

Chapter Thirty-seven

Back at the apartment, I mixed us each a King Alphonse after-dinner drink. We sat around the living room sharing banter about our successful opening night at the Hudson View Marina Restaurant.

Bitsy said, “The very least we should have gotten is four curtain calls.”

“And you, my dear, deserve a huge bouquet of roses. Getting us the table next to the Saids was a master stroke.”

I addressed Les Bladen. His assignment had been to help me hook Said. That mission accomplished, I decided to cut him loose.

“Les, it was a pleasure doing business with you, but now I believe it would be best if you take off. No use making this thing any more complicated than it has to be.”

He nodded in agreement. “I should get back to Los Angeles soon anyway. The organization has something going on in Hollywood and I’m the star.”

Bitsy said, “Oh, a Hollywood star. Tell us more.”

He shook his head. “No can do, Bitsy, though after seeing you two in action, I believe you would be a welcome addition to our cast. Maybe when we have our wrap party I’ll invite you and the Judge.”

He picked up the phone and booked a flight for the following morning. That accomplished, he asked me, “So how did you get roped into the organization, Judge?”

I said, “What did Grant tell you.”

“Nothing. When I asked, he clammed up.”

“It was parking tickets.”

He smiled. “Okay.” He looked at me expectantly. “He didn’t tell me what was so important about Mr. Said, either.”

“Ah, curiosity. Les, if you were a cat, you’d be dead by now, I’m sure.”

He said to Bitsy, “I’m not going to get anything out of him, am I?”

“Nope.”

“Well, when you write your book, Judge, send me a copy. And now, I’m going to head for the luxury of the Essex House, which Grant is paying for.”

We shook hands and he kissed Bitsy on the cheek.

As I ushered him to the door, he said, “I really don’t know what Grant promised you, Judge, but I would take it with a big grain of salt. I have a suspicion that we will find it damned difficult to be free of him and whoever the hell it is that pulls his strings. I suggest you think about developing an exit strategy.”

He opened the door and we shook hands once again. There was a strange sadness in his eyes that caused me to shudder inwardly. He had given me something to think about. It occurred to me that dispensing death was not as unsettling as contemplating my own. He showed a wry smile. “Didn’t mean to spook you. Good luck.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

After he left, I locked the door and walked slowly back to the den.

Bitsy said, “I liked him. I wonder if we’ll ever see him again.”

“Probably not. Grant seems to have taken a page from the al Qaeda instruction manual. While the terrorists operate many cells, they have a rule that insulates one from the other. You noticed we didn’t get anything from him, and he certainly didn’t get anything from us.”

Bitsy said, “How about another King Alphonse? Maybe with a little more cream this time.”

As I was filling the bar order, she asked, “When are you going to call Alfred Said?”

“This is Saturday. Next business day at the bank is Monday. I’ll let him dream for an extra day. I think Tuesday will be the best time.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“Let’s kick that one around. I think a straightforward approach is probably the best bet. I’ve had a lot of success with K.I.S.S. ‘Keep it simple, stupid’.”

“Good thinking. How involved do you want me to be?”

“If he wants to get together with his wife and you, then we should probably do that. However, he is a Muslim man, and she didn’t sound as though she liked sailing, so I believe we will be *mano a mano*, more than likely.”

Bitsy thought for a moment. “That sounds right. I’ll sit it out, unless you need me.”

We sat pensively, each pondering the immediate challenge. Bitsy said, “Duncan, do you ever think about the futility of all this. People have fought evil for centuries. War after war has been waged for freedom, and here we are doing it again. What we’re engaged in is like chipping away at a hundred foot tall statue of Baal with a toy hammer. It all seems so useless. I remember a story I read, maybe in college, I’m not sure, but it was about a group of soldiers. They were on a rainy, windswept hillside. It was cold and they were huddled around a campfire. They wore grey ponchos. It was impossible to determine what army they were in. Each, in turn, told his story. It soon became evident

they were from different armies, different times and different wars. One was a Roman soldier, another a Confederate trooper from Virginia. A G.I. who had died on Iwo Jima spoke last. He said, “Dear God, it will never end, will it?” It’s all so discouraging.

I nodded my head. “I know we’re probably just fighting a holding action, but I can’t quit. Not quite yet.”

Bitsy looked like she was about to cry, but she didn’t. “Well, I love you, Duncan. Your windmills are my windmills.”

I kissed her. She was right of course. I realized I was a lethal Don Quixote. The only difference being I’m not as crazy as he was...I think.

By the time Tuesday rolled around, I had decided to drop in on Said rather than to call him. I took the ‘6’ subway train down to Little Italy and got off. A short walk, fragrant with the smell of garlic and oregano, got me to the ‘M’ line, which in turn carried me to the Broad Street Station. I love the subway, even though half the people in it appear to be terrorists or related to terrorists. Hey, just kidding.

Broad Street is more like Wall Street than Wall Street. A number of world famous brokerage houses are headquartered along its length. The New York Stock Exchange is located there, just south of Wall. With all the prestige to be found there I was surprised to find that the entrance to the *Banco J. G. de Honduras, N.A.* was but an old oaken door from which the varnish had long ago cracked and peeled off. The brass plaque adjacent to the entrance appeared not to have been polished regularly, if at all. I pushed through the entrance and climbed up a long, scuffed wooden stairway. At the top was a small hallway. An unmarked door was on the left and the only other door, on the right, had a

frosted glass panel that went halfway down. On it in black letters was painted the name of the bank.

I pushed the portal open and entered a small reception room. It didn't look like any bank I had ever been in. The walls were paneled in cheap mahogany. An equally cheap looking receptionist sat behind a desk straight out of the Office Depot catalog. A young Middle Eastern man was perched on the corner of her desk. She was laughing at something he had said when she noticed me.

She said, in a broad Bronx accent, "May I help you, Sir?"

The young comedian stood and said, "Back to work for me." He left the room. I heard him open and close the door across the hall.

"I'd like to see Mr. Said. My name is George Lampson."

She looked puzzled. "Is he expecting you?"

"No, I'm just an acquaintance. I was in the neighborhood and thought I would drop in."

She said, in that damned huffy New York manner that spoils an otherwise great city, "Well, this is highly unusual. I'll ask if he can see you. Please wait a minute."

She rose and headed for the inner sanctum. She was a flouncer, and pretty good at it. She went into the next room and closed the door. I found it interesting that this bank was not used to people coming by unannounced. Almost at once she was back, holding the door open. Alfred Said came out, a wide smile on his face and his hand outstretched. He was obviously happy to see me. It was mutual.

"Mr. Lampson. So glad to see you again. Please come in."

His office was the only thing that fit the description of what I would have expected to find in a bank. It was sumptuous. A rich maroon carpet underfoot, with solid oak antique office furniture. His desk was a table, just distressed enough to appear to be nineteenth century. Behind the desk was a traditional highbacked leather chair with four solid legs, no swivel. And behind the chair was a roll top desk where it was obvious he did his presidential work. Another chair faced the second desk. Several files were stacked there next to a computer. And above that was the sailboat painting I had seen in his file. From my vantage point, it appeared to be a genuine painting by someone named James Edward Buttersworth. The small brass nameplate on the frame bore the title, *'Heading Home'*. I made a mental note to check out Buttersworth on the internet.

There was no overhead lighting, but several lamps glowed on small side tables scattered along the walls. A larger lamp, probably a Tiffany, was on the table/desk. Three side chairs faced his desk.

“Please sit down, Mr. Lampson. May I offer you some refreshments?”

“Coffee would be nice, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“But of course. Maizie, please bring us coffee.”

Maizie? I had to suppress a laugh on that one. I said, “I apologize for not calling ahead, but I was in the neighborhood and thought I would take a chance on catching you.”

He seemed a bit cagey at first. “No explanation is necessary. I am glad you chose to visit. I am curious. What is your profession?”

“I’m retired. I was an importer of petroleum products.”

“You are fortunate to have been able to retire at a young age. I envy that. And your Farsi speaking friend?”

“He was my supplier. Iranian oil. He operates an oil brokerage in Bushehr. He’s in the States looking for new customers.”

“He seemed a pleasant fellow.”

“Yes, he is.”

“And I assume you learned Farsi as part of your business?”

“Not exactly. My first wife, who is deceased, was second generation Iranian. Her parents never learned English, so I learned their language in order to be a respectful son-in-law. It was this knowledge that helped me to seek a connection in Iran, which turned out to be O’Herlihy.”

“Ah, life is quite complex, is it not? We never know where it might take us.”

“And so it is.”

I steered the conversation away from Les as smoothly as I could. “Your office is quite impressive. What sort of services does *Banco J. G. de Honduras* provide?”

“We are not what you would call a traditional bank. We serve more as a facilitator. We assist investors who wish to place their money in Central American enterprises. We also help channel funds from the World Bank. For a small fee, of course.” Hmm, I thought. This guy is a bigger bullshit artist than I am.

I said, “That’s interesting. I have thought about some land purchases in Costa Rica. Perhaps you could assist me in that.”

Now it was his turn to guide the conversation in a different path. “How long have you been a sailing enthusiast, Mr. Lampson?”

As I was about to answer, Maizie entered with the coffee. He said, “A special Turkish blend. Very pungent, but quite delicious.”

“I’m sure I’ll like it. And by the way, please call me George.”

“And I am Alfred.”

Pals already, I thought. Grant will be very proud of me when he hears about this.

As I sat across from the son of a bitch I wondered why I had wasted any time contemplating what his motivation had been to be involved in the terror network. That he was a part of it was what mattered, and I shouldn’t give a shit what perverse reasoning had induced him to join those assholes. Maybe his brother had talked him into it. Maybe he simply wanted to get rich off of skimming their money. Maybe he hated Jews. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Well, maybe I was going to make him my big number twenty-two.

I got back to his question. “I began sailing when I was a kid. My folks had a summer place on Lake George. I broke in on dinghies and gradually moved up to the Swan.”

“Ah, yes, the Swan. A seventy-footer you said?”

“Yes.”

“How does she handle? I’ve never sailed a boat that large. My Catalina 36 is the biggest I have ever been on.”

“I just bought her, and except for the demonstration cruise, from Port Lucaya to West End on Grand Bahama Island, I’ve never been out on her before or since. And the West End Marina is where she lies now. As far as handling goes, she is easier than most boats I’ve sailed. All electric Lewmar winches, for instance. No heave ho.”

“Then this will be a great adventure for you, sailing her up the Gulf Stream to New York. Have you had any luck finding a crew?”

“A little. I still have three slots to fill. I had hoped to use only amateurs like me, who would go for the love of sailing, but it looks as though I may have to hire a couple of hands.”

I felt like holding my breath to see if he would rise to the bait. He said, “When would you be making the voyage?”

“Soon, before the weather turns nasty.”

With his eagerness showing, he said, “I know we have just met, but I would like to offer my services as a deck hand. I would love to make that trip with you.”

I tried to look surprised. “You would? I’m not sure...”

He was obviously disappointed, but pressed on. “I am a good sailor, George. And never a sign of *mal de mer*.”

I would let him sell me. I said, “It’s just that it will probably be an arduous journey. Are you sure you would be up to it, physically, I mean?”

“Oh, yes. I work out every day.”

“And you could spare ten days away from the bank? You have someone who would fill in for you? I wouldn’t want you to be worrying about anything but sailing the *Winged Edith*.”

“That would not be a problem. My Data Processing Manager, Ghadir Al-Sassani, can handle things for that period of time. I really want to make this trip. It would be the highlight of my sailing career.”

I assumed that Ghadir was the young guy who was flirting with Maizie when I arrived. Now I knew his name, where the computers were and, since he would be left in charge, the probable number of employees. It looked like there were just three, counting *el presidente*.

The hook was embedded deeply, and now it was time to reel him in. “Well, I have a good feeling about you, Alfred. Welcome aboard. It will be an honor to have you with me.”

E-mail the author: mcdougal8@verizon.net