

Three boyhood friends decide to take their wives on a sailing trip in the Caribbean. One of the women is kidnapped by a wealthy Barbadian pirate. She falls in love with her captor and reveals a dark medical secret.

Tempest on board the Sugarcane

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TEMPEST ON BOARD

THE SUGARCANE

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Chapter I

The deck of the forty-six foot sloop was damp, a typical tropical rain shower having rinsed everything down just before dawn. At 6:30 A.M., the sun was illuminating Fort Charlotte, which guarded the entrance to English Harbour in Antigua. Early June in the Caribbean is the beginning of the “little period of the big rains” (as opposed to the “big period of the little rains”).

As usual, Mitch was the first one on deck, checking the moorings before heading back into the spacious cabin to start the coffee. The aroma of locally-brewed Caribbean beans served as a wake-up call to the other five on board.

“Honey, what’s for breakfast this morning?” called out Mitch to his French wife, Anne Sophie. She had vaguely felt him leave their forward cabin on the starboard side, but had nodded back off.

“Keep it down out there,” came the voice of Hal from the aft cabin. “This is vacation! Can’t a body get some sleep?”

From the forward port cabin, John replied, “Everybody up. It’s almost seven in the morning, and we’ve got a long day if we’re going to make the Saintes by nightfall.”

The three men met on deck, silently admiring the puffy white clouds as they gradually crossed the pale blue sky from east to west.

“Another beautiful morning,” observed Mitch. “Let’s just hope the weatherman is wrong about that tropical depression, and that it will head up north before making it to the Lesser Antilles.”

“Listen, you two,” admonished Hal. “We’ve been sailing together since we were ten years old, and a little squally weather isn’t going to scare us off. Remember that chubasco off

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Point Loma when we were in high school? We made it back with only a ripped mainsail and my dad's Victory sailboat without a scratch."

"I'm not worried about us," added John. "It's the women that worry me. I only wish that they could get along like the three of us do, but there always seems to be something wrong. I don't know what's going on with Tammy and Laura, but dinner at Admiral's Inn last night was rather uncomfortable, to say the least. And Anne Sophie kind of stays off by herself. I was hoping that this three week cruise in close quarters might bring the three of them closer together, but so far it seems the opposite is taking place."

"Whatever you're doing up there, get down here if you want your bacon and eggs warm," commanded the voice of Laura.

"And another day begins," muttered John under his breath.

In the galley, things seemed okay, the three women pitching in to get breakfast on the table. The tension of the night before had dissipated. The three men gave each other a look of relief.

"How long will we be sailing today, mon amour?" questioned Anne Sophie. "I hope the sea will be more tranquil than when we sailed down from Nevis and St. Kitts."

Mitch, eager to dispel any fear, replied, "We'll have a few hours of open sea until we reach the north coast of Basse Terre, in Guadeloupe. There, we should be protected by the mountains. The ocean will probably be very calm there, and we might even have to use the motor for a few hours before spotting the lighthouse at Vieux Fort. From there, we should be able to see the Saintes, and tonight we'll be mooring in what is considered to be the second or third most beautiful bay in the world, after Rio de Janeiro, and maybe after Hong Kong."

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“And it’s French!” exclaimed Anne Sophie. “Surely we’ll find some good restaurants, and, at last, eat decently, after a week of English cuisine,” she added somewhat pedantically. The other two women stiffened almost imperceptibly, but their attitude was not lost on the three men.

After a hearty, truly American breakfast, everyone went about the preparations for a day at sea, battening down anything that might be sent flying across the cabin if the seas roughened, or the heel increased abruptly, due to a sudden squall. They would probably only snack at noon, as the women didn’t like being thrown about in the cabin while trying to prepare lunch.

It was about nine, and they were just about ready to set sail. The women volunteered to go to the Custom’s Office with their six passports and the registration papers of the rented sloop, *Tempête*, to notify the local authorities of their departure.

Although Antigua achieved full independence from Great Britain in 1981, the British influence was obvious everywhere, even to driving on the left-hand side of the road. The Customs’ official, very black, had a spotless white uniform and a friendly attitude. He thanked the women in his British accent tainted by the tropics, and wished them a pleasant trip to their next island, after having collected the \$60 customs’ fee.

English Harbour had been an excellent haven for a three-day breather, before heading back to sea. The harbor was founded in 1725, but had been used as a hurricane shelter as far back as 1671, and served as Admiral Horatio Nelson’s base in 1784 to launch his attacks on neighboring islands. This little island, very poor and arid at first view, has been devastated several times over the years by severe earthquakes and also hurricanes – Hurricane Marilyn as recently as 1996, and Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

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The Customs and Immigration formalities took about 45 minutes. During this time, the men were charging the batteries with the big diesel motor, and readying the sails.

“Is Tammy all right, Hal?” asked Mitch. “Sorry for asking, but I can’t help my medical training. She seems pale and anxious.” He didn’t add that he noticed her checking her watch much too often for someone on vacation, and that she took many pills throughout the day. However discreet she tried to be, as a doctor he noticed these things

“Yeah, she’s fine. Just a little uptight and tired. I don’t think she really enjoys sailing all that much,” Hal explained unconvincingly.

Chapter VII

The ordeal of the day before seemed to bring them all closer together, and breakfast was relaxed, no snide remarks or oblique looks. Everyone chipped in with the dishes, and they decided to spend the day relaxing on board – swimming, sunning and catching up on postcards back to the States. Unconsciously, they were worried about being robbed on board, and that their mere presence would surely discourage any uninvited visitor.

Mitch went in with Hal at 5 P.M. to check with the gendarmes. They had nothing new to report, and the two men headed back to the boat. They suggested an early dinner at the pizza place, about 60 yards from their sloop. They cleaned up fast, and brought the dinghy directly onto the beach in front of the restaurant. After dinner, nobody felt like lingering on land, so they loaded up the dinghy and headed back. The women were tired, and turned in almost immediately. The men tarried on board, glad to have a little time together. They sat out under a huge canopy of stars, and talked about everything and nothing. There were very few lights on the island, and the Milky Way was amazingly clear. They rocked gently in the wake of a passing boat, and eventually decided to hit the sack.

About midnight, Mitch was again awakened by the creaking floorboards, and just assumed it was Tammy partaking in her midnight ritual. He didn't feel like prying, so he stayed in bed. Then he heard the sound of glass breaking, followed by a low grunt or grumble. The glass was replaceable, he thought before drifting back off to sleep.

Hal knocked on John's cabin door. "John, did you get up and open the hatch this morning? I can't find Tammy."

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“Wait a sec, Hal. I’m getting up,” groaned John. Hal was already knocking on Mitch’s door. Mitch had heard the commotion, slipped on his swim trunks, and ducked out of his cabin.

“What’s up, Hal. What’s that you said about Tammy?”

“I got up early, Mitch, when I realized that Tammy wasn’t in bed. I found the hatch open and assumed she was up on deck. I’ve looked everywhere – she’s not on deck, and I can’t see her in the water.”

John made a quick check around and saw that the dinghy was still there. “Maybe she swam in to the beach and took a walk. Why don’t we take the dinghy and see if we can find her on shore. Mitch can stay here with the girls.”

Mitch cast them off, and replayed the soundtrack of the previous evening in his head. He had heard footsteps and breaking glass, then a grunt, then nothing. He went to the galley and was surprised to find the pieces of the broken glass still on the floor. That didn’t seem like Tammy to leave her mess like that. He bent over and picked up a small capsule. He didn’t recognize it right off, read the inscription, and felt sick. What the hell was going on here? He was going to have to have a long talk with Hal, but wasn’t sure that this was the right moment. He pushed the pill to the bottom of the trash bag, already half full, and went about cleaning up the broken glass.

Their bread delivery man came by, and Mitch asked if he remembered the women on board. “But of course, monsieur. I never forget a pretty visage.”

“Did you happen to see the third woman this morning?” Mitch asked, calling the other two women out on the deck.

“Desole, monsieur,” replied the vendor. “I did not see her on shore.”

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Mitch, Anne Sophie and Laura bided their time eating breakfast and cleaning up the boat. About one hour later, Hal and John showed up, grim and sweaty.

"I just don't understand it," said Hal. "Tammy wouldn't just take off like that. I don't feel right about this. Something's wrong."

"Let's not jump to any conclusions. She probably just took a long walk, and you two just didn't see her. Why don't we give her 'til 11 o'clock before alerting the authorities," suggested Mitch.

By 11:30, everybody realized that something awful must have taken place. Anne Sophie mentioned the Gendarmerie, which, being a French administration, would probably be closed between noon and three. Once again, Hal and Anne Sophie headed into town, taking Tammy's passport with them. The same gendarme was at the front desk, and immediately recognized them.

"I'm so sorry, but we still have no news concerning your personal belongings," offered the gendarme.

"Mais non," replied Anne Sophie. "We are here to report a missing person. My friend, Hal, who was robbed two days ago, as you know, woke up this morning and discovered that his wife had disappeared. The men have been walking around the island since 7 o'clock this morning, and she is nowhere to be found."

Hal pulled out Tammy's passport and handed it to the gendarme, who stared at the picture. He had not seen this lovely woman in the picture during his morning jog that morning. He stated that they would have to wait 48 hours before filing a missing person's report, unless, of course, there was evidence of foul play. He tried to be reassuring, suggesting that she probably did just take a walk. With Anne Sophie once again translating, the gendarme asked if Hal and Tammy had had a dispute the previous evening.

“Not at all,” replied Hal, a little on the defensive now. “We were in bed around 10 last night, and at 6 this morning, I found the boat open and my wife gone. What can we do for 48 hours? The waiting will kill me!”

The gendarme, Mr. LeClerc, said they might try taking the dinghy around the island, checking the little coves, some inaccessible by land. He cautioned that the east coast was sometimes difficult to navigate, due to the easterly trade winds.

Leaving the Gendarmerie, Hal asked Anne Sophie, “What’s going to happen? Do you think that these guys are competent enough to handle a kidnapping?”

“What do you say, Hal? A kidnapping? Do you really think...?”

“I just don’t know, Anne Sophie. I know my wife, and I know she wouldn’t take off like this. We all know that there was some friction among you three women, but for the last few days, things seemed a little more relaxed. The insinuation of the gendarme is ridiculous. Tammy was not upset with me when we went to bed last night.”

“And I hope you’re not insinuating that Laura or I are somehow involved in this disappearance, Hal!”

“Of course not, Anne Sophie. I’m just upset, and that gendarme riled me a bit with his questions.”

Mitch, John and Laura were anxious for news when they tied up the dinghy to the stern of *Tempête*. Hal reported on their meeting with the gendarme.

“48 hours!” yelled Laura. “These frogs are crazy! She could drown or die or God knows what by then.”

John rebuked her sharply, “Why don’t you just shut up, Laura. You’re only making things worse. You’re a lawyer, and you know damn well that in the States there is the same 48 hour waiting period.”

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Hal tried to ease the present tension, which he really didn't need at that time. "Let's get organized, you guys. This island has 3,000 inhabitants, and maybe 200 tourists at any given time. If it's all right with you all, why don't Mitch, Anne Sophie and Laura divide up the island, and John and I will take the dinghy and circle the island. If we leave by 6 tomorrow morning, the wind should be calm, and that east coast should be easier to explore. This afternoon, we'll all take another look around the island, and if Tammy still hasn't turned up by then, we'll put my plan into action tomorrow. In the meantime, why don't we have some lunch, then rest while the sun is still high in the sky. We can shove off around 4 this afternoon."

"I'm not really hungry," replied Mitch, "but I do agree with your plan. You're probably right, Hal. A few sandwiches and some cold beer would do us all some good. But first, why don't we all cool off? Despite everything, the water does look inviting."

They all splashed around, but there was no monkey play, and their voices were subdued. Lunch followed in the same ominous mood, and they all went to their cabins for a nap. Hal went to the small head in their cabin, and found Tammy's make-up bag and her pills. She couldn't have taken off of her own volition. All her pills were there, and to not take them could seriously compromise her condition, or even lead to her death.

"Shit," uttered Hal as he fell onto the bed.

Chapter XXII

Paco really was shaken. Who was this guy Hal Thomas? In such a short period, he had already learned Paco's whereabouts, and even figured out how he had obtained the phone number. Paco would have to be doubly careful, but what could go wrong? Mr. Thomas sounded anxious to recuperate his wife, and would get the money. That was good news. It meant that Mrs. Thomas hadn't contacted her husband yet. She was surely too busy screwing the Boss, that little bitch.

First of all, he would check out of the hotel, although he couldn't imagine being traced back to there. He had plenty of cash. He could go to the local Liat office and get a ticket for the 7 A.M. flight from Vigie, the little airport near Castries. It was a twenty minute flight to Martinique. There, he could case the airport arrival area before the actual 8:30 transaction. He decided to try one of the credit cards at the nearest ATM, just to see if Hal was bluffing. He quickly found out that the operation was refused, so that wasn't just hot air coming out of the Yankee's mouth. Paco had already figured out what he would do. If Mr. Thomas showed up with the cash, he would merely tell him that Tammy was at the Halcyon Beach Club in Castries, unharmed. By the time that Mr. Thomas got to the hotel in St. Lucia, Paco would be winging his way toward Puerto Rico, and from there to Santo Domingo. Paco would be \$20,000 richer, and eventually Mr. Thomas would hear from his little whore. That wasn't his problem.

Luckily, there was still room on the early-morning flight to Martinique. He knew the airline and its dubious reputation of always being late, if the flight wasn't simply cancelled. Hopefully, tomorrow's flight would be on time, or at least not too late, he mused.

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He then went to his favorite local whore, waking her a little before noon. He offered to pay her generously for the afternoon and evening in her quarters. He promised to be out by 5:30 the following morning. She readily accepted his more-than-generous offer. He was already undressing as she spoke, and joined her in bed.

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