

Permission to Climb Aboard

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Aerial view: A yacht drifts in a vast turquoise sea speckled with small, distant islands.

Closer view: A man and a woman, both very good-looking, sparsely dressed, oiled with suntan lotion, sit together on plush cushions lining the deck of the yacht.

Even closer view:

„Where’s that go, Tom?” Carolina pointed at a trapdoor she had just noticed on the deck.

„Sail storage.”

She adjusted the strap on her swimsuit. „I guess you know boats. You were a Navy Seal, right?”

He nodded. „Yeah, but not on *boats* like this. This is a fifty-two foot Tanaya yacht. The brochure calls her an eye-stopper. And so she is.”

She smiled at him. „Two bedrooms below. Impressive.”

„You mean two staterooms.”

„I don't know much about boats, or yachts, for that matter.”

„If you knew me well, you'd know that I know you know about yachts and boats and I'm guessing much more obscure things, too.”

She yawned. „Just trying to get a dialogue going.”

„Bored?”

„Funny, isn't it? I mean, we're in paradise. You see it on magazine covers, thinking, oh, that's life worth living.”

He scanned the horizon. „It's going to be a beautiful evening, and let me remind you, we're deeply into the good life.”

Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, Carolina relaxed her face in the long rays of the late afternoon sun. „Stopped in at the post office in Roadtown lately?”

„No.” He picked up binoculars and put them to his eyes.

„You know that wall where they post pictures of the families that have disappeared off their boats-yachts?”

He nodded.

„Well, they've updated it. There are new ones, recent ones. Photographs of tousle-haired kids, tanned parents. Grinning dogs. Imagine people taking their dogs on long boat trips. I mean, where do they poop?”

He laughed.

„Seriously. That's some sad stuff.”

They sat in silence while Carolina leafed through a magazine and Tom continued his scrutiny of the empty horizon. After a while, she put the magazine down, put a white canvas hat on her head, and pulled her ponytail through the back. She squeezed some sunscreen from a soft plastic bottle and rubbed her stomach.

„Any good?” he asked, sniffing, setting aside the binoculars. „Smells nice.”

„SPF thirty-five. No worries, no burn, baby.”

„Make me hot, sweet thing. Call me names.”

Carolina punched his arm. „Pay attention, here. Grow up.”

He studied her. „I am paying attention, here. You in a bikini: brown and beautiful.”

She blushed. „You're cute in those surfer shorts, too. It's sure a different look for you.”

A few minutes passed in silence. Then Tom picked up the binoculars again.

A huge yacht skidded by. The wake rocked them.

Tom swerved his binoculars that way. „Gotta be sixty-five feet.”

„Here be rich folk,” Carolina said. „They devour catered strawberries and pineapple with whipped cream and jump into the sea looking monstrous, loaded with gear, never more than ten meters from yet another of the world's most dazzling coral reefs.”

„Hey, you snorkeled yesterday. You thought that parrot fish making those nibbling sounds on the coral was awesome.”

„He looked like a rainbow.”

„Check this out.” He handed her the binoculars.

She took them and squinted. „Two people. A girl and a guy, I think.”

„In trouble?”

„Pretty long way off, but I'd say so.” She handed them back.

„A Boston Whaler.” He watched. „Engine sputtering.”

„If they need help, they'll signal us somehow.”

„The guy’s looking at us through his binoculars.” He put his arm around her and held her close. „I say we ignore them until they let us know they want us involved. What do you think?”

„Maybe they’re waiting for help from someone they radioed already,” Carolina agreed. She popped open a couple of bottles, handed him one, and nuzzled his neck.

He set the powerful binoculars down and pulled her into a long, slow, showy kiss.

After they parted again, she drank from her bottle, turned away from the approaching boat, and made a face. „Ugh. What crap.” She set the bottle down.

„Won a prize in a blind taste test.”

„You mean a tasteless taste test.”

„We’ll crack out some champagne later, and that’s a promise.”

She ran fingers through the hair on his chest.

He nibbled her ear. „They’re heading our way. He’s pretty stuck on those binoculars. What a voyeur.”

She pushed in close to him.

„You’re trembling. Nervous?”

„Actually, I’m excited. Tired of sitting out here with nothing happening, no offense to you. You can be entertaining.”

He laughed, and kissed her again. „It’s just two kids on a rental boat that’s running out of gas or something.”

They watched the boat approach, its motor roaring intermittently. The pair chugging toward them in the boat, now more visible to the naked eye, appeared youngish, twenties.

„They need bailing.”

„The nearest island is Jost Van Dyck, and that’s got to be, um, seven miles away?” She accepted a long kiss, which took place more on her cheek than her mouth, and took the binoculars, studying the couple. „Tom, he’s got two arms up, trying to get our attention. They want help.”

Tom stepped up to the yacht’s shiny wooden wheel. He turned on the motor, and aimed for the Whaler.

A bead of sweat on Carolina’s forehead dribbled down her cheek. She brushed it away and turned her face into the wind, watching the little boat get bigger. Her hat flew off and she rushed to retrieve it before it went overboard.

„Careful there!” Tom said.

„Be right back,” she said, disappearing below. Moments later, she returned wearing a sarong high over her swimsuit.

„Hey, get over here. Snug your hot body closer,” said Tom.

„Stalker.” She nuzzled, then ruffled his hair, looking toward the little boat. „Better slow down.”

He nodded, slowing.

„Don’t want to drown them.”

Tom cut the engine. The small boat cautiously approached the yacht. The couple on board waved. Tom waved back.

„They were going toward Sandy Spit,” said Carolina.

„Lots of big yachts stop there.”

„But their engine’s failing and we’re closer.”

„And isolated,” said Tom, smelling the skin on her shoulder and sighing. „We could ignore them.”

„Don't get weird on me, okay? That might make me nervous.”

„Too late.”

„Sorry for the grease,” she said, laughing as his fingers stalled in a tangle of her hair. „Three days at sea and everything goes to hell.”

„Speaking of that.” He squinted through the binoculars. „The sea's rough right now. They're rocking.”

„Closer, closer.”

„Drink,” he said, handing her another brown bottle, “then come back and cuddle. Keep in mind we're on our honeymoon.”

Carolina tossed her old, half-finished bottle, then drank. Tom picked up a new bottle and drank, too.

Silvery-pink clouds blew in the western sky, the indigo sea churning below. The boat pulled up beside them so quickly that the pounding on the side of their yacht startled them both.

„Permission to climb aboard?” asked the muscular young man, smiling. „Always wanted to say that.”

„Sure,” said Tom. He hung a ladder down the side. The young man and his partner, a young woman in a bikini only partly covered by a shirt, grabbed the ladder and nimbly ascended.

„Got a cigarette?” the young man asked immediately upon dropping onto the deck. He wore a sleeveless tee over a pair of bulky, flowered Hawaiian trunks with multiple pockets that enhanced the fit legs that thrust out of them.

Carolina rummaged and extracted a lighter and a pack from a pocket in the bin beside her.

„Cool,” the young man said.

She threw the pack and lighter at him.

He caught with easy grace, lit his cigarette, inhaled, and exhaled. „Oh, what a killer.”

The girl sprawled against the rail beside him, her damp, white cotton shirt tied above a flat, pierced navel. Autumn gold hair floated around her head as light and thick as feathers. Her skin, rusty-over-beige, bore few traces of the sun they must have survived. She looked like a model, taller than most women, utterly at ease with her body. „Wow, thank you SO MUCH for picking us up. That was so scary.” She plunked a beach bag down beside herself.

Her boyfriend frowned slightly. „It's not like we were going to drown.”

„We were an awful long way from another boat,” she said, pointing down at the Whaler, „to be carrying so much water. You take too many risks.”

„Jude,” the young man said suddenly, extending a hand, turning everyone's attention away from the boat. He smiled again. Tom shook, then Carolina.

„Shauna,” said the girl, her eyes less friendly, her teeth less prominent than Jude's, though no less bleached. They shook hands.

„Thirsty?” Carolina asked, after Jude and Tom tied the Whaler to the yacht.

„Got beer?” said Jude.

Carolina handed him one. Jude sipped, grimaced. „What is this?” He examined the label. „Hey!”

„Sorry,” Tom said, taking it from him. „I'm in recovery.” He found another, similar-looking bottle and handed it to Jude. „This will suit you better.”

Jude drank. „Recovery. No offense, but have you ever considered that that is a fad promoted by dull people to dull people down?”

„How ‘bout you, Shauna?“ Carolina asked before Tom had a chance to respond.

„Anything cold.“

Carolina handed her a beer.

„Where to?“ Tom asked, starting up the yacht’s motor.

The two younger people looked at each other. „The dock at Cane Garden Bay. Imagine someone renting someone a leaky boat with a bad engine!“ Jude said.

„Seems unusually stupid. You sure it’s leaking?“ Tom asked.

„We don’t know that for sure, although the water got deeper, it seems to me.“ Shauna adjusted the ties on her bikini. „See, the guy who rented it told us to let ‘er rip if we wanted to reach the Spit in a small boat like that. So we were going fast, but Jude got distracted when this huge yacht breezed by us...“

„The engine sucked. Weak piece of crap.“ Jude said.

„Jude says the engine got wet. Anyway, we lost power.“ She shrugged. „I guess that’s what happened.“

„You didn’t call for help on the radio?“ asked Carolina, looking over the side of the yacht into the small, swamped boat drifting astride.

„Of course. Bum radio. Big surprise,“ Jude said.

„And forget mobile phones out here,“ Shauna added. „No reception.“

The sky darkened suddenly, cotton-ball clouds fluffing over the sun.

„What time does your rental-man close?“ Tom asked, hand over his eyes scanning the bumpy brown island in the distance.

Jude looked toward Tortola. „No rush. He lives right next to the dock. Someone can find him.“ He leaned back, one hand stroking the cushion. „Let’s face it, your ride beats our ride.“ He looked around. „Nice.“

„Ha,“ Shauna said. „That’s for sure.“ She finished her beer quickly. He finished his.

„Thanks for picking us up,“ said Shauna.

„Where have you been staying?“ Carolina asked.

„Smuggler’s Cove,“ Jude said.

„Is that also on Tortola?“

„Right,“ said Shauna. „The far side. Past Long Bay? We have friends there with a house. Not air-conditioned, if you can believe that. Hot. But there’s a teeny-weeny pool.“

„Which fruit bats love in the evenings,“ said Jude.

„They swoop down to drink,“ said Shauna.

„We’ll have to see it sometime.“ Carolina squeezed Tom’s arm. „We don’t know that part of Tortola.“

„A hidden gem of the Caribbean, the travel writers say.“ Shauna reflected Carolina’s motion, squeezing Jude’s arm.

„There used to be smugglers and pirates all over,“ said Jude. „Norman’s Island? In those caves.“ He moved away from Shauna, splashing fresh water from a jug over his sweating body. „They brought down European ships and stole their booty. They hid in the caves until the heat was off, then sailed away, totally rich.“

The conversation stalled. After Carolina offered him another beer and he took it, Jude sat down and lay back against the cushions, eyes closed, catching the last bit of sunlight.

„How ‘bout some wine, Shauna? We have some cold white. California. Prize-winning,“ Carolina said, with a private smile for Tom.

„Sounds good, but first, where’s the head?”

„Down the stairs to the right of the galley,” Tom said.

Carolina took her below, then rummaged around the galley. After Shauna finished, she returned to the deck and Carolina lingered below. Tom appeared.

„You gave him near beer?”

„I stink as a host, yep.”

„Bad enough we drink the stuff,” Carolina muttered and put together a plate of goodies on a platter that resembled a big green leaf. „Shouldn’t you be steering?”

„Gave Jude a turn.”

„Is that wise?”

„Don’t worry.”

They returned to the deck. Tom and Carolina stayed close to each other, a lingering look or touch between them here and there. Tom took the wheel from Jude, who settled back beside Shauna.

„Honeymooners?” Shauna asked, looking first at Tom, then Carolina.

They nodded, tightening their grips on each other.

„Told you,” she said to Jude. The sun continued to sink; the deck darkened. Carolina lit night lights, which twinkled like the night sky, hugely, doubled by their reflections, across the windy sea and beyond.

„Why not switch to sail?” Jude asked. Islands twinkled in the distance, at least three close enough to shine crisply. Tortola, which had appeared so faraway, now loomed close and dark, with only a few spots with many lights. „Something wrong?”

Tom laughed. „Only that I’m a lazy sailor.”

Shauna refilled her wineglass for the third or fourth time, wobbling from the cooler to the bench.

„You cold?” Carolina asked.

„Yeah, but I’ve got a sweater.” She reached into her beach bag and found one.

The silvery gray sky wavered between day and night.

„A sunset to die for!” Shauna raised her wineglass to the ever-changing froths that lit the sky.

They all watched in awe as the sky trembled between red, peach, orange, gold, violet.

„Like flames.” Shauna settled herself against Jude, who put his arm around her.

„Not long, now,” Tom said.

Darkness, with the slim smile of a moon, starlight, and glowing sea, descended.

Suddenly, Jude sat up straight. A gun sprang from his pocket and into his hand.

Carolina and Tom blinked at the sight. „What have we here?” Carolina asked, the remaining half of her sandwich, chicken with avocado and a slice of tomato, in one hand, limp. „What’s going on?”

„Nothing personal,” said Jude, not high, not the least bit affected by the multiple alcoholic beverages he had previously appeared to suck down.

Shauna, a little less on the ball, eyes a bit blurred, stood up, knocking back her last glass of wine. She tapped the empty glass against a bench, then watched it break. „Sorry,” she said.

Carolina stood up.

„We'll give you a fighting chance,” Shauna said. „Yours for ours.”

„You'd put us on that piece of junk?” Tom asked. „You survive and we drown?”

Jude said nothing, just nudged them to stand.

„We walk the plank and drown,” Carolina said. „You play pirates.”

„We do what we hafta,” Shauna said.

Walking Carolina toward the leaky, tethered Whaler, Jude pressed a gun to her back. A scrim of water shined in the bottom. „I'm grateful to people like you. Do-gooders.” After opening several bins and searching quickly, he found rope.

„Tie us up?” Carolina said. „You want us to die?”

„Here be dragons. I guess when you booked your honeymoon, you didn't consider that.” Jude tried to wrap her wrists but since he was holding a gun, couldn't. He motioned Shauna over to help.

„You're smugglers. You steal boats. You kill people for drug money,” Carolina said.

„You have a fighting chance!” Shauna said.

Jude pushed the gun hard into her back. „Rich bitch.”

Shauna offered up an apologetic shrug, then looped nylon rope around Carolina's wrists.

Carolina twisted quickly and kicked Shauna's knee out from under her. Shauna fell.

Jude, startled, momentarily lost position, then aimed at Carolina. Behind him, Tom lunged. Smoothly, he grabbed the gun out of Jude's hand and turned it on him.

Carolina wrestled free of the nylon ropes holding her wrists. She jumped up and pulled Shauna into a headlock.

„What the hell!” shouted Jude, staring down the barrel of his own gun, held by Tom, pointed at his face.

Sirens sounded.

Tom swiveled the younger man around, then pulled Jude's hands behind his back, locking them in cuffs.

Shauna, quicker to recover than expected, stood, smacking Carolina's head with a tightly balled fist. Then, while Carolina reeled, ignoring the gun pointed at Jude's head, Shauna threw herself toward Tom.

Tom's right arm struck her on the fly. She collapsed heavily onto the deck, panting, looking up at him, teary-eyed with pain.

Carolina jumped onto Shauna. Shauna wriggled and fought until Carolina pinned her like a wrestler to the deck. She cuffed her.

Tom and Carolina sat the two down on a bench a few feet apart from each other, where they drooped unhappily in the brilliant moonlight.

„Honeymooners?” Shauna frowned. Tom and Carolina faced the younger couple, each holding a gun, pointing steadily at their chests. „I could swear he French kissed you.”

Carolina didn't react.

„I hope the money makes up for those ugly big, wet lips of his slobbering all over you.”

„Who are you people, anyway?” Jude asked, leaning against a cushion, legs shaking slightly, eyes narrowing. „You don't sound local.”

„Special Ops,” Carolina said. „We're out of St. Thomas, working along with the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force.”

„We hunt pirates,” Tom said.

Carolina picked up her fallen sarong and tied it around herself all the way up to her chest, the Caribbean’s version of New York City ’s bulletproof vest.

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Aerial view: Brilliantly lit boats rock and blaze over the black sea toward the yacht at center, from all directions.

