

Black Stone (sample, first ten chapters)
A Cord MacIntosh mystery
by Stephen Morrill

49,000 words
Second in a series

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Chapter 1

When I passed Marker 19 in the Northwest Channel, a half-mile off Key West, I gently swung Black Pearl's bow into a westerly ten-knot breeze. I was steering from the inside station in the wheelhouse and I picked up the binoculars to scan the town waterfront and the anchorage off the north end of Duval Street. Key West didn't look like a dangerous town and I'd been there many times before without a problem. But that was then; this was now.

I had signed on to bodyguard a guy who had more enemies than Florida had tourists. Personally, I gave Mahdi — as my client styled himself — the life expectancy of a mayfly. He was to be the keynote speaker at a writers conference and had just published a book that offended some 1.7 billion Muslims. I was more concerned with keeping myself alive. He came second. But perhaps, just perhaps, I could do both.

I started the Volvo diesel, eased the throttle to slow, locked in the autopilot once the sails started luffing in the wind, and used the winches to take the sails down — which mostly entailed rolling them up, the genoa around the forestay, the main and mizzen into the masts. When you singlehand a sailboat, modern technology is a good thing. That done, I motored around to the East. I passed what the nautical charts still referred to as Tank Island but which was now Sunset Key. Some developer had bought the island, torn down the old Navy fuel tanks, and built some houses and tourist rental cottages for people rich enough and willing enough to need a ferry to get to town.

Once past Sunset Key I turned more North and felt out a good anchorage near Wisteria Island and dropped anchor. It was just 8 a.m. and, while Black Pearl had made good time, I'd not had much more than short cat-naps on the two-night, one-day sail from Tampa. I went below and fed Spots, my 25-pound F-1 back-cross Savannah cat, so that he wouldn't try to eat my foot while I slept, and took a nap.

By noon-thirty I was eating lunch on the terrace of the Southern Reef Resort, the location of the weekend's writing conference. I had negotiated a rate for allowing my eight-foot fiberglass dinghy to befoul their shoreline. I had broken out my cool-weather clothes: long pants, long-sleeved shirt, windbreaker. Under the windbreaker I wore a denim shirt, with enough pockets to store whatever it was that people stored in those. the Colt Commander .45 I put into its horsehide belt holster at my right hip.

As I chewed and slurped, I eyed the other diners, who seemed split about fifty-fifty between visiting gays enjoying the relief of an accepting town where they didn't have to pretend, and visiting Northern families gawking at the gays and trying to feel sophisticated at simply being among them.

Not everyone was feeling gay or sophisticated. Two men at a table near me were sharing their opinion of gays. They did that more and more loudly as they drank more and more rum and coke. I don't do rum and coke; it's a drink for twenty-somethings before their tastes grow more sophisticated. These two both wore faded denim shirts with the sleeves cut off to show tattoos on their arms, denim trousers, leather boots that were

black, dusty and cracked with age, and waist-belt chains. Two big Harley motorcycles stood by the curb nearest their table. They didn't seem to like, on balance, gay people.

I tried to ignore them and focused on my food. The conch fritters, key lime pie and ice tea were passable and the management knew not to put green food coloring into the pie to make it look limey.

The comments got louder. A waiter was staring at the two bikers. I began to worry about them too. If they got onto their bikes as drunk as they were, they could hurt themselves.

In my wild and impetuous youth — which was that portion of my wild and impetuous life when I was young — I'd owned several motorcycles, not at the same time. I was run off the road so many times by drivers who simply could not register that I was in front of them that I decided, one day as I lay in a ditch, that I was a soft fleshy body surrounding and protecting a vehicle made of hard iron. What I needed, I decided as I dragged my motorcycle back up to the road and examined it for damage, was a hard iron vehicle that surrounded and protected my soft fleshy body.

Still, I did understand the appeal to riding with the wind in your hair. Ah, youth. I took another sip of ice tea. The comments from the young and reckless grew louder and more obscene. The waiter walked away swiftly. I predicted a cop-call.

Key West is about equally divided between the east-side locals descended from Florida, Bahamian and Cuban stock and with residents mostly unamused and straight — and the flamboyant west third of the island, home to those believers in That Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name. Here in Key West it was expressed. Flamboyantly. Wonderfully varied.

Those tourists who had driven the four hours down the Overseas Highway from Miami or who had flown in to the tiny Key West airport were augmented periodically by cruise ships that disgorged thousands of shoppers determined to buy every tee-shirt and inflatable alligator swimming-pool toy in town. And your charge card is good here is the Key West Chamber of Commerce mantra. The tourists would fail; there were truckloads more tee-shirts and blow-up alligators on the way.

But they would come away with good stories to exaggerate to their friends. By the time Fred and Martha got home to Zanesville, Ohio, the gays would all have been wearing rainbow-striped pantaloons, and the orange eyeglasses made popular by Elton John.

The waiter hadn't returned. The cops hadn't yet showed. Discussing sexual preferences and citizen rights was probably boring to them, something they attended to after finishing their doughnuts. The two bikers got up and walked to a table next to them where a lone man sat. He was short, skinny, dressed in a starched white dress shirt over tan lined linen trousers and when he stood to face the two bikers, I knew he was the gay man *du jour* for these two.

White Shirt didn't look scared, merely annoyed. I ate one more bite of pie, Took a sip of ice tea, stood and walked over to stand behind the bikers. They didn't pay me any attention. One was turning a large ornate ring on his left hand around to the cutting face, the other had pulled the chain from around his waist.

"Can I help you?" White Shirt asked. I noticed that he stood with one foot extended slightly forward, the other back and sideways. Perfect balance no matter which way he moved. I smiled.

“We gonna help you,” the biker with the chain said. “Cut off your dick, seein’ as you don’t use it no ways.”

“Why don’t you guys sit down and have another drink,” White Shirt said. “I’ll buy.”

“Shit. Don’t need no fag buyin’ me no drink.” Chain Man swung his chain at White Shirt’s head. It might have arrived next Thursday but the little guy ducked beneath it and did something that, standing behind the bikers, I couldn’t see,. Chain Man oofed and folded over and fell sideways, dropping the chain which skittered under a table of tourists.

Ring Man hauled back a left fist and I reached and grabbed it. He spun around, startled. “I don’t think so,” I said.

He growled and reached to his belt with his right hand. Rather than wait to see what weapon he had in mind, I spun a half-turn, bringing his hand and arm along, and heaved him up and over me and down onto the terrazzo floor. He screamed as his left shoulder dislocated.

“Appreciate that,” I heard. I let go of Ring Man’s hand and turned to see White Shirt.

“No problem,” I said. “Thought I’d save this one from whatever you did to him,” pointing to Chain-Man still groaning on the ground, his hands down between his legs.

“Not sure you were any more gentle.”

“Well, sometimes that move does that. I got careless.”

He smiled. “Careless. Right. You feeling big and noble now, saving the little gay man from the big bad bikers?”

“You knew what you were doing. I watched your feet. I was trying to save them from you. Only two on one. Not good odds for them. Was it the ‘cut off your dick’ comment that got to you?”

He laughed. “Hardly. Why did they think I don’t use my dick?”

“Maybe they only objected to your ... technique.”

He laughed. “Probably true. Anyway, thanks. Buy you a drink?”

“Nah. Ice tea. Refills are free.”

The cops showed up. The waiter and several tourists explained things. White Shirt and I explained things. An ambulance took away the casualties. Their bikes would probably be safe enough where they were until they could get back to them later. White Shirt went off about his business. I sat back down and resumed eating and people-watching. But I had to admit that none of the remaining diners looked like enraged religious zealots out to kill my client, and he wasn’t here yet anyway. The excitement would start tomorrow. I wondered if I was up to it. Guess I’d find out.

Chapter 2

“Damn machine always screws up when I’m trying to impress visitors,” Boo Cullen said, glaring at the Coke machine. Boo was about forty. So was the Coke machine. So, too, I suspected, were the cans inside and also the Coke that was inside the cans that were inside.

“Lighten up, Boo,” I said. “A shot of scotch might impress me. A Coke? Not so much.”

“Well, it’s what we got.” She poked at the machine again.

Unlike the machine, Boo was well-built, six feet, brown eyes and black hair cropped short. and with that muscular build that body-builders strive for. Her carefully tailored police uniform showed her to best effect.

Outside the building containing the Key West police and fire stations, across North Roosevelt Boulevard from the docks at Garrison Bight, cars sped past. Roosevelt Boulevard started at the Stock Island Bridge, splitting north and south, each street being the seaside boundary and each leading to the west of the island. North Roosevelt Boulevard was officially the last of U.S 1 while South Roosevelt Boulevard was A1A and led past the airport. Neither actually led to The Southernmost Point marker at the corner of Whitehead and South streets that was a big tourist draw.

“Heard about you,” Boo said as she assaulted the Coke machine again. “Some fuss over at the ‘Reef? Heard you and some other guy took down two bikers.”

“They sort of fell down. Too many rum and cokes. They okay?”

“Will be by tonight,” Boo said. “Sore shoulder. Other guy will walk kinda dainty for a while. Bad hangovers. They’ll get a week’s worth of ibuprofen-800 in those little plastic bottles and they’re good to go. Couple of our guys got the keys and rode the bikes over to the hospital on Stock Island so the lads can leave town tonight.”

“They don’t live here?”

Cullen laughed. “Nobody who lives here tries to take on gays that way. No these were Miami guys. Standard day-off thing. Ride the overseas highway. Do the Seven Mile bridge. Wind in your hair, sun on your tats. Afternoon drunk in Key West. Beat up some fags. Ride home at night with the stars out and the moon sparkling off the ocean waves.”

“Charming image.” I looked out a window towards the Garrison Bight marina but the view was blocked by a small stand of mangroves. What I couldn’t see was that in another block westward of the police station, North Roosevelt Boulevard narrowed and traffic slowed and just finding a parking place became an obsession. Most of the locals took to feet or bicycles. Key West is a great walking town. There was a visitor center across the street from the police department and out in Garrison Bight itself were docks for charter fishing boats.

I realized that Boo Cullen was speaking. “Sorry,” I said. “I was just thinking.”

“Didn’t know that P.I.s did that,” she said. She bent back her fingers and used her right hand in a karate heel-slam into the coin slot on the Coke machine. The machine

remained unimpressed. Behind us, clerks and cops typed on keyboards, phoned people and chatted over coffee, creating a muted mumble in the background.

“Yeah, we been alerted to the Mahdi’s visit,” Boo said, as she delivered a series of increasingly violent jabs to the metal belly of the Coke machine.. “We’ll do what we can. But I gotta warn you, not all the cops in the world can protect someone like that. And we ain’t got all the cops in the world.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” I said. “And don’t for heaven’s sake, call him ‘the’ Mahdi. He’s not the savior of the Muslim world. He just has the same name. And it’s not even his real name.”

Boo half-turned away from the Coke machine, then spun sharply, putting all her weight onto her outside foot as she drove a savage punch into the coin return slot. I wouldn’t have hit a heavy bag that hard and a heavy bag isn’t made of sheet metal.

The machine rocked backward and then forward and reluctantly disgorged a can of Coke. Everyone in the office stopped what they were doing to stare at us. Boo grunted and shook her hand and then popped the top and handed the can to me with a little flourish. She turned and trotted into her tiny office and sat behind a desk with a nameplate that said she was Lieutenant Kathleen Cullen. She waved me into a straight-back wooden visitor chair.

“You want a Mahdi without the article, suit yourself,” she said. “Around here we got a lot of religions to keep up on. Some you probably haven’t heard of. Some could hold meetings of their entire congregations in telephone booths — if we had telephone booths any longer. Most of them seem to require scented candles, mumbling in tongues and, of course, cash. Around here, if you want to get rich, invest in a candle wax factory. Or start a religion.”

“I think those wax factories are called beehives,” I said. “And George Carlin said it best: ‘He loves you, and He needs money! He always needs money! He’s all-powerful, all-perfect, all-knowing, and all-wise, somehow just can’t handle money!’ ”

Cullen smiled. She had a nice smile, I decided, the few times she used it. “Well, I try to be ecumenical.”

“I’ll bet,” I said. “Let’s focus on one religion in particular. How many Muslims are there on the island?”

She shrugged. “There’s one mosque, at least one that I know of. Must be someone on the island that supports that. We get some visitors from the Middle East, college students, and some Pakistanis and Indians who could be Hindu or Muslim, I suppose. What, did you want me to go out and arrest every Muslim in Key West just to make you happy?”

I took in a large slug of Coca-Cola. Not my favorite tippie but Boo had put so much effort into getting it that I could not turn it down. “Doesn’t matter,” I said. “Easy enough to get here from anywhere else.”

Boo grinned. I liked the grin too. “Easy to come to Key West. Harder to leave.”

“What do you mean?”

“I came here twenty years ago to get laid, smoke weed and play my guitar. I’m still here. Place is like ‘Hotel California’ — ‘you can check out any time you want but you can never leave’.”

“Eagles. Good song,” I said. I looked at the desk nameplate. “Why aren’t you called ‘Kathy’? What’s with the ‘Boo’ thing?”

“I don't like Kathy. I don't much like Kathleen. I don't know why they call me Boo. They just do.”

“Okay. Boo it is.”

She nodded. “I go to Miami once in a while to deliver a prisoner or something. But otherwise, hell, I don't even get ‘rock fever’ like most folks. I love it here.”

“Rock fever?” I asked.

“Yeah. A sudden desire to see some big city lights. Or a clothing store that sells something beside tee-shirts.” She swiveled her chair around to look out a window behind her. Given the mangroves, I doubted that she was checking out the passing traffic a half-block away.

“And the weed?” I asked. “The ‘warm smell of colitas’? And the getting laid? And the guitar?”

She spun the chair back to face me, the grin still there. “Had to lay off the weed. Set an example, you know. Never did cocaine; that stuff can rot your nostrils. Still play the guitar a little, something to do on a late night shift. And around here getting laid is not a problem. This is Key West, for God's sake.”

“If you did want to get laid, what ... um ... preference would you choose?” She wore no wedding ring but, in Key West, that could mean a lot more or a lot less than it might mean in Des Moines, Iowa.

She looked down at her desktop a moment, then back up at me. “You trolling? Come to Key West to get some strange and then go on home with a happy memory?”

“Happy memories is my middle name.”

“Really? How odd.” She grinned. “Must be hard to live up to that.”

I ignored the obvious retort. “Came to Key West to try to protect a client. That won't leave much time for extracurricular activities. Just trying to make polite conversation. I withdraw the question.”

She turned back to her window and thought for so long I wondered if she had heard me, then suddenly swiveled around to face front, her expression somber, maybe a bit puzzled. “Do you find me attractive?” she asked.

“I'm sorry.” I may have shuffled my feet a little. “I didn't mean to embarrass you.”

“I'm not embarrassed. Do you find me attractive?”

“Yes I do. Very. But that may just be the Coca Cola talking.”

“Probably so. Let's clear the air here. First, I'm not a lesbian.” She held up one finger. “Second, I'm not seeing anyone at the moment.” Another finger raised. “Been about six months, in fact.” She swiveled the chair around to face me. “He took a job in Rochester, New York. Said he might be back some day. The pull of paradise. Probably he will be, but he and I are finished. And, I will say, you look damn good to me but that's probably only the six months talking.”

“Third, I may be the last woman in Key West who actually believes in love. This may be old-fashioned to dazzling urbanites like you, but I'm picky about relationships. You done with that Coke?” She held out a hand. “Do you believe in love?”

I handed her the empty can. “No,” I said.

“What?” Her eyebrows went up. “You don't believe in love? It was just a rhetorical question. Everyone believes in love.”

“I've actually thought about it,” I said. “I see people in love and think, what's with them? I seem to be immune. Love is needing someone else or needing a sense of security,

or confusing sex with the first two. I'm pretty much independent. I provide my own security, thank you. Maybe I'm only in love with myself. I do wonder about it sometimes. Wonder what it would feel like. Not being able to love is probably a failing in me but I'm not sure just what sort of failing it could be."

"What do you do for sex? You hetero? Not that it matters — especially here."

"I manage," I said. "Yes. Hetero. I am, remember, a glamorous private investigator."

"You got someone at home? Back in Tampa."

"Yes. I do."

"Oh. So why the come-on?"

"Just because I like key lime pie doesn't mean I don't like pumpkin pie too."

"Aha. So it is just the strange you're after. And here I thought you were a glamorous private eye."

"Well, I'll be glamorous again soon. Stranger."

"Of course you will be." She looked straight at me and crushed the can with one hand, the tendons in her forearm straining like cables beneath her skin.

"Ohhh-kay." I said. "Got it. How do you feel about a glamorous P.I. snooping around your little paradise here?"

"Thought you were a hired bodyguard."

"Well, I'm both these days. Extra money. I was running low."

"Maybe you need to get a real job. But as for you being here, I could not care less. Try to stay out of the way when I'm doing serious police business but, otherwise, go on soaking your client for pointless added protection when we do it for free."

"I hope it is pointless," I said.

"Me too. I hope we can get this Mahdi in and out of town with no noise whatever. Send him on to be somebody else's problem."

"Two souls with but a single thought," I quoted. "Two hearts that beat as one."

Boo nodded. "Friedrich Halm. Actually, in German. Zwei Seelen und ein Gedanke. Zwei Herzen und ein Schlag."

"You're not just a pretty face." I said.

She ignored that. "When Mahdi leaves, do you go away with him?"

I shook my head. "I'm only on duty here. Cover him while he's at this writers conference. I'm a temp. Filling in. Hired by the conference people. He's got someone else regular but that person couldn't be here for the Key West speech and book signing event. Mahdi goes on to New Orleans from here. I sail on back to Tampa."

"Sail? You came by boat."

"Black Pearl, a forty-foot pilothouse ketch. My home and office. Why not?"

She smiled. "Actually, that's pretty cool. You may fit in here. Someday."

"Fit in. Fit in to a town where, once upon a time, the entire police department was listed by the FBI as an ongoing criminal enterprise, and the fire chief — with the improbable name of Bum Farto — got mysteriously disappeared just before he could talk to the feds about his drug connections."

Boo nodded, serious. "That was a long time back. Before I came here. We've upgraded, new police and fire station, new city hall, new employees. Never found Bum Farto, but you can still find, if you look hard in the shops on Duval Street, some leftover 'Where is Bum Farto' tee-shirts."

"So, where is Bum Farto?"

“My personal opinion?” Boo pointed at the south wall of her office. “He’s part of the reef out there. Fish food. We don’t usually have much drug-related gang violence here. Out in the streets. Wouldn’t do to upset the tourists, after all. Instead, people just ... disappear. And the spearfishermen come in days later with fat grouper.”

I nodded. “Got to remember that, next time I’m chowing down on a grouper sandwich.”

Chapter 3

Earlier ...

Demetrious Skouros hadn't called ahead for an appointment because he knew I'd turn him down over the phone. Two weeks ago, at the marina in Tampa, I'd heard the cowbell that I keep on the gate at the head of the pier clanging as I was finishing my lunch. I went topside and let him in.

Demetrious is a slight, bald, bespectacled professor of ancient history at the University of South Florida in Tampa. I had once audited his course in 5th-century Hellenic history. I audit a lot of things, it gets me out of the boat. Demetrious always called it simply, "the fifth century," and we always knew he meant B.C.

It was a tough course for someone like myself. I didn't have the liberal arts background. I'm an autodidact — self-taught. I love to attend classes at universities, and have done so with several, but I don't get along with authority and that includes stuffy school rules about majors and graduation credits. My background ran more to military and then mercenary — I preferred to call it 'behavior modification' — until I got religion and quit killing poor black and brown people in distant lands and generally at the behest of rich white men. Private investigator was interesting and I got to live peacefully on my boat, even if the pay was not so good.

But somehow I always managed to rise to Professor Skouros' challenges, learning in the process much more about the ancient world than even his exhaustive course covered. Now I moved some papers out of the way and sat him down on one side of the settee in Black Pearl's cabin. We caught up on the past year as I ate the rest of a tuna sandwich on rye bread, with celery chopped into it, washed down with some coffee.

Outside of class Demetrious wrote very bad historical fiction, some travel pieces for the newspapers, and composed beautiful poetry. Despite a thirty-year difference in our ages, we had become friends.

I poured him some coffee and he sipped. "This has cardamom in it," he said after a moment. I pulled the box from its place in the galley and showed it to him. "Arabica blend," I said. "From Jordan. But I think they get the coffee beans from Yemen or Ethiopia."

He stared at the front of the box. "I can't read this."

"It's Arabic. It says this is a blend of light and dark roast finely ground with cardamom pods for a traditional tangy and spicy note."

"You can read Arabic?"

I shook my head and turned the box around. "It's in English on the other side. I buy it from a small grocery in the Al-Aqsa shopping mall not far from your office at USF." The university had a lot of Middle Eastern staff and a small Muslim community had sprung up nearby.

He laughed. "But you have spent some time, as I recall, in certain Middle Eastern countries."

Spots had been sunning himself on deck and now he came down the stairs into the cabin. Skouros rubbed the cat's head and Spots lay down on the cabin sole beside the professor.

"Middle East. Central and South America," I said. "Africa is steady work if you're into that. That was another time. Another life. I don't do that work any longer."

"Still that may prove useful. I have a job for you. Do you need work?"

"Let's just say that I'm temporarily available."

"What sort of cat is this?" Skouros said. "He's awfully big."

"Savannah. Hybrid. Three-quarters wild Serval."

"I see." He rubbed Spots' head one more time and looked up at me. "What does that mean? Temporarily available?"

"Means from now to when I get my next job."

"Ah. Well, here's mine. We've got Muhammad Mahdi coming to speak to our annual Key West writers conference, Writers in the Sun. He'll ... what?"

I had smiled. "Old song, Writer in the Sun. By Donovan."

"And you, the Renaissance man, would happen to know the lyrics."

"No. Something about being retired and sorry about it. That's all I know. Tell me about your conference. And Mahdi."

"He'll be there for four days. It's quite a coup. Do you know who Mahdi is?"

Skouros split his time between his teaching duties in Tampa and his second home in Key West. He was active in the arts community there, and the Writers in the Sun lectures and workshops had for years been a regular part of the Key West social calendar.

I raised an eyebrow; getting Mahdi was a coup. "I know that Mahdi wrote *Black Stone*, a book that seems to have offended one billion Muslims around the world, all of whom have been urged by their mullahs to kill Mahdi on sight."

"Actually, just one mullah. In Iran."

"Sure. I also know that his name has to be an alias." Crossing to the tiny galley I added my tuna sandwich plate to the growing pile in the sink.

Demetrious nodded and smiled. "Still as sharp as ever, Cord. I, not being a policeman, would call it a *nom de plume*. The 'Muhammad' may actually be correct; it is, after all, the most common given name on the planet. 'Mahdi' is Arabic for 'divine guide,' and refers to the man who would rise at the end of the world as leader of the faithful. He probably took the name to further goad the more fundamental of the Islamic sects."

"Well," I said. "He had already done that pretty well with his book. As I recall, he claims that the Kaaba — the sacred stone of Islam — is a fake."

In class, Demetrious' own enthusiasm had infected all of us. He could make something that happened two-and-a-half millennia ago seem as if it had leaped off the pages of today's newspapers, but I sometimes wondered if, for Demetrious, there was any other time but B.C., or any other place but Greece. Apparently, he'd advanced at least as far as Arabia of the 7th century A.D.

Now he removed his glasses and then carefully polished the wire frame with a handkerchief. "The Kaaba isn't a fake. It's just the building that houses the Black Stone. The word simply translates as "cube" and there were other kaabas too, one Green and one White. Arabs were stone worshippers long before Muhammad came along, and he simply accepted the ritual surrounding the Black Stone rather than argue with it."

"Sort of like Christians with Christmas trees. Just adopted a Saxon pagan symbol."

“Well, yes. Though Christians don’t worship trees.” Anyway, today, the Kaaba is the focus of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. The Black Stone is imbedded in the southeast corner of the Kaaba, at just the right height for kissing it, which is something that a lot of pilgrims do. But in the year 930, a faction called the Carmathians sacked Mecca and slaughtered thirty thousand people. They also shattered the Kaaba, and carried the Black Stone away with them to their stronghold on the shores of the Persian Gulf. The Carmathians’ movement collapsed with the death of their leader, and Caliph al-Mansur restored the Black Stone in 951.”

“And Mahdi says the stone of 951 isn’t the original?” I asked.

“Exactly. A Sunni himself, and something of a scholar within his faith, he claims in his book that al-Mansur had political reasons, valid at the time but forgotten by anyone today, for gaining favor with the city of Mecca. And, since pilgrimages to the Black Stone had been Mecca’s chief source of income, returning the stone would certainly make the city leaders smile. But the real stone had vanished, so — according to Mahdi’s book — the Caliph found a similar rock and sold that back to the city of Mecca. After twenty-one years, no one could remember what the original had looked like anyway.

“Still, why does this book infuriate Muslims? Why is every true believer’s day ruined if the sun sets on a Mahdi still alive? Why don’t they just laugh at him?”

Skouros shook his head. “Islam is a young religion, as religions go. And things like this are taken very seriously. Christianity is seven centuries more mature, but what would have happened to some scholar in the 13th century who suddenly announced that the Church’s most holy relic was a fake?”

I thought about it. “The scholar would have been burned at the stake, probably before close of business that day.”

“Exactly. And that’s why I’m here. Mahdi is going to need protection. I want you to ...”

He stopped because I was laughing. “What’s so humorous?” he asked.

“I’m not taking anything but simple industrial cases these days, that’s what’s so funny.”

“I fail to see the humor. Are you saying you’re getting out of the police business?”

“I’m not the police, professor. You know that. And I’m doing just fine, thank you.”

“Humm. So fine that you’re turning down jobs.” He looked at me a long moment, sipping his coffee, then at the dishes and papers strewn around the cabin. “And living, if I may say so, in squalor. Classic sign of depression. Something is bothering you, Cord. Talk to uncle Demetrious.”

I was tempted. Could I really tell him that not too long ago I had killed one of his fellow faculty members, a man of about his own age? Could I tell Demetrious that the man was trying, very hard, to murder me and that I had then arranged the evidence to make the death seem accidental so as to spare the man’s reputation? I hadn’t had a lot of choice in the killing, which was in self-defense, but concealing the truth had been all my idea. I hadn’t known it would be so hard.

I hadn’t told anyone else, not even Father Rastomar at the church. And I wasn’t going to tell Demetrious now. I’d done hard things before. The pain always lessened after a while. It never went away though. You learned to live with it. Having killed, in my earlier life, more people than I could count, I have learned to live with quite a bit of it.

“I’ve had some problems,” I said at last. “I’ll get over them.”

“Then you can take my commission.”

I shook my head regretfully. “I don’t do bodyguard work. It’s boring. It’s also expensive for the client, and very few people want to pay what I’d charge. And it’s usually pointless. If someone seriously wants to kill you, and knows how to go about it, it’s hard to stop them. And if the assassin is a fanatic, willing to die in the process, it’s nearly impossible to prevent.”

“Ah,” he said. He drained his cup and rose to add it to the pile in the sink. “This will be different.”

“Different how?”

“For one thing, it won’t be boring. Think of it! Mahdi, making his first public appearance since the publication of the book. It’s been nearly a year since he went into hiding. What stories he must have to tell. And he’ll be telling them to our own writers conference. A coup. Yes, indeed. A coup for the university.”

I shook my head. “I doubt that stories about self-imposed house arrest will be all that fascinating. But I’ll grant you the exciting part. It’s not every day that an author gets gunned down in the middle of a writer’s conference. Probably be a good career move. Sell more books. I look forward to reading about it in the paper.”

“No, no, Cord. He isn’t going to be assassinated. The FBI will have a special man on hand. And there will also be plenty of policemen. I’ve already made the contacts, and that’s all arranged.”

“So why do you need me?”

“An extra precaution. The problem with all policemen is that they look like policemen. They also don’t pay much attention to elderly college professors. I’d like to have a known and trusted person, answerable to me, in there as well.”

Maybe Demetrious wasn’t so oblivious to modern times after all. “You want me to work for you, but somehow interact with Key West city cops and with the FBI? That will be a trick.”

“True. But with that, at least, I can help. I’ve already discussed the concept with Mahdi’s publishers, West-Raver Books. Mahdi has agreed, and West-Raver will pay a reasonable sum. Between us we can make the police accept the arrangement.”

“They won’t like it.”

“Their likes and dislikes are of no concern to me. Having the conference run smoothly is.” He looked at me and grinned. “Sometimes, Cord, I can be as dismissive of authority as you tend to be. Will you help me?”

I laughed. “You know me too well, Professor.” I told Demetrious my daily rate and he sat back and thought a moment.

“It’s more than they authorized me,” he said. “Which is just about half that. I may be able to get them to kick in a little more.”

I shook my head. “You’re asking me to do something that I don’t like to do anyway, and at which will I will almost certainly fail. If that many people want to kill Mahdi, he’s going to die unless he pulls the ground over his head.”

Demetrious looked disappointed. He pulled his spectacles off and examined the right-hand lens for imaginary dirt while I waited patiently. I’ve always wondered how you were supposed to see the dirt on your glasses when you didn’t have them on.

“I can offer you most of your regular rate,” he said, slipping the glasses back on. “I can also offer you the same thing I’ve always offered you. A challenge.”

“What challenge?”

“Two challenges, actually. Can you afford not to take the job? Something’s wrong with you,” he waved at the cabin about him. “You’re usually extremely neat. You need to snap out of it.”

“And, coincidentally there’s Mahdi,” I said. “Guarding him is supposed to snap me out of something?”

“Yes. Think of the challenge. One billion Muslims — in fact a billion and a half, more or less — have been ordered by a mullah to kill Mahdi, or to die trying. It will take every bit of your skill, intuition, strength and courage to keep Mahdi alive for four days.”

It sounded absurd. “I have to out-think and out-fight all the Muslims in the world? Someone must have told you about my ego.”

He looked annoyed and shook his head. “Of course not. All but a fanatic few are decent, good people. But there are some fanatics.”

I took my time answering, looking at the notion with about the same enthusiasm I’d have considering a dead mullet that had jumped onto my deck and now needed disposing of. I’d just finished an insurance job, a matter of some bulk-cargo contamination down at the port, and I had no other immediate prospects. And, while I’d never admit it to anyone, half of my daily rate was just fine and I didn’t have another job anyway.

But I had gotten to the point where I didn’t care if I never had another investigative job. I was thinking, when I bestirred myself enough to think, of making some calls to some old associates in South Africa, seeing if a “fixer” could line me up with some work for some ruthless wealthy dictator. Africa had modernized in the years I’d been doing that work. The ruthless dictators today were just as black as the people they would hire me to kill. It was a depressing thought.

“I’ll do it, Demetrious,” I said at last. “It sounds like a fair fight. And how can I say no to the man who introduced me to Pericles?”

He smiled. “And, don’t forget, the FBI and police will be there too.”

“Yeah, you said that. But I’ll do it anyway.”

Chapter 4

Mahdi's private plane arrived at the airport in the late morning the day after I had anchored in the harbor. I'd met Demetrious Skouros, who had driven down from Tampa the night before, at the hotel an hour earlier. Demetrious drove me out to the tiny airport on the east side of the island. A conference volunteer followed in a second car.

The Key West International Airport was a conch-shell-throw from the sea and someone had painted a huge 'Conch Republic' wall mural on a two-story building. In 1982, the Border Patrol had taken advantage of the fact that US 1, the "overseas highway" was the only road on or off the islands and took to stopping every vehicle leaving the Florida Keys and searching them for drugs or illegal aliens. That put such a crimp into the tourism business — not to mention ticking off the residents — that Key West had declared itself an independent nation.

After one minute of independence, the Conch Republic surrendered and demanded one billion dollars in foreign aid. Apparently they had watched *The Mouse That Roared* as a high school play. They didn't get the money but they got what they really wanted. The Border Patrol was told to stand down and go somewhere else and do something actually useful and stop harassing American citizens. But the Conch Republic lives on in the minds of locals and on tee-shirts sold in stores on Duval Street.

There were several small buildings next to a loading ramp and the runway. On the ramp side a sign over a simple double glass door welcomed people to "Key West, the Conch Republic." On a flat roof above the door there was a copy of the Southernmost Point marker. In case some visitor missed the point, the airport copy was complete with some store mannequins pointing at it.

Inside the terminal there were two camera crews from Miami television stations, and reporters from the Key West Citizen and the Miami Herald waiting for us. A Corporal Dobbs, whom I'd met at the police station, and three Key West patrolmen stood around looking conspicuous and a little nervous.

I took a few minutes to go over the airport exits and the routine with Dobbs. When we saw the small aircraft touch down, Dobbs spread out his men and I went back to Skouros.

"Dr. Skouros," the Herald reporter was asking, "it's all very well for Mahdi to take his chances by coming out of hiding. But who's going to be responsible for the deaths or injuries to innocent bystanders?"

I thought it was a good question. Skouros looked confused. "Well, there isn't going to any trouble," he said. "Mr. MacIntosh, here, and the police will see to that."

The reporter looked across to me. "Well, is that true? Who are you?"

"I like you," I said. "You have a way of cutting through to the quick of the matter."
"Nicely put. And you haven't answered the question."

I shook my head. “No I haven’t.” I walked to the double glass door to the ramp and looked out, leaving the reporter wondering. Stay mysterious. In his mind, in ten minutes, I’d be a CIA agent.

The Key West airport was one of those leftovers where you walked from your plane to the terminal in whatever weather they were having. No tubes. The early October air was cool this morning and I had opted for a pale blue sport coat and some darker blue pants. The coat also covered the armament.

Of course there was a small TSA security checkpoint manned by two guys who looked bored because, while the Departures board had more than twenty commercial flights listed as departing each day, those were all in the afternoon and, with the exception of a Boeing 737 and a couple of Embraer regional shuttles, the “commercial” flights were a flock of small Pipers and Beechcrafts that could take as few as three passengers off to nearby Florida cities. That they all had schedules listed struck me as about as optimistic as an accordion player with business cards.

The TSA boys perked up when I approached and at my telling them I had a firearm at my right hip. They went into full-anti-anybody mode, demanding that I surrender the gun as I was not a licensed police officer. Corporal Dobbs came over to explain that I was working with the Key West Police. The TSA guys acted as if they had no idea who the Key West Police were. They’re not actually the dumbest hirelings in law enforcement; Border Patrol has held that title for forty years. The three of them debated my probable terrorist connections. I waited patiently and tried to look like someone who had never been to the Middle East. I had left my passport in the boat, which was probably just as well. Eventually I was determined to be an actual American and a deputized Key West cop — that was Dobbs’ idea and I doubted it would stand legal scrutiny but the TSA guys were so dense they bought it.

While they were debating, Mahdi’s private plane, a small twin-engine of some sort, landed and parked a few yards away. Someone opened the door and lowered a short stair. The debate ended and I — now a deputy of some sort — walked out into the bright sunshine and intercepted the security detail, two guards, hired by West-Raver to watch the publisher’s most valuable property while he was en route. Skouros greeted Mahdi while I signed a form one of the guards handed me, accepting responsibility for one Mahdi in good condition.

The Middle East’s most hated man had a small head with a wide mouth, high forehead and a shock of greasy black hair that fell over his ears and flipped up in back. His shoulders were narrow, and he had a big, well-padded pelvis. His feet were almost dainty, and his nose was still a narrow, proud beak. With the extra hundred pounds he was carrying around his middle, he looked like two ice-cream cones stuck together. His rumpled grey suit looked like a Salvation Army reject. He smelled like he hadn’t showered recently. Maybe was scared; he had every reason to be.

“And this is Mr. MacIntosh,” Skouros said, turning to include me into the conversation. “He will be your personal bodyguard. In addition, of course, to the forces of the police and FBI.”

Mahdi glanced my way and nodded. “He certainly looks big enough. Is he any good?”

I put my hand forward and he looked down at it as though I’d just cleaned a fish and forgotten to wash. He turned back to Skouros. “Dr. Short, I was expecting at least several men to protect me.”

“It’s Dr. Skouros. But please call me Demetrious. And I assure you Mr. MacIntosh is fully trained and quite competent.”

“I was supposed to be met by someone named Cormorant,” Mahdi said petulantly.

“That’s me,” I said. “Cordwainer MacIntosh. Do you have something against shaking hands, Mr. Mahdi?”

He looked down at my still-extended hand, then turned and walked toward the terminal. “One man,” he muttered to himself. “They must want me dead.”

Skouros followed after Mahdi. I dropped my hand, then glanced around to see how many news people had filmed my embarrassment. No one was paying the slightest attention. I put my hand up to my nose and sniffed it. It smelled like a hand.

A pilot had climbed out of the plane and now opened a baggage compartment and dragged out an astounding amount of luggage. He left that on the parking ramp and climbed the stairs and into the plane. The West-Raver guards promptly climbed back too, pulling up the stairs and closing the door. The small plane revved its engines and pulled away, the wind blast knocking over some of the bags. The conference volunteer was there and he grabbed two bags and headed through the terminal. I trailed along behind Skouros and Mahdi, gimlet-eyed, alert to every potential danger. That’s sometimes useful in bodyguard work.

Inside the terminal I lengthened my stride and pulled up alongside the great man. I pointed to the volunteer. “Phil, here, will get your luggage and bring it to the hotel,” I told Mahdi.

He stopped short and puffed up, a bullfrog getting ready to croak. “I’m going nowhere until I see that my luggage is intact. And you had better handle it carefully, too.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but standing around here, waiting for your bags, is not a good idea.”

Corporal Dobbs, quick to notice the problem, was at my elbow by then. “What’s the holdup. Keep ‘em moving.”

“I’m trying,” I said.

“Mr. Mahdi,” Skouros interposed, “We’ll take good care of your luggage. Mr. MacIntosh works for West-Raver on your behalf. He has your best interests at heart.”

Mahdi humphed. “You may call me Mohammad,” he said to Skouros. “ ‘Mr. Mahdi’ is just too much.” He glanced at me and frowned. “Since I suppose I have no choice but to put up with him, I just hope that your hireling can learn to keep his place when you’re not around.”

Well, that brightened my day. I stood by a few moments while Mahdi answered questions put to him by the reporters and Dobbs and I kept a nervous lookout. Mahdi was a good deal more patient about it than I was but then he had something to sell, and this was how he did it.

Eventually we loaded ourselves into Skouros’ big Lincoln and rolled for the Southern Reef resort, Skouros driving and me riding shotgun, Mahdi alone in the back. Corporal Dobbs and two patrolmen followed us in a patrol car. The volunteer came along behind with a car full of luggage.

“Mohammad,” I said, twisting in the right front seat to face him, “I’d like to go over some arrangements with ...”

“I didn’t say that you could address me familiarly. My name is Mahdi.”

“But you said ...”

“I know what I said. You’re only an underling. Mahdi, if you please. Not Mr. Mahdi either. Just Mahdi”

I took a deep breath and then felt Skouros’ hand on my arm. I turned around and stared through the windshield, seething. Skouros and Mahdi made small talk until we pulled into the parking garage under the hotel. By that time I had my breathing and my heartbeat back down to normal.

Mahdi maintained his accustomed foulness as we walked to the hotel entrance. On the sidewalk just outside he nearly stumbled over a legless man in starched grey work pants and work shirt who was panhandling the passing crowd.

“Watch where the hell you sit, “ Mahdi barked as he tried to wobble his seventh of a ton of flab around the beggar.

“Not sittin,’ the beggar said with a toothless grin. “Standin’. You got a buck on ya?” He wore a long-billed fisherman’s cap and had to tilt it back to look up at us. He was, indeed, standing. The stumps of his legs were fixed into a leather brace which was bolted into the bed of a child’s wagon. His empty trouser legs were neatly rolled up and pinned. He had a cracked sun-dried hide and I placed him at once as an old fisherman. The wagon actually had oarlocks, and two short oars, modified with cloth pads on the ends, lay across the wagon amidships.

Mahdi glared down at the beggar, then up at the two cops who were with us. “Don’t you have some sort of home to stick things like this into?” he said.

“He’s got a right to be here,” one of the cops said.

Mahdi opened his mouth to roar, but the beggar broke in “If ya can’t spare a buck, maybe yah’d have a Cuban cigar on ya?”

Mahdi shut his mouth and blinked. “What brand would you prefer?” he asked.

Ah’m partial to Bolivar Coronas Gigantes,” the beggar said. “Big, sweet-smoking and last a long time.”

Mahdi blinked again. “Those are perhaps \$350 a box, even if I could get those.”

The beggar nodded. “You know your cigars. Don’t need no whole box, though that would be precious of you. One will do in a pinch.”

Mahdi grinned. “I’ll see what I can do for you, sir. Doubt that I can get you a Bolivar. But I shall come close.” He waddled into the hotel entrance.

I was about to follow when the beggar called to me. “How ‘bout that dollar, big guy?”

I looked down at him. “You said a buck or a cigar. You’re going to get the cigar.”

“I’m gonna get somethin that’s not a Bolivar Coronas Gigantes,” he said. “So I still deserve the buck.”

“You’ve got a lot of gall, “ I said as I handed him a dollar.

“You got a lot of legs,” he said, looking up at me. “Like, your own personal tuna tower. By the way, this here dollar is wrinkly.” He waved it up at me. “Gimme a better one. I look like the kinda man would have wrinkled money?”

“Who is that guy?” I asked Corporal Dobbs as we all squeezed into an elevator. I eyed the weight plate on the wall. Would it actually lift Mahdi and us as well?

“Horace Wright,” Dobbs said. “Used to be a good all-round fishing guide. Slipped between his boat and a dock one time. Crushed his legs so that they had to take ‘em off. Lost his boat paying the medical.”

“He could still be a guide,” I said.

Dobbs looked at the weight plate on the elevator wall and then at Mahdi. I knew what he was thinking. “He could. If anyone would help him. But he’s jinxed. The charter captains all say that they can see the Angel of Death hovering over his shoulder. They say he should have died the day he lost his legs.”

Chapter 5

At the hotel, Mahdi kicked up rough again, demanding a better room, even though he already had the best one. He also needed Piper Heidsieck champagne, for which someone from the hotel staff went in search. The sheets weren't silk and someone went off to buy some silk sheets. Then he needed a dozen fresh-cut long-stemmed roses in a crystal vase. Someone else went for those. In fact there was a list of things he required, including his special pillow that was in his luggage yet to be delivered.

I could relate; I always traveled with a 100-watt light bulb to replace the 15-watt bulbs in hotel room table lamps. Then I could read in bed and, as revenge, I usually left the brighter bulbs in place and threw the cheap ones into the first dumpster I passed. My contribution to the social good.

"Why didn't you tend to everything on my list," Mahdi said, waving the list he had taken from his suitcoat pocket.

"Possibly because nobody sent the list to us," Skouros said patiently. "The one in your hand is the first I've heard of this."

"West-Raver," Mahdi muttered. "Idiots. I'm their star and they can't get their act together."

"Have you thought of changing publishers?" Skouros asked.

"I've done that in the past," Mahdi said. "Twice, with different publishers. But I'm stuck with West-Raver for Black Stone."

"What was wrong with your previous publishers?" Skouros asked.

"They said I was too hard to work with. The reality, of course, was that they were unable to meet my expectations. A writer of my status requires a top-end publisher with a proper publicity arm. I had thought West-Raver was up to the challenge but this sort of thing, failing to look after their most famous writer on a simple book tour, is disappointing."

"Yes," Skouros said. "I can see how that would be."

While these negotiations went on I scouted out the suite, which consisted of a bedroom, sitting room and bath. There was no connecting door to the next suite, so that was one less worry.

The nice thing about modern hotel rooms is that there are so few places to hide anything. The bed was built into the floor, the cabinets contained nothing more threatening to Mahdi than a Gideon Bible and some stationary. And the bathroom didn't even have a medicine cabinet that connected to the next room.

"I thought it was only rock stars who got catered to," I said brightly, once the hotel staff had fled. I looked around the sitting room, which had a sofa, a desk, and a grouping in one corner of chairs and a round table.

"Mr. MacIntosh," Corporal Dobbs said as I started searching, "you're wasting your time. We already checked the room."

I picked up the lamp on the round table and read the wattage off the top of the bulb. Fifteen-watt. Figures, I thought. Best room in the best resort and they don't expect anyone attending a writers conference to read. We're supposed to just watch the television bolted to the dresser. "Call me Cord. And was that before you went to the airport? And have you kept a guard on the room since then?"

"Uh. Yeah. And no." Dobbs looked chagrined. "No on the guard. I see what you mean."

Mahdi went to the window and looked out. "You're not just catering to me," he said. "And I'm every bit as famous as any rock star. To maintain my creativity at a high peak, I must be comfortable. And I've reached the level in the literary world where my comfort, maintained at all times, is of crucial interest to many people, West-Raver Books for instance. It was their interest in my comfort that resulted in your presence, Mr., er, what is your name?"

"MacIntosh," I said. Dobbs started pulling out drawers to look behind them. I walked to the window and looked down onto the Mallory Dock, now the up-named Mallory Square, just a half block away. It was relatively empty now. The daily party didn't start until sunset. The balcony was thirty feet in the air, but it looked as though an athletic sort could climb across from the adjacent balconies.

"Yes, yes," Mahdi said, petulantly. "But what's your first name? What do I call you?"²¹²¹

I couldn't believe he'd forgotten so quickly. "You weren't listening," I said. I pulled the curtains together across the window. "I'm Mr. MacIntosh. Use that."

"Ah. A jumped-up class-climber, are you? You're an employee. You have a first name. I don't kowtow to employees with their meaningless family names. Wait, I remember my briefing letter. Some kind of bird. It's Cormorant? What kind of first name is that?"

I sighed. "It's Cordwainer. I'm not a bird."

Mahdi smiled. "No. A cordwainer is a shoe-maker. Don't see that name much any more."

"Most people call me Cord."

"I'll call you Cordwainer. Remind you of your place. And, Cordwainer, I didn't tell you to close those curtains."

"No, you didn't. Don't open them again, unless you like being shot by snipers." Dobbs glanced up at that, looking first at me and then at the curtains. "With a good scope, I could shoot into this window from anywhere in the Truman Annex."

Mahdi stepped forward, brushing my shoulder aside roughly, snatched at the curtains and flung them wide. "I didn't come to Key West to hide from the sun," he blustered.

I backed away. Up close, it was more obvious than ever that Mahdi needed a bath. An oil change on his hair would have been a good idea too.

"Mahdi, West-Raver didn't hire me to treat you like a rock star, or even to make sure you were comfortable. They hired me to make sure you were alive when you left Key West. Are you going to help me to keep you alive, or are you prepared to die of stubbornness?"

Mahdi turned to Skouros. "You," he snapped, "get him out of here. What I don't need is a pushy rent-a-cop telling me what to do. Who's idea was this, anyway? These policemen will be plenty."

I was starting to understand why the two guys from West-Raver had been so eager to get back on their plane and leave. They probably had a can of Lysol to use to decontaminate the plane's cabin. I turned and looked across to Skouros. "Well, prof? For once Mahdi and I are in agreement. Zwei Seelen und ein Gedanke, Zwei Herzen und ein Schlag."

Skouros managed to look amused and alarmed simultaneously. "I'm sure we can sort this out to everyone's ..."

"No, you can't." Mahdi snapped. "Mine is the prerogative that matters. And I simply will not be treated like a child by some rent-a-cop. Send him to stand around some shopping mall. He's worthless here."

I folded my arms and waited for something to happen. If Skouros fires me, I thought, I'll take a few days off and hang around anyway. Get some of Joe Sancto's conch fritters under my belt. Then maybe I could take the boat over to Dry Tortugas for some snorkeling.

Skouros looked at me a long moment, then at Mahdi. Then he took off his glasses and examined them. I realized that I'd been on the balls of my feet, ready for action, and relaxed. Skouros wouldn't be embarrassed at the prospect of chewing me out. It was Mahdi who was in for it.

"Mahdi," Skouros began quietly, "you aren't accustomed to taking orders, and I can't make you. But your fame seems to have made you arrogant, not happy."

Corporal Dobbs, myself and Mahdi were all waiting silently for the punch line. Skouros' voice sharpened and went up a few decibels.

"But your personal quirks are becoming tiresome. I'd hoped you would have something to contribute to our aspiring writers. The writers attending this conference are my main concern, not Mr. MacIntosh, not me, and not you. Now, I'll give you a choice: get on a flight out of here this afternoon, or follow my, and Mr. MacIntosh's, orders without question."

Mahdi opened his mouth, and Skouros held up a hand, palm out. "Without question. If you cannot agree here and now to my arrangements, I'll have West-Raver on the phone within minutes, and I'll tell them that we've fired you, or that you've quit. I'll give you that much choice. But we aren't going to have your blood on our hands just because you can't face the reality of your own dangerous situation."

Mahdi had swelled up during this. "Listen, you — whatever your name is — I'm not going to put up with this ..."

"You don't have to," Skouros interrupted, his voice quiet again. "You only have to leave. It might even be best to send you by auto. We could have you at Miami International Airport in three hours that way, and not have to wait for the afternoon plane. And I'll see that you get your honorarium anyway."

Skouros looked at Mahdi with something akin to curiosity. "You can still do that much by yourself, can't you, Mahdi? Just ... leave?"

All four of us stared at Mahdi. He looked from face to face as though there might be a life ring hanging from one of our noses. For a moment, I felt sorry for the man. I remembered a time when I'd been out for a run and a short-legged mutt had taken it into his head to chase me. I'd swung aside from the street and hurdled a low brick wall to discourage him. Instead of stopping, the mutt had hit the wall full tilt. I remember the stunned look on his face as I cradled his head. He'd been so intent on biting me on the leg

that he'd never seen the wall. Part of me wanted to cradle Mahdi's head for him. Then I remembered the grease.

"You know I can't just leave," Mahdi said at last. "West-Raver would kill me."

"You wouldn't be the first writer a publisher wanted to assassinate," I said. "And in your case maybe they'd get the bounty, too. And they could still sell the books, maybe even more of them. And they wouldn't have to pay me not nearly enough money to protect you. It's a thought. Hell, it's an entire business plan."

Mahdi didn't bother to respond, which showed how upset he was. "Look," he said to Skouros after a moment. "I'll do what you say. But I'd feel a lot better if my safety wasn't in the hands of this bubble-head and the Keystone Cops. Can't you get some professional help in here?"

Mahdi was obviously recovering fast. I glanced at Dobbs, expecting to see him going into the normal defensive-cop reaction to citizen complaint. Instead, he was stifling a laugh. I felt the corner of my mouth quirk up too. He was all right. A pro.

"There will be an FBI man, an expert on Middle East terrorism, here in the morning," Skouros said. "You are in good hands, so long as you follow orders."

"Well, I'm not going to eat my meals up here," Mahdi said, heading for the door. "You can just guard me while I enjoy my outing. After this conference, and the one in New Orleans, it's probably back into hiding again."

I couldn't say that I blamed him; who wants to come to Key West and eat in a hotel room? But then again, how many people were as widely hated as Mahdi?

"Insh'allah," I muttered. Mahdi shot me a reproving look as he walked out into the corridor.

Chapter 6

We trooped down to the dining room, Mahdi, Skouros, myself and Dobbs and another cop named Henderson, looking as inconspicuous as a tribe of visiting Goths. The background buzz in the dining room stopped when we paraded in, then slowly picked up again. I gave everyone present the hard eye, but they all looked like tourists, not terrorists. Terrorists wouldn't be wearing blue plaid shorts, black dress shoes and calf-length brown socks. Or so I assumed.

Mahdi and Skouros ordered the conch chowder to start, and they split on the fish entree. Dobbs and Henderson passed on the food. I asked for a glass of ice tea. Because I forgot to specify unsweetened, it came Southern-style. Icky. I decided to drink it anyway. Glucose and caffeine I figured, ought to keep me bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

I heard a mumbled conversation from one table, references to Mahdi, glances our way, and then here came the groupies. Four girls, young, presumably aspiring authors here for the conference, presented themselves and offered books for signing while gushing praise for the great man. He took it with surprising humility.

"It took decades to develop my craft," he said to one. "I'm not yet fully developed. It's a struggle for all of us. Will you be at the opening tomorrow?" Oh, yes, they would be.

"So will I," I muttered under my breath.

Mahdi signed the last book with a flourish, and watched thoughtfully as the girls made their dazed withdrawal. "Cordwainer, you have to follow me, I suppose, and I can't do much about it. But at least stay out of my way when I'm acknowledging my public."

"I sure will," I said. "Not all of the public adores you and some of those may be moved to express themselves. When that time comes you can be assured that I'll be out of the way."

He started to puff up, I recognized the symptoms by now, but he controlled himself. "But you're supposed to be my bodyguard. If you don't want to do the job, let West-Raver know, and perhaps I can get some better protection."

I shook my head. "You've been watching too many movies. Maybe that's to be expected in a man who's hidden in a house for a year. But I'm not the Secret Service, and you're not the president of the United States. I watch out for you. I check things. I do not become a human shield."

He astonished me by laughing out loud. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"You are. You're so, so sure, so full of yourself. Everything is black or white to you, isn't it?"

"Cut and dried." I said. "All of those clichés. And then some. I don't get to rewrite the action if I don't like the way it turned out. There are no second drafts in my life. I get it right the first time or I could die. And you're on my playing field now, and you need to try to follow the same rules."

He was still laughing. "You're a pompous ass."

“Coming from you,” I retorted, “that’s a real compliment.”

“Girls, girls,” Corporal Dobbs said. “No hair pulling, please.” Mahdi’s laughter subsided into chuckles. I found myself breathing hard and tensed up to leap. Onto Mahdi, I suppose. Or maybe Dobbs.

Skouros coughed politely for attention. “Cord, please calm down. Mahdi, stop baiting him.”

Mahdi only chuckled louder. “Can’t help it. He’s too much of a mental midget to hold discourse with, and too skinny to be much use as a human shield to a man of my proportions, even were he so inclined. What good is he?”

I pushed my chair back and stood. “Excuse me, gentlemen,” I said. “But I simply must go and piss on something.”

In the men’s room I tried pretending the urinal cake was Mahdi but that didn’t seem to dissipate my mood. As long as I was up, and not wanting to go back to the table, I visited the kitchen, walking in as though I owned the place. I’ve noticed that kitchen staffs usually look at you funny when you invade their territory, but they rarely say or do anything about it. I might be a friend of the owner. I might be, God forbid, a sanitation inspector. I tried to look officious.

In a moment I found good cause. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a dark-skinned young cook’s assistant spit into a bowl. Then he ladled in some clam chowder from a tureen simmering on a stove. I slid sideways along the counter, seizing his wrist as he was about to do the same with a second bowl.

“I’d always wondered what the secret ingredient was,” I said.

He tried to jerk his wrist away, looked surprised when it didn’t work, and turned to me. “I’ve tried and tried to make chowder like they do here,” I continued, just as though he wasn’t struggling, “but it never comes out the same. I should have tried spitting into it.”

I let his wrist go and he backed up a step. “I don’t know what you are talking about,” he said, his dark eyes looking at my shoes. “Who let you in here, anyway?”

I looked him up and down, slowly. “What’s your name?”

“My name is my business. You aren’t supposed to be in here.”

I nodded. “Neither are you, if this is how you usually treat the paying customers. Would you like to be fired tonight, or would you like to tell me your name?”

He looked down for a moment. “Mashiz,” he said.

“Mashiz what?”

“Mashiz Zarand. Please don’t tell my employer what you saw. Who are you anyway?”

“Let me see some I.D.”

His face changed instantly, his eyes shuttering down into bureaucratic-confrontation mode. He produced an expensive wallet, from which he took a Florida driver’s license and, of all things, an immigration green card. I was reminded of something that a friend in the Border Patrol once said, explaining how they sorted out the illegal aliens from the citizens.

“If you ask the average American for his identification, he’s going to at least look puzzled for a moment. Sometimes he’ll tell you to go to hell. But an alien will always give you something, usually the most incriminating I.D. he’s got on him. It’s like they’re trained to be obedient.”

I looked at the license and the green card — which is actually called a Permanent Resident card and is small and laminated like the driver license. He said he was Mashiz Zarand. And he was Iranian.

I handed the cards back. “I’m still the man who can get you fired,” I reminded him. “Are you some sort of student or political refugee?”

He looked worried. “I cannot return to Iran at this time. Someday, yes. Someday there will be change. Enough change. I already have my degree. But I am here legally.”

“You have at least an undergraduate degree. And you’re ladling up soup in a Key West hotel kitchen?”

“It’s hard to get a job out of college. Even harder if you’re not a native.”

“I suppose that’s so. Maybe you should have gone to France, to Le Cordon Bleu cooking school. They probably have special recipes for spit. And you plan to serve up your special honker chowder to Mahdi? Does that strike you as good and proper?”

He went from worried-looking to angry once more. “He disgraces that title,” Zarand said. “For what he did, I would be justified in killing him.”

“You mean the book?”

“I mean the contempt, the affront to my religion.”

“In other words, the book. Why don’t you just run out there and stick him with a knife?”

Zarand shook his head. “I spoke in haste and in anger. I think the mullahs go too far. Perhaps that is because they have not spent as much time in the West as I have, to know the corruption. Perhaps it is because they have remained pure in their belief. But no, I cannot kill him, or anyone. In Islam, there is honor in kindness, gentleness. Even towards vermin.”

“Mashiz,” I said, “you asked me who I am. I’m Mahdi’s bodyguard.” He stiffened. “But I’m also a good Christian ...”

“So what if you...”

“Shut up. I’ll do the talking. I’m just pointing out commonalities. In a funny way I understand you ...”

“Yes, but ...”

“I said shut up. Have your fun with the soup, but if I catch you around Mahdi again, I can make you long for the comforts of an Iranian jail. Trust me on this one. I have that power.”

I walked a few feet to a desk at one side of the kitchen and picked up a pencil there. I drew a tiny circle on the side of the bowl of chowder. “Now, Mashiz, get back to work. And please don’t spit into the other bowl. The other man is a friend of mine. And no enemy of yours.”

He smiled for the first time. “And you won’t get me fired?”

“Nope. But stay out of trouble. You’re running out of countries that will put up with you.”

Back at the table I sipped my ice tea and nibbled on a bread stick while Skouros and Mahdi slurped up their chowder. The waiter, not Mashiz but a young redhead woman, made sure that Mahdi got the bowl with the spot on the side. She also winked at me as she left, which I ignored. I didn’t want to encourage anything.

Key West wasn’t New York City or Washington D.C., but there were Muslims everywhere. In your regular bodyguard work you need only watch out for the obvious

types, or one or two specific people whose photographs you probably already have. And the one advantage you always had was that the would-be killer wanted to get away to live out a long and probably nasty life.

But with Mahdi, anyone walking by might be an assassin. I couldn't always count on their charity to the vermin of the earth, or their fear of death. I was beginning to realize that keeping Mahdi inhaling and exhaling regularly could be a tough assignment.

A grumbled comment from the great man brought me out of my reverie. I looked to my right.

"What's this?" Mahdi was poking his spoon at a big booger floating on top of his chowder. Another one floated on the other side of the bowl. Mashiz must have really cleaned out his sinuses after I left.

"We call those 'clam boogers'," I said. "They're the testicles of a male clam. They're supposed to enhance virility, but most people are too squeamish to eat them, so go ahead and put them aside."

Corporal Dobbs leaned in for a look, as did his buddy Henderson. Dobbs frowned and glanced up at me. I winked. Henderson opened his mouth to say something and Dobbs stuck an elbow into his ribs.

"Hah," Mahdi said. He scooped the slimy thing up and swallowed it. Professor Skouros had paused, his own spoon halfway to his lips. His glance flickered from Mahdi to me and then to his own bowl. He was probably wondering if he'd accidentally eaten a clam booger himself.

"What's it taste like?" I asked, curious. The two cops were staring at Mahdi, expressionless. But then, I knew they were pros.

"Don't you know?" Mahdi said. "Or are you afraid of testicles?"

"Well, yes and no," I said. "Clam boogers, I can live without."

Chapter 7

Back in Mahdi's suite, Dobbs flipped on the wall light switches and I checked the bedroom and then the sitting room. The drapes were still closed and it was still bright outside. In a few hours we would be able to hear, from our high window, the evening's humming out on the Mallory Square below us. If we pulled aside the curtains to look, anyone down there could see us. It would be a long shot for a pistol but an easy one for a rifle.

Beginning in the 1960s, the resident hippies celebrated the setting sun by gathering on the Mallory Dock and humming in unison, "humming down" the sun. Today the square, which is really more of a big parking lot facing the water, teems with what the local Chamber of Commerce bills as artists, an artist being anyone who will do silly things for a tourist buck. Mahdi had mentioned, during dinner, that he wanted to attend a sunset and Dobbs had firmly vetoed the idea until he could clear it with Lieutenant Cullen.

"Mahdi ..." I said, turning from the closed drapes. There was nobody in the sitting room except Dobbs. "Where's Mahdi?"

Dobbs jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Bathroom. I think maybe he ate too many clam boogers." He flopped into a chair at the corner table and stretched. "Henderson's taking over door guard duty for a while. Let my other man get some chow. Maybe those clam boogers will catch on, be all the next rage."

"Yeah. Maybe."

"So who's the spitball artist back in the kitchen? I'd have asked downstairs, but you seemed to have things under control. I saw that mark on the side of Mahdi's chowder bowl. You do that?"

"You're pretty quick."

"For a cop, you mean? Ah shucks, they teach us all that at cop school. Half day alone on how to identify chowder bowls full of boogers."

I smiled. "No, they don't. They didn't teach Henderson. And he went to cop school, too."

"Well, he skipped that class. Do I get an answer? Be nice to have something to pass on to Boo Cullen."

"Wasn't me. We've got a nice Iranian boy, a young man who despises Mahdi. But he also thinks his religion requires charity toward the vermin of the earth."

"And that includes Mahdi?"

"You got it. Two minds with but ..."

"Save it. I've heard it before."

Obviously it was time for a new set of quotes. Should have brought my Bartlett's with me. I turned instead to the television and pushed the on button. I stared at the blank grey screen the way you always do, waiting for the picture to come on. Reflected in the screen I saw a mirror-image Dobbs reach forward in his chair to turn on the table lamp

beside his chair. An all-encompassing flash made me think for an instant that the television in front of me had exploded.

The blast hit me in the back and across my legs, bounced me off the television and the long cabinet on which it sat and slammed me face-first against the wall. Stunned, I fell to the floor, vaguely aware of a general numbness in my back and legs. The world seemed to exist for a moment in some far-off place, where I lay all was eerily quiet. Quiet and gray; I seemed to see only gray swirling around me. Through the quiet I heard, faintly, a high-pitched squealing. I shut my mouth but it went on. I rolled over, things crinkling beneath me and smoke billowing, and managed to get my bearings.

The room, what I could see of it, was wrecked. Ceiling tiles hung loose, and some had disappeared. The chairs and the sofa cushions were flung into corners. The gray mist was actually a combination of smoke and dust. I'd seen that before, when a rocket-propelled grenade had hit an armored vehicle I was riding in. The blast overpressure shook loose every speck of dust that nobody had cleaned in the past, leaving it to float in the air along with the smoke.

I looked around, squinting. One drape billowed out the side of the building where the sliding glass doors had once been, the other drape seemed to have vanished entirely. The ruined television lay beside me. Next to the television was a leg, no pants, but a regulation black low-top shoe still attached. I stared at it. For an instant I wondered if that was my leg. Someone had fastened the shoe onto the foot with those skinny round shoelaces. I'd never liked those; they came undone at the worst times. Leg must not be mine.

The high keening sound went on, and I crawled across the floor and around what was left of the sofa. Dobbs lay there screaming at the ceiling. Most of Dobbs, anyway; he had no legs at all.

"Oh, no," I prayed. "Please no." I crawled to his side and tried to stanch the fountains of blood that were spurting several feet into the air. Most of his clothes were gone, but he still wore his belt and a few scraps of pants. I fumbled at the belt and was pulling it from around him when I felt a hand on my shoulder and twisted to look behind me. Henderson was there, white-faced.

"Mary Mother of God," he said softly. Then his eyes focused on me. "I've already called for backup." With his hand on my shoulder, I realized that my sport coat was totally missing. All I had left of my shirt was some tatters hanging around my neck and chest. I looked down. My pants were mostly blown off too, just a bit around the waist held by my belt. Incongruously, my Colt Commander .45 pistol was still attached to the belt, safe inside its horsehide holster. Always wear clean underwear, my mother used to say. You never know when you're going to be in an automobile wreck. Or a bomb explosion.

"Where's Mahdi," I asked, still working on Dobbs.

"He's in the bathroom. I told him to stay there." Henderson pulled out his mobile radio and screamed at the dispatcher to hurry with an ambulance. Then he dropped to his knees and tried to help, applying direct pressure to Dobbs severed arteries. It was like trying to clamp off a half-dozen garden hoses. We didn't have enough hands. I looked down at Dobbs and shook my head. "No ambulance is going to do any good unless we can stop the bleeding," I muttered. I had Dobbs belt now and tried to get it around what was left of one of his legs. Henderson used his own belt on the other. It helped, but

Dobbs had also taken a lot of stuff directly into his groin and abdomen and we would have had to put a tourniquet around his waist to do any good.

But we tried, interrupted only once by Mahdi, who came into the room on tiptoe, careful of broken glass and blood. "Aren't you supposed to be guarding me?" he said sharply. I shook my head. My ears, I thought, they must have gone out on me.

"Get over here, man," I heard Henderson say. "Help us."

"I really do think one of you ought to be guarding the door," Mahdi said. "Someone else could come in and try again."

It hadn't, somehow, occurred to me that we still had a door to the suite. "Is that door locked?" I said to Mahdi.

"Yes, it is. But you should still be guarding it. That's what West-Raver hired you to do. That man's obviously dead. You should be doing your job."

I sensed movement beside me and clamped a bloody hand around Henderson's wrist just as he tried to draw his pistol. We held a brief, silent tug-of-war before he subsided and turned back to Dobbs.

"Mahdi," I said, "I want you to stand right by that door and be ready to open it as soon as the paramedics arrive."

"I'm not opening that door to anyone. And you don't need to shout." Mahdi tiptoed away and into the bedroom.

"Was I shouting?" I shouted at Henderson. He nodded.

Dobbs screamed until he was too weak to scream, and breathed until he was too weak to do that. When the medics and more cops arrived, Henderson and I were doing CPR on the corpse. When I got up to open the door I caught a quick glimpse of Mahdi in the other room as he hid behind his bed. Henderson and I, and a good part of the room, were totally covered with blood. So as not to waste a trip, the EMT guys bundled me face-down onto a stretcher and I got a ride out to Lower Keys Medical Center on Stock Island.

Chapter 8

I've never liked hospitals. Hospitals are full of sick people and dying people and people who have grown inured to it all. And lying half-naked and face-down on a gurney in a brightly-lit room in the middle of a bunch of people who acted as though I might have been an end table did nothing for my temper.

One of the cops had the wits to throw my wallet onto the stretcher as I was being carted away from the Southern Reef Resort. Thus I was eventually able, by grunting intelligibly and waving grubby bits of paper in my bloody hands, to convince the admitting nurse that, despite my shabby appearance, I had medical coverage. Everyone seemed to mumble in a low tone, which didn't help.

Eventually I was rolled into a treatment cubical and transferred to a narrow steel examining table. They had, apparently, stored that table in a large freezer until needed. A woman doctor named Selama and a nurse swabbed my back clean, exchanging orange Betadine ointment for dark red dried blood. Selama examined, poked and, here and there, used tweezers. I appreciated the tweezers; I'd once had medics use a wire brush to get small shrapnel bits out when I absentmindedly stood too near an exploring mortar shell. The wire brush was an effective procedure, if not so pleasant.

I had a few shallow cuts and punctures in my back and some nicks in my hands and knees from crawling around in broken glass, but most of the blood was not mine. My hair was stiff with it, too.

"What's this mark on your left cheek," Doctor Selama asked at one point.

"Powder burn from an exploding shell." I didn't go into detail but a few years back, in a place not listed on my passport, an M2 .50 caliber machinegun with a bad headspace adjustment had once surprised me with an exploding cartridge.

"Scar on your neck," she said. "Scars on your back. And I think I see a through-and-through bullet wound on your left thigh. You seem to have led an exciting life."

"It's had its ups and downs."

"You're very, very fortunate, Mr. MacIntosh," Selama said in a distant voice. "You had a few small pieces of glass and wood splinters in your back, a generalized first-degree flash burn, and a lot of bruises."

I twisted my neck to follow her as she walked around my head, seeing dark brown eyes competent in a young light brown face

"I can't hear so well. May I sit up?"

"Please do. Your hearing is poor now because the concussion of the bomb bruised your eardrums. The cochlea, that part of your inner ear that analyzes sound, in each ear may be traumatized as well."

Why should they be exempt? Now that I was getting more accustomed to talking and paying attention to the responses, I realized that Selama had a thick accent which I could not place. Not Indian. Somewhere else. I heaved myself around, becoming aware of muscles that had had better days. I finally got my legs over the edge of the examining table, but my feet still didn't reach the floor.

“Will my hearing get better?”

“Oh, yes, yes. Fairly quickly, if you’re lucky. You may have some tinnitus, the so-called ringing in your ears. If that persists, you should see a specialist.”

“You say it was a bomb?” I ignored the bit about tinnitus; I’d had tinnitus for decades, the result of too many loud explosions, most outgoing, some incoming. It was just background noise for me now, like someone running a power drill a long way off. “How do you know it was a bomb? Where’s Corporal Dobbs?”

“Lieutenant Cullen told me it was a bomb. She is in the lounge, waiting to talk to you. I don’t know any Corporal Dobbs. Was he the man who was killed?”

“Yep.” I eased myself down off the table and nearly kept going, to the floor. I should have expected that, having been wounded before. You tell yourself that it’s not so bad after all, but the blood loss and the aftereffects of the adrenaline rush makes you weak as a baby. A few hours of normalcy and a few days of good diet will fix it. I liked it that Selama didn’t try to stop me or baby me. With a struggle I managed to stay up by grabbing the table.”

“Get Cullen in here. We need to talk, and I can’t go out there like this.” I still had only blood-soaked underwear. And shoes. The gun and holster was on a side table and I got that and put it back in its proper place on my torso. I was a belt, some rags, a pair of shoes, and a holstered gun. Shoes were important in Florida. You had to have shoes and a shirt to eat in a restaurant. ‘No shoes, no shirt, no service’ all the signs said. It was a state law. Nobody said anything about pants. When I had been strolling around earlier today I’d noticed the same sign posted outside the door to the Key West City unemployment office. I didn’t have a shirt, which seemed like a terrible failure on my part. I couldn’t get a meal in my present condition. Or apply for a job.

I shook my head. I was hanging onto the side of the table and staring at my feet. Selama was waiting patiently. I turned to her. “Where are you from, doctor?”

“Malaysia. But, rest assured that I am licensed to practice here.”

“I’m sure you are. Are you a Muslim?”

She shook her head. “Actually, I am a Baptist. Why do you ask?”

“No good reason, doctor. Can I see Lieutenant Cullen now?”

Cullen still looked starched and clean, as though she hadn’t been in her uniform all day and into the night, and had to deal with a bombing and a slaughterhouse. She did not look jovial. “Tell me all,” was what she said by way of greeting.

“Quid pro quo, first,” I said. “Get me some sort of clothes to wear.”

“You don’t need clothes You’re not going anywhere until maybe tomorrow.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I have a client to look after.”

She considered it a long moment, then pulled out her radio. “I need a man’s extra-large shirt, or a tee-shirt,” she told the radio. “Some kind of windbreaker, same size. And some pants, a men’s 36 waist, as long in the legs as you can get them.”

A tinny voice complained from the earpiece. “Lieutenant, where the hell am I supposed to come up with that sort of stuff?”

“I don’t know. Or care,” Boo answered. “Just do it. We have streets full of clothing shops. Show some initiative. Send the clothes over to Lower Keys and see that Mr. MacIntosh gets them.”

“Okay boss. This’ll be fun. Sort of like a treasure hunt.”

“You have a pretty good eye for men’s sizes I said when she had signed off. “How did you come by that?”

Boo put the radio away. “Practice.” She looked at me again. “You would need the larger size condom too. I like that in a man. Tell me about the bomb.”

“You tell me first. Where was the bomb?”

“In the night light bedside. The lamp is totally trashed. But we got some pieces off it.”

“I picked up that lamp earlier,” I said. “Looked at the top to see the bulb wattage. Didn’t think to switch it on.”

“You should run to the nearest convenience store — if you’re up to running — and buy a lottery ticket. Today’s your day.”

“Not so much for Corporal Dobbs,” I said.

“No.” Boo looked sad. “Not for Dobbs. Tell me what happened.”

I did so, although there wasn’t much for me to tell. When I was done Boo filled me in on what I had missed by being hauled out of that hotel room.

Someone had taken the stiff felt bottom off the brass table lamp, stuffed the hollow lamp full of C-4, wired a blasting cap to the light switch, and glued the bottom back on. C-4 is “plastic” explosive that comes in convenient 1.25-pound blocks and is the consistency and color of a large amount of marshmallow. You can not only mold it to any shape you please but you can even pinch off small bits to use to cook with over a “stove” made of a tin can. In another career I’d used it to make foxholes in hard earth, first pounding a deep hole with a metal rod and a sledgehammer, then rolling up golf-ball-sized bits of C-4 to drop down the hole, then lowering the last ball down with a blasting cap attached.

The only reason I hadn’t been killed, or even seriously hurt, was that one entire end of the room, the sliding glass doors and windows, had blown out, relieving the blast pressure. Cushions, books, ceiling tiles, even some of Mahdi clothes had been sucked out the window. Dobbs, who had been right next to the blast, was in the morgue downstairs, reunited with his legs. A minister and some of Dobbs closer friends were with his widow and 14-year-old daughter. And Mahdi was being detained for his own protection at the police station.

“He must be furious,” I said at that.

“Try to imagine how little I care,” Boo said. “One of my men is dead because of that big asshole.”

“No, Boo. One of your men is dead because we let somebody get through our security. That room was supposed to be clean. If we’d used an explosives sniffer, like I’m sure they have at the airport, we’d have detected that C-4.”

Her face reddened I swear she started to pull one fist back. Smart Cord, I told myself. It not enough you get blown half through a wall. Now you want to be a punching bag for Key West’s female Charles Atlas.

“Boo, stop it,” I said sharply. “It’s true, and you know it. Let’s figure out where we go from here.”

She froze and then relaxed to merely coiled-spring status. “You’re right. You’re right twice.”

There was muted conversation outside the door, then a patrolman stuck his head in, spotted us, and slid around the door with a long-sleeved man’s shirt, a windbreaker, and some pants draped over his arm, like a valet. If he found odd the sight of his female

lieutenant chatting with six-two, 180-pound man dressed in little more than a coating of orange betadine, he didn't mention it.

"Get out of here," Boo growled as I took the clothes and thanked the man. He recoiled backwards through the door like he was on an elastic string.

I held up the shirt, which was light blue polyester. "This looks like jailbird wear."

"It is," Cullen said. "Put it on. We got work to do"

"I almost hate to," I said. "I'll get this orange goop all over it."

"Believe it or not, it washes out," Boo said. "I should know; they've poured enough of that stuff over me in the past twenty years."

As Boo waited outside the door, I stripped completely and put on the pants and shirt. I still had no underwear. I transferred the belt, which helped even though the pants had no belt loops, and then rolled up my underwear in what was left of the bloody jeans. I practiced walking around the room. I seemed able to manage if I avoided any sudden turns. I nodded; it would get better soon. Been there before. I still had the bloody rags in one hand as we headed back toward the emergency room to where Boo's sedan was parked just outside.

The admitting nurse came around her desk as she sighted us. "Hold on, honey," she said. "You're not going anywhere."

"Here," I said, thrusting the bloody underwear bundle into her hands. "Burn these."

I kept walking and nobody tried to stop me.

Chapter 9

“I could use some food,” I told Boo. “Pick a place. My treat.”

“What about Mahdi,” she said. “Thought you were all business.”

“I’m not much good to him half-starved. I skipped lunch and there’s the blood loss.”

“Oh, bull. You didn’t lose that much blood. But let’s see what I can do.” She drove to the east side of the island and pulled into a driveway of a small Bahamian-style bungalow with pastel paint colors.

“What’s this?”

“My house. Food’s cheaper here. And you can get a shower. If you don’t mind my saying so, you look like you’ve been rode hard and put up wet.”

She rummaged in the fridge and started to cook a couple of steaks. I sat and sipped some chardonnay she opened. Boo drank from her wine glass and then went into her bedroom and came back with some pants and a shirt and a pair of panties.

“More clothes?” I asked.

“Some of my clothes. They don’t fit perfectly but the leg length is close. Pants have belt loops. Shirt doesn’t come from our jail. And the panties will fit, I think. I’m narrow-hipped.

“For God’s sake, the panties have lace and a little pink bow thing in front.”

She grinned. I liked the grin. “Sexy. Shower first. Then dress. Food will be up in ten minutes.”

We ate at the kitchen pass-through counter. Steak, mushrooms, some stuffed potato skins she had bought at the store. And more wine. She started some decaf coffee for later. “I usually buy things I can cook fast and easy,” she said. “Not a lot of spare time with my job.”

“Take a break when you can,” I said. “Or when your day is too overwhelming.” I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “Thanks for all you’ve done. I’ve been in a few explosions but so far this is the best one. I’m sorry about Dobbs.”

She nodded. “Sucks,” she said. “He has a wife and a kid.”

“Had a wife and kid,” I thought. I kept my mouth shut.

She hadn’t removed my arm or straightened back up in her chair. She bent farther and rubbed her cheek on mine. I turned and kissed her on the cheek. Then on the lips. She pushed back hard. I put a hand on her right breast, which was meaningless given her heavy uniform blouse, and kissed her again.

She took in a long breath and straightened up. “Whew!” she said. “Maybe it’s the wine.”

“It’s the aftereffect,” I said. “Normal. Seeing death so close makes you want to celebrate life. You get horny. I’ve felt it before.”

She glanced down. “I see. How are my lace panties holding up?”

“I think I’ll need a fresh pair pretty soon if we don’t do something quick,” I said. I leaned in again for another kiss. “I could do this all night.”

“You wouldn’t need to. But we have to get back to the station. Pick up Mahdi.”

“He’s safe enough there. Probably more angry. He can wait. I can’t.”

She pulled her head back until our noses just touched. She put a hand on either side of my head and stared into my eyes, her own dark brown eyes inches from my own baby blues. “You can’t wait? Or you won’t wait?”

“Ummm. Both. I have needs.”

“I see. How strong are these needs?”

“I strongly need a strong woman. Now.”

“Well, we seem to have gone from metaphysical to just physical. Two souls ...”

“Zwei Seelen und ein Gedanke,” I said. “Zwei Herzen und ein Schlag”

She laughed. “Can’t believe you remembered that and memorized it.”

“I’m quick.”

She kissed me again, still holding my head between her hands. She pulled back to look into my eyes. “I hope not,” she said. She stood, pulling my hand along. “Come with me.”

“It’s the German,” I said. “Gets them every time.”

In her bedroom, she had my pants off and her hand inside the panties. “You don’t seem to have lost much blood after all,” she said.

“How do I get your uniform off,” I said. “Damn buttons everywhere.”

She laughed. Then we were naked and flopped onto the bed, on top of the spread. She made creative use of big pillows. I made creative use of her.

“Never heard someone make so much noise,” I said when we were done, damp and exhausted. “My hearing must be coming back. Lucky this is a single-family house. But what’s that noise?”

“Coffee maker. It’s been perking for half an hour. Fuck it.”

“I don’t think I can,” I said.

Chapter 10

The sun had set and the police station was an island of light behind its screen of trees. Boo Cullen went straight to her desk through a crowd of detectives and patrol officers and started reading reports.

I followed her and as she sat she picked something up from the desktop. A sealed evidence bag, clear plastic.

“We had a bit of luck right off,” she said. She was all business again. “We know how the bomb got planted, anyway.” Inside the bag was a piece of glass, roughly circular and about four inches in diameter. It was lightly dusted with black fingerprint powder.

“Let me guess,” I said. “It’s a wonder the explosion didn’t blow it off the edge of the balcony. And we didn’t notice it because we had the drapes closed.”

She nodded. “You’re pretty smart, for someone in lace panties. Somebody went balcony-hopping and used a glass-cutter on Mahdi’s sliding glass door. The explosion, of course, blew the rest of the door to bits. Most of it ended up clear out on the Mallory Square, along with a lot of other stuff. But whoever cut their way into Mahdi room had carefully put this down, probably because just dropping it would make noise, and it stayed put.”

“Glass would have been stuck to a centered suction cup,” I said. “Those round cutters, you stick the cup on and lock it down, then work the cutter, on a short metal arm, around in a circle to take out the glass. You didn’t find the glass cutter itself? The guy didn’t just drop it when done?”

“No. Just the round cut glass piece.”

“So we look for a very neat bomber?”

“We look for a very neat bomber. And a gutsy one, too. He, or she, must have climbed across those balconies in full view of the people on the Mallory Square. I’ll talk to some of the regulars tomorrow.”

“C-4 has taggants in it these days,” I said. “And the RDX that makes it explosive is not that easy to wipe off your hands. I’m not sure how they do it but someone from ATF could probably get a sniff off the hands of the perp.”

“I know that. And we don’t have the gear to check on that, even if we had a hand to sniff.” She picked up some paperwork and started reading, dismissing me for the moment.

I didn’t leave yet, loitering in the squad room instead. I found that my first impression, that these people ought to be out on the streets serving and protecting, was all wet. These people were off-duty, and had either stayed on after their shifts, or had come in to share memories of Dobbs and to see what they could do to help. There’s a camaraderie in a police department that outsiders don’t always see.

Most of them even found time to be nice to me. I found, to my surprise, that I needed someone to be nice to me. The conversations seemed to fade in and out, like old-fashioned radio transmissions. There was an incessant background whine, more tinnitus. I found myself holding fingers in my ears, alternately, trying to see which one was the culprit. Both were.

It was while doing this that I realized that not everyone felt that Cord MacIntosh was the cat's meow.

"Dumb bastard got Dobbs killed," I heard a patrolman say loudly. I felt my face turn red with anger and embarrassment. A knot of officers near the entrance were looking at me covertly. I squared my shoulders and walked over.

"Mind elaborating on that one?" I said to the man who had spoken.

"Hell, yes. Dobbs let a civilian in on a security setup. If there had been two cops in that room, if I'd been there, Dobbs would have had the backup he needed. I would have spotted the bomb."

He turned away, tears welling up in his eyes. "We gotta stick together. Its us against them. Civilians."

He stumbled out the door, the knot of officers parting to let him through. I felt a firm hand on my bicep. "Pay no attention to Romar. He'll get over it one of these days. We appreciate all that you did for Charlie." I looked down at a medium height man in civilian clothes. Ray Porto, the chief.

"Sometimes, when a man is dying, just holding his hand is the best thing," he said. "Let him go knowing that someone cares. I understand you did that."

I looked into dark sea-blue eyes in a pale face that had frowned for so many decades that the frown had become permanent. I had no recollection of holding Dobb's hand. Maybe I should have.

"Was 'Charlie' Corporal Dobbs?"

He nodded. "I still don't like having you around our necks. But Dobbs didn't die because of you. And Henderson says you were in there trying."

"Fat lot of good it did. But thanks for the kind word."

"Well, I heard Henderson's report. And Boo Cullen speaks well of you. I trust Boo's character judgments."

"She's a remarkable judge of character." Especially after she's bedded one, I thought. I decided that Ray Porto didn't need to know that.

"She's tough on people," Porto was saying. "But she's a good cop. Not much gets by her."

I'd been forgetting someone, and now seemed like a good time to bring the unpleasant subject up again. "Chief, where's Mahdi now. We've got to stay on top of ..."

"Woah, fella," Chief Porto held up a palm. "Mahdi's in a new hotel room, in a new hotel. And he's up to his armpits in protection just now."

"I've got to go see him."

Porto shook his head. "You're off this case. This is no place for a civilian."

"But you just said ..."

He held up his hands, palms out. "I said you did your best. And that was as good as any of my men could have done. But this is just no game for an amateur."

I started to answer but Boo Cullen walked into the room, saw us, and came over.

"C'mon, Cord. I'll run you out to your boat."

"He lives on a boat?" Porto said, not taking his eyes off mine.

"Yes, I do," I said.

Porto shook his head. "A private cop who lives on a boat. What's the world coming to?"

— end sample —

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