



A MAC TRAVIS ADVENTURE

WOOD'S RELIIC

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By
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Chapter 1

The only thing separating the two men was two feet of water. Wood struggled with the wheel and throttle, fighting the wind to keep the barge as close to the seawall as possible. And it was a good thing, too, because if he could have reached Eli Braken, he would have strangled him. As it was, he could only hold the piece of hydraulic hose in his hand.

"Somebody cut this. It didn't just blow."

"You're drunk again, Wood. Hell, it's only a hair past noon!" Braken yelled into the wind. "I need you to get this job back on track, or I'm pulling the plug on your contract and cutting you loose."

Wood put his head down. He was standing at the helm of the barge, shirtless, his overalls covered in grease -- what the hell did a few drinks matter? He was working his butt off to get the bridge section rebuilt. Desperate to pay his bills after his insurance company had cancelled his policy, he was forced to take smaller less profitable jobs, instead of bidding the larger projects that required bonding. The deepwater span he was working on between Big Pine and No Name Key had been damaged by a wayward boat blown loose from its mooring. A casualty of Hurricane Andrew. The insurance company had blamed the failure of the span on his construction, further infuriating him. "I'll get 'er done, Braken. You know I always do."

"You always did you mean," Braken said. "I get that you can't get bonded, and you're mad at the world, but I'm giving you work here. The insurance companies are screwing everyone, not just you, to try and recover their losses from the storm. I'm sorry this came down on you." Braken leaned into the wind. "You know if it was just me I would cut you some slack, but I've got investors on this project to keep happy."

Wood was not placated. "This wind's killing me. No way I can work in these conditions. How 'bout we meet at your office, and I can get that draw you owe me." Losing his insurance in the wake of the storm had been bad luck. Damned adjustors, blaming his work when a stray boat had crashed into the bridge pile.

Every other project he'd built in the last twenty years had survived the storm unscathed. This one bridge section was the only failure, and that had been due to a boat, not the construction. Now without the ability to bid the larger projects he was known for, equipment sat idle, their payment books stacked on his desk at home. He thought about the money now past due to the IRS -- for withholding taxes on his employees prior to the storm -- and clenched his fists. Of course, to make matters worse, the bank had followed the insurance company and cancelled his line of credit.

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled back on the throttle and the twin engines went into reverse, pulling him away from the seawall. The boat coasted back to the deeper

water, where he turned the wheel and headed south toward Bogie Channel which led to his mooring in Spanish Harbor.

Braken stood on the seawall, hands on hips, glaring at him.

Water crashed over the low freeboard as the barge moved slowly through the building chop. The rig was dangerous in this kind of water; a John Deere excavator sat on the bow and a shipping container on the stern. The twenty-by-fifty steel hull floated on two pontoons, with a Mercury 115hp engine mounted on each one. Two cylindrical steel spuds, used to anchor the barge, projected twenty feet into the air. A big wave over any quarter could upset the top-heavy craft causing it to capsize.

Wood entered Spanish Harbor and approached the mooring ball. He judged the current wrong on the first pass, and had to circle around, his small aluminum john boat swinging in the current from a line tied to the large white ball. He lined up again and moved forward on the barge, this time setting the engines in neutral earlier, allowing the boat to coast to a stop at the buoy. He grabbed the free line with a fishing gaff and threaded the thicker line from the barge through its eye. Once secure, the barge drifted around the buoy and stopped, bobbing in the swells.

He shut down the engines, drank the last quarter from the beer in the cup holder, and headed for the john boat. As he secured the barge and hopped into the skiff he hoped he could get enough money out of Braken to get his bond reinstated and go back to real jobs.

"Whada ya mean you're not going to pay me?" Wood slurred.

"You better listen to my words. I'll pay you when you catch up to the schedule. You're three weeks behind now. This is costing me money. I can't show the properties on No Name until you finish the bridge."

"What's the rush? There's no power on that hump of coral. How you gonna sell that crap? Anyone around here knows it's about as worthless as tits on a boar."

Braken didn't answer, and the smile on his face was enough to push Wood to the edge. He stood and closed the space to the desk trying to force the response he sought. Without the line of credit his cash flow was non-existent. Braken had been around construction long enough to know that you had to grease the wheels to get things done. With some cash he could hire help and finish the job. As it was there were few skilled workers left, most having gone to Miami where the storm's damage had created a shortage of workers and raised wages. The few guys left insisted on being paid every week, some every day. The only help he had was old Ned, who was good company, but too old to do much work. The small deposit Braken had given him when he started was barely enough to cover the materials he had bought.

"This is your schedule. It's not in my contract, and I didn't sign off on it. There's no weather allowance in here either." He slammed his hand down on the desk. "Never done a job down here without a weather allowance. Look at it out there." He shifted his gaze from the desk, past Braken, and to the window at the bent over palm trees. "It's blowing more than twenty knots, and there's no work when the winds are that high. Been like that for as long as I've been in this game."

"Maybe," Braken said, "but my investors write the checks, and they don't give two shits about the weather here. Just get it done."

Wood snarled. "I got problems here, and you're one of them. And remember, I gave you some slack on the change orders last time you started crying about your investors."

Now, that old pier holding the bridge strut has got to be replaced down to bedrock. That's going to take some blasting and excavation. Then I'm gonna have to find somewhere to dump the debris. Can't leave it there." Now he regretted not being more proactive documenting changes. Some contractors made their living bidding work at cost and counting on the inevitable change orders for their profit. That wasn't his style but he had given Braken a rock bottom price just to get the work.

Braken leaned back, as if he was deep in thought. "I'll go to my investors with that. I can get you something if it'll get you moving. But you gotta get it done."

"You give me ten grand and I'll have it done in a week," Wood boasted, unsure whether he could execute in this time frame without finding a diver and some equipment. The weather report didn't look favorable either, but he'd do whatever it took to get his hands on some cash; whatever promises he had to make, he would. He cursed his pride for getting in the way of his sense.

"Done." Braken went for his checkbook, and started writing slowly. "If this isn't done, there are going to be repercussions. Do you understand me?"

Wood didn't answer. He grabbed the check from Braken's hand, turned, and went out the door. A glance at his watch showed 4:45; he would have to move to get to the bank and cash the check. A list formed in his head as he allocated the money, hoping nothing else would go wrong. With any luck this would get the job finished and pay some of the bills growing dust on his desk.

Rain lashed at him as he made his way to the beat up Datsun pickup. The door squealed on its hinges as it opened. He jumped in and slammed it. The motor started, he rubbed the windshield with the old rag sitting on the dash board, cracked the windows, turned on the wipers, and started out of the parking lot. Traffic was slow, the rain decreasing visibility to a car length. When he finally reached the bank, he got out and ran for the entry.

The teller looked at the damp check, as if waiting for the ink to disappear. "Give me a minute. I have to get Mr. Bailey."

"What for? I've known you since you were knee high to a tire."

"It's a lot of cash. More than my limit." She locked her cash drawer and went toward the back office.

Wood waited impatiently until she returned with the manager.

"What's up, Bill?"

"Mr. Woodson. Can you come back to my office?"

"What's this Mr. Woodson crap?"

"Come on, Wood." They moved toward the back of the bank and entered the sparse office, then sat opposite of each other.

Bailey put his hands on the desk. "Look, Wood. I've got to hold this against your line of credit. You know the bank called it in." He stayed stoic, waiting for the outburst.

"Goddamn bankers and insurance men will see me to my grave. Look, Bill, you know the deal -- I'm never going to be able to pay that back if I can't work. This here check is working capital."

Bailey looked at the check. "It's drawn on the bank across the street." He handed the check back to Wood. "Take it over there and cash it. They'll have to honor it. I never saw it." He winked.

"Preciate that, Bill," Wood got up and went for the door. "I owe you one for this."

He walked toward the door with his head low, as if he had done something wrong. Several minutes later, he emerged from the other bank with a wad of cash in his pocket. Back in the truck, he reached under the seat for the bottle stashed there. He leaned over

and took a long draw off the bourbon before putting the cap on and starting the engine. The gears ground as he released the clutch.

The truck weaved down US1, passing the airport as he headed south. Rain banged on the hood of the truck, the wipers running full out but not making a dent in the increasing torrent. He was forced to slow down and pull off onto the shoulder to wait out the storm. Several other cars had already taken refuge off the same embankment. He reached for the bottle again and drained it while he waited. He had just ducked below the dashboard to stash the empty bottle when a knock on the windshield startled him.

"Hey, man. Can I get a ride up the road?"

"I ain't your man, and I'm going down the road not up."

"Sorry. Just looking for a ride to Key West," the stranger said as he stooped slightly to show his face.

Wood was about to tell him to get lost when he spied the Scuba Pro dive fins sticking out of his backpack. "You ever do any commercial diving?"

"Yeah, man. I'm actually down here looking for work. Got certified in Galveston, and worked on some oil rigs out there. My girlfriend got tired of it and--"

"I didn't ask for your resume. Get on out of the rain." He waited while the stranger tossed his bag in the back of the truck and came around to the passenger door.

When the guy got in the truck, he stuck out his hand. "Mac Travis."

"Well, Mac, whatever, you work for me now." Black smoke erupted from the tailpipe as the truck coughed and died. Finally, on the third try, the engine kicked to life, and Wood accelerated onto the wet pavement. He hit the gas, seeming not to notice as a truck swerved out of the right lane to avoid contact.

"Think maybe I should drive?" Mac asked.

"I want you to do something, I'll ask." The slip stream from the semi pushed the smaller truck onto the shoulder, and Wood overcorrected, hitting the curb. He put the truck in park, got out, and went to the passenger door. "In fact, it's been a long day. You can take it from here."

Wood got out of the truck, leaving the door open as he went to the passenger side and waited for Mac to get out. They drove in silence, Wood giving directions to his house, and after a couple minutes, Mac pulled into the driveway, which sat between a stilt house off to one side and a larger garage on the other. Beyond the buildings sat a seawall and dock.

Wood looked over at Mac. "Bring your stuff. You can stay here with my daughter and me for a bit. Don't look like you have too many options."

"Thank you, sir," Mac said as he got out of the truck and grabbed his bag from the back.

"Ever call me sir again, I'll clock you upside the head." Wood led the way up the stairs, Mac following behind with the large bag over his shoulder. He waited patiently, watching Wood stumble several times before he reached the front door, which opened just as he reached out his hand.

"Dad, not again," said the teenage girl.

Wood rose. "Melanie, don't give me no lip. It's been a bad day."

"And who's this you dragged home?" "Huh, oh... Name's Travis or something. He's going to be staying with us until he can get situated."

"Well hello, whoever you are, and thanks for getting him home, but I think you need to find somewhere else to camp out." She yanked Wood into the house.

Wood turned toward the open door. "Sit tight for a minute. I'll at least offer you a beer." He turned and went inside, Mel following behind. In the kitchen, he opened the

refrigerator door and took out two beers. "Listen, don't take me for no fool. Just 'cause you're seventeen and all, doesn't mean you know everything." He popped one of the tops. "Did you see the dive fins sticking out of his pack?" He didn't wait for an answer. "No, because you were too busy criticizing me. Now, turns out he's a commercial diver. Think that might come in handy to have close by?"

"It scares me to have a stranger living here. You don't even know his name."

"Point is, girl, there won't be a here to live in if we can't get this job done, and that old boy there could be exactly what we need." He went back to the door without waiting for an answer, and turned toward her before he opened it. "Set him up in the guest room." He yanked open the door and handed Mac the beer. "Welcome home."

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER



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