

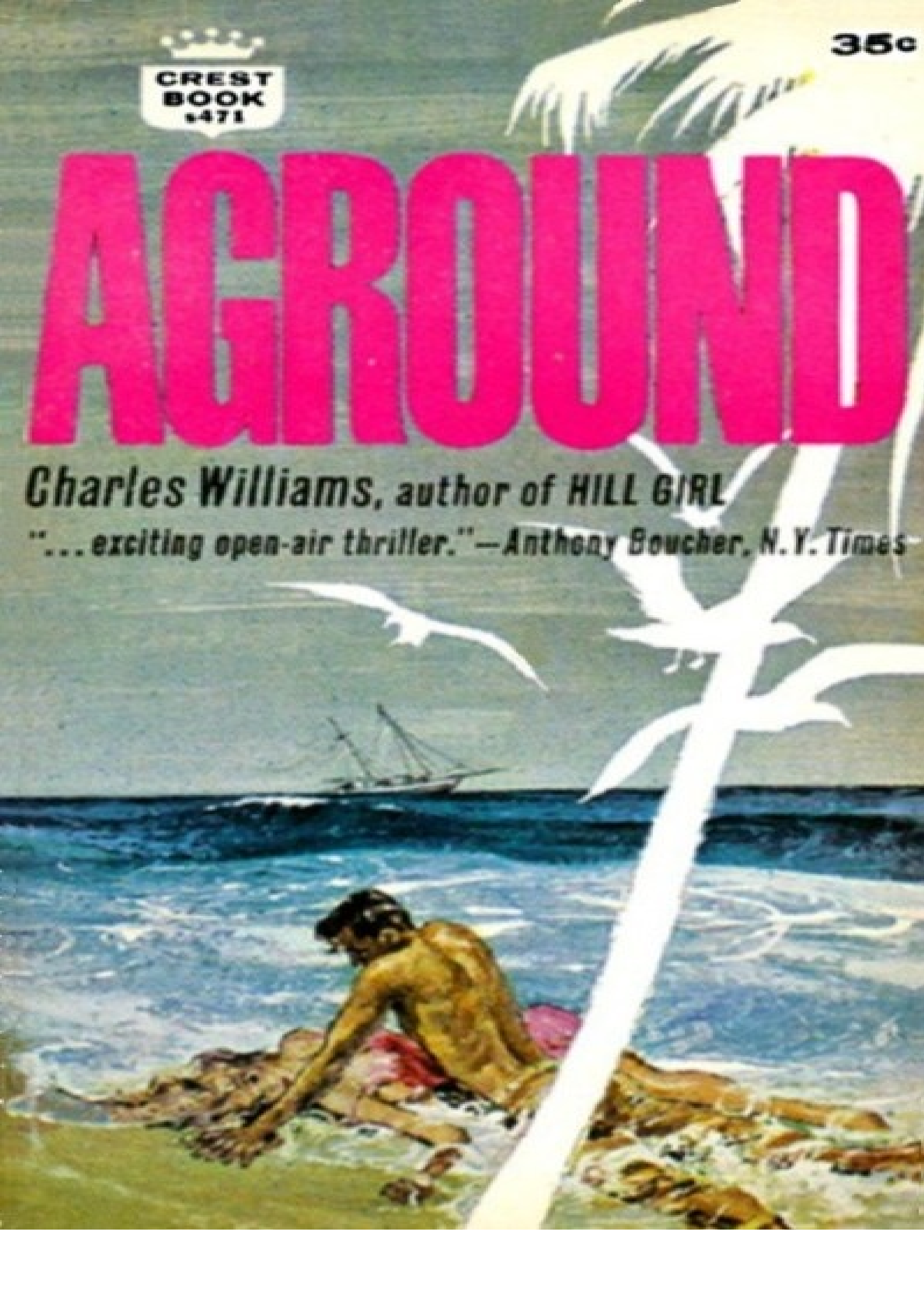
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AGROUND

Charles Williams, author of HILL GIRL

"...exciting open-air thriller."—Anthony Boucher, *N.Y. Times*



Aground

by

Charles Williams

1960

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

They were down at Miami International between thunder showers at 3:40 p.m. Ingram, a big, flat-faced man with aloof gray eyes and an almost imperceptible limp, followed the other passengers off of the DC-6 into the steamy vacuum left behind by the departing squall. His leg had stiffened a little as it always did when he had to sit still for very long, and he thrust the foot down savagely against the pull of tendons as taut as winched halyards. He checked through Immigration, and when he was cleared by Customs he waved off the porter with a curt shake of his head, carried the old suitcase off to the lower ramp, and took a taxi downtown to the La Perla, the shabby third-rate hotel he'd first checked into some fifteen days before and had used as a base of operations ever since. There was no mail for him. Well, it was too soon.

"You can have the same room, sir, if you'd like," the clerk said.

"All right," he replied indifferently. It commanded a view of a dank airwell, but was cheaper than the outside ones. He signed the registry card and rode the palsied elevator to the third floor. The operator, a bored worldling of nineteen, picked up the suitcase and preceded him down a corridor where flooring creaked beneath its eroded carpet.

The room was high-ceilinged and dim and passably clean, stamped with the drab monotony of a cheap hotel room and that air of being ready, with the same weary and impervious acquiescence, for sleep, assignation, or suicide. The bathroom with its old-fashioned tub was just to the left of the doorway. Beyond its corner the room widened to encompass a grayish and sway-backed slab of bed, a dresser marked with cigarette burns and the bleached circular stains of old highball glasses, and, at the far end, beside the window looking into the airwell, a writing desk, on top of which were the telephone, a coin-operated radio, and a small lamp with a dime-store shade. It had begun to rain again. He could see it falling into the airwell beyond the parted slats of the Venetian blind. Looks like the set for an art motion-picture, he thought; all we need is a Message and a couple of rats.

The youth deposited the suitcase on a luggage stand at the foot of the bed and switched on the air conditioning unit installed in the lower half of the window. Ingram dropped a quarter in his hand. He let it lie there for an insulting half-second before he closed the fingers, and started to look up at Ingram with the bright insolence of the under-tipped, but collided with an imperturbable gray stare that changed his mind. "Thank you," he said hurriedly, and went out.

Ingram ran hot water into the tub and stripped, hanging his suit in the closet with the automatic neatness of a man accustomed to policing his own loneliness. After rinsing out the drip-dry shirt, he selected a wooden hanger for it and hooked it on the curtain rod. When he got into the tub, he stretched his legs out and put his hands on the knee of the left one, forcing it down against the pull of the tendons. Sweat stood out on his face. It was better, he thought. He'd got rid of the crutches a month ago, and then the cane, just before he'd come up from San Juan. In another month the limp would be gone entirely, and there'd be nothing left but the scar tissue. After a while he climbed from the tub, blotted himself as well as he could with the sleazy and undersized towels, and put on a pair of boxer shorts. The skin across the hard wedge of his back and shoulders and the flat planes of his face had a faint yellowish cast, the residue of old tan faded by weeks in the hospital. The slick, hairless

whorls and splotches of scar tissue around his left hip and in back of his left leg still had an ugly look and would probably never tan again. He made the futile gesture of running a comb through the intransigent nap of graying dark hair, and went out into the bedroom.

He broke the seal on the Haig & Haig pinch bottle he'd bought in Nassau, and poured a drink. He selected one of the thin cigars from the leather case in his suit, lighted it, and looked at his watch on the dresser. He'd better call Hollister and explain what he'd done. He was just reaching for the telephone when someone rapped on the door.

He put down the drink and opened it. There were two men in the dingy hallway. The nearer one crowded the door just enough to prevent its being closed again, and asked, "Your name John Ingram?"

"Yes," he said. "What is it?"

The other flipped open a folder containing a badge. "Police. We'd like to talk to you."

He frowned. "About what?"

"We'd better come inside."

"Sure." He stepped back. They came in and closed the door. One took a quick look into the bathroom, and then the clothes closet, reaching in to pat the suit hanging there. Ingram went over to the suitcase lying open on its stand at the foot of the bed, and started to reach inside. "Keep your hands out of there," the other man ordered.

He straightened. "What the hell? I just wanted to put on some pants."

"You'll get 'em. Just stand back."

The one who'd checked the bathroom and the closet came over and riffled expertly through the contents of the bag. "Okay," he said. Ingram took out a pair of gray slacks and started to put them on. The two detectives noticed the scars. One of them opened his mouth to say something, but looked again at the big man's face and closed it.

"Who are you?" Ingram asked. "And what is it you want?"

It was the one near the doorway who replied. "I'm Detective Sergeant Schmidt, Miami Police." He was a dark, compactly built man in his early thirties with an air of hard-bitten competence about him, neatly dressed in a lightweight suit and white shirt. He nodded to the other. "This is Arthur Quinn. You're from Puerto Rico—is that right?"

"More or less," Ingram replied.

"What do you mean, more or less? That's what the hotel register says."

"I lived in San Juan for the past three years."

"What line of work are you in?"

"I was in the boat-repair business down there. Another man and I had a boatyard and marine railway."

"Is that what you're doing now?"

"No. We had a bad fire. He was killed in it, and his widow wanted out, so we liquidated what was left."

"What are you doing in Miami?"

"Looking for a boat."

"To buy, you mean?"

"That's right," he replied. "What's this all about?"

Schmidt ignored the question. "You checked in here the first time fifteen days ago, but you've been gone for the past eight. Where've you been?"

"Nassau. Tampa. Key West."

"When were you in Key West?" Quinn asked. He was a slender, graying man with a narrow face.

and rather cold eyes. He looked more like the manager of a loan company than a cop, Ingram thought. "Sunday," he said. "A week ago yesterday."

The two men exchanged a glance. "And you went down there to look at a boat?" Quinn asked.

Ingram nodded. "A schooner called the *Dragoon*. What about it?"

Quinn smiled. It didn't add any appreciable warmth to his face. "We thought you knew. The *Dragoon* was stolen."

Ingram had started to take a drink of the whisky. He lowered the glass, stared blankly at the two men, and went over and sat down beside the desk. "Are you kidding? How could anybody steal a seventy-foot schooner?"

"It seems to be easy, when you know how," Quinn replied. He moved nearer the desk. Schmitt leaned against the corner of the bathroom and lighted a cigarette.

"When did it happen?" Ingram asked.

"Oddly enough, the next night after you were aboard," Quinn said.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Ingram asked quietly.

"It means you'd better come up with some answers. Somebody cased that job, and you look mighty good for it."

"You mean just because I was aboard? That boat was for sale, and open to inspection by anybody."

"The watchman says you were the only one that'd been aboard for nearly a month. He gave us a description of you, and we traced you back here."

"Description? Hell, I told him my name, and where I lived."

"He says you gave him some name, but he couldn't remember it. So it could have been a phony."

"Well, I'll have to admit that makes sense."

"Don't get snotty, Ingram. You can answer these questions here, or I can take you back down there and let you answer 'em. I'm from the Monroe County Sheriff's Department. That boat had been lying there at her mooring in the harbor for nearly a year, but whoever stole it knew she was still in condition to go to sea."

"Maybe they towed her away."

"She left under her own power." Quinn leaned his arms on the desk and stared coldly. "So how would they know there was even an engine aboard, let alone whether it'd run or not, or whether there was any fuel in the tanks, or the starting batteries were charged? You were on there all afternoon poking into everything, according to old Tango. You started the engine and ran it, and inspected the rigging and steering gear, took the sails out of their bags and checked them—"

"Of course I did. I told you I was looking for a boat to buy. You think I went down there just to find out what color it was painted? And, incidentally, what was the watchman doing all the time they were getting away with it? He lived aboard."

"He was in the drunk tank of the Dade County jail. Clever, huh?"

"Dade County? How'd he get up here?"

"He was helped. He went ashore Monday night in Key West and had a few drinks, and all he can remember is he ran into a couple of good-time Charlies in some Duval Street bar. About three o'clock in the morning a patrol car found him passed out on the sidewalk on Flagler Street here in downtown Miami. He didn't have any money to pay a fine, so it was three days before he got out, and it took him another day to thumb his way back to Key West and find out the *Dragoon* was gone. Of course everybody around the Key West water front knew it was, but didn't think anything of it. He'd already told several people there'd been a man aboard thinking of buying it, so they took it for granted it had been moved to Marathon or Miami to go on the ways for survey. See? Just a nice convenient string of

coincidences, so the boat was gone four days before anybody even realized it was stolen.”

“I was in Tampa Monday night,” Ingram said. “Also Tuesday, and Tuesday night.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Sure. You can check with the Grayson Hotel there. Also with a Tampa yacht broker named Warren Crawford. I was in his office a couple of times, and aboard a ketch named the *Susannah*. If you’ll look in the breast pocket of my coat you’ll find the receipted hotel bill. And the stub of an airline ticket from Tampa to Nassau, Wednesday morning, and a receipted hotel bill from Nassau for Wednesday night to last night. Then there’s a Pan American Airways ticket stub for the flight from Nassau back to Miami. I landed here at three-forty this afternoon and came straight to the hotel. Anything else?”

Schmidt had already removed the receipts and ticket stubs from the coat and was riffling through them. “Seems to be right.”

“But he could still have cased the job,” Quinn insisted. “The whole thing’s too pat. And if he was just the finger man, he’d make sure he had an alibi.” He whirled on Ingram. “Let’s take another look at this pipe-dream you were going to buy the *Dragoon*. What’d you expect to do with it?”

“Sail it out to Honolulu. I’m thinking of going back in the charter business. That’s what I used to do, here and in Nassau.”

“You know the owner’s asking price?”

“Sure. Fifty-five thousand dollars.”

The detective surveyed the room with a contemptuous smile. “You must be one of those eccentric millionaires.”

Ingram felt his face redden. “What I pay for hotel rooms is my business.”

“Come off it, Ingram! You expect us to believe a man living in a fleabag like this really intended to buy a fifty-five-thousand-dollar yacht? How much money have you got?”

“That’s also my business.”

“Suit yourself. You can tell us, or sweat it out in jail while we find out ourselves. What bank’s your money in?”

“All right, all right. The Florida National.”

“How much?”

“About twelve thousand.”

“We can check that, you know. There’ll be somebody at the bank till five.”

Ingram gestured toward the telephone. “Go ahead.”

“So you expected to buy a fifty-five-thousand-dollar yacht with twelve thousand?”

It might have been more sensible to explain, but he was growing a little tired of Quinn’s attitude and he’d never been a man who took kindly to being pushed. He leaned forward in the chair and said very softly, “And if I did? Quote me the law against it, by section and paragraph. And stop breathing in my face.”

“Come on, Ingram! Let’s have it. How many of you were there, and where’s the boat headed?”

“If you won’t take my word for it, call the owner. I wrote to her.”

“In a pig’s eye. You wouldn’t even know who the owner is.”

“Mrs. C. R. Osborne, of Houston, Texas. Her address is in that black notebook in my bag.”

Schmidt gave him a thoughtful glance, and removed the notebook. Quinn, however, smiled coldly and said, “Funny she didn’t mention it. We talked to her about an hour ago and told her we were looking for a man named Ingram, but she’d never heard of you.”

“You mean she’s here in town?” he asked.

“Yes, she’s here,” Schmidt said. “She flew in this afternoon. When did you mail that letter?”

“Saturday morning, from Nassau,” he replied. “Maybe she left Houston before it was delivered.”

“We can find out. But what’d you say in it?”

“I made her an offer of forty-five thousand for the *Dragoon*, subject to the usual conditions survey.”

“And payable how?”

“Cash.”

“All right,” Schmidt said crisply, “if you did write a letter, which I doubt, it has to be a bona-fide offer, or a phony—in which case it’s probably a deliberate alibi. You haven’t got forty-five thousand dollars. So what were you going to use for money? Put up or shut up.”

Ingram hesitated. Then he shrugged wearily, and said, “All right. I was acting for a third party.”

“Who?”

“His name’s Fredric Hollister, and he’s president of Hollister-Dykes Laboratories, Inc., of Cleveland, Ohio. They manufacture ethical drugs. He’s at the Eden Roc Hotel; go ahead and call him.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this in the first place?” Schmidt demanded.

“Partly, I suppose, because it was none of your damned business,” he said. “But principally because he didn’t want it known the buyer was a corporation until after the deal was set, because of the effect it might have on the price. I was to select the boat, subject to his final approval, and then take over as captain. We’d pretty well settled on the *Dragoon* after I gave him the report on it Sunday night, but he decided to wait till I’d looked at the others in Tampa and Nassau before we committed ourselves. I’d supposed to call him this afternoon.”

Schmidt nodded. “Can I use your phone?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

The detective picked it up. “Get me the Eden Roc Hotel, in Miami Beach,” he said, and waited. The room was silent except for the faint humming of the air-conditioner. “Mr. Fredric Hollister, please . . . Oh? . . . Are you sure? . . . And when was this?”

Ingram stared at his face, conscious of a very cold feeling that was beginning to spread through his stomach. Schmidt hung up, and snapped, “Get your clothes on, fella.”

“What is it?”

“Hollister checked out of the Eden Roc a week ago. On Monday night.”

His leg hurt. He'd smoked the two cigars he had, and the cigarettes they gave him tasted like ha They sent out for coffee. Quinn and Schmidt questioned him, moving like cats around the table whe he was seated, and then Schmidt was gone and there was another man, named Brenner. There was on window in the bleak interrogation room, covered with heavy screen, but from where he sat he cou see nothing but the sky. He thought it was still raining. It didn't seem to matter. Quinn went out, an came back shepherding an old man with dirty white whiskers and sharp black eyes, an old man wh clutched a comic book in one hand and a crumpled and strangely bottle-shaped paper bag in the oth and pointed dramatically from the doorway like some ham in an amateur production of *Medea* or *King Lear*, and cackled, "That's him! That's him!" It was the watchman, the old shrimper who'd live aboard the *Dragoon*.

"Hello, Tango," Ingram said wearily, to which Tango made no reply other than to heighten the fir theatrical aspect of this confrontation by leaning further into his point and belching. "Ain't nobody ever forget a big flat face like that," he announced triumphantly, and was gone, presumably back the bottle. The identification seemed rather pointless, since he admitted being aboard the *Dragoon*, b maybe it was something technical about preparing the case.

Schmidt came back, and Brenner left. Schmidt leaned on the other end of the table with a unlighted cigarette in his mouth, and said, "All right, let's try again. Who's Hollister?"

"All I know is what he told me," Ingram replied.

"We just heard from Cleveland. There is no such outfit as Hollister-Dykes Laboratories—if that news to anybody. And he paid his hotel bill with a rubber check. How long have you known him?"

"I didn't know him at all. I met him just twice."

"How did you meet him?"

"I told you. He called me at the La Perla Hotel."

"When?"

"A week ago last Saturday. He said he had a proposition that might interest me, and asked if I come over to Miami Beach and see him."

"He just pulled your name out of a hat, is that it?"

"No. He said I'd been recommended to him by a couple of yacht brokers."

"He mention any names?"

"No. It didn't occur to me to ask, at the time. But there are any number of people around the Miar water front who could have told him about me. I've been in and out of here for years. Anyway, h seemed to know all about me, and wanted to know if I'd had any luck in finding a boat. I told him no

"This was over the phone?"

"Yes."

"So you met him at the Eden Roc?"

"That's right. In his suite, about two p.m. Saturday. He explained who he was, and gave me rundown on the deal he had in mind. The company wanted an auxiliary ketch or schooner, seventy fe or longer, one that would accommodate eight guests in addition to the crew. It would operate out o

Miami, and be used for conferences and company entertainment, that sort of thing—deductible as business expense, of course. I was to get five hundred and fifty a month as skipper, and during periods when nobody from the company was using it I could operate it as a charter boat on a commission basis. I wasn't crazy about the idea, because I'd rather work for myself, but I was in no position to be choosy. We didn't have the boatyard fully insured, and three-quarters of it belonged to Barney's widow, anyway, so by the time I'd settled my hospital and doctor bills I had less than thirteen thousand left. Any kind of boat I could use at all would run twenty-five thousand, and I just didn't have enough cash to talk to anybody. So I told him I'd take it.

"He had a list of five boats the company had been considering. The *Dragoon* in Key West, the *Susannah* in Tampa, and three over in Nassau. He suggested I look at the *Dragoon* first, since it seemed to be the most promising. I went down to Key West Sunday morning, spent all afternoon on it, and flew back that night. I called Hollister, and he asked me to come on over and give him the report. I met him in his suite again, and we spent about two hours going over all the dope I had on it—sketches of the interior layout, inside dimensions, estimates on minor repairs, condition of the auxiliary engine, rigging, sails, and so on. The boat had been kept up, in spite of the fact it hadn't been used for a long time. He liked it. I told him that of course any offer we made would be subject to her passing survey. You don't buy a boat just on preliminary inspection. He suggested we hold off final decision until I'd looked at the others, but that if I still liked the *Dragoon* we'd get in touch with Mrs. Osborne and talk about forty-five thousand dollars. I left for Tampa Monday morning, and then went on from there to Nassau on Wednesday."

"He didn't say anything about calling him from Tampa with a report on the *Susannah*?"

Ingram's face hardened. "No. In fact, he said he'd probably be in West Palm Beach the next few days at a house party, and just to wait till I got back from Nassau."

Quinn came around in front of him and leaned on the table. "That's a great story. I love it. It covers you from every angle except being a chump, and there's no law against that."

"I can't help it. That's exactly the way it happened."

"Then you just swallowed all this whole?" Schmidt asked. "It never occurred to you to question it?"

"Why should it?" Ingram demanded. "His story made sense. Corporation-owned boats are nothing new. He had all the props. He was living in a suite on the ocean side, with a sundeck. He gave me his business card. It said he was Fredric Hollister, president of Hollister-Dykes Laboratories. When I was there the first day, he got a long-distance call from the home office in Cleveland—"

Schmidt gestured pityingly. "From some joker on a house phone in the lobby?"

"Sure, I suppose it's an old gag, if you're looking for it. But why should I? And don't forget, he fooled the hotel too."

"I know," Schmidt said. "And to do that, he'd have to have more than a business card. He was beginning to smell like a real con artist to me. But that's the stupid part of it—what the hell would a con man want to steal a boat for?"

"You tell me," Ingram said. "He can't sell it. And he can't even leave the country in it without papers."

"Who paid your expenses while you were looking at all these boats?"

"Apparently I did. He gave me a check for two hundred dollars and said if they ran over that I'd keep a record and I'd be reimbursed. That's the reason I kept all those receipts."

"Where's the check?"

"I couldn't cash it before I left, because it was the week end, but I had enough cash of my own

carry me, so I mailed it in to the bank from Tampa. On Tuesday afternoon, I think.” He tossed his checkbook over in front of Schmidt. “The deposit’s entered on my stubs.”

Schmidt looked at it, and nodded to Quinn. Quinn went out.

“Can you describe him?” Schmidt asked.

“He was in his late thirties, I’d say. Close to six feet. On the slim side, but big-boned and rangy and sunburned, with big hands. A tennis type. Blue eyes, as I recall. Butch-cut hair. I’m not sure, but I think it was sandy, maybe with a little gray in it. Lot of personality and drive—one of those guys with the bone-crushing grip and the big grin.”

“You didn’t notice what kind of watch he was wearing?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. It was an oversized thing with a lot of gingerbread on it. Chronograph, I think they call it. You know, little windows with the day of the month and day of the week, and a sweep second hand.”

Schmidt removed a watch from the pocket of his coat and set it on the table. “Like this?”

Ingram glanced at it in surprise. “Yes. That looks just like it. Same type of filigree gold case, and everything. Where’d you get it?”

Schmidt lighted the cigarette he had stuck in the side of his mouth. “It was picked up at sea.”

Ingram stared. “How’s that again?”

“Couple of men in a fishing boat brought it in. The *Dorado*—one of those fifty-thousand-dollar deals you use for marlin—”

“Sport fisherman.”

“Yeah. Anyway, they were bringing this *Dorado* back to Miami from the Virgin Islands. Arrived yesterday afternoon a little before sunset they sighted a rowboat—a dinghy, I think you call it. Nobody in it; just drifting around in the ocean by itself. They went over and picked it up. There was an outboard motor clamped on the back, and some man’s clothes in the bottom—sneakers and a pair of dungarees and a shirt. The watch was in one of the pockets of the dungarees. They got into Miami early this morning and turned the whole thing over to the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard figured there might be a chance it was the *Dragoon’s*, and called us. We went out and got a description, and called Mrs. Osborne to see if she could identify it. She wasn’t sure—she’s not too familiar with the *Dragoon*—but Quinn brought old Tango up from Key West, and he identified it.”

“Where did they pick it up?” Ingram asked.

“South of here somewhere. The Coast Guard told me, but I’m no navigator.”

Schmidt went out, leaving him in the custody of a uniformed patrolman who chewed a pencil stub and scowled at a crossword puzzle. When he returned, some ten minutes later, Quinn was with him.

“We’re not going to hold you,” Schmidt said curtly. “But before you go, we want you to look at some pictures.”

Ingram sighed with relief. “Then you located my letter to Mrs. Osborne?”

“Yes. She called her maid at home. The letter apparently came this morning after she’d left for Miami. The maid read it to her, and it checks with what you told us. We also got hold of one of the officers working late at the bank, and he dug out that check Hollister gave you. It was the same phone account he stabbed the hotel with. It bounced, of course, but they hadn’t got the notice out to you yet.”

“Then you’re convinced?”

“Let’s put it this way—you helped steal that boat, but there’s no proof you did it with intent. I don’t know whether you were just a sucker, or smart enough to make yourself look like one, but either way we can’t hold you.”

“You die hard, don’t you?”

“You learn to, in this business.” Schmidt jerked his head. “Let’s go see if you can pick Hollister out of some mug shots.”

They went downstairs to another room that was harshly lighted and hot. The two detectives sat watching while he scanned hundreds of photographs—hopefully, and then with increasing anger as the hope faded—trying to find the man who’d called himself Hollister. He knew he was still suspect, and failure to turn up Hollister’s picture would certainly do nothing to lessen their suspicion. There was anger at himself for having been taken in, and a burning desire to get his hands on the man who’d done it.

“I think this is a waste of time,” Quinn said, after an hour.

“Haven’t you got any more?” he asked.

“No. That’ll do.” There was curt dismissal in the tone.

Ingram stood up. “Where is Mrs. Osborne staying?”

“I don’t think I’d bother Mrs. Osborne, under the circumstances,” Schmidt said. “That might have been the last fifty-thousand-dollar yacht she had.”

“What about the *Dorado*? Do you know where she’s tied up?”

“No. And what difference does it make?”

“I want to find out where they picked up that dinghy.”

“Why?”

“Just say I’m curious. There’s something damned funny about it.”

“You were never more right,” Quinn said coldly. “So why don’t you just get out while you’re ahead?”

* * *

When he emerged on the street the rain had stopped and it was dusk. Neon flamed hotly beneath the darkening blue bowl of the sky, and tires hissed on wet pavement in the ceaseless river of traffic. He walked back to the hotel, feeling his shirt stick to his back with perspiration. The desk clerk looked up with a nervous smile. “Uh—I hope everything’s all right.”

“Yes,” he said.

“I hope you don’t think—I mean, there wasn’t anything I could do. They told me to call them when you checked back in—”

“It’s all right. The key, please.”

“Yes, *sir*.” The clerk whirled and snatched it from the pigeonhole. There was a slip of paper with it. “Oh. You had a phone call. It was about a half hour ago.”

Ingram read the scribbled message. *Call Mrs. Osborne. Columbus Hotel.*

That was strange. But maybe she wanted to unburden herself of a few remarks on the subject of meat-heads who helped steal her boat. Probably an imperious old dowager with a voice like a Western Ocean bosun. Well, he intended to call her, but she could wait a few minutes; right now the important thing was to find the *Dorado* before her crew left for the night. The chances were that he was too late already. He strode to the telephone booth in the corner of the lobby, looked up the number of the Coast Guard base, and was just starting to dial when someone rapped on the glass panel of the door. It was the clerk.

He pushed it open. “Yes?”

“She’s on the line now, *sir*. She just called back. You can take it on the house phone.”

“Oh.” He retrieved his dime and walked over to the desk. He might as well get it over with. The

clerk patched him through on the small switchboard and disappeared into his room in back.

"Hello," he said. "Ingram speaking."

"This is Mrs. Osborne." The voice was rather husky, and sounded much younger than he expected. "Would you come over to the Columbus right away? There is something very important I like to discuss with you."

"What?" he asked.

"Just say that it has to do with the *Dragoon*, and that it's quite urgent. I think you could help me."

This appeared to make very little sense, but he realized asking questions would only waste more time. "All right," he said, "I'll be there as soon as I can make it. But first I want to try to get hold of the captain of the *Dorado*—"

"That won't be necessary," she broke in. "I've already talked to him."

"Did he tell you where they picked up the dinghy?"

"Yes. I have the whole story."

"I'm on my way. Where shall I meet you?"

"Just come up to my room."

It was less than ten minutes later when he stepped out of the elevator at the Columbus and strode down the carpeted and air-conditioned quietness of the corridor looking at the numbers. When he knocked, she answered almost immediately, and for a second he thought he must have the wrong room. Even hearing her voice over the telephone hadn't entirely prepared him for this.

Somehow, a woman who owned a seventy-foot yacht in her own name figured to be a graying and wealthy widow on the far side of fifty, at least, but this statuesque blonde with the flamboyant mop of hair couldn't be much over thirty. She wore a green knit dress that did her figure no harm at all, and he had a quick impression of a well-tended and slightly arrogant face with a bright red mouth, high cheekbones, sea-green eyes, and a good tan. "Come in, Captain," she said. "I'm Rae Osborne."

He stepped inside. The room was the sitting room of a suite, furnished with a pearl-gray sofa, two armchairs, and a coffee table. At the far end was a window with flamingo drapes. The door into the bedroom was on the left. There was soft light from the lamps at either end of the sofa. The thing that caught his eye, however, was the chart spread out on the coffee table. He stepped nearer, and saw it was the Coast & Geodetic Survey No. 1002, a general chart of the Florida Straits, Cuba, and the Bahamas. A highball glass stood in the center of it, in a spreading ring of moisture. He winced.

"Sit down," she said, with a careless gesture toward the armchair in front of the coffee table. She seated herself opposite it on the sofa and crossed her legs, the knit skirt hiking up over her knees and molding itself against the long and rather heavy thighs. He wondered if he was supposed to look appreciative. Then he decided he was being unfair; it was just that highball glass on the chart. She picked up the glass, rattled the ice in it, and took a drink, not bothering to offer him one. If this was the new look in yachting, he was caring less and less for it. You are in a nasty mood, he thought.

"You *are* a captain, aren't you?" she asked. "That's what they called you."

"I don't have a boat now," he said. "As you may have heard. But who called me?"

"Some people I talked to about you. Lieutenant Wilson of the Coast Guard, and a yacht broker named Leon Collins. They said it was stupid. You never stole anything in your life."

"Thanks," he said laconically.

She shrugged. "I'm just repeating what they said. But anyway, I'm willing to take their word for it. You didn't know that man Hollister, did you?"

"No," he said.

"Would you tell me what he looked like?"

He repeated the description he'd given the police. She listened intently, but with no change of expression. "I see."

"What did you want to see me about?" he asked.

"I want you to help me find the *Dragoon*."

He frowned. "Why me?"

"For several reasons. I'll get to that in a minute. But will you?"

"Believe me, there's nothing I'd like better than to find the *Dragoon*. And Hollister," he added grimly. "But if the police can't locate her—"

"She's at sea. Outside police jurisdiction."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I forgot—you still don't know where the dinghy was picked up."

"No," he said.

"It was right here." She leaned over the chart and indicated a pencil mark with one red-lacquered fingernail. It was in the open sea, far out over the western edge of the Great Bahama Bank along the Santaren Channel, probably a hundred and fifty miles south-southeast of Miami. At five-thirty yesterday afternoon."

"The time doesn't mean much," he said. "There's no telling how long ago they lost it, or when they found it. They could be five hundred miles from there by now."

She shook her head. "Didn't they tell you about the clothes, and the watch?"

"Yes. But what about them?"

"The watch was still running."

"Oh," he said. Then the dinghy must have been adrift for less than twenty-four hours. "Are you sure of that?"

"Yes. I went down and talked to the captain of the *Dorado* myself. And the Coast Guard doesn't think the *Dragoon* was under way when they lost it."

"No, of course not, if they lost it out there. They wouldn't have been towing it. But, look—the men in the *Dorado* didn't see anything of the schooner at all?"

"No. They watched with binoculars until it got dark, but they didn't really search the area. She might have been in over the Bank somewhere. Maybe anchored."

"Not for long, unless they were gluttons for punishment," he said. "Except in a dead calm, it'd be like riding a roller-coaster. With fifty to seventy-five miles of open water to windward—"

"But it's all real shallow—or is shoal the word you use? Less than four fathoms, according to the chart."

"It can still kick up a nasty chop, in any breeze at all. Not to mention the surge running in from the Santaren Channel. It's more likely they were in trouble of some kind."

"Then she might be still there. Will you help me find her?"

"How?" he asked.

"How would I know?" she asked, rattling the ice in the glass. "That's why I'm asking you. Maybe we could charter a boat?"

He shook his head. "You'd just be wasting money."

"Why?"

"I don't think you realize what you're up against. In the first place, that position you've got marked is where they think they were when they picked up the dinghy. Big-game fishing guides aren't the world's greatest navigators, as a rule. That far at sea, on dead reckoning, they could have been as much as twenty miles out. Add another thirty for the possible drift of the dinghy in the currents and

tides along the edge of the Bank, and you're in real trouble. You have any idea of the area of a circle with a radius of fifty miles?"

"God no, you figure it out."

"Around eight thousand square miles. That's not somebody's front yard."

"But—"

"Furthermore, that Bank is nothing to fool with—especially at night or in poor light conditions. It's several thousand square miles of shoals, reefs, coral heads, and sand bars, and it's poorly charted, especially down there where you want to go. But disregarding all that for the moment, what good would it do if you did get lucky and find her? Assuming, I mean, that the people who stole her are still aboard? There's no way you can regain possession or have 'em arrested until she goes into port somewhere; out on the open sea's a poor place to try to call a cop."

"Well, you're sure not much help, are you?" she asked. "Or maybe you just don't want the job. Can't you use the money?"

He stifled the slow burn of anger. "I'm trying to keep you from throwing yours away. I'm just as interested in finding the *Dragoon* as you are, but you'll never do it that way."

"Well, what about a plane?"

"You'd have a better chance of finding her, if she's still in that area. But you couldn't get aboard, you did."

"At least I'd know where she is—and whether she's in trouble. What kind of plane would it take?"

"An expensive one."

"That doesn't matter. Where can we get one?"

"Why do you keep saying we?" he asked. "If you charter a plane, what do you need me for?"

"As I said, for several reasons. You're an experienced yachtsman. You've been sailing boats all your life. So you'd be able to tell if she was in trouble of some kind. But the main reason is I'm not sure I'd recognize the *Dragoon* if I saw her. They must have repainted her and changed the name."

He remembered then what Schmidt had said about her not being very familiar with the schooner. It also occurred to him that he knew nothing about her whatever except that presumably she was a widow; the ad in *Yachting* had listed the schooner under her own name. Alarm bells began to go off in his head. He glanced at her left hand. She wore engagement and wedding rings, but that didn't prove much.

"Why don't you think you'd recognize her?" he asked.

"I've been aboard her only once."

"How's that?"

"My husband took her in on some property he sold about a year ago, just before he died. Since the estate was settled, I've been trying to sell her. But to get back to the subject, you'd recognize her, wouldn't you?"

"I think so," he said.

"Good. Now, about the plane?"

"Not so fast. Maybe Hollister made me a little gun-shy, but this time I'd like some proof. How do you know you're Mrs. Osborne?"

"Well!" He thought for a moment she was going to tell him that *anybody* knew who Mrs. C. Osborne was, but she fooled him. "You're pretty hard-boiled, aren't you?"

"Not particularly," he said. "It's just that I've made my quota of bonehead plays for this week. But you don't have to bother digging up identification. Just tell me what I said in that letter."

She repeated it almost exactly as he had written it. "Are you satisfied now?"

“Yes.” Then it occurred to him that his manners were almost as bad as hers. “And, incidentally, want to thank you for going to all that trouble to call back to Houston to verify it.”

She shrugged. “No trouble. Now what about the plane?”

“You’re sure you want to go to all that expense, just to see if she’s out there? She’s insured, isn’t she?”

She nodded. “Against marine risk, as I get the picture. But I don’t think the policy covers theft, and if something happens to her out there and I’ve got no witnesses or actual proof of loss, it might be years before I could collect.”

That was possible, he thought. But the feeling persisted that she wasn’t telling the truth—or at least not all of it. Well, it was none of his business. He bent over the chart, studying the position she had marked and estimating the distances. “I think Nassau would be the best bet. It’s a little nearer, and McAllister Air Service used to have some big twin-engine amphibians that should be able to do it. Want me to call them now?”

“Sure.”

He reached for the telephone on one of the small end-tables. While the operator put through the call he sat frowning thoughtfully at the chart. What could they have been doing out there? He was connected then with the office at Windsor Field in Nassau. McAllister had left for the night, but one of the pilots was still around, a man named Avery. He said they were still flying the amphibians.

“What’s their range?” he asked.

“It depends on the load. What do you want to carry?”

“Just a couple of passengers. Here’s the deal. . . .” He explained briefly, and asked, “Do you have a chart handy, any general chart that takes in the area west of Andros?”

“Yes, sir. There’s one right in front of me.”

“Good. Take a look at the outer edge of the Bank, opposite Cay Sal. Got it? They picked up the dinghy at about 23.30 north, just off the hundred-fathom curve in the Santaren Channel. If we want to fly a search pattern around that point, how much of the area could we cover and still not have to walk home?”

“Hmmm . . . Just a minute . . . We could stay down there close to two hours and still get back all right.”

“What’s the rate?”

“A hundred and twenty-five dollars an hour.”

“Just a minute.” He placed a hand over the transmitter and relayed the figure to Mrs. Osborne.

She nodded. “Tell him we’ll be there as soon as we can.”

He spoke into the instrument. “Okay. I think there’s a Pan American flight out of here early in the morning—”

“Yes. Flight 401. Arrives Nassau at nine a.m.”

“Check. And if we can’t get space on it, I’ll cable you what flight we will be on. That okay?”

“Yes, sir. So unless we hear from you, we’ll have her fueled and ready for nine a.m.”

He broke the connection, got the hotel operator again, and asked for Pan American Airways. They were in luck; space was available on flight 401. He made the reservations and hung up.

“It’s all set,” he said. “I’ll meet you at the Pan Am counter at the airport about three-quarters of an hour before flight time.”

“Good. Now about your pay—”

“There’s no charge,” he said.

She frowned. “What?”

“I helped them steal the boat, didn’t I? The least I can do is help you find it.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He stood up to leave. “Whether or not I did it with intent, as the police call it, doesn’t change the facts. I’m at least partly responsible for their getting away with it.”

“Well, you’re an odd one, I must say.” She regarded him for the first time with something approaching interest. “How old are you?”

“Forty-three.”

“You don’t look it.”

“Thanks,” he said. She didn’t bother to rise. He walked to the door, fighting the stiffness in his legs but paused with his hand on the knob. “That dinghy—when they found it, were there any oars in it?”

“No,” she said. “Just the motor.”

“Was there any gasoline in it? Or did they look?”

She stared down at the glass in her hand. “They looked,” she said. “It was empty.”

He nodded. The silence lengthened. “See you in the morning,” he said, and went out.

It was a long time before he got to sleep. On the evidence, the theft of the *Dragoon* was no haphazard, spur-of-the-moment stunt; it had been carefully thought out by men who knew what they were doing. Then by the same token they must have known they couldn't enter any port in the western hemisphere without the necessary documentation—which they couldn't possibly steal. So what had they planned to do? Stay at sea, or put her into orbit?

And how had they lost the dinghy? The police seemed to accept this as merely a routine incident—they'd been towing it, it came adrift, so what? But it wasn't that simple. They wouldn't have been towing it at sea; and certainly not with the motor and somebody's clothes in it. It would have been aboard, lashed down on the deckhouse. So they had put it over the side for something. But for what? The watch and the clothes were easier to understand, at least up to a point. The man—whoever he was—had taken them off to go in the water for some reason. But what reason? You were stumped again.

And what about Mrs. Osborne—aside from the obvious things like the good looks and beautiful manners? Something didn't quite ring true. The theft would have been reported to her as soon as the police learned of it themselves—last Friday, at the latest. That was four days ago. But she apparently hadn't thought it necessary to come to Miami until this morning; and then presumably she'd grabbed the first available plane after the police called to tell her about the dinghy. Why? It wasn't to identify the dinghy. She'd admitted over the phone she wasn't familiar enough with the *Dragoon's* gear to be sure. And it wasn't necessary, anyway, because Tango identified it. So could it have been that watch that brought her flying in from Houston? Maybe she had an idea whose it was. But if so, why hadn't she told the police?

Forget it, he thought. All you have to do is find the schooner. He closed his eyes, and in back of them was the deadly flower of explosion. He had seen it nearly every night for the past two months—the same unvarying and frozen scene like a nightmare captured intact and imbedded in plastic. It was too late to stop him. Barney leaned forward to strike the torch. . . .

* * *

She was waiting near the Pan American counters when he arrived at the airport the next morning, and had already picked up the tickets and checked her bag. He tried to pay for his, but she brushed the money aside impatiently. "Don't be silly, I'll pay the expenses."

She was as attractive in the light of early morning as she had been under the softer illumination of the night, but her face showed signs of weariness, as though she hadn't slept well. She wore a crisp white linen skirt and short-sleeved blouse, and carried a heavy binocular case slung over her shoulder. When their flight was announced they went out and boarded the plane, and she slept all the way across to Nassau. They landed at Windsor Field at nine a.m. and filed through Immigration and Customs. He was gathering up their suitcases at the Customs counter when they were approached by a tall and sun-reddened man in tropical whites. "Captain Ingram?" he asked.

He nodded. "You're from McAllister?"

“Yes. I’m Robin Avery.”

~~They shook hands, and he introduced Mrs. Osborne. Avery had a spiky red mustache and very cool blue eyes and spoke with a clipped economy of words that was suggestively British, though with no discernible accent. He motioned for a porter to collect the bags. “Leave those in the office until we get back, if you like,” he said.~~

They followed him over to the office next to the McAllister hangar. Mrs. Osborne produced a sheaf of traveler’s checks and made a deposit on the charter. Avery unrolled a chart on the counter and brought out a pair of parallel rulers. “Any particular preference as to a starting point?”

“Yes,” Ingram said. “Why not hit the southern end of the area first?” He lined up the parallel ruler and walked them across the chart to the compass rose. “A course of two hundred True will put us over the hundred-fathom curve about forty miles south of where the dinghy was found. From there we could fly an east-west pattern out over the Channel and back in over the Bank with about ten-mile spacing.”

“Right,” Avery agreed. He rolled up the chart and they went out to where the big amphibian squatted on the apron in white sunlight. There were three seats on each side of the narrow aisle in the aft compartment. “Who’d like the co-pilot’s seat?” Avery asked, with a hopeful glance at Mrs. Osborne. “Visibility’s much better up there.”

She nodded to Ingram. “Your eyesight’s probably better than mine at this sort of thing. I’d rather you took it.”

“Okay.” He followed Avery through the narrow doorway. They strapped themselves in. Avery started the engines, taxied out to the end of the runway, and called the tower for clearance. The engines roared, and they began to gather speed. Then they were airborne and climbing in a long turn toward Andros.

* * *

The blue chasm of the Tongue of the Ocean passed beneath them, and then the coral-toothed white surf of the barrier reef along Andros’ eastern shore. The interior of the largest island of the Bahama chain was a green mat of vegetation broken only by meandering creeks and great marshy lakes dotted with mangroves. The plane came out at last over the desolate west coast where the land shelved almost imperceptibly into the vast shallow seas of the Bahama Bank and the patterns of sand bars were like riffled dunes beneath the surface. Ahead and on both sides the horizon faded into illimitable distance, merging finally with the sky with no line of demarcation and seeming to move forward with the progress so that they remained always in the center. It was only by looking down at the varying terraces of the bottom and the shifting patterns of color that it was possible to tell the plane was moving at all. The colors themselves were indescribable, Ingram thought; you had to see them to realize they could be that way, and he didn’t believe that anybody ever entirely forgot them afterward. He wondered if Mrs. Osborne was enjoying them. He glanced aft, and she was leaning back in the seat with her eyes closed, smoking a cigarette. Well, maybe nobody’d ever told her it was an expensive ocean.

Andros faded away astern and they were alone above the immensity of the sea. Another thirty minutes went by. Then, a little over an hour after their take-off from Windsor Field, Avery said, “We should be coming up on the area now.”

Ingram nodded. Ahead, just emerging from the haze of distance, was the long line sweeping across the horizon where the delicate shades of turquoise and powder blue and aqua changed abruptly to indigo as the western edge of the Bank plunged into the depths of the Santaren Channel. He stepped

into the after compartment. Mrs. Osborne opened her eyes, and he pointed out the small window nearest to her seat.

She nodded, removed the binoculars from their case, and slung them about her neck. He bent down so as not to have to shout above the noise of the engines, and said, "I wouldn't try to use those too much. With this vibration, they'll pull your eyes out."

"All right," she said. She turned back to the window. Ingram returned to the co-pilot's seat. He unrolled the chart, penciled a mark on it where their course intersected the hundred-fathom curve, and set a clip-board in his lap.

As they came over the drop-off, Avery banked in a gentle right turn, steadied up on the new course, and checked the time. "Two-seven-oh," he said. "Ten twenty-six."

"Right." Ingram wrote the figures on the pad attached to the clip-board without looking down. His eyes continued their search of the surrounding sea—ahead, starboard, out to the horizon, and below. The wind was out of the southeast with a light sea running, dotting the surface with random whitecaps that winked and were gone, but as far as the eye could see there was only emptiness. Fifteen minutes went by. They banked to the right and headed due north. Ingram noted the time and course. At the end of seven minutes they turned right again. "Ninety degrees," Avery called out as they steadied up. They were now flying back parallel to their first course and approximately ten miles north of the Bank. Between changes of course, no one spoke. Avery flew mechanically while he searched the sector reported along with Mrs. Osborne. They came in over the Bank, turned north again, and then west once more. There was no sign of life, no craft of any kind, anywhere in the emptiness below them.

An hour dragged by. An hour and a half. They came up to and passed the area where the dinghy had been found. His leg began to bother him, and his eyes ached from staring. Once they sighted a small dot far to the westward and changed course with sudden hope. It was a commercial fishing boat over the Cay Sal Bank on the opposite side of the Channel. They picked up the pattern again, and went on twenty-five miles west, ten miles north, twenty-five east, and then north again, squinting against the sunlit water below them and straining to pierce the haze of distance far out on the horizon. At 12:15 p.m., Avery made a last check of the fuel gauges, and said, "That's it for now." They flew back to Nassau and re-fueled.

They took off again, made the long run down across Andros and the Bank once more, and went back in the search pattern shortly after three. It was almost hopeless now, Ingram thought. They were already north of where the dinghy had been picked up, and working farther away from the area all the time. They went on, not speaking, eyes glued to the emptiness below and on all sides of them.

At 4:35 p.m. they were on an eastward leg. As they came in over the edge of the Bank, Avery checked the time and the remaining fuel, and said, "Best make the next leg a short one. Only about thirty minutes before we have to start back."

Ingram nodded. They started to turn to the left, while his eyes searched the blurred distance in over the Bank. "Hold it!" he called out suddenly. "I think I see something."

It was only an indistinct speck, far ahead and below them. He pointed. Avery saw it, and nodded. They continued on course, heading straight toward it. In another ninety seconds he could make out that there were two separate objects. One was a narrow rock or sand spit showing just above the surface; the other, however, was a boat, and he felt a tingle of excitement along his nerves. He started to call out to Mrs. Osborne, and then was aware she had come forward and was crouched behind him, peering over his shoulder. Avery changed course slightly to put the boat on the starboard side, and nosed down to lose altitude. He could see the masts now. There were two of them, the taller aft. The boat was a schooner, and a large one. He saw the large cockpit aft, the long, low deckhouses, the rakish bowsprit

“There she is,” he said. It was the *Dragoon*.

~~She was lying dead in the water, listing slightly to port, with her sails furled. They went over at a thousand feet, still losing altitude. Avery banked right to swing back. Ingram stared down to keep her in view, conscious of Mrs. Osborne’s face touching his and her hand digging into his shoulder. She was clutching the binoculars in her other hand, trying to bring them to bear on the schooner’s deck. He slid out of the seat, pushed her into it, and stood behind her. The schooner was momentarily lost to view then as Avery lengthened the radius of his turn. When they straightened out at last they were some four hundred feet above the water and about a mile astern. They flew up past her, less than a hundred yards off her port side, and he could see everything quite clearly.~~

Her hull was painted a light blue now, instead of white, and while he couldn’t make out the name lettered on her stern it was shorter than *Dragoon*. She lay roughly on a northerly heading about three hundred yards southwest of the dry sand bar, which was itself approximately that long, very narrow and not over two or three feet above water at its highest point. The water was very shoal on all sides of the bar except for one twisting channel of slightly darker blue extending along its western side, past the *Dragoon*’s stern, and then on westward toward the outer edge of the Bank. The tide was flooding onto the Bank, flowing around her hull, but she lay broadside to it and unmoving. The deck was empty of any sign of life. Then they were past her, and Avery was climbing to gain altitude for another turn.

Mrs. Osborne had put down the binoculars and had her face pressed against the window, trying to see aft. “Are you sure it’s the *Dragoon*?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “There’s no doubt of it.”

“There’s something funny about the way she’s lying. What is it?”

“She’s aground.”

“I didn’t see anybody. Did you?”

“No. I think she’s been abandoned.”

“There *must* be somebody. . . . What could have happened?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

Avery completed the turn and they came back, still lower and off the schooner’s starboard side this time. She was in no immediate danger, Ingram thought, as long as the wind held out of the southeast. There was a short, choppy sea running across the Bank, but she was completely protected in the lee of the shoal surrounding the sand spit. A norther would break her up, but there was little chance of one in June. As they went past he swept the deserted deck with a cool professional eye. There appeared to be no damage. The sticks and rigging were all right as far as he could tell. The sails were sloppily furled as though they had been stowed in the dark by farmers, but the booms were inboard, the main resting on its gallows. There was only one thing that appeared to be amiss, and that was hard to judge with the list she had. She could be a little low in the water. Maybe she had been holed on a reef somewhere and they’d deliberately beached her. But there was no anchor out, which would seem to indicate she had been abandoned before she went aground. It was baffling.

Then they were past, and climbing. Ingram made an estimate of the position and marked it on the chart. Avery checked the time, and cautioned, “Can’t cut it too fine. We’d best start for home.”

“Could we go by just once more?” Mrs. Osborne asked.

Avery nodded. They made the turn and came back, higher this time. She stared down at the empty deck. Then the schooner was falling away behind them, looking helpless and forsaken in the lone distances of the sea. When she disappeared at last, Mrs. Osborne turned away from the window. “How do we get aboard?”

“Charter a boat,” Ingram replied.

“How long will it take?”

“Two days, at least. Maybe three.”

“That’s too long. Why don’t we land out there with the plane?”

He glanced at Avery. The latter nodded. “Could be done, if there’s not too much sea running. Early in the morning would be the best time. But you’d have to take it up with McAllister.”

He started to point out that merely getting aboard wouldn’t solve anything; the chances were they were going to need the help of another boat, and one with plenty of power, to pull her off. Then he reconsidered; there were several things in favor of it. He could size up the situation at first hand, see just what it was going to take to get her afloat again, and find out if there was any damage below the water line. Also, she might not be fast aground at all; she might merely have lodged there on a change of tide and float off herself on the next flood. With no anchor out, there was no telling where she would wind up. An abandoned boat was always in danger.

“What about getting over to her?” he asked.

“We have some rubber life rafts,” Avery replied.

They landed in Nassau shortly before six. McAllister was still in the office. He was a portly Irishman with curly black hair, a cigar, and the affable charm of a successful politician. Ingram unrolled the chart on his desk and explained the situation.

“You’re sure that’s the position?” McAllister asked. “The chart doesn’t show a sand bar there.”

“I know,” he said. “It doesn’t mean anything. A lot of the Bank’s pretty sketchy in the survey department, and those shoals and bars change with every storm. We checked the course on the way in and wouldn’t have any trouble finding it again.”

“Any rocks or coral heads close to the surface?”

Avery shook his head. “No. There’s plenty of water to the westward of the sand spit. Early in the morning, before the breeze gets up, we could bring her in well off the shoal and taxi up in the lee of it while they go aboard.”

“Okay,” McAllister replied. “If it looks safe to you. What time do you want to take off?”

“The earlier the better. As soon as it’s light.”

“All right. We’ll put one of those surplus life rafts aboard and have her ready.”

Ingram retrieved their suitcases and they went around in front of the terminal and took a taxi downtown. As they pulled away from the loading zone, she asked, “What do you think happened to them? What became of them?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You don’t think there’s a chance anyone is still aboard?”

“No. They’d have made some attempt to get her off. There would have been a kedge anchor or a kedge astern, or some roily water downstream if they’d been turning the engine. She was apparently abandoned even before she drifted in there.”

“But how? And why?”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t even try to guess. There’s been no bad weather, and I didn’t see any sign of damage. Hollister couldn’t have taken her down there alone. There had to be others. And as far as we know, they didn’t even have another dinghy to get off with even if they’d wanted to. It makes no sense at all.”

“But what about Hollister?”

“There’s a good chance he’s dead.”

It was a moment before she answered. “Why?”

“He took off his clothes and that watch to go in the water after something. He didn’t come back.”

into the dinghy. And if he's not aboard the *Dragoon*, that doesn't leave much."

"I see," she said. ~~He turned and glanced at her, but she was staring out the window on the opposite side.~~ She was silent during the rest of the ride into town; when he suggested the Pilot House Club as a good place to stay, she merely nodded. When they came into the central business district she asked the driver to stop, and got out.

"I want to do some shopping," she said to Ingram. "Take my suitcase and the binoculars, and reserve a room for me. I'll be along later."

After he'd shaved and showered he ate a solitary dinner in the patio near the pool. He didn't see her anywhere. He crossed the road to the Yacht Haven; none of the skippers he knew were around, so he walked downtown, driven by restlessness, and had several bottles of beer in the Carlton House bar. You're getting old, he told himself; you've been to too many places for too many forgotten reasons, and now you're going around again. Remembering the same place offset in different layers of time makes it too easy to count the years in between and wonder where they went. You wake up in the morning and they're speaking Spanish outside your window, so it could be Mexico again, and you remember lightering bananas down the Grijalva River in a wheezy gasoline-powered tug with a string of crank barges and the goofy invincibility of youth, and the salvage job off the Panuco River bar below Tampico when the tanker piled up on the south jetty because the skipper wouldn't wait for a pilot and didn't know about the bad southerly set across the entrance during a norther, and then you realize the two memories are eleven years apart and somehow they've shoved a whole war, several other countries, and a good deal of the western Pacific in between. And Nassau . . .

That had been the good time. Seven years of it, with Frances and the *CanCIÓN*. He'd met Frances in 1948 when she'd been one of a party of five Miami schoolteachers who'd chartered the *CanCIÓN* for a week's trip to Eleuthera. They were married that same year, and lived aboard the ketch as skipper and mate in a very special and private world of their own happiness while carrying charters along the New England coast in summer and around the Bahamas in winter—until 1955. She'd flown home to Seattle to visit her mother, and was going to drive back to Chicago with friends to take the plane down to Miami. Everything had seemed to run down and stop then, on that endless bright November afternoon in the Berry Islands with the wind blowing blue and clean from the north, when he got the word by radio. She'd been killed in an automobile accident at a place called Manhattan, Montana. While he stood there holding the handset of the radiotelephone in his hand waiting for the numbness to wear off and the thing to begin to get to him wherever it was going to start, it seemed the only thing he could think of was that if he could only isolate it and pin it down there must be a question in his mind somewhere for the boys who could always explain everything. After all the places he'd been in the world, the only thing he'd ever been handed that he wasn't sure he was going to be able to handle had happened to him in a place he'd never even heard of.

You've had too much beer, he thought, or you think too much when you drink. He left the bar and walked back, and it was after eleven when he came into the lobby of the Pilot House. The girl at the desk said Mrs. Osborne had tried to call him several times in the past hour. "Thank you," he said. He went on up to his room, looked at the telephone, and shrugged. The hell with Mrs. Osborne; he was going to bed. While he was unbuttoning his shirt, the telephone rang. He ignored it until the third ring when it occurred to him the girl would have told her he was in now. He picked it up.

"I want to talk to you," she said. Her voice sounded blurred, and the words tended to run together. "I was just going to bed."

"At eleven o'clock? Do you get a merit badge or something?"

"Can't it wait till morning?"

“No. Come over to my room. Or I’ll come over there.”

Stoned, he thought. He’d better humor her, or she’d be banging on the door. “All right.” He put the instrument back on the cradle and went down the hall.

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