

Chapter Fifty-four

The *Ocean Star* was a rusty tub of a freighter of Panamanian registry. She was owned by World Shipping, a Saudi firm. On her present course she would be close by Frying Pan Shoals on Thanksgiving Day. Her cargo was edible oils and cereal grains from Argentina. Her ultimate destination was the Iranian port of Bandar-e 'Abbas on the Strait of Hormuz, midway between Pakistan and Kuwait.

This was not Captain Abdul Rashid's favorite port of call. The harbor was ill sheltered and quite shallow. When he had to go there it was usually necessary to offload his cargo onto barges some kilometers out. However, his orders were to go there this time because of certain passengers who had been ordered to debark there. They were not on board as yet, but would be soon.

He was operating under a directive from the Institute for Political and International Studies in Tehran. He knew quite well who those people were and he was not about to argue with an order from them. His current problem was trying to explain to his First Mate why they were proceeding at only three knots when they normally cruised at eleven. Regular speed would put them past the proposed pickup point in one day instead of two. And if he got there early and had to heave to, it might attract the attention of the U.S. Coast Guard.

He had nearly thirty years of sea duty, long enough to be attuned to any sound from the hull that might be a harbinger of trouble. He noticed an almost imperceptible shudder as the ship pushed through the Atlantic swells, which was not normal for the *Ocean Star*. It could be caused by any number of things, but his years of experience led

him to believe one of the screw's shafts had twisted slightly out of alignment. If that were the case, it would be a risky and very slow Atlantic crossing unless they put into Norfolk for repairs. That could be real trouble if the men he was going to take aboard didn't like it. Well, he thought, I'll fuck that camel when I come to it.

Jorash, his steward, brought him his morning coffee and a radiogram. The coffee was good, but the message was sour. *Proceeding as scheduled. Pickup at 78° W 33.5° N 1700 Hrs. 25th. Confirm rendezvous.*

Captain Rashid frowned. He said to Jorash, "Get off a reply to the sender, confirming that we will be there on the 25th. And tell him they better be on time, because I'm not waiting."

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