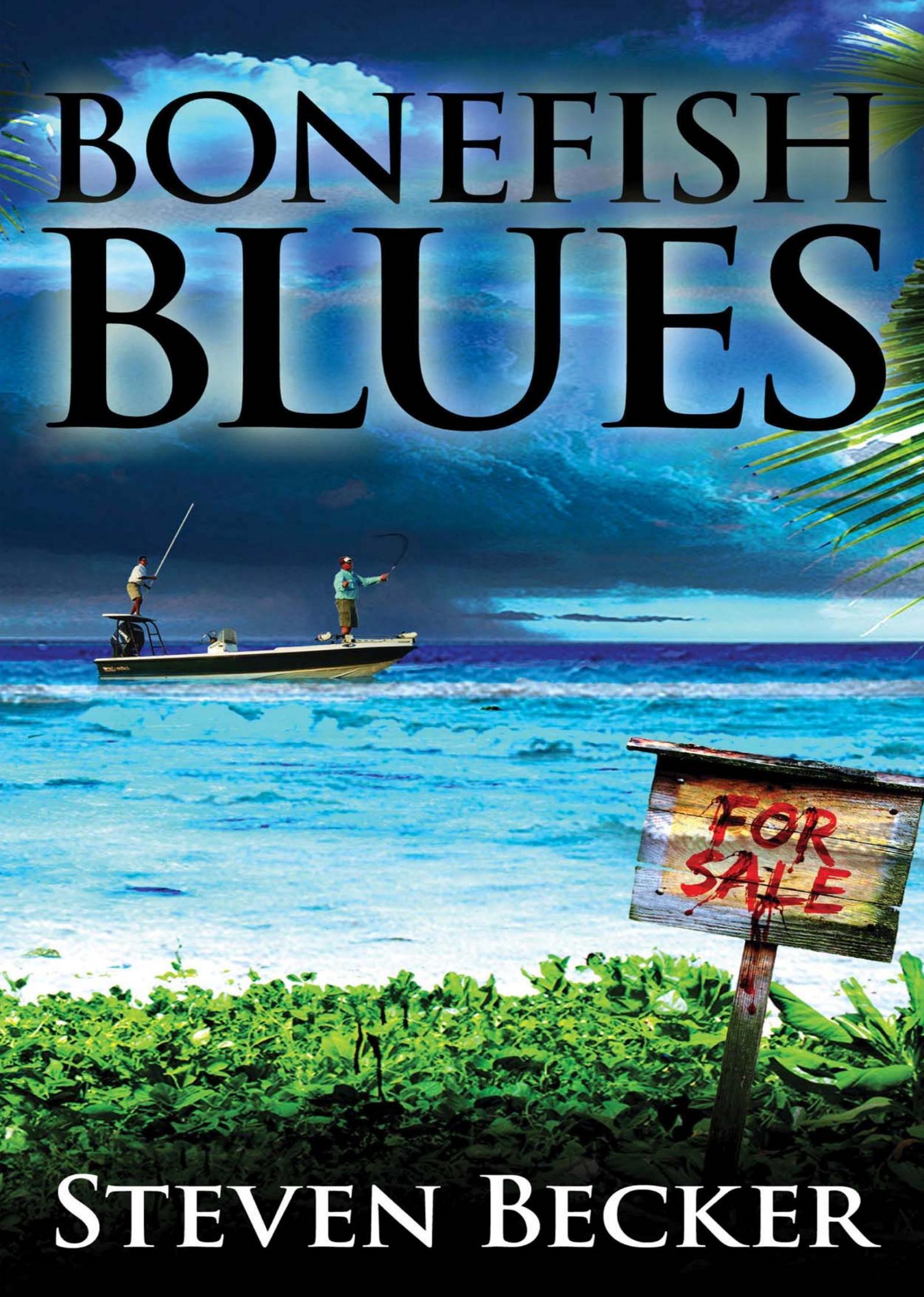


BONEFISH BLUES

A tropical beach scene with a boat and fishermen. The sky is a vibrant blue with some clouds. In the foreground, there is a wooden sign on a post that says "FOR SALE" in red letters. The sign is surrounded by green foliage. In the middle ground, a small boat is on the water with two people on board. One person is standing and holding a long pole, while the other is sitting and holding a fishing net. The water is a deep blue with white waves breaking on the shore.

STEVEN BECKER

Bonefish Blues

By
Steven Becker

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Chapter 1

Joey Pagliano opened the trunk and pulled the body onto the gravel driveway.

“That’s the third one this month,” Eli Braken said as he puffed furiously on his cigar to cover the smell of the bloated body. “We can’t keep dumping your trash out there.”

Pagliano ignored him and went to the storage room. “Did you get the ice like I asked or are you just going to stand there and preach?” He emerged with a large canvas bag used to preserve tournament fish.

Braken opened the trunk of the Cadillac and removed two bags of ice and set them next to the body. “Just saying. We have plans for that island. You keep bringing bodies down here and someone finds out it could blow the whole deal.”

Pagliano tried to control his temper. Dumping bodies in Miami had gotten tricky. In the past he had taken his victims out to the Everglades but the once deserted swamp had turned into an eco-tourist park in the last few years. Cement shoes had gone out of vogue as well with South Beach’s resurgence. You couldn’t get out one of the cuts leading to the Atlantic without a tourist training their binoculars on you. Even the backwaters of Homestead were constantly patrolled by Fish and Game officers.

The Gulf side of the Keys was too vast to patrol and tourists rarely ventured onto the unmarked shoal ridden shallows. Flamingo Key was the best option whether Braken liked it or not. The deserted island with its abandoned septic tanks was the perfect dumping spot.

“Cody’s out on a charter. We won’t be able to dump it until tomorrow.” “Just shut up and help me,” Pagliano said as he dragged the body

toward the bag. Braken reluctantly came over to help stuff the body in. They added ice and lifted it back into the trunk. “It’s not like he’s not dead already.”

The fin sliced through the water as the fish cruised the flat. Will saw it before the man did, his view from the poling platform of the flats boat giving him an advantage. “There,” he whispered, as if the fish could hear him from fifty feet. “Lead him with the fly.”

The fly line was pooled on the deck around the man’s feet. Will grimaced, already knowing the outcome but unable to correct him, as the man lifted line off the water and swung the rod back over his head for the back cast. The cast went too far back and snagged in the mangroves lining the shore of the small island known as Flamingo Key. Frustrated, he looked at Will, “I can’t get this right.”

Will poled the boat toward the bank to retrieve the fly, shaking his head; the fish was gone. “It’s hard. But when you hook that first fish, it’ll all be worth it.” The boat edged toward the bush where the fly was hooked and he gently reached over, pulling the offending branch toward him and removing the hook. Pole in hand, he moved the boat toward the feeding fish. “Let’s do a couple more practice casts off to the side. Get your rhythm back.”

He moved the boat further away from the mangroves and nosed it into the current. Another boat, all too familiar to him, was fishing a quarter mile off the point. It had the familiar outline of a

cuddy cabin probably Cody Braken's Grady- White. Will wondered why Cody fished that spot so often. He had checked it out; the bottom was sandy there, barren of the rocks or coral that attracted fish. He knew Cody was lazy, but there was no way someone with his experience as a charter captain would fish there. He squinted into the sun and watched them; rods bent over, rejoicing as the fish came over the side of the boat. He shrugged his shoulders and wondered again what made that spot so special.

The line snapping back and forth as the man practiced brought him back to the present he released more line with each cast. Will watched with feigned interest. He'd been here and done that with rookie anglers for years. Fly fishing was not rocket science, but it took practice. A thousand good casts and you had a chance at being somewhat competent. It was playing the law of averages. He knew the man would eventually get a good cast to the right spot, and — fish gods willing — hook the fish. He looked up at the cloudless sky, the color a pale blue, perfectly accenting the water, and hoped the gods had heard his plea. As if on cue, the man pulled back on the rod, lucky not to pull the hook from the fish.

"Got one!" he said.

Will's eyes followed the fluorescent green fly line to where it disappeared in the water. He watched several feet of line peel off the rod as the fish ran. The dorsal fin rose as it dove attempting to shake the hook.

Satisfied it was hooked well, he moved his gaze toward the rod. The nine- weight rod was bent double but was suitable for the task.

"Easy, don't yank on it. It's a nice fish, and you're going to have to fight it on the reel." The man looked at him, confused, line pooled at his feet. "Loosen up your right hand and let him take some line if he wants, while you reel the extra line on with your left hand." Often smaller fish could be brought in by hand-lining the loose line. In this case, Will knew the angler would need the assistance of the drag the reel provided to tire the fish enough to land it.

The man returned his gaze to the reel. His right hand, holding the line pinched against the rod, eased slightly, allowing the fish to take some line and run instead of meeting resistance and either breaking off or shaking the hook.

Will noticed the fish start to sense the lack of pressure. "A little harder, and bring the rod to the side a little, not overhead." He watched as the man followed his directions. It would be a constant adjustment of give and take until the man had the line on the reel and the mechanical drag could take over. Until then, the inexperienced angler would have to sense when to loosen and tighten the line against the rod as the fish moved. Either too loose or too tight, and the fish would be gone. Slowly, the man got comfortable with his right hand and started winding the line on the deck onto the reel with his left. Will breathed a sigh of relief once all the line was on the reel and the angler was able to fight the fish with the reel's drag.

"Got him now," the man exclaimed, relief evident in his voice.

He adjusted the drag and started to bring the fish toward the boat.

Now, when it wanted to run, the drag set on the reel would handle it evenly. It took several long minutes before they could see a flash of silver come parallel with the boat, and when it did, Will knelt on the deck and reached both hands in the water.

"OK, step back with the rod and bring him to me."

The man took two steps backward as the fish slid over Will's waiting hands. Once the creature was above both open palms, he raised them and plucked the fish from the water, then grabbed the mouth of the twenty-four- inch fish and held it for the man to see. The reddish scales glittered in the sun, the dark spot above the tail easily identifying it as a redfish.

"Wow. Nice fish, and dammed more fun than catching it on a spinning reel with a shrimp on the end of the line."

Those were the words Will longed to hear that made his career as a charter captain worthwhile — justification for everything he did bringing novice fly fishermen out, tying their flies on the line, managing tangles and removing wayward hooks. He held the mouth pinched between two fingers and went to his belt for his pliers. The fly pulled easily from the fish's mouth, and he handed it back to the happy angler.

“Lefty’s Deceiver. Works every time.” With that, the fish went into the box. Flats fishing in the Florida Keys brought in both edible and sport fish, the redfish a very desirable catch. A quick look to the west showed the sun about a hand and a half above the horizon; roughly an hour and a half until it set.

The man followed his gaze, grinning. “That made my day. We can head in anytime.”

Will knew better than to push too far. Pulling the plug and heading in after a catch was the best way to end a charter. If they continued, the man would quickly forget the thrill of the catch after another inevitable mess of tangled line ensued; and that would certainly ruin the day.

He breathed out, knowing they’d been fortunate to hook up this close to slack tide. The twenty two foot push pole used to move the boat through the shallow water was vertical in its deck fitting, anchoring the boat against the gentle current, the water barely making a wake against it. He secured the pole in its holder, went to the console and started the engine. One hand pushed the throttle forward as the other turned the wheel toward the west. Seconds later, the wind blew through his hair as the boat went onto plane, skimming over the small waves. The flats of Flamingo Key receded behind them.

Russell Key was the first landmark, with Stirrup Key jutting out in the distance. Will held the course straight from the shallow flat off Bamboo Key to Stirrup Key. There he turned the wheel to the left and ran parallel with the mainland. Once past the airport, he slowed the boat and turned toward a small canal. The man-made canals, blasted in the 1960s and 70s, provided access to many of the areas that had been previously landlocked by shallow water.

“Got a couple of beers in the cooler,” he shouted to his client. “Sure, sounds good,” the man said, gratefully reaching down and grabbing a dripping can of Yuenling. “Took me a while to get the hang of it, but that was everything I expected and more. What a rush.”

Will let the man revel in his victory as he navigated the canal. The boat idled to the dock where he skillfully cut the engine, reached over for the line sitting on the dock and tied the boat off. He repeated the procedure on the stern and hopped onto the dock.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER



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