

Prologue

Deep within the murky, unlit darkness of the Caribbean waters skirting the northern tip of the Lesser Antilles, the stocky shadow of a catamaran powerboat rocked against a wooden pier off the tiny island of St. John.

The short length of the boat was built up over its center, providing an elevated captain's tower and, beneath, a small rounded cargo hold fitted with benches for passenger seating. A line of red letters in bold block print ran across the vessel's white-painted side. The text spelled out WATER TAXI.

The captain glanced impatiently at the empty dock and the path leading up to the sprawling resort laid out across the hillside above. He had a schedule to keep, and he was anxious to depart. But his last passenger was still en route, somewhere within the mass of palm trees and dense vegetation surrounding the cove. She had reportedly run back to fetch a forgotten item.

The captain skimmed the tip of his tongue over the plump surface of his upper lip as he surveyed the two passengers already on board. They were seated several feet apart on a bench that lined the boat's open back landing.

On the far right side of the bench sat a fleshy, pear-shaped man in a sweaty golf shirt and wrinkled chinos. He was a computer programmer, according to the resort manager who had scheduled the pickup. The resort's parent company had brought the man in to set up their Wi-Fi Internet system. With his work now complete, the programmer was on his way to the St. Thomas airport, where a series of red-eye flights would carry him to the next vacation destination in line for his specialized services. Following the prescribed protocol, the programmer had been waiting dutifully by the dock when the water taxi arrived.

The captain's eyes passed critically over the programmer's bulging form. This porky, pigeon-eyed man would look out of place, the captain thought, anywhere other than in front of a computer terminal. The shape of his body appeared to have evolved



over many years of desk work, melding into a lumpy hump of colorless, amoeba-like flesh that could instantly surround and engulf a computer's console.

Even in the cool nighttime breeze, the programmer's pouchy skin glistened with a shiny layer of sweat. The captain watched as the man folded the puffy, swollen mitts of his hands and rested them on the uppermost roll of his stomach, sedate and seemingly unbothered by the delay. The round lenses of his wire-rim glasses stared, unseeing, into the blue blackness of the liquid night.

The programmer let out a tired yawn. He'd been bouncing around the Caribbean for several weeks now, and the endless stream of exotic island locations had begun to blur together. To his travel-glazed eyes, one hotel complex nestled beneath a cluster of planted palm trees looked pretty much the same as the next.

The programmer wiped the back of his hand across his damp forehead. He'd put on clean clothes not more than an hour ago, but already the cotton fabric of his collared shirt had begun to cling to his chest. He wasn't cut out for all this heat and humidity, he thought wearily.

A drop of perspiration slid across the bridge of the programmer's nose as he glanced down at his watch. They were running late, but not unusually so.

Everything in the Caribbean, it seemed, ran on a laid-back, unrushed, "island time" schedule. There was no use trying to fight the delay—he knew from long experience.

After the events of the last couple days, he was more than ready to get off this island, but the boat, he reasoned, would leave soon enough. He shifted his weight, trying to ease his back into a more comfortable position against the rounded curve of the bench, and closed his eyelids with an air of resigned acceptance.

The captain grunted testily and turned his gaze to the boat's second passenger. The elderly cleaning lady had been a last-minute addition to his roster. What was her name again? Beulah. That was it. Beulah. The captain angled his brawny arms out in front of his chest as he studied the feeble crimp of her body.

The old woman was but one of the hundreds of day laborers who supported the island's booming tourism and hospitality industry. The majority of this workforce lived on the neighboring island of St. Thomas, where low-income housing, however meager, was at least available, and the cost of goods and services, while still island-inflated, was somewhat more manageable.

Each day, a lumbering fleet of ferryboats shuttled the workers back and forth across the Pillsbury Sound, dropping them off in Cruz Bay on the west end of St. John in the morning, returning them to Red Hook on the east side of St. Thomas in the evening. Occasionally, circumstances arose that prevented one or more of the workers from making it to the last departing ferry, so their employer arranged for their passage back to St. Thomas on one of the private water taxis that filled in the late-night gaps in the ferry schedule.



Beulah had hobbled down to the pier just as the water taxi pulled up to the dock. She was the one who had reported the delay of the third passenger, the captain remembered with an irritated *thunk* of his thumb against the side of the boat. That girl had better hurry up. She was throwing off the entire night's schedule.

The old woman appeared distressed by her impending ride on the water taxi. Her bony face was drawn and pinched, her dark skin tinted with a grayish hue of concern. She crossed her arms over her chest and cupped her hands around the pointed tips of her frail shoulders.

"Ohhhh, no . . .," she muttered, her voice rhythmic in its lilting Caribbean dialect. "What-ter taxi . . . what-ter taxi . . . ohhh, no . . ."

The maid shook her head, as if trying to rid her mind of an unpleasant image. Her stiff, arthritic hands reached up and fretfully pulled on the frizzled gray wisps of her hair. Her muttering voice continued its singsong lament. "*Eye doon nut lyke thuh what-ter taxi . . .*"

Crazy old bag doesn't like my water taxi, the captain silently translated and rolled his eyes. The corners of his mouth curled into a slight grimace. She could bloody well swim across to Red Hook, then.

The captain slapped one of his muscular hands against the top of the nearest railing. His fingers wrapped around the curve of the piped trim; his smooth ebony skin stretched across the healthy bulge of his bicep.

What was keeping that woman? He couldn't afford to wait much longer.

A slender female figure sprinted across the resort's manicured grounds, her path marked by the soft glow of the intermittent lanterns that lined the concrete curb of the trail. The soles of her sandals slapped against the walkway's red brick surface as she passed through a cluster of villas and headed toward the wooden dock where, she hoped, the water taxi would still be waiting.

The woman clutched the handle of a small blue satchel in her left hand. The nylon bag swung wildly back and forth as she sped around a corner, startling a large iguana whose three-foot length skittered beneath the nearest hydrangea. From the safety of the bush, the giant lizard rose up on its crooked front legs and billowed out the frilly collar of loose skin that hung beneath its stubby neck.

The creature's affronted gesture was lost on the woman who had so rudely interrupted its nighttime stroll; she was already twenty yards farther down the path.

The air was moist with the forecast of a coming rain; its heavy, damp presence blanketed the resort. As the trail opened out onto a sloping green lawn, the storm's first sprinkling drops began to fall, pattering like the light drumroll of fingertips across the woman's shoulders, spattering over the cinnamon sun-kissed tops of her feet, dotting the flowering spin of her chiffon sundress.

A member of the grounds crew drove up beside her in one of the resort's ubiquitous motorized golf carts. He motioned for her to climb into the passenger seat beside him.



“Don’t worry, Hannah,” he assured her with a wink as the cart whizzed off down the path. “He will wait.”

The captain huffed a sigh of relief when he saw the golf cart carrying his last passenger motoring down the dock.

“Come on, then,” he bellowed as the cart screeched to a halt beside the boat.

Hannah clambered out of the cart’s front passenger seat and lunged toward the edge of the water taxi. The captain grabbed her forearm as she stepped off the pier and firmly pulled her into the swaying boat. She quickly took a seat on the back bench in between the other two passengers.

Still clutching the nylon satchel, Hannah took in a deep breath and pushed back the sweaty mass of her curly dark hair. She ran her hands over the ruffled folds of her dress, trying to smooth out the wrinkles as she worked to calm her racing pulse.

The captain wasted no time in departing. Revving the engine, he steered the boat toward the mouth of the cove.

The black silk of the water lapped at the pointed prongs of the catamaran’s bow, drawing the boat into the slippery crease of its thick, sensuous folds. Despite the glow of the numerous lights affixed to the masthead, sides, and stern, the misting darkness quickly swallowed the vessel whole.

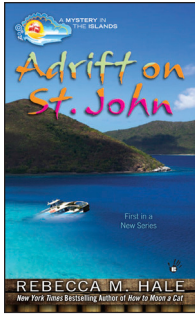
As the boat’s rudder met the rougher sea of the Pillsbury Sound, the hoarse voice of the elderly cleaning woman rose above the humming *pat-a-tat-tat* of the motor. Her dry, blistered lips smacked against the ending consonant of each syllable, making her thickly accented words difficult to distinguish.

After several repetitions, Hannah managed to make out the woman’s mournful refrain. She closed her eyes as the small boat bounced across the current, but the old woman’s haunting, singsong voice filled her ears with its chilling chant.

*“What-ter taxi . . . what-ter taxi . . . ohhh, no . . .
Eye doon nut lyke thuh what-ter taxi . . .
Beeg sheep go down slowe . . .
Small sheep go down fest . . .
Eye wurk und Eye wurk,
But steel Eye’ve gut to tek thuh what-ter taxi . . .
Ack, Eye doon nut lyke the what-ter taxi . . .”
Water taxi . . . water taxi . . . oh, no . . .*

*I do not like the water taxi . . .
Big ship go down slow . . .
Small ship go down fast . . .
I work and I work,
But still I’ve got to take the water taxi . . .
Ack, I do not like the water taxi . . .*





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The Dumpster Table

The old woman had been right to worry. The water taxi reportedly sprang a leak halfway across the channel to St. Thomas and sank before the nearest Coast Guard vessel could reach it. The captain, the miraculously buoyant computer programmer, and the elderly cleaning woman had all survived by clinging on to the side of a hastily deployed inflatable raft. But the third passenger, Hannah Sheridan—a recent employee at my resort—had vanished into the sea.

It was late morning on the island, only a handful of hours after the water taxi's mysterious sinking, and I was already midway through my second cocktail. I sat on a white plastic lawn chair at a table outside a local dive bar called the Crunchy Carrot, waiting for news of the accident to filter through the porous island community of Cruz Bay.

My name is Penelope Hoffstra—at least that's what's printed on the nameplate that sits atop my desk at the resort. It's just plain Pen to everyone here on the island.

It's been four years now since I moved down to St. John, making me a veteran among the island's resident "Continental"—a constantly rotating pool of pale-faced immigrants from the upper forty-eight.

There's no shortage of stateside applicants seeking jobs down here in the Virgins. The promise of an idyllic island lifestyle draws individuals from every social class and background. Once they arrive at their dream location, however, few make it longer than a year.

They all start out the same: so full of hope, so sure they've found paradise. After a couple of weeks, maybe a month or two, it begins to fall apart.

Some discover they actually miss all the mainland conveniences they'd come here to escape. Others run out of money—this isn't an easy place to earn a living, and a dollar doesn't go very far in the way of rent or groceries. Many find themselves feeling trapped on the island's meager landmass, confined by the surrounding acres of uninhabitable sea.

For a small number of us, though, somehow it just fits. As for me, I'll never feel at

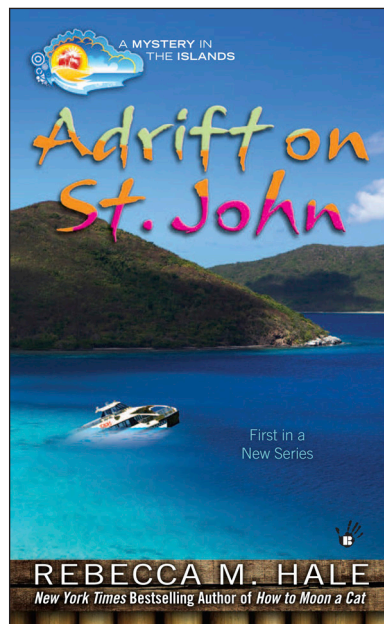


home anywhere else.

I flew down here on a whim, lured by the promise of an exotic, stress-free existence in the tropics. It was an impetuous act, spurred by an unusual relocation proposal from an admittedly questionable source. But before I could talk myself out of it, I'd hopped a flight and disappeared into this tiny U.S. territory ringing the eastern edge of the Caribbean.

The gamble had paid off. I'd never once regretted the decision. My only goal had been to make my time in the islands last for as long as possible...

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