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SNATCH

by **Gregory McDonald**

A HARD CASE



CRIME NOVEL

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SNATCHED

(THE FIRST SNATCH)

*Dedicated to several women
I have been lucky to know,
who have taught me from their
courage, strength and wisdom.*

One

“Is the Ambassador there?”

“I’m sorry. The Ambassador is in conference.”

“This is Mrs. Rinaldi, Sylvia. Calling from California.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mrs. Rinaldi. One moment.”

Across the airport corridor from her was a bookstore. People with luggage at their feet, some with packages under their arms, were browsing. Moving themselves and their luggage a few steps, stopping, taking a book off the rack, looking at it, perhaps keeping it in hand, perhaps putting it back, moving another few steps, sometimes moving back to take a book they had already returned to the rack: they were doing a dance, really, a slow dance with books as partners.

“Christina?”

She turned to face the inside of the phone booth.

“Are you having a good time at your tennis camp? How’s your serve coming?”

“Teddy,” she said, “What’s the change of plans? I’m at the airport in San Francisco now.”

“What change of plans?”

“Toby wasn’t on the plane.”

From behind his desk in his United Nations office, Ambassador Teodoro Rinaldi glanced expressionlessly at the three members of his staff sitting comfortably around the room, notes and note pads on their laps. None looked at him. Unrealistically, politely, they were trying to grant the Ambassador a private conversation with his wife.

In his own head, a distant alarm bell sounded—just once. It was the sound he had been half expecting every moment of his professional life.

Even in front of his own staff he must be careful in what he was to say now.

The Ambassador said to his wife, "Tell me about it."

"Flight 203," she said, "New York to San Francisco, Brandt Airlines, arriving three fifty-three P.M."

"Yes...." he said.

"They were supposed to deliver Toby to the V.I.P. lounge. I was there in plenty of time."

"I see."

"They didn't bring Toby to the lounge. The plane arrived. I watched the electronic board. I waited a half hour, forty minutes, thinking there might be a baggage delay. No Toby. What plane is he on?"

The Ambassador looked at his watch. It was five eighteen in California. His wife's alarm had been growing for almost an hour. She was doing well.

He said, "There had been no change of plans, as far as I know."

"But, Teddy. There must have been."

"What have you done so far?" he asked.

"I explained the situation to the head stewardess in the V.I.P. lounge. She brought me to the manager. The Brandt Airlines manager here. A Mr. Swenson. He was very kind. He was able to tell me Toby's plane reservation was canceled last night. In New York."

"He said what?"

"Why didn't you have someone tell me?"

The Ambassador said, "Hold on one moment." He depressed the intercommunication-system button on his desk and spoke to his secretary: "Sylvia, what plane was my son, Toby, on to California?"

"Brandt Airlines Flight 203," she answered. "Arriving San Francisco International at three fifty-three this afternoon."

"Would you please call Mrs. Brown at the Residence and confirm that Toby got off all right?" From across his office, the Embassy's chief of Public Relations, Ria Marti, looked up at him sharply. The Ambassador said evenly, "There seems to be some delay."

The secretary said, "Yes, sir."

Into the phone the Ambassador said to his wife, "I'm sure there's just some mix-up, Christina. I'm having Sylvia call Mrs. Brown."

"Teddy, Mr. Swenson—the Brandt Airlines manager here—

wasn't able to tell me what plane Toby is on. He said the reservation was simply canceled. He said there is no reservation for Toby Rinaldi on any Brandt Airlines flight today, tomorrow, whenever...."

"The airlines are very careful about these things...." The Ambassador knew that in talking he simply was filling up empty air. He was confronted with two sets of facts that did not jibe. He said, "Hold on." The light of another telephone line on his desk was flashing.

Through the intercom, Sylvia said, "Mrs. Brown is on three, Mr. Ambassador."

"Thank you." The Ambassador put his wife's call on hold and pushed the button for extension 353.

"Mrs. Brown? Did Toby get off all right?"

"Of course."

"You got him to the airport on time?"

"Plenty of time. He even insisted on my sittin' down with a cup of tea. A born diplomat, like his father, sir, I tell you."

"Did someone meet you at the airport?"

"Yes, sir. A young man. From the airlines."

"Did Toby have Mrs. Rinaldi's telephone number at the tennis camp in California?"

"Oh, he had everything, sir. The airlines sent a complete packet, you know, I had to fill out, for sending a child alone on an airplane. Names, addresses, numbers to call, allergies, if any, if the child is a particular eater, please state, Toby's name tag, everything."

"What did the name tag say, Mrs. Brown?"

"It was from the airlines, sir. Well, it said, printed out, you know, I'M BRANDT AIRLINES CAPTAIN and then I had printed in TOBY RINALDI...FLYING FLIGHT 203 TO SAN FRANCISCO and then today's date, sir. It had a picture of an airlines captain's hat in the upper left-hand corner."

"What was the last you saw of Toby?"

"Why, going through the security systems, sir. Toby was real disappointed he couldn't make the warning buzzer go off. Mr. Ambassador, there isn't anything wrong, is there?"

"No," he said too quickly.

"How could there be?" she said. "He was in the charge of airlines people. If they don't know how to put someone on an airplane, I don't know who would. His mother was meeting him in San Francisco."

"Quite right," the Ambassador said. "You haven't heard from the airlines or anyone else since you got home?"

"Well, I did, sir. The carpet-cleaning company. You know, the company that picked up the carpets for cleaning? Their manager called. Fairly choking, he was. He said they could never take responsibility for such priceless carpets. He said we should have told him what they were before they picked them up. He said if we couldn't prove they were heavily insured and—what did he say?—that our insurance policy extended to cover him, he was going to deliver the carpets back to us by five o'clock tonight. Uncleaned. How do you like them green apples, Ambassador? I was about to call you about it."

"I don't know..." he said absently. Without intending to, Mrs. Brown was giving him time to think. He was not thinking well.

"What am I to do about the carpets, Mr. Ambassador?"

"I don't know."

"Well, they'll deliver them back—"

"Fine," he said. "Right."

"Mr. Ambassador, there's nothing wrong, is there?"

"Absolutely not."

"Toby wasn't sick on the plane, or anything? All he had at the airport was orange juice."

"Everything's fine, Mrs. Brown. I expect I'll be in at my usual time."

"Should I try to call Mrs. Rinaldi in California about the carpets?"

"No," the Ambassador said. "Mrs. Rinaldi will be out of touch most of the afternoon."

He pushed the flashing button to extension 351.

"Christina?"

"Teddy? I'm a little worried."

He looked around the office at his staff. Each was quietly

reviewing notes on United Nations Resolution 1176R—the culmination of years of intense diplomatic effort and, finally, negotiation; His Majesty's sole object of desire; a few words, really, that would do more than warships and tanks and planes to keep the Persian Gulf open for the flow of oil to the free world. They were only pretending not to hear his conversation.

Slowly, the Ambassador said to his wife, "I understand."

She said, "You mean there is reason to be worried?"

"Listen, Christina, I suggest you do the obvious, simple things." He had learned the wisdom of keeping people busy in a crisis. "Look around the airport, especially the baggage areas, the snack bars."

She said, "Yes."

"Have Brandt Airlines page Toby. That's simple. The kid knows his own name."

"Teddy, Mr. Svenson said Toby wasn't aboard that airplane. His reservation had been canceled."

He said, "I understand."

"Oh, my God! Teddy!"

Quietly, he said, "That's right."

"Oh, God!"

"Call me back in an hour or so," he said. "I won't leave the office."

He hung up and pushed the intercom button. "Sylvia, call Brandt Airlines and see if that plane Toby was on to California was a through flight. Make sure it didn't stop in Chicago, or wherever."

"It was scheduled as a through flight, Mr. Ambassador. That's why we put Toby on it."

"I see. Nevertheless, make sure the plane didn't land anywhere between here and San Francisco."

"Yes, sir."

The Ambassador sat back in his swivel chair and smiled blankly at his staff.

"Mrs. Brown seems to be having a domestic crisis," he said slowly. "Something about carpets. Getting carpets cleaned."

He blinked at their stares.

"Nevertheless, I think I shall suspend this conference for the moment...."

The three staff members obediently put their papers in order and stood up.

“His Majesty’s carpets may seem a small matter next to Resolution 1176R, but they are national treasures.”

The Ambassador knew his dissembling was being ignored.

Ria Marti came to his desk and waited until the others had left the office.

She said, “Toby isn’t missing, is he?”

He said, “This is about carpets, Ria. Embassy carpets.”

“Mr. Ambassador.” Ria was scrupulous about using his title in the Embassy offices and almost always at the Residence. “If this is about Toby, you’ve got to keep me informed from the very beginning. The press would be the hounds of hell on a matter of this sort.”

Ambassador Teodoro Rinaldi smiled the smile that he knew had won more negotiations for him than all His Majesty’s faith and power.

“Ria,” he said, “skies may crumble and mountains tumble, but our young friend Toby will let nothing stand in the way of his trip to Fantazyland.”

He saw that using his smile on her had convinced her that something was wrong.

As she was leaving the office, Sylvia’s voice came over the intercom. “Mr. Ambassador, I’ve called Brandt Airlines. They have confirmed their Flight 203 today did not make a stop between New York and San Francisco. The plane landed at San Francisco International a few minutes ahead of schedule.”

“Thank you.” He kept his finger on the button. “Sylvia, get me His Majesty on the scrambler phone as quickly as possible. This is an emergency.”