

A CARIBBEAN ISLAND ECO-ADVENTURE

Hogsty Reef

JOHN DOWD

To Bea, who just kept paddling.



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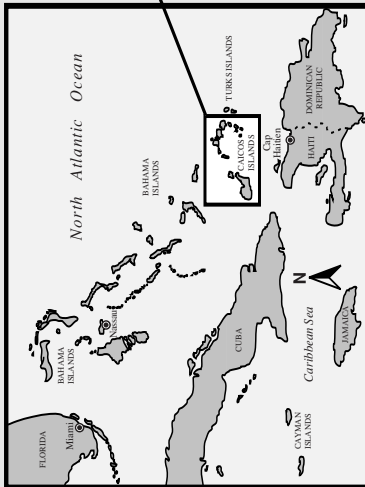
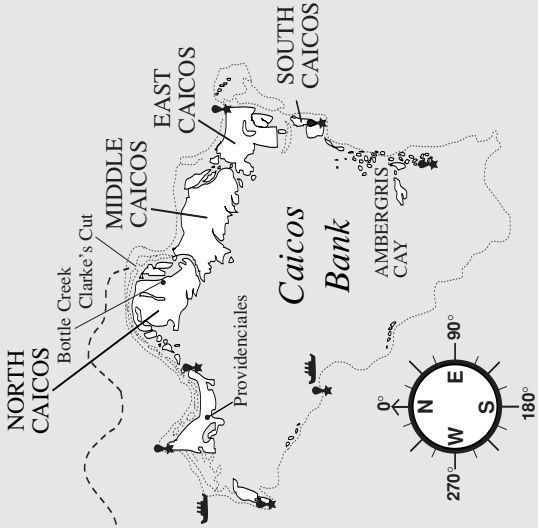
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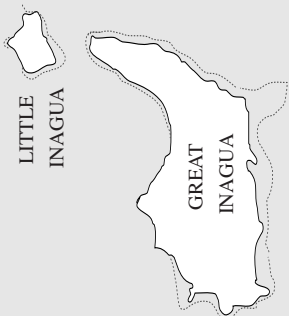
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CAICOS ISLANDS

- Reef
- Voyage of Agwe
- Conspicuous wreck
- Navigation light



HOGSTY REEF



Chapter One

Bottle Creek

Jim pressed his face to the window as the 737 banked tightly over Providenciales. The earth spun in a drab kaleidoscope of khaki scrubland, dotted with the scars of new building sites and a sprinkling of large pink houses.

When Jim had looked at the Turks and Caicos islands on a map of the Caribbean, he had envisioned a tropical paradise. *This is not what it's supposed to look like*, he thought. *No palm trees, no lush jungle, just a screwed-up-looking desert. But hey, at least it's different.*

The plane leveled off over a pale, blotchy-looking reef that grew like lichen just off the shoreline, pushing back the deep blue of the ocean with a fringe of white surf. *So that must be coral*, he observed. It looked very ordinary from where he sat, and it was hard to think of it as the reason for him to be on that plane in the first place. He figured it had to look more interesting up close, but it was odd the way it looked like it had fluorescent lights beneath it. The wake from a speedboat carved a meteor

trail across the brightest part of the reef, heading for the freedom of open sea.

The jet's nose dipped for the final approach and the land rushed at them: bushes, rocks, and sand flashed by. A road came into view with a solitary car on it heading toward the airport. Maybe it was George and Julia. He drew a deep breath and held it so the plane would not crash. It annoyed him that he was still doing that even though he knew it made no difference. He closed his eyes and saw the plane plummeting to earth and exploding in flames right before his friends. What would George tell his mother? He let out his breath and sucked in another quickly, stealing a glance out the window. They were almost down.

For the longest time after the car crash that killed his father, Jim had mistrusted most forms of transport, especially cars, buses, and airplanes—in fact, everything except boats. The wheels bumped once, twice, and they were down, speeding along a narrow strip of runway that stretched like a highway to nowhere before a cluster of grim cement airport buildings. A couple of Lear jets were parked to one side with covers tied over their cockpit windows. He breathed a long, deep sigh and sank back into his seat.

A wall of scorched air blasted into the cabin the moment the door opened. Jim's first thought was of fire, and he had to resist the urge to bolt for the door. Nobody else seemed concerned, even though it felt like the engines were blasting into the cabin, or like the pilot had turned on the heater instead of the air-conditioning. Gradually it occurred to Jim that the world might really

be that hot out there; a far cry from the cool rain forests of the Queen Charlottes, the islands north of Vancouver where he had spent the previous summer.

A woman who had boarded in New York was stuffing a fur coat into a large plastic bag where it would no doubt stay until the return trip. She wore a short-sleeved floral dress that exposed too much white skin.

Standing impatiently behind her was a lean black guy wearing a shiny suit and heavy gold bracelets. He poked a piece of gum into his mouth and chewed rapidly, staring into the blazing heat from behind wraparound sunglasses.

Jim had taken almost all his earnings from last summer and put them into his airfare. But he would have happily paid double to get away from the stifling atmosphere around his house. It was not that he did not love his mom or even his sister Monica, it was just that since the accident everything had changed. For a long time his mom had slept a lot and things never seemed to get done. She had made an effort to get her life together, but then she had become more protective, wanting to know where he was every minute. Even the air in their house had seemed hard to breathe. He wanted out...*had* to get out; there were too many memories around that apartment, and too many on the streets. For a time there had been broken glass at the intersection, glittering like scattered diamonds where that drunk had smashed into the side of his car. Jim had gone to the spot on the way back from the hospital, but when he returned again a week later, the sweeper had cleaned it away and he had to look really hard in the gutter for pieces.

Jim looked at his watch, which was still on Pacific standard time. He tried to remember when it was they turned the clocks forward for daylight savings time. His mother would be going to work soon, and his sister Monica would be sent off to camp for spring break. The thought of hanging around the city killing time, or worse, being packed off to some camp, made him shudder.

"You traveling by yourself?" a buxom, matronly woman asked. Jim wondered why women like that always felt the need to mother him. He decided she was probably harmless.

"Oh, just from Vancouver," he said lightly, as if he normally traveled alone much farther than that.

"Really?" she said. "I have a niece in Vancouver. Do you know Peggy Hurst? She would be around your age. Thirteen, I think."

Jim winced.

"No," he said frostily, figuring he might have been wrong about her being harmless. "It's a big city. Besides, I'm almost fifteen," he added, turning his attention toward the stairs and willing her out of his life.

The engines wound down their high-pitched whine. Jim pursed his lips and drew in the last cool air flowing from the nozzle of the dying air conditioner. The babble of voices on board seemed loud in the sudden silence.

"Good-bye, come again," chimed a flight attendant, her smile fixed in place as she panned the passengers' faces from the top of the stairs.

Jim clattered down the steps onto the scorched runway and squinted against the glare. He took a deep breath.

The air was spiked with a sweet fragrance like wild herbs. It mingled with a whiff of jet fuel, seaweed, and salt marsh stewing in the sun and formed a spicy cocktail that carried the promise of new adventure. By the time Jim reached the terminal building, sweat was trickling down his back.

He was about to enter the shade of the main building when something caught his attention: a group of about twenty black people were being ushered out of an adjacent building and into the bright sun. They were less than twenty yards away, and from what he could see, their clothes were ragged and dusty, their feet bare, their heads bowed. Most held their hands behind their backs. When the first ones in the line passed him, Jim caught the gleam of handcuffs. Young men with bare torsos shuffled by. Their dry, dusty arms showed every muscle and vein, and their chests showed every rib. But there were women, too, gaunt and weary, with faces blank and streaked with tears. One woman, also in cuffs, spoke softly to a crying girl about nine years old clutching her faded dress. By twisting her body, the mother was able to reach around with her cuffed hands and stroke the child's short, curly black hair. The girl, who had been shaking her head, stopped sobbing suddenly and turned to stare at Jim. Jim looked away hastily.

Two well-fed policemen with neat blue cotton uniforms stood watching from the shade, twirling long rubber batons.

"Excuse me."

It was the woman from New York. Startled, Jim looked over his shoulder to where the child still stared at him,

moved on and joined a line of passengers that was forming at a number of little booths. Through an exit door he could see a crowd waiting. George's face was not among them and he wondered what he would do if George was not there.

When his turn came, Jim handed his new passport to the immigration officer, who was joking with a friend.

"Ma Missus, she be a-waitin' fer me, an' when I com in de house, she sure be mad, mon."

The man stamped Jim's passport without glancing at him. Jim collected his baggage and moved on to customs. The customs officer was plump with narrow, puffy eyes. The flashy black guy in front of Jim was leaving a trail of aftershave aroma, dissipated by the overhead fan. He chewed rapidly at the customs officer, who waved him through with a nod of recognition, then turned and fixed his eyes on Jim suspiciously.

"Wot yo got'n dar, mon?"

"Clothes and some camping gear," said Jim.

"Campin', eh? Bit young fer campin' by yerself, eh, mon?"

"I'm staying with friends on a sailboat, but thought I might want to camp ashore sometimes," Jim explained.

The officer nodded.

"Bidder watch dem m'skeetas, mon. Dey drag yo off an' eat yo in de bushes."

He glanced at the woman from New York and roared with laughter, leaning across the table for a clear view of the rest of Jim's bags. He smelled of the same soap Jim's grandmother had used.

“An’ dat bag der, mon, wass in dat?”

“Clothing and some books,” Jim said, then he remembered the two new regulators and the depth gauge he was bringing for George. They were wrapped up in the bundle of T-shirts near the top of his bag. He was wondering if he should declare them when the man exhaled with a sound like a deflating tire.

“Okay, mon. Have fon an’ watch de m’skeetas.” He hooted gleefully, reaching for the bags of the lady with too much white skin.

Jim dragged his bags across the tiled floor to the reception area. Suddenly, strong hands gripped his shoulders from behind. His heart leaped to his throat. He was certain the customs man had seen straight through his omission and had only waited till he had almost escaped before pouncing.

“Ehhh, Jimmy, m’lad,” boomed a familiar voice. He turned, weak with relief, to see George, tanned and bleached like a surf bum.

“You scared the hell outta me,” Jim said, submitting to having his hand pumped. He passed the heavy bag to George and swung his pack onto his shoulder with that sense of impending adventure he had come to associate with George. It had been George, marine biologist and friend of his father, who had rescued Jim from Dullsville and given him his first job aboard *King Fisher* the previous summer. It had been perfect timing; just when it looked like he had no choice but to get more tangled in an increasingly scary street scene, there was George—Saint

George, his mother used to call him—offering a way out of those long summers hanging around Vancouver's streets.

A skinny girl with sun-bleached hair pushed through the crowd. She was wearing red shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals. Jim did a double take.

"Hi, Jim." She grinned.

"Hi, Julia! Boy, you've grown tall and you're tanned like a local!" he said, placing his pale arm alongside hers for comparison.

"I am a local," she retorted, tossing her head back. "And I'm almost as tall as you now."

With an effort, he quit staring.

"So how is it here?"

"It's great once you get away from the tourists," she said. "The diving's out of this world, specially on the Silver Banks."

"Silver Banks?"

"South of here. That's where all the Spanish treasure ships are supposed to be wrecked. It was kinda scary to find this huge reef in the middle of the ocean but no land. Even Dad got a little spooked, but he loved it. Now that we're anchored, he wants to get back out there all the time."

"Here, these are for you." Jim unzipped his bag and passed her a plastic bag full of books. "Some were mine and I bought the rest at a garage sale last week." Already "last week" felt like another lifetime.

Julia peered into the bag and flipped through the pile eagerly.

"How do you like home schooling?" Jim asked.

"It suits me," she said. "No teachers bugging me all the time, and I get to read what interests me."

"No regular subjects?" Jim asked enviously.

"Well, math. I have to keep up with math. Algebra is hard."

"That's cool. It sure beats some of the stupid assignments I have to do while I'm here. Get this: I have to write an essay comparing the different levels of government. I mean, really, who cares?" He zipped up his bag. "Hey, what's this about you doing my job?"

Julia laughed.

"There's no rule that says driving boats is just for guys."

Jim slipped into the washroom and threw some water onto his face and hair, but the water was tepid and hardly cooled him at all. As he groped in vain for a towel he caught a glimpse of his dripping brown hair and freckled face in the mirror. *I sure look pale beside Julia*, he thought.

Outside, he joined the others beside the curb where a line of elderly taxis streamed in to scoop up passengers from the crowd of people who stood clustered around piles of baggage on the sidewalk.

"No problem with customs?" George asked.

"Nope," said Jim.

"They didn't charge duty on the dive gear?"

"Nope. Nice of them, huh?" Jim looked over his shoulder to make sure the customs officer was still busily engaged. He was.

"Not exactly their style," George said doubtfully. He shook his head and hailed an old Cadillac that sagged at the rear and banged like there was someone with a

hammer trapped under the hood. Jim slumped into the plush backseat, and soon his face was pummelled by warm air streaming through the open window. Maybe he was getting used to cars again at last.

"Is it always this hot?" he asked.

"The wind's blowing today," said George. "You oughta feel what it's like when there's no wind."

"I can wait," said Jim. Then, "Do you know anything about the people in handcuffs at the airport?"

"Probably Haitians. A boatload came ashore near us a few days ago. They're being flown back to Haiti today, according to the newspaper."

"They didn't look too happy about it," Jim said.

"They're not."

They were passing a parade of drab hills with an occasional dismal shack surrounded by junk, when abruptly the road widened, running between a row of modern boutiques and a mall that had sprouted from a bulldozed wasteland. George looked at Jim and laughed.

"Not quite what you expected?"

"I expected coconut palms and jungle, not malls and desert."

"Wait'll you see the resorts. The developers planted coconuts there. It's what they call progress; everything's specially designed for extracting dollars from North American tourists. Some people are making a lot of money here.... Too bad most of the islanders will never get a penny of it."

Soon they were cruising along a narrow strip of tarmac which led a dozen miles northeast along the spine of the

island, toward the marina at Leeward. On each side, the dun hills dropped away to a vivid turquoise reef, while beyond the reef to the north, the deep blue of the open ocean was flecked with white. Down secluded driveways Jim glimpsed huge luxurious homes.

"A lot of rich people live here," he observed.

"They come to escape the cold and taxes," said George. "This place is a haven for tax evaders, sleazy business dealers, and druggies. Not too long ago, U.S. marshals busted several Turks and Caicos government ministers caught stuffing their pockets with drug money in Miami. This place was awash with drugs."

"Sounds like some of my old friends would be right at home here."

"Tell me, how's your mother?"

"She's okay...."

"C'mon, you can do better than that."

"She's okay," Jim repeated, irritated. "She's getting better."

Jim felt bad about being so tight-lipped. He knew George wanted news about his mother, lots of news. For a time it had looked like there was even going to be a romance between them till his mom got cold feet. But Jim had just got clear of the Vancouver scene, and he could not face dragging it along with him. He made an effort.

"She says to say hi and to thank you for relieving her of the horrible liability of having me at home."

"Ugh, it's like pulling teeth. Okay, you give me news when you feel like it. Deal?"

"Deal."

The marina of Leeward lay at the northern tip of the island. It smelled of mangroves, gasoline, and coffee, and sported several new piers that reached out into the narrow passage between the main island and a line of mangroves to the north. Fancy speedboats and sleek cabin cruisers tugged at their lines in a gentle current. Along the waterfront, looking like an unsuccessful hair implant, struggling young coconut palms sprouted from scorched sandy soil still marked with the tracks of the landscaper's bulldozers. A cappuccino bar, gift shop, and marina office, topped with a steep, peaked roof like an inverted ice-cream cone, gave the place a surreal look as though lumps of the twenty-first century had been dropped into the eighteenth century.

The only car in the parking lot was a silver Mercedes convertible with its door swung wide. Beside the car stood a tall woman with the high cheekbones and the slim build of a model. She wore a tightly fitting white dress and a floppy white hat beneath which flowed long black hair. She was yelling fiercely at a man on the dock and took no notice of Jim and his friends as they piled out of the old Cadillac next to her.

"Speaking of drug money," George muttered. "She and her friends were brought in during that drug bust I mentioned, but there wasn't enough evidence to put them away. It really eats me up the way people like that waste money on fancy cars and boats when we can't get proper funding for research and when half the population of the islands is on the breadline."

“You *will* drive me or you’ll regret it,” the woman shrieked, storming down the dock and stepping with precarious dignity onto the gunwale of a black ocean racer with a dark red slash down its middle and the name *Black Widow* painted on its stern. The man, apparently a local water-taxi operator, looked at the dockmaster, who just shrugged. The boatman hastily put on his cap and followed the woman.

With a snarl and a cloud of blue smoke the boat’s twin motors burst to life. As the boatman hit the throttle, the woman sat in the stern, hand clasped to her floppy sun hat. Five hundred sea horses exploded with a surge of power that churned up the water, rocked the boats in the marina, and left a creamy trail as it disappeared through the channel between two small islands in the emerald bay. Only a low wake remained to lap through the mangroves.

“Wow, it would be cool to drive that thing,” said Jim.

“Too macho,” Julia said.

Jim shrugged. “But it’s one helluva boat. Where do you think they go with it?”

“Who knows?” said George. “All I know is that it has huge fuel tanks on it and it goes like stink.”

“I’d still trade boats for a day,” Jim said, looking over at the dockmaster, who was still watching the spot where the *Black Widow* had disappeared through the cut. The man shook his head and disappeared into his office. A water taxi nudged softly at its fenders in front of the cappuccino bar. A long hose stretched to it across the dock from the gas pump, jingling as it fed fuel into the tanks for two huge outboard engines.