

'IF YA MISS ME, I GONE'

by Jeannette Dean

So there we sat, discussing the constellations, as one does when sitting on a yacht anchored in the Caribbean. New moon, so no interference from its bright reflection. Doug was displaying his superior knowledge (I'd never even heard of the Seven Sisters constellation) when a shot rang out.

"Christ, next we'll hear sirens," I snarled. "One week I've been here and it starts already."

"Which boat did it come from?" Doug demanded.

"That nice wooden cutter, 'Sea Dream', anchored to port, three boats over." My instincts weren't on vacation. I hadn't turned the key and left them behind for a month like I had my office.

"That's old Captain Roach," Doug said as he untied his charming but unstable little wooden dinghy from the stern.

"We better take mine. There's someone in a real hurry to leave that boat."

Doug didn't argue. A ten foot inflatable with eight horse outboard had come with the 40ft sloop I had chartered for the month.

"You drive." I was standing in the bow, hadn't taken my eyes off the tall, skinny guy in his white foul-weather jacket. No professional would've worn that at night.

Doug was heading for the boat, as were two other dinghies I could see coming from neighboring boats.

"No! Follow that guy," I yelled back at him. Would've lost my footing as he banked to port in pursuit if I hadn't been clutching the painter. Good thing I'd been working-out every day. I was fit, had natural balance.

I didn't have to tell him to open her up as we pulled out of the crowd of anchored boats. The deep-throated throb up ahead told me he had more horse power. Bad news since he had a head start.

I saw him throw back his hood, turn to look. It seemed he hadn't heard us, but with that glance gave it full throttle and simply left us behind. He rounded the headland and we slowed.

"This is a wicked point," Doug called. "Reef and rocks, some just below the surface. I won't chance it unless we go out quite a way."

"Okay. Let's go back to see what he was running from." I moved back to sit beside him.

"Too bad we were interrupted," I said, put my hand on his bare knee, squeezed. I liked his fit brown body.

“Thanks for inviting me over, that was a great dinner.” He slowly looked down my body, not much of which was hidden since the spray had soaked my little cotton dress. “You sure look good.” The white of his smile in the dark night warmed me.

We pulled up beside ‘Sea Dream’. Two men were on deck, several more were standing in their dinghies around the boat.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Someone shot Captain Roach. He’s dead,” the older man answered.

“Did anyone radio harbor police?” I demanded.

“Yes, they’ll be here soon.”

“Don’t touch anything, there may be fingerprints.” I knew what a mess amateurs could make in their innocence.

“I’m a retired attorney. Everything’s intact,” the man nodded. I noticed his erect posture, the tastefully styled white hair and quality casual clothes.

“I’m Jesse Johnson. I do independent crime research in Miami. Doug and I followed a guy who left the boat after the shot. We’re on ‘Temptress’ if anyone wants to talk to us.”

“So, you’re a private eye,” Doug’s brown eyes danced as he took the cappuccino I’d made.

“No, wrong hat,” I smiled at the common misconception. Leading him out into the cockpit I explained, “I’m a researcher. That means I assemble the pieces for objective understanding. Clients include law schools, writers, police, corporations and only occasionally individuals.”

“Obviously you don’t come cheap.”

“Of course not.”

“And already I’ve lost you to your first love, your real passion.”

I turned to look at the ‘yacht bum’ whose natural countenance, curly blonde hair and nice ass had prompted my culinary efforts. Of mixed West Indian and English parentage, he had been educated in the States and seemed without the curse of ego. A rare find.

“Sorry,” I said sincerely, “I do get involved. But I left my PC at the office, I’m just curious. You expect violence in a city, not in paradise.”

He snorted, “I’m pretty sure paradise ceases to exist the minute man sets foot in it.”

We both turned as the small patrol boat pulled up and spent twenty minutes answering questions. We promised to go to their office the next morning to fill out papers.

Peace in the anchorage was finished for the night but we got too involved to notice. I had been right . . . he was good, very good. I slept like a baby.

The next morning we walked to the police station in Philipsburg. Most of St. Maarten's tourist business was centered there, but it wasn't completely overrun. Some locals were still friendly.

We answered questions, 'full de forms', and headed to the Harbor Lights for lunch. I liked the pace of life. Miami seemed another planet.

We got a couple of Heinekens at the bar and joined Bill, the retired lawyer, at his table. The rough wooden balcony was framed by vines mingled with year-round Christmas lights and fly-strips.

"To Cap'n Roach," Doug toasted. We lifted our bottles to each other then to the sea that spread before us. Past the marina and our anchored boats, Great Bay became the Caribbean became the Atlantic.

"So tell me about him," I addressed them both.

Doug shrugged, "He was an okay old cuss. Used to tell himself jokes and really laugh at them. Was always singing old sea songs. I invited him over for parties a couple of times but he just said, 'I may be gone'. Always wore his smelly old foul-weather gear, no matter how hot it was."

"Well, the boat smelled just as bad," commented Bill. "It didn't look like robbery. I doubt he had anything worth stealing anyway. Everything was neatly stored, quite seamanlike." He looked at me, "Your thoughts?"

"Can't really add much," I shrugged. "Sounded like a small gauge rifle."

"It was a 22, the killer left it on the navigation table. Roach was shot through the head as he sat at the saloon table."

"The guy we followed was either a lucky fool or he was born here. He went close in, right through the shoal of South Point," Doug said.

"What do you know about Roach, Doug?" I asked.

"He's been sailing around the Caribbean for years. Never stayed here long. Sounded American to me, but he had no home port painted on the boat's stern."

"Ever talk with him?"

Doug smiled, "I bought him a few drinks here one night, though he was already cooked. Told me he had a 22 hidden away, hadn't claimed it in any port and no one had ever found it though he'd been searched many times. Said he had something else hidden away but that nobody'd know 'til he was ready. He passed out then. They're used to him in here, said to leave him, that he'd wake later and say, 'I gone', then wander out."

We sat staring out to sea for a while.

“Roach had what all the rest of us make half-assed attempts at,” Doug sighed. “He was free, made his own little world.”

“His world was in a bottle,” Bill remarked.

“Who the fuck are you to say something like that?” Doug flared.

“Just an observation,” the lawyer said quietly. “I’ve been sailing around these islands for years. Seen him many times in various places, never sober.”

“But he managed to navigate these waters with a sextant and to keep ‘Sea Dream’ in good nick even though she’s over fifty years old. But you wouldn’t appreciate that in your plastic boat with so much instrumentation it doesn’t even need you on board.”

“I’m going for another round. Don’t get physical before I get back. I want to watch.” I was laughing as I stepped up to the bar.

“Three moh?” the rotund West Indian asked from his chair. I was disturbing his meal.

I nodded. “That smells great. Is it the special today?”

“Yeah. Curried snapper.” Moving his bowl over, he slid the lid and pulled out three cold ones, not needing to lift his bulk.

“You know Captain Roach?” I asked casually.

“Yes mahn. Bahd ting. Him hurt nobody.”

“Come in here often?”

He nodded, cocked his head, “Wuz here last night. Fust time in a long while. Hadn’t been gone an hour when all the c’motion c’mensed at his boat down there,” he nodded toward the bay.

“Anyone leave here with him?”

He gave me an engaging smile, “You an’ me thinkin’ the same ting. Yeah. Some Yank muk-a-muk sportin’ a Rolex an’ no manners. Act like they’s buddy-buddy. Cap’n Roach got no buddies, so I paid ‘tention.”

“You didn’t know him?”

“Oh, I seen ‘im few times ‘round. Come in once a time back, askin’ for Roach. I reckon he’s off a boat.”

“Wearing a foul-weather jacket?” I smiled.

He chuckled, “Right there. Ya know ‘im?”

“Sort of. Tall and skinny, right?”

“Yeah, an’ short black hair and a big ol’ nose an’ got nearly no lips. Ya reckon he shot Cap’n Roach?”

“I’d put money on it, but wouldn’t want folks to start talking about it.”

"Stops here," he winked. "Ya just let me know if ya need help."

The boys were coldly polite to each other through lunch then Doug left to work on a boat he was tricking out as the owner had just returned. Bill volunteered to take me around the island when I mentioned I'd like to check out a few theories. He had a rental car he'd hardly used.

It took us four hours to circumnavigate the island so I could check out all the harbours and the lagoon.

"This drink is overdue," I laughed as we climbed the Harbor Light stairs.

"There's been a lot of development since I first came, especially around the lagoon, but I still love the place," Bill said.

I sighed, "It's nice but I think I'll stay on the boat."

The bartender gave me a conspiratorial look as he stepped through the fly-blocking beads that hung in the kitchen doorway. He glanced at Bill.

"It's okay, we can talk but we need a couple of rum and cokes first, please."

He put our drinks on oft-used coasters and smiled, "My wife, she knows ev'ting. She tink he one of the Ross family. Big rich. Big house on the lagoon, fancy new yacht. The one Doug be workin' on."

A rowdy group on the balcony demanded his attention.

"Well, you certainly tapped the right source," Bill sipped his drink. "Wonder why Doug didn't mention it when you described the guy at lunch."

I wondered the same, said nothing.

"Theirs was the white gabled house with the big sloop moored in front."

I took out the list I'd made during our drive. "Yes, home port Boston. It had a small inflatable dinghy tied off the stern, not the size or quality such a yacht would need. What do you know about the Ross family?"

"One of the old east coast dynasties, tied into shipping. Very respectable."

His blue eyes bored into me. "You going to present the police with the pieces you've gathered?" I wasn't sure if he was just curious or demanding that I follow proper procedures.

"First I've got to make a few calls stateside, then I'm going to freshen up. I think better clean."

It was dark by the time I was aboard 'Temptress'. I rushed to change clothes, having seen Doug's dinghy at his boat. As I stepped out into the companionway he rowed up alongside.

"Well hello! You read my mind?"

"We need to talk," he replied as he tied off and joined me in the cockpit.

"I've been waiting for you." He sounded and looked like a jealous lover.

Curbing my first impulse of a snide remark and my second to laugh, I quietly asked, "Did you come to tell me you're working for the murderer?"

I like a man who doesn't hide his feelings, but had to smile at his shocked face.

He smiled, then chuckled, "You somthin' else girl," shaking his head.

I filled him in on most of the day's research.

"So, why didn't you tell me at lunch?" I asked.

"I wasn't sure it was Jack. He was supposed to be in the States. I needed to check it out before I said anything. I've worked for the family ever since I came back from school in Boston. They paid for that, you see, as part payment to my family for their land. Jack's not my boss. His uncle hired me, manages the money, is the centre of the family. They don't get along."

"Jack's here?"

Doug took a deep breath, "Yeah, flew in yesterday morning. He's staying on 'Renegade', has the inflatable dinghy I normally use when I work. The Whaler with its 25hp was missing. He'd told the gardener it was being worked on. I checked the boatyard. He took it in this morning with the outboard prop all chewed up and a gouge in the fibreglass bottom. I made an excuse to go up to the house, but no one's there or expected 'til next month."

"What about staff?"

"There are always two staff on, guys they brought from the States. Can't ask them, but the gardener's local, lives in a little shack on the property. He saw Jack leave in the Whaler around 16:00, but never heard it come back."

"Were they fair with your family on the land deal?"

"They got it as cheap as they could, of course, as with all the land they've bought. But locals are smartening up. They've ended up in court for the second time. Looks like they'll lose this one."

"Why?"

"Can't find the real owners. Families here are big, spread all over the world, and lots of members have the same name. They had paid someone who was living on the property and had the right name but by the time the government finished processing and rejecting, she was gone. Problem is, that's the place they built the house."

"Tell me about Jack."

"Don't know him really. He always comes down alone, hangs out at the casino. I once heard his uncle talking

about what a greedy bastard he was. He's got a real attitude. The only locals he associates with are the girls that service him at the Blue Lagoon. Hates sailing, no patience."

"Would he have known the South Point area well enough to negotiate through?"

"Doubt it, more like luck."

"You don't know if Roach had family or was married?"

"I'll need something to drink if you're going to keep grilling me," he laughed.

We perused my liquor locker but both opted for beer. The day had drained energy with its heat.

"This is the time to sail," I sighed as we stepped outside. The evening was delicious, the heat a soft hug.

"There was a rumor that he once married a woman from here. But that probably circulates on every island he's visited. Folks have trouble understanding a man on a boat."

It was all coming together. I liked the feeling.

Doug touched my hand, "Explain that self-satisfied smile."

"I called some folks, should have confirmation faxes tomorrow, but 'Sea Dream' is registered to Dave Rochard in Florida. He was married 15 years ago in Miami to a woman from here. She was shot a few months later, the murder was never solved. I was at law school then, studied the case. Rochard disappeared after the case was closed.

"I believe Jack Ross had traced the deed for the property where the family built their house to that woman, that the deed was that something Captain Roach had hidden with his gun. He opened his stash when Ross either threatened him or offered enough money. Killing him with his own rifle and leaving it there was the safest move, of course. I doubt it was a planned move. The noise of the shot in the crowded bay and the white jacket at night were signs of rash behaviour. Lack of patience with the drunk captain, perhaps."

Doug was leaning forward, tense. "If you're right, he'll be out of here as soon as possible."

"If I give all this to the police before there's hard evidence I have doubts they'll act on it. Do you think they're covering outgoing flights?"

With a dismissive wave of his hand Dave stood up. "They work on island time. Getting directions from an outsider, especially a woman, would slow them down even more."

He looked down at me. "He won't fly. He'll take 'Renegade'."

"You said he hates sailing."

"She's got a big diesel. He can motor to one of the other islands and fly from there."

"Of course," I mumbled, feeling rather annoyed for having missed the obvious. "He may have already gone."

“Possibly,” Doug said slowly and looked away. “If not I could cripple the engine if I managed to get on the boat.”

We both turned at the sound of a dinghy and watched Bill pulling up to his boat.

“He’s got a car,” I offered. All the unsolved cases I’d witnessed must have built up frustration for I wasn’t the least hesitant to break the law to see this one solved.

“I’ll get a couple of tools. I know a fisherman who lives close to there. He’ll lend me a boat.”

Bill took no convincing. He drove in silence as I filled him in.

He inhaled deeply, shaking his head, “If we were in the States I’d tell you to get out right now. As it is, every inch of me says you’re making a mistake. But, I’ve seen the arthritic workings of island legal machinery. The guy’ll be gone by the time they get around to questioning him.”

We were relieved to see ‘Renegade’ sitting peacefully at anchor, her saloon light on, the small dinghy still tied off her stern. Bill parked just down from the fisherman’s rough wooden house and stayed in the car.

It was close to midnight but the old guy was watching television. Amused, he let Doug know he approved of whatever he was going to do with me on that moonless night, and helped us push the heavy wooden tender into the still water.

We could hear traffic in the distance, a few dogs, a boat party, the splash of our oars and Doug’s steady breathing as he rowed.

“Okay,” Doug whispered, “he’s not on deck. Once you get him up there, keep him on the bow at least five minutes.”

It was incredibly dark but the boat’s white hull gave discernible contrasts. Leaving Doug crouched in the inflatable, I rowed forward and grabbed hold of the anchor chain. To get Jack on deck I let the tender bang against the fiber-glass hull, hoping it wouldn’t damage the perfect finish. Then I banged with the oar and began to wonder if he was gone . . . no one could have slept through the noise.

A head appeared over the pulpit and I jumped, nearly dropping the oar.

“He’s dead!” Doug’s hoarse whisper was surrealistic in the sudden silence.

“He’s lying in a pool of blood in the cockpit.”

Don’t touch anything,” was my automatic reaction. “Get to the stern, I’ll pick you up.”

We spoke not a word, both lost in our thoughts during the row back. We were struggling to pull the boat up the bank when four figures emerged from the darkness.

“What have you been up to?” demanded a deep, harsh voice as the flashlight blinded me.

"Who are you?" Doug demanded, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Police. Answer me!"

"Oh good!" I swallowed my fear. "Listen, we found Jack Ross dead on his yacht when we went out to talk to him. I'm Jesse Johnson. I was at the station this morning."

"I know who you are. Now let's see what we shall see."

* * *

That was a year ago. Bill was not waiting for us. Indeed, he had sailed away before the police went to question him the next morning. Doug's sure he killed Jack for the Ross family. Interesting that they did come up with the deed and win their case.

Jack's prints were on 'Sea Dream' and he was found guilty, post mortem, of the murder of Dave Roach, alias Captain Roach. Doug's prints were found on 'Renegade' . . . he was given 20 years for the murder of Jack Ross. I was given 5 years for being an accessory. If I'm lucky I may be sent back to the States halfway through. I'm told they have a lesser roach, fly and mosquito populace in their prisons.

And still I'm frustrated by the unsolved case.

The End