

**Dead Wreckoning Book Excerpt**

1

Sidra Smart sat with her back to the desk staring out the window, watching traces of pink crawl across the southeast Texas sky. A soft click echoed in the office as her index finger flicked across one corner of the envelope in her hand. She shifted her gaze from the brightening sky back down to the letter. The muscles in her shoulders cramped, begging to relax their vigil on her emotions, but she dared not move. Not yet, not with so much at stake. After working under the tutelage of licensed private eye George Léger, she now held the results of her state board exam, and her future, in the palm of her hand, afraid to open the stupid envelope.

“This isn’t the craziest thing you’ve ever done, Sidra Smart,” she said, admonishing herself. “But it sure ranks right up at the top with a couple of other doozies. Whoever heard of a woman, married to a preacher for thirty years, divorcing the guy and then inheriting a private detective business?”

But she had done just that and found not a hen scratch of similarity between the two worlds.

In the first one, her self-appointed instructor-husband required that she be the subservient, inferior wife and play by rules written by the superior gender. Striving for perfection within that role left her with so many religious wounds she felt like she’d survived the Christian Chainsaw Massacre.

In this second world—the private eye one—she’d learned she didn’t have to be perfect

## Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

and didn't have to act like she was, that she had an opinion worth as much as any man's, and she no longer had to act like a lady 24-7 and sit with her knees together. She'd also been shot at, half-drowned, and hung by her wrists—naked—like a beef carcass ready for butchering.

And she'd take this second world any day of the week.

Slider romped into the room. The half-paranoid, half-Chesapeake Bay retriever's snoring had kept her up half the night, but now he pranced in with the energy of a newborn colt.

“Look here, Slider. My test results came in.”

He sauntered over, sniffed the envelope, and lifted his head in the air like some snotty-nosed critter too good to eat dog food. And that part wasn't an act.

“So you think I'm crazy, eh? You think I should forget all of this private eye stuff and take the easy way out. Marry Ben and let him take care of me?”

Slider's front end wagged one way while the back half wagged the other. His tail tried to keep up.

Sid loved Ben Hillerman, but she never should have accepted the engagement ring he slipped on her finger one night. A few weeks later she'd taken it off and stuck it in a drawer when he started talking about her closing the private eye business. With her lack of experience, he said, it was far too dangerous. She'd get herself killed. Well, she too struggled with the thought of a gruesome death.

Then again, she'd never felt so alive.

If her office across the street from the courthouse hadn't been firebombed, she'd still be working there instead of at Annie's ghost-active house, built in the 1850s and known then as the Catfish Hotel. Sid swore that the aroma of fried catfish still wafted down the halls. Which ghost did the cooking—and whether or not they competed with Aunt Annie, the self-proclaimed best

## Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

cook in the south—hadn't yet been determined. What Annie meant, of course, was she cooked better than anyone on the planet.

Slider barked and sniffed at the envelope still in Sid's hand. The envelope that started this whole recall of the craziest things she'd ever done.

"Okay, okay! I'll open it." Holding her breath, she tore into the packet, yanked out the letter and read.

"Seventy-six, Slider, seventy-six!" She chucked him under the chin. "Not bad for a fifty-year old."

Slider glared at her and barked, not once, but twice.

"Okay, okay, fifty-two. Come on, let's go show Annie."

Sid always swore she'd sleep on a bed of fire ants before moving in with her meddlesome, bossy, outlandish-dressing aunt. But when necessity demanded, she'd moved in, and still hadn't slept on that bed of fire ants. She sprinted out of the office and headed to the kitchen, the good news in her hand and Slider at her heels.

"Annie, where are you, sweetheart? Look what came in the mail."

With a patience that put Job to shame, Aunt Annie stood at the stove stirring the dark brown roux for a chicken and sausage gumbo. The heat from the stove left her cropped, bottle-red hair lying in soft curls alongside heavily rouged cheeks. Chesterfield, Annie's cat-with-an-attitude, lay at her feet curled into a fluffy orange ball.

Her aunt wore a bright yellow, long-sleeved top, banded at both wrists and just below her thick belly. Mid-calf-length brown stretch pants clung to spindly legs. Gold-colored tennis shoes completed the picture. Once again, Big Bird had invaded their kitchen.

King Cat—as Sid referred to Chesterfield—half-opened his eyes, apparently irritated at

## Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

the interruption of one of his many naps of the day. He and Slider barely tolerated each other, knowing if they didn't, they'd be banished—the dog outside and the cat to a room by himself. Being alone didn't bother Chesterfield nearly as much as outside bothered Slider, but they'd settled into a grudgingly endured love-hate relationship. The hate usually won out.

Annie gave the contents of the cast iron skillet one more stir and half-turned toward Sid. “What is it, Siddle? I can't stop right now. If I burn this roux, I'll have to start all over again.”

“Look! I passed the exam. I'm now licensed in the state of Texas.” She rattled the sheet of paper in front of Annie, who gave it a quick scan.

“Seventy-six. Humph. You passed all right, but just by the skin of your teeth. Wasn't 75 the cut-off?”

A few months ago, the comment would have sucked the wind right out of Sid's enthusiasm, but not this time. “Hey, the way I see it, passing is passing.” She snatched the paper back and stared at it one more time.

“So what does that mean?” Annie turned off the fire and slowly spooned the roux into the large stock pot. It bubbled, sizzled and splattered all over the stove. Startled, the cat hissed and sprinted out of the kitchen, cursing all three of them.

“It means as soon as the insurance money comes in, I can rebuild the office.”

“That's what I was afraid of.” Annie stared into the pot, stirring fast and rhythmically, her displeasure filling the room. “I was kind of hoping you'd keep the office here. I like having you nearby.” She adjusted the fire to simmer, lidded the pot and wiped her hands on a bright orange kitchen towel. The hot brown mixture released a smell that it would make a milquetoast slap his pappy.

“I know, sweetheart, and I hate to break your heart by relocating my office, but...” Sid

## Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

headed over to the coffee pot and poured a cup. Not that she hadn't had enough caffeine for the day, but if she didn't do something, the black hole descending on the room might swallow her whole. "It'll be okay. You'll see." She took a sip of the strong hot liquid.

Instead of responding to Sid's last remark, Annie hummed and stuck her head in the refrigerator, the message clear. Don't expect her to support the move.

Collecting a stick of butter, Annie closed the refrigerator, marched over to the stove and started into her usual tirade. "And for God's sake, Sid put some color on that white flour hair of yours and, for heaven's sakes, go to the beauty parlor. Cutting your hair with pinking shears is just asking for wood rot."

Sid spun on her heels, certain she'd spilt a couple drops of coffee, but since she was in no mood to look, much less clean it up, she marched straight back to her office.

There, for several marvelous minutes, she sat and stared at the letter, letting every glorious word on the page burrow deep into her opinion of herself.

She was now bona fide. A full-fledged private investigator who, at times, still had no idea what the hell she was doing. She wondered if she had enough years left to ever feel qualified in this strange new world she'd chosen. Then sometimes she felt like she hadn't chosen it at all, that it had chosen her.

As luck would have it, Annie walked in a few minutes later with the newspaper and an attitude. "Wanna see the morning paper?" She offered Sid the bundle, her words as stiff as her back.

"No, not yet, thanks. I'll look at it later. Right now, I've got to make some order out of this desk."

Annie tossed the paper aside and collected a stack of unopened mail. Without stopping to

## Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

read the return address, she rammed the letter opener through the flap on an envelope, slit it open, and slapped it in front of Sid. “I thought you were happy here,” she said, sniffing, her bottom lip stuck out halfway to Mars.

“Oh, honey, don’t be like that,” Sid said. “You know I’ve got to do what’s best for the business. Folks just don’t know we’re here. The Third Eye needs visibility, or I’ll never make a go of it.”

“But this works so well for *me*. I can cook and help you in the office at the same time.”

Sid picked up the top envelope, pulled out the enclosure and stared at it slack-jawed. “Speaking of insurance, they finally came through. Here’s my settlement check. Now I have a choice—keep my office here and make you happy, or rebuild and ... Of course, I could just delay the rebuild and let the interest accumulate.”

Encouraged, Sid pulled out the enclosure from the second envelope and scanned the letter. “Well, I guess the decision is made for us. This is a notice from the city. Seems a detective office can’t be in a residence. It’s against a city zoning ordinance. I have fifteen days to show serious intent to relocate.”

Out of arguments, Annie turned and stalked out of the room, taking with her the vacuum she’d created when she’d entered a few minutes earlier.

Eager to deposit the check, Sid drove straight to Orange Savings Bank, and after conducting her business, paused long enough to admire the numerals on the deposit slip. Clarity of decision sat on her shoulders as firmly as it had the day she’d walked away from her marriage to Sam and his denomination.

She headed home, eager to make an appointment with a contractor, amazed at how her attitude had changed since she first awakened that morning, and amazed at the difference a few

## Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

zeros made.

In early June in southeast Texas summer often arrived earlier than the calendar, and this was one of those days. As soon as she pulled into her driveway and stepped out of the air conditioned vehicle, tiny beads of perspiration coated her skin. Overhead, birds whistled at her from the sycamore tree, and she laughed up at them. “Don’t think that flattery is going to keep you out of trouble if you dump on my car,” she advised, shaking her finger at them just as a faded-blue jalopy of a truck sputtered up.

The vehicle turned into the driveway, left fender dragging the curb, and by the time it came to stop mere inches away from Sid’s vehicle, her mind had already racked up mounting repair bills.

She headed down the driveway peering through the truck’s filthy windshield. “Durwood? I thought that was your truck.”

Durwood had been one of her first clients. His case had been one of those she almost didn’t survive. Now he greeted her with a smile and stuck his hand out the window. She clasped it in hers, taking great care not to squeeze. Arthritis had twisted his fingers so they even looked painful. She hadn’t seen him since she’d closed his case a few months ago, and yes, the omnipresent tobacco juice still coated the corners of his mouth.

“I was hoping to talk to you, but it looks like you’re heading out somewhere.”

“No, just getting back. What can I do for you?”

The gristly old man opened the truck door and climbed out, stopping long enough to swipe his spit ’n polish black leather shoes on the back legs of his overalls.

His furrowed brow told her something bothered him. “You okay?”

“It’s that dang sheriff.”

Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

“You mean the new one, Sheriff Quade Burns?”

Durwood nodded, fidgeting. “He’s scared my friend Boo Murphy half to death. Keeps questioning her about the pirate ship she saw out in the swamp behind her house. I need you to come talk to her, calm her down. She’s afraid he’s going to arrest her.”

“For seeing a pirate ship?” She laughed. “That’s not against the law.”

“No, no, Sid, for murder. Dang it, you know what I meant.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I shouldn’t make light of your friend’s situation. Come on in and let’s talk about it.” Sid took his elbow and tried to steer him toward the house, but the soles of his shiny black shoes stayed glued to the driveway.

“No, Sid, we need to go to her house right now, before she has a coronary. She’s an old woman what likes the outdoors. She won’t make it locked away behind bars.”

“Can we sit and talk first?”

“We can sit in my truck and talk on the way over there. Come on. Climb in.”

Giving in to the stubborn old coot was easier than arguing with him. She walked around the front of the dilapidated truck and popped open the screeching door.

The condition of the cab almost made her change her mind. Stuffing stuck out of holes in the upholstery. Duct tape tried to keep the seat together and a tear across the back still had residue where one piece had abandoned its responsibility. The floorboard held an unopened can of motor oil, and a wooden box full of assorted tools and oily red rags. On the dash lay a well-worn copy of *Lafitte the Pirate*.

Gingerly, trying to climb in without touching anything, Sid wished she’d chosen blue jeans earlier that morning. Her white linen slacks would never be the same. When the buzz of an insect caught her attention, she turned toward the sound and saw a spider web in the corner of the

Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

window. A bee fought for a way out of the trap, but so far, was unsuccessful.

She knew that feeling.

The truck backfired and skipped down the road, forcing Sid to glance in the rearview mirror. Just as she suspected, dark smoke billowed out behind them.

“Okay, catch me up,” she said, hoping to get the ride over quickly.

“Here’s what I know.” Durwood stared straight ahead, his blue, watery eyes focused on the road. “Boo went squirrel hunting out in the swamp just like she always does, but this time she found a pirate ship stuck up out of the water. The next day, she took Sasha out to see it.”

“A pirate ship? Who’s Sasha?”

“Boo’s second cousin, twice removed. She’s going crazy thinking folks believe she killed him.”

“Sasha?”

“No, dang it. Not Sasha—Boo. Keep up, Sid.”

“Believe me, I’m trying to. You need to slow down, Durwood. I can’t make sense of what you’re saying.”

“Best I can tell, she came home and told Sasha—”

“Her second cousin, twice removed,” Sid said, suppressing a grin.

Durwood nodded again, seemingly pleased that she was catching up. “Sasha went into hysterics, bellowing about how Boo killed Zeke.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Sid’s head swam. “Who’s Zeke?”

“Sasha’s husband, or was—till yesterday.”

No wonder she couldn’t keep up, she first had to translate the man’s language. For he put an I in yesterday and took out the R and the A—as in *yistedy*.

Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

“Okay, okay, I get the picture. A man is dead, and Boo thinks she’ll be arrested for the murder.”

“And if she’s arrested, she’s gonna plead guilty. Only thing is, she ain’t killed nobody, Sid. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” Agitation took his eyes off the road just as a mangy cur dog claimed his pedestrian rights. Sid yelped and threw on her own brakes, fearful her feet might go through the rusted-out floorboard. The floor held, although her brakes didn’t. Durwood didn’t touch his. He simply swerved, tossing Sid against the door, while the dog ignored them and continued his saunter across the street.

Durwood turned off on a winding dirt road that eventually led to the river. Water tupelo, cypress, and pine trees stood tall and resolute between two unpainted houses. A wide, hard-packed dirt yard separated the two. Each house, catty-corner to the other, sat on concrete blocks, while rough-hewn steps led up to their front porches. Odds and ends of junk lay in big piles under a shed between and underneath the houses.

“She knows you’re coming.” Durwood reached across Sid—smelling like he’d spent the night in a tobacco barn—and yanked the handle until the door opened.

“She knows? Is she psychic or something?”

“I told her I was bringing you back here with me.”

“Pretty sure of yourself, weren’t you?”

“Sure about you,” he said, his grin showing off brown-stained teeth.

Just as they got out and closed the doors, an elderly woman with wiry gray hair, rounded shoulders and sun-leathered face, stepped out the screen door and started yelling and raising a fist in the air.

“Dadgum it, Durwood, I told you not to bring that woman here. Don’t think just ’cause

Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

you did, you're gonna get in my pants!"

Durwood looked at Sid with a big grin on his face. "Ain't she cute?" Then he turned back to the big-fisted woman. "Now Boo, I told you that ain't what I'm after. I'm just trying to help."

"Then why'd you bring that Myra whore by here last week if you ain't wanting her to teach me the tricks of her trade?"

"Good lord, Boo, that ain't why me and Myra came to see you. She's my friend. I just wanted you two to meet. People judge her for what she does for a living, but she's just as human as you and me."

"Friend, huh? Well, I hear tell she's got lots of friends and they're all men."

By now Durwood had taken Sid's elbow and led her up the front steps—or maybe pulled would be more like it.

"This here Ms. Smart is a dang good detective, and she can help find out who killed Zeke."

"Meddling old fool," Boo mumbled. "Well, now that you're here you might as well come on in and sit a spell." Boo opened the door wide and gave Sid the onceover as she passed through the doorway. The room's furnishings were simple. Ancestral photos sat on table tops and a sideboard, while the wall held faded pictures of pirate ships—schooners of various models. Sid headed to a straight-backed chair and sat.

"One thing I can tell you for sure," Boo said to Sid, stationing her own chair as far away from Durwood as possible and still be in the same room with him. "I ain't killed Zeke. I didn't like him none, but so what? I only know two people in the whole world that did like him, and that was his mama and God. Course they ain't got much choice." Boo chuckled at her own joke, and then the laughter turned to tears. She covered her face with her hands and her shoulders

## Smith/DEAD WRECKONING

shook.

Sid felt like a giant tsunami sucked her toward Boo. “Excuse me, ma’am, but Durwood said you’d seen a ship out in the swamp. Are you up to talking about it?”

The veil of misery that had filled the old woman’s eyes dropped away. In its place, diamond beams of delight glistened out, transforming her from a tired, grief-stricken old woman into a young girl sparked with the excitement offered by a pirate ship. Her voice bubbled over like that of a small child.

“I never seen nothing the likes of before in my life. It was big, big I tell you, and I just knew it had treasure down in the captain’s cabin, but I never got down that far. When this dang soda water bottle rolled across the deck, I just about messed my pants.” She pointed a finger at Durwood. “And if you laugh, I’m gonna kick your ass outta my house.”

“I ain’t laughing,” he said, obviously suppressing a snicker.

“Weren’t nobody else out there to see it, so I finally gave up and come home, but I was so excited about it I couldn’t wait to tell Sasha. When I docked, I spied Zeke out in his garden hoeing them shriveled-up cucumbers. ‘Morning, Zeke, where’s Sasha?’ I says, right nice like. Well, he clams up and won’t say nothing. He just takes off his straw hat and fans his face, looks over at me with them glaring eyes, and then turns back to his hoeing.

“‘Zeke,’ I says to him, ‘you make me so dang mad, I could...’” Boo grew silent, staring at her hands.

“What did you do then?” Sid scooted forward in her chair.

“Well, I raised my gun, pulled back the hammer, and fired.”