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The Inside Passage

A new suspense novel by Pendelton C. Wallace

The Inside Passage is the first installment in the Ted Higuera series. Follow first generation Latino Ted's adventures as he graduates from the University of Washington and begins his career as a computer security analyst.

In the first novel in the series, Ted and his best friend Chris Hardwick run into homegrown Al-Qaeda terrorists along Canada's magnificent Inside Passage. With danger at every corner can Ted, Chris and Megan, Chris' girlfriend, save their lives and prevent a major terrorist attack?

Subsequent novels will take Ted and his friends deep into corporate intrigue and murder, to Mexico in pursuit of Mexican drug lords and following the path of the owner of a chain of bikini barista stands that has disappeared. Watch for these exciting new adventures of our Latino hero.

The Inside Passage

By

Pendelton C. Wallace

Chapter 1

The Johnstone Straits, Canada,

August 14, 2006

“I hate this part of the trip.” The stocky helmsman clung to the huge teak and brass wheel. Outside the windows mist swirled across the water. “I don’t know why the company insists that we take the Inside Passage. It’d be much safer, standing out to sea.”

Standing next to him, the man in an officer’s uniform, Tom Paget, scanned the water with a pair of binoculars. “The passengers are paying for scenery. If we stood offshore, all they’d see is water.”

This trip wasn’t new for Tom. The ship was. *The Star of the Northwest* was the largest cruise ship in the world. Taking her through the narrow Johnstone Straits was like forcing a basketball through a garden hose.

To port, the snow capped peaks of Vancouver Island floated above the morning mist. To starboard, West Cracroft Island dropped rapidly to the water. In front of them Hanson Island blocked their way, a narrow channel a couple of hundred yards wide the only safe, deep water.

They were entering the mouth of the funnel. Once committed, there was no turning around.

“Cut our speed to one half.” Paget lowered his binoculars and gazed at the almost mystic view below him. From the bridge deck of *The Star* he was high above the water. While the morning fog and mist rapidly dissipated, it still obscured his view of the pass.

“Hey, Mr. Paget.” The radar man looked up from his screen. “I got something on the radar.”

“What is it?”

“Looks like a small boat. Port bow. Crossing our course.”

Paget scanned the swirling mist to port. Maybe he did see something. “Cut speed to one fourth. They probably don’t see us yet.” *How could they not see a floating city?*

“I got ‘em.” The helmsman pointed. “Damn, they’re cutting it close.”

What’s wrong with those idiots? The faded blue sailboat was running under power. They were cutting across *The Star’s* bow. It was going to be close.

Paget reached up and pulled five long blasts on the ship’s whistle. “They’re not responding.”

“Shit, Cap’n. They don’t see us.” The helmsman’s fingers tightened on the wheel’s spokes.

“I got another one.” The radar man looked up again. “Bigger, must be a fishing boat or somethin’. Comin’ out from behind Hanson Island.”

Paget looked to starboard. A large green fishing boat emerged from the fog. Without a moment’s hesitation, the sailboat spun on its keel and headed towards the fishing boat.

“At least the stupid bastard is getting out of our way.”

The sailboat continued on a collision course with the fishing boat. They were out of the cruise ship’s way, but still of mild interest to the officer. Paget watched the arrow of water between the two boats narrow.

“Holy Christ.” Someone on the fishing boat opened fire on the sailboat.

Paget pasted the binoculars to his eyes. On the foredeck of the fishing boat, two dark, swarthy men kneeled behind the bulwark and fired with automatic rifles.

The first shots flew wide of their target. Paget could see bits and pieces of fiberglass and wood fly from the sailboat on the second burst. The third burst hit its mark. The forward part of the sailboat’s cabin dissolved in the hail of gun fire.

Paget stood frozen to the deck. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. *What in the hell is going on?*

A gray headed old man popped up from behind the sailboat's cabin and returned fire. Chucks of the fishing boat's bulwarks flew in the air. The two men with rifles ducked down.

"Cap'n, what're we gonna do?" The helmsman followed the scene below them with as much interest as his officer.

"Ah. . . get on the horn. We better call the Coast Guard."

Things were happening too fast. A third man appeared on the deck of the fishing boat. He opened fire. The firing from the sailboat stopped. The two boats closed rapidly. The sailboat was going to ram the fishing boat.

"Jesus God. You got the Coast Guard yet?"

"I got 'em now. Just reportin' the shootin'."

Paget grabbed the microphone from the helmsman's hand. "Mayday, mayday mayday." He shouted at the top of his lungs. "This is the *Star of the Northwest*. We're being attacked."

The scene below him had turned from one of mild interest to one of immediate threat. On the stern of the fishing boat, a cloud of white smoke exploded from a long steel box. Paget saw the white missile emerge from the launcher. He traced the trail of smoke in its wake as it arched though the sky towards them.

Husky Stadium, Seattle, Washington

June 2006

“Graduating *Magna Cum Laude*, Christopher Hardwick.” The dean’s voice boomed over the loudspeakers.

Chris Hardwick, Ted Higuera’s best friend and roommate climbed the steps to the stage. *Man, that guy has it all*, Ted thought. Not only was Chris tall, rich and good looking, he was graduating at the top of the class. Everything came so easy for him. Ted had to fight and claw for everything he got.

The rain of the past week melted away to bright sunshine for graduation day. Husky Stadium had perhaps the best view of any college stadium in the country. Sunlight danced on the waters of Portage Bay and Lake Washington just beyond the stadium, Mount Rainier towered over the snow-topped Cascade Mountains.

The docks to the east of Husky Stadium were crowded with the yachts of the rich families coming to watch their prides and joys graduate. Electricity stronger than anything Ted had felt at his four years of home football games tingled in the air.

“Eduardo Higuera.” The voice boomed again.

Ted looked out over the sea of caps and gowns seated in folding chairs on the stadium floor, the crowd of families and friends in the grand stand beyond. Mama was somewhere up there. He hadn’t found her yet, but he knew she was beaming with pride.

He was the first one in his ‘hood to make it out. He scored a football scholarship at the University of Washington when some higher ranked *tonto* had decided to go to Illinois at the last minute. Graduation from college was not just a source of pride for his family. His whole neighborhood, all of his relatives, in LA and in Mexico, had their hopes pinned on him.

“Hey man, move it.” The guy in line behind Ted gave him a little nudge.

“Don’t push Ted man, he’s on his way.” Ted came out of his reverie and climbed the steps.

“Huh?” the guy said. “Who’s Ted.”

“Me.” That old I’ve-got-the-world-by-the-balls grin spread over Ted’s face. “I’m Ted.” This was the moment he’d been waiting for all of his life.

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

The line was long and the wait dreary. A light mist fell from the gray sky, the windshield wipers made a quick swipe every thirty seconds or so. Ahmad Fazul felt his heartbeat quicken as they approached the front of the line.

“What’s the purpose of your visit?” the border guard asked. The way he looked at the four Muslims in the car made Ahmad’s breath come a little faster.

“We’re on holiday.” Ahmad tried to appear calm. *This guy’s going to make trouble for us.* “We’re going to Detroit.”

“Where are you from?”

“Toronto.”

“Citizenship?”

“Canada. All of us.”

The guard stared into Ahmad's eyes. Ahmad looked away.

Why am I nervous? We haven't done anything wrong.

"May I see your identification and proof of residence please?" the guard asked.

The guard reminded Ahmad of the Pillsbury Doughboy. Ahmad handed him passports for himself and his three friends.

The guard took the paper work, glanced at it and turned to the computer terminal in his stall. He scanned the bar codes, then stooped to Ahmad's window again. Ahmad's fingers drummed on the steering wheel.

"This will just take a minute sir. If you'll just be patient." The guard stepped out of his booth and walked across to the main building, still studying the passports.

Now what? What can the problem possibly be?

"What's taking so long?" Mohammed asked from the back seat.

"Racial profiling." Ahmad was used to "special" treatment. "Four Muslims in a black sedan. You know they're going to cause us trouble."

The guard walked back, his hand resting on his waist, close to the holstered pistol on his belt. "Pull into space six up ahead, please. We need to ask you a few questions."

"Why?" Ahmad fought to control his anger. "What have we done?"

"Just pull forward, sir."

Ahmad noticed as the guard's thumb flipped the restraining strap off of his pistol. "It is because we're Moslem? I don't see you pulling any white people over?"

“Sir, this will only take a minute.” The guard’s hand now rested on the handle of the ugly black automatic.

Ahmad endured forty-five minutes of questioning in an isolated room while customs agents and dogs searched his Chevy Impala. Finally, Ahmad and his friends were led back to his car.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen,” the guard told them. “Mr. Said is on our ‘No Entry’ list.” Ahmad turned and stared at Mohammed. *What had he gotten into?*

“That’s outrageous,” Ahmad said. “We’ve done nothing.”

“We’re not going to be able to allow you to enter the U.S.” The guard held the door open.

Edmonds, Washington

The battered silver Mitsubishi Mirage pulled into the circular driveway. Ted hopped out and ran around to the passenger side to open his mother’s door.

“I don’t know, Mama,” he looked up at the big house with yew trees lining the drive. “This might not be a good idea.”

“*No te preocupes, Mijo,*” she replied. “Chrees wants you here and he’s your best friend, you’ve lived with him for four years.”

“Ted wasn’t sure about Chris at first.” Ted closed the car door. “He seemed out of Ted’s league.”

“*Si,*” Mama said. “But you did like we always taught you and didn’t judge him just because he was *rico*. You’ve come a long way together.”

Before their sophomore year Chris' dad bought a house in the U District for Chris to live in while attending school. When Chris asked Ted to move in with him, he jumped at the offer.

"Ted's hung around with Chris for four years," Ted looked up at the imposing structure. "But he's only been to his dad's house a couple of times."

"When I met Meester Hardwick at the graduation ceremony today he seemed very gracious." Mama, a small, dark, middle aged woman, wore her years well. It made Ted proud to be seen with her. While Papa remained in LA to take care of the rest of the family she took her first airplane trip to Seattle to see Ted's graduation.

Ted's heart nearly stopped when a willowy thirty-something woman with long black hair met them at the door.

"Ted, you finally made it. Please come in. I'll find Chris for you." Her voice was like velvet, her crystal green eyes melted Ted's brain.

Seeing Candace always took his breath away. She was like something out of a fashion magazine or a Victoria's Secret commercial, a whole different species from Mama and him.

"Candace," Ted unraveled his tongue and motioned the dark haired woman back. "I'd like you to meet my mother, Roberta Higuera. Mama, this is Candace Anderson, Mr. Hardwick's fiancée."

Old Harry made out like a bandito, Ted thought. Candace was closer to Ted's age than to Chris' dad's age.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Meess Anderson." Mama extended her hand.

"*El gusto es mio.*" Candace smiled back. "And Candace, please."

"I was so pleased to hear about your engagement," Mama said in her sing song accent. "Eet's good to see that Mr. Hardwick ees getting on with his life."

“Ted, Mrs. Higuera,” Chris interrupted as he came into the foyer, a petite blond on his arm. “Come in. Let me show you around.”

“Please, Chreestopher, call me Mama.”

“All right. Mama, I’d like you to meet Meagan O’Donnell. Meg, this is Mama.”

“I’m please to meet you Mrs. . . . Mama.”

“I’ve heard so much about you, Meagan.”

Yeah, Ted thought, *but it sure ain’t been good*. He thought back to how he and Chris first met Meagan at the Aquarius Tavern after a ball game. She practically seduced Chris, right there on the dance floor. Chris must have had a big dollar sign painted on his forehead.

“Mrs. Hi. . . . Mama, let me show you to your room.” Candace bent over to pick up Mama’s bag. “I’m so glad you can stay with us.”

Ted came back to reality. *Man, that’s one fine ass.*

Chapter 2

Toronto, Canada

Ahmad slammed the door behind him as he entered his parent's house

"Father, how can you listen to such a man?" They had just returned from Rogers Centre at Exhibition Place from a rare family outing. It was Allah's will that he respect and help his parents, but they were so far from the true path that he could barely tolerate being around them.

His father was an older version of Ahmad. His dark skin, darker eyes and hawk-like nose all mirrored his son's appearance. Tall and thin, with short cropped dark hair graying at the temples, his father had eschewed wearing the traditional headgear of his ancestors.

When his father asked him to accompany them to see the Islamic cleric Amr Khaled, Ahmad thought maybe they were ready to begin the path back to Allah.

"Amr Khaled is the most popular cleric in the Islamic world." His father, Mahmoud Fazul, hung the car keys on a hook by the front door and precisely placed his umbrella in the stand. He stopped to adjust all four umbrellas equidistance apart. "He broadcasts in eighteen languages. He has millions of followers."

"He's a charlatan." Ahmad brushed past his father and started towards the living room. "Did you see how the audience dressed? Young girls in tank tops and jeans, their heads uncovered. He's not an imam. He's a rock star."

"He preaches a message of peace and co-existence. We need to listen to men like him to get along in this world."

"No," Ahmad stopped and turned back to his father. "If we listen to men like him, we'll lose all that is

great about Islam. We must follow the path of the prophet Mohammed.”

Mahmoud picked up the newspaper that was neatly placed on the coat stand and walked into the living room.

“As Khaled reminded us,” Mahmoud stared at Ahmad. “Mohammed said ‘Whoever puts joy in the hearts of the believers, his reward is not less than paradise.’”

“Paradise will come to those who fight for the true faith.” Ahmad returned his father’s gaze.

“Be careful, my son.” His father reached out for Ahmad. “You are getting close to the evil ones who are making life nearly intolerable for us.” Mahmoud shook his head slowly. “Their path is not Islam. We must reject it.”

“Father, look at the world around you.” Ahmad made a broad sweeping motion with his hand. “On every continent we’re being repressed. Our people are being slaughtered daily by the Americans and their toadies, including your beloved Canadians”

“I don’t agree with what’s happening in Iraq and Afghanistan.” Mahmoud flicked an imaginary piece of lint from his sleeve as he took his place in the recliner and adjusted his glasses, then straightened his tie unnecessarily. “But we have to make our views known through the political process. Already Canada is wavering in their support for the American president.”

“You came to this country to escape the revolution in Iran.” Too agitated to sit, Ahmad paced the living room. “But you were on the wrong side. You should have stayed and taken the word of the Prophet to heart.”

“And the Prophet taught you to disrespect your father?” Mahmoud glared at Ahmad.

“Father, you’ve fallen away from the faith.” Ahmad felt patches of moisture spreading from his arm pits. “You’re being assimilated by this corrupt Western culture. You’ve completely forgotten the true

faith and our heritage.”

Ahmad withered under the stare from his father. *What am I, ten years old?*

After what seemed an eternity, his father finally took a deep breath and spoke. “My son, the Prophet taught us mercy and kindness. He wanted us to co-exist with others that are different from ourselves. He showed us that Allah created us different so that we could get to know each other, to learn from each other.”

In a low voice, Ahmad responded to his father. “I was ashamed to be seen in Khaled’s audience.”

“Amr Khaled instills pride in us. He shows the happiness and joy there is in being Muslim. He has helped to strengthen the faith worldwide.”

“He’s helping to bring down the traditional values.” Ahmad retrieved his coat from the rack by the door. “Men like him are more dangerous than men like Bush. He’ll weaken the faith, one brick at a time, until the whole tower crumbles. We must remain strong. God knows that following His path isn’t easy. It’s only the strong who can remain true.” These last words were spoken as Ahmad turned his back on his father and walked through the doorway.