. As difficult as it is to believe, it also proves that a kid can be smarter than her father.

The following year, she was accepted at the San Francisco Art Institute as a graduate student. After one week of classes we received the devastating news about her mother's cancer. Without hesitation, she left her studies and came home to help her mom through the horrendous ordeal. Seven months later, Dori, her mother, my wife, died. I love my daughter very much, but never more so than that time when she selflessly devoted her life to caring for her mother. Without getting maudlin about it, I will just say that she is one hell of a kid.

If I had held a contest for a son-in-law, Gerald Corrigan would have won. His career path is similar to Elizabeth's. He has a Master of Fine Arts degree, but long ago eschewed art as a vocation. He is in business for himself as a custom furniture manufacturer. Because he is an artist, the furnishings he produces are gloriously original and I must say, beautiful. I kid him by saying I would be a customer if I could afford it.

When Beth answered the phone, I said, “This is Kayla’s Grandpa. Bitsy and I are here in the center of the universe and would like to come by and spoil the kid for a few hours.”

“Pop, that’s wonderful. Only why don’t Gerald and I spoil you two instead. Where are you staying?”

“I’ll get into that when we see you. How about tomorrow night?”

“Great. Come by about seven.”

I called the Hudson View Marina the next day and asked for the dock manager. Herman Greeley came on the line. I said, “This is George Lampson.”

When he spoke he sounded eagerly solicitous. I figured his salary was partly commission. “I’m glad you called. We got your application and initiation fee. You’re on the fast track for membership. The board meets next week, but getting you approved is just a formality. Now, what can I do for you today?”

“Will I need reservations for your restaurant for Saturday evening?”

“That would be for this Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take care of it. How many?”

“Just three.”

“Do you know how to get here?”

“I’m not sure. What’s the best way?”

“If you are not driving, the Jersey Waterways cutter has a landing next to the marina. Or if you prefer, there is a Path Subway station just a block away.”

“Thanks. We’ll be there about eight.” I hung up the phone and filled Bitsy in on the latest marina news, as well as the invitation from Elizabeth.

“The guy at the marina didn’t say a word about Alfred Said. Maybe we lucked out on that one.”

“I hope so. So what’s the drill for Saturday night?”

“As soon as I can get in touch with Les Bladen, I’m going to let him know that I want him with us. He’ll be posing as a former supplier of mine when I was in the oil importing business.”

“Well, until we hear from him, why don’t we get out and do some of New York. There’s so much to see and do, I don’t know where to start.”

“How about at F.A.O. Schwarz on Fifth Avenue. I’ve heard it’s the greatest toy store in the world. Let’s go by and let them prove it.”

“A terrific idea. And I believe it’s very close to another toy store dedicated to women of a certain age, Bergdorf Goodman.”

We had a great time being briefly carefree as we shopped and did touristy stuff. I bought a new winter coat for Bitsy and a musical treasure box for Kayla. In mid afternoon we walked into Central Park through the Grand Army Plaza, trailing a gaggle of teen gigglers swishy skirting through the park. The centerpiece in the plaza is a gilded equestrian statue of General William Tecumseh Sherman. He is being led by a dramatically gilded woman whom, I supposed aloud, represented victory. Bitsy said, “Well for sure, she isn’t representing the women of Atlanta. I’m glad he was a Yankee. I wouldn’t have wanted the South to be associated for all time with someone like him. I read his memoirs in college. I was surprised to learn that after The War Between The

States, he led the Army of the West. He said his proudest achievement in life was, as he put it, ‘to rid the plains of the worthless Indian’.”

I was born a long time after the Civil War. However, my Texan grandmother carried a grudge about the outcome of that strife until the day she died, based on tales told her by her parents. In retrospect, I believe she did that more for the dramatic effect. It was fun for her to succumb to the vapors when she got too exercised telling anyone who would listen how the Yankees stole her granddaddy’s horses. When Grandma wasn’t around, my mother always said that the Yankees were merely stealing them back.

We strolled towards the pond that covers a large part of the southern portion of the park and found a bench on the water’s edge. The trees were turning color, their upside down, rippling reflections in the water enough to inspire even the most inartistic to want to pick up a brush.

Bitsy said, “It’s so delightful here, as if someone makes sure every day that Mother Nature is on her best behavior. And just a few hundred feet from a bustling city.”

“Which do you prefer? This spot or the beach on Grand Cayman.”

She laughed. “Neither. I liked the hotel room at the Grand Carib the best.”

I put my arm around her and sat quietly, taking in our surroundings with an appreciation I had rarely felt before. A homeless man in a raggedy army coat and a scruffy black toboggan hat shuffled by us. He had passed us a few feet, when he did an about face and meandered over to our bench. He sat down next to me. I ignored him until he said, “Hello, Judge. How’s it going?”

Startled, I turned and looked at him. It was my old friend, ochre-face. His cobalt blue eyes were squinted as he smiled broadly. “Gotcha.”

I said, "Well, I'll be damned. Gotcha indeed. You sure get around, fella."

"Yes, I do. We haven't been formally introduced. I'm Able Kane. Don't laugh. I've heard all the jokes a hundred times. I know who you both are. Glad to meet you as well, Mrs. Travis."

Frowning, she answered semi-politely, "Likewise, I believe."

I said, trying not to sound too sarcastic, "So what brings you to New York, Able? Going to take in a few shows?"

"I might, if time allows. The truth is, you and I are colleagues in the war."

"I already had that figured. What is it specifically that you are up to?"

"I'm here to help you. You may have guessed that Joe Waldrip is going to be out of pocket for a while. The truth of the matter is that he is a goner. Stage four lung cancer. He has brought me up to speed on your situation. So, bottom line, I'm your new Joe."

I said, "I'm sorry to hear that about Joe." I was really unhappy about the news, but Joe's welfare was the least reason for it. I knew a lot about Waldrip and what he might be up to later. I didn't know squat about my new, blue-eyed handler. I didn't like the disadvantage this put me in.

Kane said, "I have some new information that you need to know." He pulled an envelope from his coat and extracted several photographs. He flipped through them to get to the best one. It was a snapshot of two men, one of whom I recognized from other photos I had seen of Alfred Said. Kane said, "You probably recognize Said as one of the men in the photo. The other one is Seyed Mahmood, who is attached to the Iranian Mission to the United Nations. We believe he's actually a high-ranking official in Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security. They're Iran's domestic head-choppers who serve

as the Ayatollah's thought police. They're also Iran's very nasty version of our CIA. This picture was taken outside the Al-Fatih Mosque in Brooklyn. I'm not sure why they went to Brooklyn to meet rather than some place more convenient in Manhattan, but they did. Anyway, Alfred Said passed an envelope to Mahmood. I believe it contained something pretty hot. They, and the rest of the civilized world, are aware that the National Security Agency is probably reading their mail. Thus the face to face at the mosque."

"So how does this affect my job?"

"It adds another facet to the intrigue. Don't think if you get next to Said, you should be aware of the Mahmood connection. He might let something slip. That's all."

I had always intended to pay close attention to whatever came up when Said and I would meet. I didn't need my partners to caution me to do so. However, if they thought I was a little slow on the uptake, that might work to my advantage.

Kane asked, "Now, is there anything you need from me?"

I was a bit tired of feeling like I was being manipulated. "Actually, there is. Just who in the hell are you, Able Kane? I mean, how are you connected with the organization?"

He paused, then said, "You really don't need to know that, Judge. Suffice it to say, I'm just a soldier like you. What you really should realize is that I'm your friend and guide. We, you and I, will be walking through a minefield. Maybe not forever, but for a while, for sure. I know where most of them are buried, and if you let me, I'll keep you out of trouble. If I succeed, then we both stay out of harm's way."

"And that harm would come from...?"

He grinned. "Why, the bad guys, of course."

“That’s not terribly reassuring, Kane. I have found that sometimes it is hard to tell the bad guys from the good ones.”

He didn’t respond to that bit of wisdom, but he knew what I meant. He pulled a small pad and a pen from his pocket. He wrote a number down and handed it to me.

“Here’s where you can call me if you need to talk. Please keep me up-to-date.”

I said, “Sure,” and wanted to add, and please don’t kill me someday.

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