

Chapter Forty-five

Alfred Said was seated in the waiting area at American Airlines gate seven when I arrived. He was as excited as a kid going to Disney World. When I approached him, he stood and embraced me in the manner of Middle Eastern men. “Thank you again, George, for inviting me on this great adventure. The life of a banker is not a thrilling one. This break from my rather mundane existence is going to be very fulfilling.”

Yeah, you asshole, I thought, if being instrumental in the murder of hundreds, maybe thousands, of your fellow human beings can be called mundane.

I smiled at him as I disentangled from his clinch. “I’m very happy you are coming along, Alfred.” And that was the truth.

On board, the steward came by for drink orders. I said, “I’ll have a scotch and soda, two cubes of ice.” I turned to Alfred. “How about you? Or do you follow strict dietary law?”

He smiled. “Only at home. I’ll have the same as my friend.”

After the steward had moved on, I said, “I hope you were not planning a big Thanksgiving celebration. We will most likely be at sea on the 25th.”

“No. We have postponed the dinner until I return. My son, Heydar, will come into town when we have Thanksgiving. He is at Princeton, studying pre-law. He hopes to specialize in international law. There is a good future in that in New York, where I hope he will decide to practice. We are especially enthused about his coming home this time as he is bringing a young lady whom he wants us to meet. Do you have children, George?”

I lied. “No, I have not been blessed. Your son sounds like a fine young man. I hope someday I might meet him.”

“Yes, that would be my wish also. So, how did you like the oil business? And did you ever go to the source, Iran?”

“I was very happy dealing in petroleum. It was extremely good to me financially. And I met many fine people because of what I did for a living. But no to your second question. I never went to the Middle East.”

He said, “I was born there, in Iran actually. My parents worked in the field of archeology. You can imagine the wealth of activity to be found in that discipline in the Middle East. My father served for many years as the curator of the Museum of Antiquities in Tehran. I have not been back to Iran since I left as a teenager, but I can remember the beauty of the country.”

I nodded. “My friends who have been there have all told me how impressed they were with the country and the people. Maybe some day I’ll go there, but probably not any time soon. Once I have *Winged Edith* in New York, I plan to outfit her for a long voyage, perhaps to the Mediterranean. The thought of sailing to the Greek Isles, for instance, is an exciting prospect for an old sailor like me. There are many ports of call I would hope to make in that area.” I looked at him conspiratorially over my glasses. “Israel is not on the list.” I shouldn’t have said that, I know, but I was looking for one more confirmation that he was what he was supposed to be.

He moved his head up and down as he said, “For certain. What decent man would want to visit the criminal nation that has murdered so many innocents?”

I replied vehemently, “Not me, brother.”

If it sounds as though I had been psyching myself up for the task that lay ahead, you're right. To get myself in the correct mode before a job I usually mentally recount the sins that I am going to cleanse from the scumbag in question. This son of a bitch facilitated the murder of hundreds of my fellow countrymen. He would do it again and again unless I killed him first. Believe me, all this helps.

He changed the subject to the matter at hand, the great voyage that lay ahead. "How will we get from Freeport to West End? Is there a bus that goes there?"

"Yes, there is, but I don't like public transportation. I've arranged to rent a car on a no return basis. For a fee, they'll send someone to West End to retrieve it. Besides, I thought you might enjoy seeing the sights along the way. There is one particular spot called Dead Man's Reef that's quite interesting. We'll stop there so you can see it."

He grinned and said, "You are most kind. I'm glad I brought my camera."

We took the shuttle at the airport in Fort Lauderdale from American Airlines to Bahamas Air. The timing was close but we settled into our places on the Bahamian plane with ten minutes to spare. I insisted that Alfred take the window seat so he could see the Island as we approached Freeport. "The waters are spectacular," I said.

The customs clearance in Freeport was easy. The Bahamians know the value of tourism and do nothing to impede its growth. After picking up our luggage at the carousel, I said to Alfred, "I'm going to the john. Back in a minute."

In the restroom, I entered a stall with my bag. I opened it and reached under my packed clothes, grasping the side of the flat bottom. I slipped my fingernail under the edge and lifted it. Neatly stored there was the Glock. I pulled it out and nestled it into the ankle holster on my left leg.

When I emerged from the men's room Alfred decided he should probably use the facility, too. I said, "While you're in there I'll sign up for the car."

My arrangements had been made with Dollar Rentals. The car was a small Ford. I remember when Ford's slogan was "There's a Ford in your future." Well, that would hold true for Alfred Said, even as limited as that future appeared to be.

After tossing our luggage in the car trunk we headed toward West End on the West Sunrise Highway. We passed the industrial complex at The Bahamas Oil Refining Company and arriving at the junction with Queen's Highway we took the road northwest that ran to West End.

The weather was what you would expect in a tropical paradise, warm by Yankee standards but delightful by any other measure. A few clouds drifted slowly toward the north on a gentle southerly breeze.

As I drove along, I said, "The wind is out of the south, which is good. I once entered the Gulf Stream during a norther, and believe me, I'll never do that again. The Stream's current flows north and a contrary wind from the north kicks up some damned bad wave conditions. Really big ones out there are called elephants. They ought to call them snakes. They slither at you, building and building until they're right on you, and you can hear them hissing out of their foamy mouths and then wham and the boat shudders and rolls and settles in the trough 'til the next one strikes. A situation like that is hard as hell on a boat and doubly hard on the crew. If the wind isn't southerly, we won't go until it is."

He said, "Why not skirt the Gulf Stream and stay out of it?"

"The Stream adds four or five knots to our speed. I don't want to lose that."

Of course, this was all bullshit conversation, meant to screw with his mind and keep him thinking that I was his true sailing buddy. My Gulf Stream story was one told to me by Todd Linkenhofer, the man from whom I had bought my Lake Texoma boat. The snake part was my own embellishment.

About ten miles out of town the landscape became dominated by Caribbean pine trees and scrub palmetto. We came upon a small marker on which was painted ‘Dead Man’s Reef’ in faded letters. It pointed down a sandy road to the left.

As I turned in I said, “Here’s the place I was telling you about. You don’t want to miss this. You’ll remember it for the rest of your life, I promise.”

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