

Down at the Stern

By Jack English

Chapter One: Ghost Ship

“That ship is sinking,” Bernie Rothman stood on the bow of a forty-eight-foot yacht, fifty miles off the coast of Atlantic City looking through binoculars.

“What do you mean sinking?” Jay Herndon asked.

“Sinking! Like blub, blub, blub... blub, blub, blub... going underwater,” Rothman said.

Roy Packett and Jack English were sitting in the back of the yacht, fishing lines over the stern, beers close at hand.

“Bernie is having one of his hissy fits,” Packett said.

English shook his head. “It’s his way. It comes with being a defense lawyer.

“Hey guys,” Herndon said, “Bernie might be right... this time.”

“What do you mean, this time?” Rothman walked to the stern and handed the binoculars to English. The ship they were looking at was a half mile away.

“Something’s wrong,” English said. “That ship is down at the stern and the bow is higher out of the water than it should be.” He handed the binoculars to Packett.

“I don’t see any crew. I don’t see any lifeboats either,” Packett said.

“We should render assistance?” English asked.

“What can we do?” Rothman whined. “That ship is huge. They might have a hundred people on board. They’d sink us for sure.”

“My guess,” Packett said, “is they have a crew of fifteen or twenty, tops.”

“We can’t fit twenty people on here,” Rothman said.

Packett shot him a hard look. “We’ve got to render assistance if they need it. It’s the honorable thing to do. Or didn’t they teach you that at Harvard?”

Herndon handed Rothman his phone. “Bernie, make yourself useful, take pictures of this thing,” he pointed to the derelict ship, “a lot of pictures. If it’s really sinking, it will be the talk of Flanagan’s Bar.”

“Before we jump to conclusions,” English said “let’s see what’s going on.”

Rothman fiddled with the phone and started snapping pics.

Herndon started the Yacht’s five thousand horsepower engines. As the most successful lawyer in Atlantic County, Jay Herndon believed that anything worth doing was worth doing to excess. And, with five thousand horsepower, the yacht lived up to its name, the *Kick Ass*. He didn’t know much about boats, but he liked the rumbling

sound the engines made when he cranked them up. Besides, it was just a rental.

“Jay,” Packett said, “can you get us closer without crashing into them?”

“Captain Jay at your service.” Herndon touched the corner of his gold braided captain’s hat. He nudged the throttle and the yacht sprinted toward the ship. Thirty yards out he threw it into reverse and they glided to a stop.

The derelict vessel was about three hundred feet long and sixty feet wide. There was a mast or rigging or crane toward the bow, and a superstructure toward the stern. The middle of the ship was relatively flat.

“If I had to guess,” English said, “I’d say it was a cargo ship.

“I don’t see any containers,” Rothman said.

“Containers aren’t the only way to move cargo.” English handed the binoculars to Rothman.

“Not too close,” Packett said. “Let’s do a once around and see whether there is anyone aboard.

Herndon throttled the engines back to where they were barely turning over as he paralleled the ship.

Rothman handed the binoculars back to English. “I don’t see anybody on the bridge. I don’t see any lifeboats either.”

“Let me see,” Packett tapped English on the shoulder with the back of his hand, asking for the binoculars. He slowly swept his gaze from one end

of the ship to the other. “Am I crazy or are there trees growing on that ship?”

Herndon put the boat into neutral and took the binoculars out of Packett’s hands so he could see for himself. “Damn! There *are* trees over there. And, it looks abandoned.”

Packett looked toward the ship, then back at Herndon. “What makes you think it’s abandoned?”

“You mean besides the fact it’s not moving? I haven’t seen any people over there, I can see fifty seagulls perched on the railings, and there are trees sprouting here and there. Trees are the kind of thing you see on abandoned buildings, not ships,” Herndon said.

“Maybe they’re at lunch,” Rothman said. “It’s almost noon.”

English took the binoculars from Packett. “That ship is low in the water.”

“Maybe they were importing trees when whatever happened, happened,” Herndon said.

English pointed to a solitary tree growing on top of the bridge. “If that were the case, I would expect the trees to be on the deck. They seem to have sprouted up all over the place. Cargo doesn’t explain that.”

“They’re too spindly to be commercial,” Rothman said. “I think they’re just weeds with attitude. And that ship has got the worst paint job I ever saw. It looks like it was done by a bunch of drunks.

The hull was a splotchy combination of green and grey and blue that was darker at the waterline and got lighter the farther up it went. The paint was interrupted by patches of rust. The superstructure was also painted splotchy shades of blue that got lighter the farther up it went. There was more rust on the superstructure.

“It looks like they ran out of blue paint and were mixing in white to stretch it,” Rothman said.

“The name of the ship is painted out,” Herndon said.

“I heard it was bad luck to change a ship’s name,” Packett said. “Erasing it has got to be disastrous.”

“Well, that’s got a couple of hairs on the back of my neck standing up,” Herndon said.

“Maybe it’s a plague ship,” Rothman said.

Packett, Herndon and English did a slow turn toward Rothman.

“I’m just saying,” Rothman spread his hands.

“Let’s see what’s on the other side,” Herndon said as he slowly maneuvered the yacht around the ship.

“I see a lifeboat,” English said.

“But no people,” Packett added.

Herndon shifted into neutral, but left the engine running. He pulled a bullhorn from a cabinet on the bridge. “Shall we contact them?”

Packett took it from Herndon and switched it on. “Ahoy the ship. Are you in trouble? Do you need assistance?”

The sound seemed to annoy the seagulls who cackled and fluttered their wings a little, but it didn't annoy them enough to move from their perches. Other than that, there was no response.

"Do you think it ran aground?" Rothman asked.

Herndon glanced at the depth gauge. "We're in a couple of hundred feet of water here."

"So, what happened?" Rothman asked.

"I don't know. Try again," Herndon said.

"Ahoy the ship, do you need assistance?"

Packett repeated.

There was still no response.

"It's abandoned," Rothman said. "It's a ghost ship."

"What do you mean ghost ship?" Herndon asked.

"I mean the people on board are ghosts."

Herndon, Packett and English just shook their heads as if to say Bernie was being Bernie.

"We should let the Coast Guard know about this," Packett said. "If it's abandoned, it might be a hazard to navigation."

"No can do," English said.

"Why?"

"We have a VHF radio," English said. "It only works on line of sight. Jay, how far out did you take us before we stopped you?"

"I don't know," Herndon said. "Fifty, sixty miles."

"How come you don't know?" Rothman whined.

“The navigation system gives us coordinates. It doesn’t give us miles,” Herndon said.

“So, I guess we’re done here,” Rothman said.
“Can we head home now?”

Jack English looked from Roy Packett to Jay Herndon and said, “I think we should go on board.”

Chapter Two: Over the Stern and Through the Woods

“We don’t know what’s on that ship,” Bernie Rothman said. “It might not be safe.”

“One way to find out is to go aboard,” English said. It was half suggestion, half challenge, half joke. But then, Jack English and his friends never worried about coping with three halves. It was more evidence that lawyers can’t add. “Jay, bring us around to the stern.”

“Aye aye,” Herndon said as he nudged the controls ever so gently to keep from overshooting the mark. “Bernie,” he ordered, “throw some marine fenders between us and the ship.”

“The what?” Bernie Rothman asked.

“You know, the things that kept the boat from banging up against the dock,” Herndon said.

Rothman did what he was told but grumbled about it. “The ship has a barnacle beard,” he said.

“A what?” Roy Packett asked.

“A barnacle beard, when ships are in the water for a long time, barnacles, little clam-like things, attach themselves to the hull.”

“Where did you hear about barnacles?” Packett asked.

“Discovery Channel,” Rothman said. “Look, just below the waterline. This ship has six inches of barnacles on it. That didn’t happen overnight. This thing has been adrift for a long time.”

“Well, if she’s been adrift for a long time, it’s high time someone had a look at her.” English stepped up onto the side of their yacht and from there it was just a big step up onto the stern of the ship. He deftly hoisted himself over the ship’s rail and was fully aboard.

Roy Packett threw him a rope and English tied the two vessels together.

“Anybody else coming?” English asked.

“I’m in.” Herndon stepped up onto side of the yacht but couldn’t quite get his leg high enough to plant a foot on the ship’s deck. Jay Herndon was a great guy, but at sixty-five, time and gravity had taken its toll. Packett put two hands under Herndon’s butt and pushed, while English pulled him up by the arms.

“I’m on board!” Herndon said as he heaved himself over the ship’s rail and onto the deck.

Roy Packett had no problem scrambling up under his own steam. “I’m only coming to keep you two guys out of trouble.”

The three of them looked down at Rothman who said, “Somebody’s got to mind the boat.”

Herndon leaned over the rail and looked down at him. “Give us a couple of toots on the horn if you get in trouble. It’s the big red button next to the wheel.” Herndon turned his back on Rothman and toward English and Packett. “Do you think he’ll be O.K. or should one of us babysit him?”

“He’ll be all right,” Packett said. “Bitching and complaining is in his nature. Let’s see what we can find.”

The stern was low in the water and the deck sloped up a couple of degrees toward the bow. Every place along the deck where there was a wall or piece of equipment or bracket that could catch and hold dirt, there was dirt. And every place the dirt was more than half an inch thick, some small plant struggled to make a living. In some spots, no more than a few blades of grass poked their heads up. In other spots, the dirt was deep enough for small weedy trees to sprout.

“I wonder what happened?” Herndon said.

Packett bent down and picked up a couple of brass shell casings, half buried in the dirt. “Something happened.” I wonder how long these have been here?” Packett handed them to English.

“These look pretty weathered,” English said. “They have probably been here a long while.” He stooped and picked up two shiny, brass shell casings and smelled them. “These are new. They were fired quite recently.”

Chapter Three: Captain's Cabin

Jack English handed the casings from the recently fired bullets to Roy Packett.

“So, what do you think happened?” Jay Herndon asked. “Where’s the crew? Why would anyone abandon a ship that still floats?”

“Breakdown, mutiny, plague, pirates,” Packett said.

“If there are bodies,” Herndon said, “we shouldn’t touch them, just in case it’s the plague.”

“It’s probably something simple like a breakdown,” English said. “I hope.”

The three of them walked along the outside edge of the ship, next to the railing. The ship had a single, long, retractable hatch. It was open and they could see down into the cargo hold. Water sloshed around in at the aft end. The bow end was high and dry. There was no cargo.

An advantage of being tall, Jack English was six four, was that he had a different perspective on the world. There was a spot on the ship’s superstructure where two curved sections came together leaving a two or three-inch gap between them. The sun, reflecting off the water or some piece of glass somewhere, created a slight glint in that gap. English stood on his tip toes and looked in. A plastic bag was wedged deep in the gap. He could hardly reach it with his fingertips. He pulled on some of the loose plastic, but the bag wouldn’t

budge. He pulled harder and the bag, not more than ten inches high and an inch thick came flying out and as did, so did a half inch of dirt and dried seagull poop. The dirt and dried poop got all over him and he cursed a little curse he usually saved for Army screw-ups. He wiped himself off as best he could and looked at the bag. The side that had been exposed to the weather was brown and cracked. The top, exposed to the seagulls was... well you know. The sides that were protected from weather and seagulls were clear. It was full of money.

The only problem was that the money bore Saddam Hussein's smiling face. It was old Iraqi dinars. Old Iraqi dinars had been replaced with new Iraqi dinars stripped of Saddam's image after Gulf War 2. Before the war, the money would have been worth a fortune. Now it was worthless. English handed the bag to Roy Packett.

"This has been here a long time," Packett said and handed it to Herndon.

"It will make an interesting souvenir," Herndon said. "I wonder what else we'll find?"

"There may be records somewhere," English said. "I'd like to know the name of the ship and what happened to her."

"Where would you look?" Herndon asked.

"I'd try the bridge first and the captain's cabin next," English said.

“Is that wise?” Packett asked. “This ship looks like it could slip beneath the waves any minute. I wouldn’t want to be inside when it decides to go.”

There was a long, low rumbling sound like metal being dragged across metal.

“What was that?” Herndon asked.

“Expansion and contraction?” English offered.

“Maybe,” Packett said. “Let’s just keep a sharp eye out for anything unusual.”

“If it starts to go,” English said “I hope Bernie’s smart enough to untie the yacht. I wouldn’t want it to pull the *Kick Ass* down with it.”

“There’s a lifeboat,” Herndon pointed up ahead.

English walked over to the boat and stuck a finger into one of about fifty bullet holes. “Ooops! That’s going to hurt the resale value.”

“What’s this painted on the wall?” Herndon asked.

It was a single word, *Fiable*, painted in a shade of blue, just slightly darker than the surrounding paint. It was crossed out with a thin coat of spray paint.

“Maybe it’s a foreign word for, ‘Oh crap!’” English said.

“Let’s do a little risk management,” Packett said. “Let’s see what we can see in an hour, then let’s report this thing to the Coast Guard. They may want to sink it or mark it or something so it’s not a hazard to navigation.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Herndon said.

“The bridge should be up there,” English pointed up and as he did, he swung a steel door open and stepped inside. There were windows, portholes are what a proper sailor would call them, that let in light, but it was still quite a bit darker inside than out and it took his eyes a minute or two to adjust. A steel staircase led up to the bridge. The bridge was light and airy and stripped of every piece of equipment. The wheel was gone, there was no compass, there was a gaping hole the size and shape of a television or computer screen in the main console. Wires stuck out of openings where bridge instruments might once have been mounted. There were bullet holes in the glass. From the fracture pattern, it was clear that some of the bullets were fired from inside the bridge, some fired from the deck below. There was literally nothing to see on the bridge. But looking out onto the deck of the ship was revealing.

English tapped Packett on the arm and pointed down to the deck. “What do you see when you look at the paint job from here?”

“You mean the whales?”

Two giant whales were painted on the deck on either side of the cargo hatch, each forty feet long.

“Look at the rest of the paint job.”

“It’s messy, haphazard...” Herndon said.

“It’s camouflage,” English said. “Make the enemy see things that aren’t there; keep him from seeing things that are. That explains the crappy paint job we saw from the yacht.”

“Why camouflage?” Packett asked. “This isn’t a military ship, at least not that I can see.”

“The military aren’t the only ones that want to hide ships,” English said. “What about drug smugglers, people smugglers, any kind of smuggler? I’m going downstairs to see whether I can find the captain’s cabin.”

“Jack,” Packett grabbed English’s arm firmly, “if this thing goes, you don’t want to get trapped below decks. Be careful and don’t spend a lot of time down there.

English grinned, “You know me, I’m a very careful guy. Besides, I’m a survivor.”

Another low, hollow, metallic groan rumbled through the ship.

“Survivor or no, be careful,” Packett said.

English walked back down the stairs. He later learned the proper term for stairs on a ship is a ladder. He opened several doors and found half a dozen small rooms. He found a galley, stripped of food and equipment and what might have been a storeroom with its door ripped off. He used the light on his cell phone to peek into the ship’s darker compartments.

Finally, he found what he guessed was the captain’s cabin. It was larger than most other compartments and there were vestiges of paneling glued to the walls. The glass had been smashed out of the portholes exposing the room to the elements. There was a safe in the room. The lock had been cut out with an acetylene torch. The furniture had

been stripped out, bookshelves pulled down, and there was a pile of books on the floor.

A seagull seemed to be guarding the highest point on the pile of books. It screeched at English as he approached and when he shoed the bird away, it tried to peck his hand. In the end, he prevailed but not before the annoyed bird took a dump on one of the books.

All together there were fifty or sixty books scattered across the floor. Most were on navigation, engineering, and so forth. There were also a couple of large, leather-bound ledgers. They appeared to be the ship's official log. Most of the books had been ruined by wind and rain, and birds and mildew. They were beyond saving. Several of the reference books were in leather covered sleeves, probably to keep the pages from wicking up damp sea air and disintegrating. English nudged one with his foot. The book's title, *Celestial Navigation*, was printed in fading gold letters. The author was Wm. Jamison. The date, 1936, was printed on the spine.

He moved another of the books with his foot. Its title was *Marine Engineering*. The author was A. Davidson. The date was also 1936. *Those are pretty old books*, he thought. *It's a wonder they are still relevant*. He picked up the volume on *Celestial Navigation* and slid it out of its protective sleeve. When he opened the cover, he found a neat square hole about six by eight inches had been cut out. A small, leather bound book had been stuffed

inside. It was the captain's personal journal. "Hey guys, I think I found the captain's personal journal. We should take it and a couple of log books."

Herndon poked his head into the cabin and spread his hands, "Why?"

"Might give us a clue as to what happened."

Roy Packett looked over Herndon's shoulder. "Come on, Jack, let's finish our look around and get back to the yacht. Bernie's probably having kittens by now."

"You guys finish your look around. I'll be right with you."

Even though it was early summer, English had worn a sweatshirt because the water was still cold and the least little breeze could make things a lot colder. He stripped off his sweatshirt and tied the arms together to make a sort-of pillowcase. He slipped three logs and the captain's personal journal into it and piled the Iraqi dinars on top of them. The bundle was awkward and if he didn't hold it just right, books would come tumbling out. Somehow, he got his treasure onto the deck and was halfway back to the stern when Rothman frantically sounded the yacht's horn.

Roy Packett jogged past Jack English and Jay Herndon quick marched close behind.

"What's up, Bernie?" Packett asked.

"We have company and they are closing fast," Rothman pointed to a boat on the horizon. It was large, old and painted sky blue above decks, fading to a dark sea green near the waterline.

Packett stepped down onto the fishing boat and took the field glasses from Rothman. “I can just barely make out the name on the boat, s... u... n... s... h... It’s the *Sunshine*. How much trouble could a boat with that name be?” He handed the field glasses back to Rothman.

“There is a guy reaching down to the boat’s name,” Rothman said. “The name seems to be painted on a hinged board or something. He’s folding the board up and tying it off. There is another name underneath.”

“What is it?” Packett asked.

“Hold your horses. I’m trying to see, b... u... c... k... e... t...”

“Bucket list?” Packett asked.

“O... f...” Rothman continued,

“b... l... o... o... d... *Bucket of Blood*? That can’t be good.”

Packett took the field glasses back from Rothman, “Damn! It is *Bucket of Blood*. And, I see guys with guns. Let’s not hang around to see what they want. Let’s get out of here,” he looked up at Herndon. “Jay, we got to go! Get your butt down here.”

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