

BAHAMA
BREEZE

*A Novel of Hijacks & Hijinks
on the High Seas*

EDDIE JONES

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Dedication

Dedicated to the ones I loved and lost (in no particular order): Terresa, Martha, Peggy, Diana, Sherry, Sarah, Carol Lynn, and the one I loved and caught, Bennie, my bride of 30 years.

1

Sonny hooked his forearm around the thin braided wire attached to the sailboat mast and, blinking rain from his eyes, looked up. Somewhere above his head, caught in a black pulley he couldn't see was the end of the rope he'd been warned not to lose—the one boat part that, if retrieved, would allow him to abandon ship and return to his motel room.

But his recovery of the wayward rope was hampered by strong winds and heavy rains from Bert, a slow moving tropical storm that had spent the past few days wandering around the Bahamas like a dog looking to do its business. Circle once, circle twice, and squat. Now the storm had settled over Cockroach Cay, prompting Sonny to conclude that renting a sailboat during hurricane season, while exciting and dangerous, was too much fun for him.

He was glad they were still at the dock.

"You're an idiot, Joe, you know that? What was the last thing I told you to do before I crashed into the dock?" Sonny said.

"Hold on to the rope."

"Halyard. The big rope that raises the sail is a halyard. Now it's up there and I'm down here and *you* can't raise the main.'"

"Who cares? Why would anyone want to go sailing in this, anyway?"

Good point, Sonny thought. Gale force winds had whipped the tiny harbor into a foaming froth of whitecaps. Across the cove, trees tipped sideways, bending like inverted beach umbrellas, littering the sand with palm fronds and coconuts. Tourists huddled on motel balconies, pointing at the dark storm clouds rolling over the island.

"I say we leave the rope up there and go back to the room," Joe added.

"Hey, now that's a bright idea. Then, when the boat rental boy checks on his boat and sees the halyard flapping around he'll know I broke his boat."

"You don't think he's going to figure that out when he sees the dock line wrapped around the motor?"

"Just need to untangle it."

"You going in the water?"

"You got a better idea?"

"Just looks nasty, is all. And deep. I watched a National Geographic special about these guys who went swimming in a river in the Amazon jungle. This worm swam up his...you know. Started having baby worms in his intestines. Had these hook like probes that—"

"Would you shut up? I need to think."

"Yeah, like that's ever worked in the past."

Sonny thought back to a night on his cousin's farm in Pender County when he'd gotten his pickup truck stuck in a ditch. He remembered how he'd managed to get the truck moving again by shifting it back and forth between forward and reverse.

Maybe he could do the same thing with the

outboard. Maybe by reversing the prop at low speeds he could untangle the rope. But there was something about that night on the farm that bothered him. Something about the way it had ended that made him think he was going to have to get in the water, anyway.

It'd been raining that night. He'd gotten out of his truck and walked around back, running his hand down the crumpled bumper caked with dirt and grass. The headlights were pointed up the embankment, illuminating the muddy ruts of his tire tracks. He'd hopped back inside the cab and worked the clutch and accelerator until the front tires gripped a patch of firm soil and began moving forward. But the muddy sole of his boot slipped, popping the clutch and causing the truck to accelerate. It bucked across the gravel road and fell down the other side, flattening a fence post before dropping hood first into an irrigation ditch.

A tow truck operator (his Aunt Effie) drove past a few minutes later and pulled the truck back on the road.

Because Sonny was family, she only charged him \$79.95 for the thirty-minute job. She wouldn't have charged him anything at all, she'd kept saying, if he'd just come to visit once in a while. But Sonny knew that the \$79.95 towing charge was a bargain compared to an afternoon of conversation with Aunt Effie and her husband, Bernard, "who has a plate in his head." Whenever Aunt Effie mentioned her husband's name it was always followed by "who has a plate in his head," even though no one could remember why Uncle Bernard "who has a plate in his head" actually had a plate in his head. Certainly not Uncle Bernard "who has a plate in his head" since he thought his name was Malcolm.

Sonny leaned over the back of the boat and stared down. The water did, in fact, look nasty. And dangerous. Lying on the sand were coral encrusted soda bottles, beer cans, conch shells, a flair gun shell, starfish, and a long, dark, cylinder-shaped object that, to Sonny, looked like whale poop.

Sonny straightened. "Maybe I'll deal with the outboard, later."

"Good. *Now* can we go back to the motel?"

"Right after we get that rope down."

"I'm not going up that mast and you're too big."

"I've lost weight."

"Not that much."

"They have a special thing for it."

"For losing weight?" Joe asked.

"Going up the mast. It's a swinging seat. Saw one in *Caribbean Sailing Magazine*."

"When have *you* ever read a sailing magazine?"

"Oncologist's office. And I didn't say I *read* it. Said I *saw* it. There was an ad in the back for a swinging seat."

"You see anything like that on this *yacht*?"

The comment was a dig at Sonny and his "sticky note" agenda: the one the doc had told him to make. At the top of the list was, "go sailing in the Caribbean" (which the Bahamas weren't) "on a yacht" (which the rented sailboat wasn't) "with his high school sweetheart" (who hadn't arrived...yet).

Sonny wasn't sure when a sailboat became a yacht, but he was pretty certain it happened when crew and women came aboard. There were lots of women on boats in the sailing magazine—all in skimpy swimsuits. This seemed to please the skipper, who looked like Mark Hamill. Or maybe he looked like

Mark Harmon. Sonny wasn't sure which Mark he looked like, because he was really bad with Hollywood actors' names. But he knew the man on the yacht didn't look anything like Luke Skywalker, even though the woman pressing her boat fender-sized features against the man's arm did look a little like Princess Leia.

Sonny didn't have any women on his rented sailboat. He only had Joe, and Joe was no Princess Leia. Joe looked more like a skinny Yoda with ears mounted like a satellite dish. His bug eyes appeared too large for his face because of the thick, black-framed glasses he wore. Joe was a packaging specialist who liked to dress, talk and act like an industrial engineer from the 70's. He thought that by dressing this way, real engineers would think he was one of them and buy more box-sealing tape. Sonny knew from selling 2-ply toilet tissue to engineers who doubled as purchasing agents that they didn't really look like nerds anymore, and didn't appreciate packaging specialists thinking they did. This was one reason Joe wasn't very successful at selling box-sealing tape. There were other reasons, as well.

Sonny lifted the lid to the storage area and while tossing out boat cushions, life jackets, ropes and paddles, wondered if he should apologize to Joe. Joe was, after all, Sonny's best and last friend. But Joe had already let go of one rope and Sonny didn't want him letting go of another one with Sonny attached to it.

On the other hand, at six-foot four, there was no way Sonny could climb the mast himself.

Then again, a scrawny guy like Joe wasn't strong enough to crank Sonny up to the top of the mast. But, if not Joe, then who?

This mental match of pong might have continued until Tropical Storm Bert reached hurricane status, except just then, Sonny found a canvas sling harness with the words "Bosun's Chair" stitched across the seat. Only Sonny didn't call it the bosun's chair. He called it the swinging seat.

"Hey, look! I found the swinging seat!" Sonny tossed Joe one end of a muddy rope. "Run up to that golf cart and tie your end off to the back bumper."

"I don't think golf carts have bumpers."

"I didn't mean literally to tie it off to the bumper. I meant tie it off to something sturdy."

"Why didn't you say that, then?"

"Because I didn't."

"Just saying, you got mad at me for letting go of that other rope because I didn't know what you meant when you said, 'Don't let go of the halyard,' and now you're asking me to tie this rope off to something that isn't really there."

"Would you just hurry up before someone sees us?"

"I still say this is a bad idea."

"Renting the sailboat?" Sonny asked.

"Coming down here. Twenty bucks says your girl doesn't show."

"She'll show."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I got connections."

"You got grits for brains, is what you got." Joe had only gone a short ways up the dock when he called back. "What kind of knot do you want me to use?"

"How about a square knot? Think you can tie one of those?"

"Is that a boating knot?"

"I guess. Probably used them on those square-rigger ships."

"Bet you're right," Joe said. "Square knot it is."

Sonny knew there were better boat knots for tying ropes to things, but he had no idea what any of them were. He just knew that real sailors, like the ones who were members of yacht clubs and boating organizations and U.S. Power Squadrons, were proud of the way they could lash a pair of shoelaces together to haul a drowning man back aboard a sinking ship. He'd read a story like that during his last visit to the VA hospital.

"When I give the word," Sonny yelled over the roar of the wind. "Ease forward. Got it?"

Ignoring him, Joe slid in behind the wheel of the golf cart. He tensioned the slack out of the line and glanced up the dock toward Sonny.

"Ready!" Sonny yelled.

Joe stomped the accelerator.

The golf cart leapt forward, speeding across the lawn, across a gravel walkway and towards the patio deck behind Mama Pearl's Bait and Tackle Shop. The sudden acceleration compressed Sonny's buttocks into the shape of a canned ham, jerking him off the deck and flinging him skyward, past the first set of spreaders and toward the top of the mast.

Sonny let out a loud, "Whoa!" hoping Joe would hear him—hoping anyone within earshot would hear and tackle Joe. But Joe just kept speeding away, racing across the soggy grass before crashing headlong into a rack of garbage cans. The cart stopped.

Sonny wrapped his bare legs around the mast, wincing as the swinging seat pinched the meat on the back of his thighs. Suddenly he remembered the other

boat part the boat rental boy had warned him not to forget.

“Whatever you do, mon,” the boy had said. “Don’t forget de centerboard. Dis boat don’ have a ‘kill’ wit’out de centerboard.”

Sonny had no idea why the boat needed to “kill” anything. But Sonny liked the boat rental boy’s accent. “Dis boat, mon,’ Sonny would say to his toilet paper customers back home, ‘it didn’ ‘ave a kill wit’out de centerboard. And dere was dis tropical storm dat de locals said wuz just a Bahama breeze.”

He hoped no one would ask him what a centerboard was, even though now he wished he knew, because the boat was leaning. Or maybe it was listing. Sonny couldn’t remember if a boat had to be sinking to be listing, but it had definitely reached a tipping point. The boat rolled, dumping Sonny into the rigging of the large schooner parked in the next slip. He skidded down the schooner’s metal wires, cutting chunks from his sunburned skin. He crashed onto the other boat’s boom and tried to extract himself from the swinging seat, but as he did, Joe slammed the golf cart into reverse and pressed the accelerator.

The golf cart bucked backward as Joe retraced his route. The sudden shift in direction wrenched the sailboat back into an upright position, catapulting Sonny up and over the mast. Just then, the rope reached its limit; Joe continued, trampling manicured lawn plants and brightly painted conch shells before finally ripping the golf cart’s roof off its frame. Bits of fiberglass, aluminum tubing, and shards of windshield flew past Sonny’s head. Joe’s end of the rope, suddenly liberated from the golf cart, was free to fly—and it did, dropping Sonny like the 240-pound weight that he

was.

Sonny plunged back to earth like Neil Armstrong. Or maybe it was Lance Armstrong. Sonny could never remember which man had ridden around the moon seven times. But he knew he was headed for a splashdown.

He hit the water and dropped into a tan and sandy soup. Fumbling with the square knot, he tried to wiggle free but became distracted by the whale poop that was now nervously darting back-and-forth in front of him. The dark, cylinder-shaped object stopped a few feet from Sonny's face. Even in the nasty and silt-filled waters, Sonny could see that the whale poop had very long and very shiny teeth. And it seemed to be grinning at him.

2

Anna Fortune eased the shift lever into reverse and backed out of her slip, spun the wheel, and powered forward, guiding her sailboat out of the channel and toward the fuel pumps. This simple act of seamanship: motoring away from the dock, avoiding other yachts, and maneuvering up a canal not much larger than a pit stall, all proved Anna was a better skipper than her favorite stock car driver, Little E.

Anna was still sore at Little E for losing the lead, the race, and his final chance at the championship title when he'd exceeded the speed limit on the pit road during the final caution of the Yippy Skippy 500. Because of the infraction, NASCAR officials had ordered Little E to perform a stop and go—a stupid punishment, Anna thought, since stock cars didn't even *have* speedometers, much less drivers who would read them.

"They're race car drivers!" she'd wanted to scream at the TV. Speed bumps, on the other hand. Now there was an idea that made sense. Or those flashing signs that work crews used for highway construction zones. Maybe drivers could see that.

Anna brought the *Miss Fortune* alongside the fuel pumps and dropped a stern line over the piling. She put the engine into neutral and tossed a pair of ropes onto the dock. Hurrying up the side deck, she kicked

two fenders over the side, pushed off the forward piling and returned to the cockpit, shutting down the engine.

Jumping onto the dock, she handed the attendant the fuel cap key. "Fill it up with diesel and top off the water tanks. And this time if you spill fuel, clean it up. Don't leave it on the deck like you did last time."

Anna had no idea if it was the same boy or not, and didn't care. She just wanted her boat wiped down, and now she knew it would be.

Striding up the dock, she turned right and walked past an outdoor bar decorated with yacht club pennants hanging beneath varnished cedar beams. The pink glow of an afternoon sun painted the underbelly of thunderheads blooming over the Chesapeake Bay. Cars slid into the gravel parking lot. Remote key locks chirped. A table of men with shirt sleeves rolled up and ties loosened sat around a bucket of beers. They quieted down when Anna walked past.

She paid for the fuel and two bags of ice. Placing the ice on her shoulders, she strolled back across the patio, feeling the chill of the water dripping down her bare shoulders and soaking the green straps of her one-piece bathing suit.

Another long rumble of thunder preceded the first fat drops that slapped the wooden planks. Within seconds a gray curtain of rain swept across the harbor, turning the water dark.

She stepped aboard, frowning when she saw the smudge of pink fuel smeared on the deck around the cap. Tossing the ice onto a cockpit seat, she tensioned the spring line, securing the boat seconds before a blast of wind slammed into the side, shoving it sideways. Ducking under the canvas dodger, she removed the

hatch boards and was about to hurry below when she saw a silver Hershey's Kiss resting atop the companionway steps.

Turning quickly she searched for the dockhand. But the sudden downpour made it impossible to see past the end of her boat. Kicking the candy aside, she went below, feeling violated, angry, and a little impressed that someone knew her favorite candy. Three chocolate deposits in the past month. How cute. The first on the roof of her sports car outside the bookstore in Georgetown; the second inside that flower basket sent to her office; and now here, on the boat. *Somebody is going to a lot of trouble to be clever and it's a waste of time. Not interested. Not now. Never will be.*

She flipped a toggle switch. A bank of recessed lights cast a yellow halo over the blue Oriental rug. She dropped three ice cubes into a tumbler and splashed them with diet cola, then put the bag in the freezer. Adjusting the radio dial, she found a jazz station out of Baltimore playing a tribute to Dizzy Gillespie. She built a nest of cushions in the elbow of the L-shaped couch and closed her eyes, cradling the glass on her thigh. Rain drummed the deck overhead. The carbonation stung the back of her throat. She rolled a chunk of ice against the inside of her cheek and exhaled deeply.

It felt good to be tucked in tight at the dock, the lockers stocked for a month-long cruise. Maybe longer. A week from retirement, she thought, with nothing left ahead but endless days of beach walking and sailing and sunsets over islands with names she couldn't pronounce.

The past few months working at the Central Security Service had left her feeling soiled and unkempt, the commute from Annapolis to her

Gaithersburg office pressing permanent wrinkles into her slacks and forehead. The endless hours of data-mining and mapping of terrorist cells hadn't left her any time for running, shopping and swimming. But now the end was here. In seven days, she'd leave the burden of her country's national security in the hands of someone younger, smarter, and more career-minded.

Her Tragus 9555 global satellite phone began to chirp. She drained the rest of her cola and reached into her purse, flipped open the cover and pressed the SEND key.

"Anna Fortune."

"Is this line secure?"

"Call you right back, chief."

Anna killed the call and began rummaging through her wallet, searching for the new security code. She hated the new protocol, the numerous layers of encryption and the way the cumbersome black phone clashed with her ensemble. But what choice did she have? Now that Homeland Security required all employees to use the new 256-bit key coder she was constantly hanging up, getting hung up on, or hooking up with the wrong party. She punched in the code and rang her boss.

"You may be nearing retirement, Fortune, but don't forget you still work for the Federal Government."

"I know, sir."

"Can't have these calls traced."

"Understood."

"The American tax payers have spent a lot of money so our agency can speak—"

"Sir, was there a reason you called?"

“Wild Bill Boggs? Know him?”

“First term congressman from Texas? Running for president?” Anna felt her stomach tighten. “What about him?”

“Dated once, didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t call it a date. We were on the same cruise ship. He had a state-room overlooking the pool. I slept in a bunk above the engine room. He probably wouldn’t remember me.”

“Oh, he remembers you, all right. Called to ask if you were available for a little undercover work. His words, not mine. He’s got another of his fund-raising junkets planned for this weekend in the Bahamas.”

“You want me to babysit Boggs?”

“When you put it that way...yes. That’s exactly what I want you to do.”

“Why me?”

“Why not? We’re hip-deep in more important things like tracking Al-Qaeda, Al Roker’s calorie intake and Al Franken’s visits to the men’s room. Anyway, think of this assignment as a vacation.”

“I don’t need a vacation. Not when I’m days away from retirement. What’s Boggs doing in the Bahamas, anyway? Shouldn’t he be on the campaign trail?”

“Speaking at the Diana Cole Smyth memorial and ribbon cutting ceremony.”

“You mean the ex-stripper who overdosed on diet pills?”

“Apparently they were close,” her boss added.

“You’re asking me to shadow a congressman while he goes to a stag party?”

“The woman’s dead, Fortune. Show some respect.”

“But it’s Boggs, sir.”

"Look, you need to get over yourself. I'm sure he picked you for your counter-surveillance skills, not your looks."

"Thanks."

"Your flight leaves out of BWI at 3:10 p.m."

"Are you serious? I can't make that. Traffic will be insane this hour of the day..."

"Then you better hurry."

"Can't I fly out in the morning?"

"There's a tropical storm brewing down there. Who knows if there'll even be any flights tomorrow? The place you're heading is off the beaten path, which is saying a lot given how off-beat the Bahamas are in the first place. Oh, and one other thing. You should know there's been a lot of chatter coming out of Central America."

Anna crunched ice and swallowed. "And?"

"That's it. Just chatter."

"I don't understand, sir."

"Do I have to spell it out for you? The bad guys are talking."

"About?"

"We don't know. That's what chatter means. Just be careful. I don't want anything to happen to Boggs. He could be the next president of the United States."

"But isn't he polling in the single digits?"

"What can I say? It's politics. People change. Voters vacillate. Pundits push agendas. Remember what happened to JFK?"

"You're not suggesting someone might try to kill Boggs, are you?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of Kennedy and Monroe with you playing the part of Marilyn."

"I'll phone you when I get there, sir. And just

make sure Human Resources has my retirement package ready to sign when I get back.

"You mean if you get back."

Click.

3

Anna stood at the end of a short line of passengers standing outside the terminal of the Cockroach Cay International Airport. Behind her, turbo-prop engines revved as a flight bound for West Palm Beach taxied to the end of the runway. She shifted the strap of her knapsack and stepped forward, inching closer to the door leading to customs and immigration.

Rain dripped from the eaves of the roof, leaving silver puddles in cracks of gray concrete. A boom box blasted hip-hop music. Baggage handlers tossed luggage onto a green linoleum floor. Anna claimed her duffle bag from among the pile of duct-taped coolers, fishing rods, and battered suitcases. She proceeded through the luggage inspection area and got her passport stamped. Outside she surveyed the fleet of microbus vans parked at the curb. What she needed now was a dry room, a warm shower and long nap.

Across the road in a muddy parking lot, a blue vintage Chevy BelAir station wagon flashed its headlights. The driver, a young black male with corn-rowed hair pulled into the circle, parked, and placed Anna's bags in the back. Anna opened the rear passenger door and slid in.

"Sea Grape Motel, right?" the driver asked.

"How did you know?"

He held up a photographed copy of her