

## Freighter Captain

A Novel of 143,000 Words

by

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The following excerpt from Chapter 8 of *Freighter Captain* (1998) describes the extraction of the *M/V Erika* from the Dominican Republic.

Eight o'clock came, then nine, and still no stevedores. I was in the chartroom, about to call the agent on the radio, when I saw a small detachment of soldiers and police walking toward the ship from the port offices. Yussuf was wrapping scrap wire into a bundle forward. I leaned out the window and whistled to him. I pointed my chin toward the boarding party.

They came up the gangway single-file. I met them at the foot of the steps.

"¿Capitan?" the lead man said. He was a small, neat civilian with a doll's head, his slick black hair combed tight to his round skull. I nodded.

He handed me a paper in Spanish. I scanned it. The ship was *detinado por debtos*. I tried to hand it back, but he waved it away. "The ship is detained at the port, Captain," he said. "By order of the court in Santo Domingo, you cannot sail."

"But what is this all about?"

"Your cargo, Captain. The ship is accused of taking the cargo."

"We're accused of stealing waste paper? Is this a joke?"

"No, Captain, it is not a joke. It is very serious." He summoned one of the soldiers. "A guard will be put onboard for security. You do not have to give him any food. He will not interfere with your crew if you do not try to leave."

"I understand."

The little man hesitated. "I am sorry about this, Captain, but it is the way of shipping, no? I am the director of the port. . .if I can help you in any way, please call on me in my office." He pointed to the gray building. "Good luck, Captain. Let us hope this problem is resolved quickly."

"Yes," I said, "let us do that."

All but the guard went down the gangway. He was a sallow young man with a hairline mustache and a shabby, ill-fitting uniform. He carried a pistol-grip shotgun and wore a cartridge belt. I smiled at him. He

returned a sullen look and went to sit on the edge of the hatch.

"Ricardo," I said, in Spanish, "get the guard a chair to sit on."

I went up to the wheelhouse and called the agent on VHF. "Gustavo, what is this about the ship getting seized?"

"Oh, Captain," his tinny voice said, "very big problem. All the missing bales. . .Dompapel has gone to the court and gotten an order seizing the ship for the missing bales."

"This ship is on time charter," I wailed. "We aren't responsible for short-loads. And deck cargo is always shipper's risk."

"Very sorry, Captain, but Dompapel is powerful company here. Maybe your owner will have to get a lawyer and fight them in court."

"Oh," I said, "fight a Dominican company in a Dominican court. That's a good one. I'm going to tell that one to all my friends."

I signed off and went ashore to call Dickie, but his answering machine picked up again. I relayed the news and left. It was almost 1000, and the air was already hot under puffy brownish clouds racing westward. It took a while to find a *moto* to take me back to the ship. I bought a hot Coca-Cola to wash down the dust while I waited. A group of men came surging up the street with a door held above their heads. An enormously fat woman was lying on it, writhing in pain. With traffic backed up behind them into the distance, they carried her up the hill and into a ramshackle little building with "*Cirujano*" scrawled on the wall.

I finally snared a beat-up dirt bike with the tank wired to the frame and made it back to the ship. The crew were on the fantail. Yussuf said, "The agent was here. He said he will come back at 1400 to take Jhonny to the airport."

“Did he say anything about crew wages?” I asked. “Dickie is supposed to wire crew wages. I can’t sign Jhonny off until I get some money.”

“No, Captain. He said nothing about receiving money.”

I sighed. He moved up closer. “What will happen, Captain? To the ship, I mean?”

“Nothing. It’s going to sit here.”

“But how long? When can we sail?”

I sat on a bitt. “Yussuf, this may be it for the old *Erika*. Rio Haina is where ships come to die. You see all those wrecks upriver?” I pointed to the hulks lining the banks ahead of us. “They came in, got seized, and never left. You know there is no law in this country. It’s as bad as Haiti.”

Ian said, “But Captain, what ’bout us? When will we get paid?”

I regarded him somberly. “Frankly, Ian, when an owner knows he’s going to lose his ship, he doesn’t care what happens to the crew.”

“But we get paid when the ship is auctioned, no true?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No crewman has ever seen a dime from a ship auction in Dom Rep, even when it was the crew that had the ship seized in the first place.”

They sagged like leaky balloons. “Oh, *Capitan*,” Ricardo said, “*muy malo, muy malo*. My wife has no money, no food in the house. I must go home.”

“I know, Ricardo. I know. I’ll try to call Dickie again after lunch and see if he sent the money. You can sign off if you want to. I don’t blame you.”

“Oh, no,” he said in anguish, “I don’t want to leave the ship. You are *buen capitan*. But. . .my family. . .”

I looked around the others’ faces. Their eyes searched mine hungrily, but there was nothing for them there. I went upstairs.

At noon another guard came onboard, a skeletal young man with angry boils on his wasted cheeks. I watched from the saloon as he took the shotgun and cartridge belt from the first guard, pulled the chair over to a small rectangle of shade, and settled in.

I went to the phone office. This time I got Dickie on the first ring. “I know, I know,” he said, before I could say anything. “The ship’s seized for the fucking missing bales. You know how much they want? Two hundred thousand dollars. Can you believe that?”

“Sure I can believe it. But don’t think that’s all it’s going to cost.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’ll take a month to get the ship released. By then there’ll be another 40 or 50 in port charges and dockage.

They’ve got us by the balls here, Dickie. You’d better get the P&I club to post a bond.”

He hesitated. “The ship. . .doesn’t have P&I.”

“What? We’re under Manchester P&I, aren’t we?”

“No,” he said, “they dropped the ship after Mobile. Assholes.”

“And we’ve been running without cover since then? Jesus Christ! Jacques know about this?”

He said in a small voice, “He never asked.”

Static crackled in the wires. I said, “Then you can forget about the *Erika*. She’s finished. By the time this thing goes to court she won’t be worth the money it’ll take to get her out. It’s not the missing bales on deck, you know. That’s shipper’s risk. It’s the short-load. The receiver has already paid the shipper for 1302 bales, and now they’ve paid off some judge to seize the ship.”

He didn’t say anything. I couldn’t even hear him breathe.

“You’ve got to find the money somehow to send the crew home,” I said. “You can’t let them rot away in this Godforsaken place.”

“And where do I get the fucking money?” he yelled into the phone. “Every goddamn trip I get further behind. The fucking *Veronika* just blew a generator and I’ve got to ship a whole rebuilt generator to Santo Tomas. And that sonofabitch Garot deducts so much money from the charter hire I can’t even pay ship’s expenses.”

“That’s your fault. Every time I come into port I fax you the ship’s accounts, logs, and Notes of Protest. There’s nothing else a captain can do. Hell, this ship is a cash cow. We hardly ever go off-hire.”

He didn’t say anything. Finally I said, “Well, there is something we can do.”

“What’s that?”

“Steam out. Just cut the dock lines and go.”

“Can you get away with that?”

I looked through the glass wall of the phone office, toward the gray clouds rushing up out of the southeast. “Maybe,” I said. “There’s a storm coming. Maybe we can hide in it.”

“Go ahead, Captain, go ahead,” he said. “Do your best. Call me on the SSB when you get out.”

I got back to the ship just before 1400 hours. Black clouds raced out of the southeast across the lead-gray sea. The salt wind blew clouds of scrap paper along the dock as I went onboard. I nodded to the guard, sitting slumped in his chair with his feet propped on the hatchcoaming, but he just stared at me. I went upstairs and into the chartroom.

The coast to the east followed the latitude line, straight to Santo Domingo about 15 miles away. Along the route I was interested in, the coast ran south-southwest about 30 miles to Punto Nizao, then southwest to Isla Beata, the great rock, then westward to Haiti.

I went out on the port wing of the bridge. One of the little wooden ferries was pulling up behind the ship, filled with people coming from the shipyard. They held onto their hats in the rising wind and looked over their shoulders at the scudding clouds. Half-a-kilometer behind the ship, down the wide river, the breakwater bracketed the entrance to the port, two lines of concrete boulders piled about a meter above the water. The entrance was marked by beacons on lattice-work towers. Between the beacons was the entrance, not more than 200 feet across, and beyond that was the open sea.

I went forward and looked down. The guard was sitting with his head on his chest, but as I watched he put his feet down and stretched his back, arching his shoulders one way and the other. Two girls came walking down the hill from the bars, Dominicanas in bright blouses, their wide skirts blowing in the wind. The guard went to the bulwark and whistled at them. They looked his way, but didn't respond. He called to them. They turned into an alley. He returned to his seat and slumped into it.

I found Yussuf in his cabin, lying in his bunk with his shirt off. He struggled up when I came in. "Yussuf," I whispered, closing the door, "I think we're going to try to sneak the ship out."

He pulled his shirt off the chair. "Sneak out? You mean, without a clearance?"

"Yeah. Just cut the dock lines and go."

"But Captain, what about the guard? You're not going to. . ."

"No, I won't hurt him. I'll give him a drink with something from the medicine chest to put him to sleep, then I'll put him on the dock."

He grinned. "Of course you can count on me, Captain, but what about the Dominican Navy? There's a big base in Santo Domingo, you know."

"Yeah, I know. They could get here in minutes. But you see that storm coming?"

"Where?"

"Out of the southeast. If we take off in the storm, the navy ships won't be able to find us in the rain clutter."

He got out of the bunk, buttoning his shirt. "Only if it is very heavy rain, Captain. Otherwise. . ."

"Otherwise the crew gets taken off the ship and I go to jail. Come on."

We went on deck together. The guard cast his eyes at us for a moment, then sank back into his reverie. A dark gray band of rain was spreading across the horizon. Yussuf and I nodded to each other and went up on the bridge.

"Look," I whispered, "if we wait until the storm is almost here, we can cut the dock lines and steam out before anybody on shore knows what's up. We head right for the thickest part of the storm and pray that the Dominican Navy has old radars."

"What if the guard won't take the drink? What if he tastes the medicine in it?"

I thought for a second. "I've got another idea. Come on, let's go up to the Manila Sunrise."

I left the ship under the chief's command and we walked up the road to the bars. Dust-devils whirled in the street and scooped trash from the gutters. The Manila Sunrise was open, but it was still early, and only a couple of girls were on duty. Hanio was drinking a Presidente and reading a Tagalog newspaper. He put the paper down and started to rise, but I held up a hand and we joined him at his table.

"Hanio," I said, "we've got a problem. My ship's been seized."

He raised his eyebrows politely.

"It's bullshit, but you know what that means here."

"Maybe she never leave," he said.

"That's right. We've got to sneak her out."

He grimaced. "Very dangerous, Captain. Dominican Navy very close. Maybe you go to jail for long time."

"Yeah, maybe. But I need your help. You got any Dominican girls working for you?"

"No sir. Only Filipinas."

"You know a Dominicana you can trust? I want a girl to snuggle up with the guard onboard and feed him some alcohol. I'll pay her \$100."

"I know just the girl. She works at the Rincon, on the corner. Wait here."

He left one of the Filipinas in charge and went out. Five minutes later he was back with a short, buxom girl in her early 20's, wearing a silver lame tank-top and black velvet short-shorts. She had long black hair piled up on her head and falling around her shoulders. She gave me a crooked smile.

"This is Dolores," Hanio said. "She used to work for me."

"Good. Dolores, I've got a job for you. I'll pay \$100, but you've got to keep your mouth shut and stay out of sight afterward."

She frowned. "What is this job?"

“Do you know any soldiers at the port?”

She shook her head. “Soldiers can’t afford me. I only date *marinaros*.”

“Excellent. This is what I want you to do. . .there’s a soldier on my ship. I want you to get comfortable with him, make him think you like him. Take a bottle with you. I’m going to put some sleeping powder in the bottle. You get him to take a couple of drinks, and when he’s asleep we’ll carry him ashore. You sneak out of the port and the ship sails off. Sound okay?”

“The soldier, he will not die?”

“Oh, no. I will give him just enough medicine to make him go to sleep. *No te preocupues*.”

“When do I come?”

I went to the door and looked to the east, where the storm was still building. “As soon as you can.” I gave Hanio a 10-dollar bill. “Give her a bottle of rum.” Then, to the girl, “Come down the road in 10 minutes. Yussuf here will meet you outside the port. I’m sure you know the place where girls crawl under the fence. Yussuf will take you to the ship.”

“No problem, *Capitan*.”

“Then you and Yussuf will pretend to have a fight in his cabin. The guard will hear you fighting. You come on deck and make friends with the guard. As soon as. . .”

“What if he doesn’t like girls?” she asked. “Some soldiers are like that, you know.”

“This guy’ll like you just fine.”

“Okay, *Capi*,” she said. I get my money first, okay?”

“As soon as you come onboard, I promise.”

Hanio said to her, “Don’t worry, Dolores. I know the captain. He is a friend of mine.”

I shook his hand. “Thanks, Hanio. I may not see you soon, but when I do, we’ll have a blow-out.”

“I will be watching, Captain. When you are beyond the breakwater, I will sing a special song for you.”

I looked through the french doors. We could see the breakwater in the distance, with gray rollers battering it from the ocean side. Yussuf and I hurried down the hill to the ship.

“Yussuf,” I said, “tell the crew to come up to the bridge. I want to give them a chance to get off.”

“They will come with the ship,” he promised. “No one wants to be stranded in this outhouse of a port.”

“Well, I wouldn’t blame them for staying, two months behind in wages and the chance of going to jail if we get caught. But bring them up without telling them what it’s about.”

I went up first. The crew filed onto the bridge and looked at me curiously.

“Men,” I said, “I’m going to take this ship out without a clearance. I’m going to do it without violence, but I’m not going to let these Dominican pirates steal my ship.” I looked around. “I want to leave in the middle of the storm that’s coming.”

They glanced back through the chartroom windows.

“There’s a chance we all could go to jail if we get caught. Probably it would just be me, but who knows? If you want to get off, I don’t blame you, but you probably won’t get your back wages if you do. If you stay, I believe you’ll get your wages in the next port. Now, who wants to get off?”

They looked at each other. No one moved. Jhonny said quietly, “I think I should leave the ship, Captain.”

I nodded. “Okay, Jhonny. That’s fine. I have only about \$500 onboard, but you might as well take it. I promise you as your captain that as soon as we reach the next port, I will wire the rest of your wages to you. I know the agent already has your ticket.”

He nodded. I looked around. “Anyone else?”

No one moved. “Okay,” I said, “let’s get going. Ricardo, take a fire axe up on the forecastle. Lionel, get another axe and take it on the fantail. When I give the signal, chop the dock lines and do it quick. We won’t have much time before they see what we’re up to from the port office. As soon as the dock lines are free, get back in the accommodations in case some asshole starts shooting. That’s all you have to do.”

“What about the guard?” Ian asked.

“I’ve got him taken care of.” I outlined the plan.

They started grinning. “Good plan, Captain,” the chief said, “but make sure you don’t give him too much. If you kill him, maybe the U.S. police send you back here to jail.”

“I won’t. He’ll be sleeping like a baby. Let’s go. Yussuf, go meet Dolores and bring her back. Try to keep the guards at the gate from seeing her.”

I went into the hospital and searched through the narcotics until I found a bottle of benzodiazepan. The label said, “Benzodiazepan is a powerful sedative. Do not give to persons under the influence of other sedatives. Dosage: 2 tablets. Induces sleep within 30 minutes. Maximum 4 tablets in 24 hours.”

I took four pills and closed the bottle, then opened it again and took out two more. I went down to the galley. Victor was washing dishes. He rolled his eyes at me, but I shushed him with a finger to my lips. I crushed the tablets on the countertop with a spoon and scooped the powder into a folded piece of paper.

I found Jhonny in his cabin, packing. I pressed \$400 into his hand. "I'm sorry, Jhonny, but I have to save a hundred to give to the girl. I promise to send you the rest. Do you have an address for me?"

"Send it to Octavio Munoz. He'll hold it for me." He gave me a worried look. "Good luck, Captain."

"Thanks. Get ready to go now. As soon as we put the guard ashore, you gotta go."

Ricardo appeared in the door. "*Capitan*," he whispered, "Yussuf and the girl are coming."

I went out on the fantail and craned my head around the bulkhead. Yussuf and Dolores were coming up the gangway. I looked over at the gate. A truck was coming through and the guard shack was hidden behind it.

I nodded to Victor in the galley and slipped forward along the starboard hallway. Yussuf and the girl were in his cabin, arguing.

"*No soy una puta*," Dolores cried out. "I only came to the ship to be friends."

Yussuf said, "*¿No eres una puta?* All Dominicans are whores! Take your clothes off."

"No!"

"*¿Desnude!*" There was the sound of flesh on flesh. The girl cried out. Yussuf's door flew open and Dolores ran out on deck with a hand to her cheek. Yussuf told me later he had slapped himself.

I went up to my saloon and leaned out the window. The girl was standing on deck with the bottle of rum in her hand. The guard was getting out of his chair with the shotgun in his fist, turning toward her.

"What is the problem, *muchacha*?" he asked.

"*El primer oficial*, he wants to violate me. I told him I am no whore."

The guard moved up to her. "Want me to teach him a lesson?"

"No, no," she said quickly. "You would get in trouble."

He struck a pose. "I am the guard on this ship. I can have him thrown in el *jugado* if I want."

She put a hand on his chest. "Please, no trouble." She moved closer. "What do you call yourself?"

"Adorno. Adorno Reyes. And you?"

"Mercedes, but my friends call me Quiti. You can call me Quiti." She glanced up toward my window. I drew back. I heard her say, "Adorno, may I sit down with you for a while?"

"Of course." He pulled the chair over for her. She sat down and he sat on the hatchcover, his ravaged face intent on hers.

"Adorno, the cook is a friend of mine. I will fix us two drinks, no?"

He glanced toward the port office. "Em, no thank you. I am on duty, you know."

She pouted. "No one is thinking of you here. This duty of yours, it is very boring, is it not? We should have one little drink, so you can tell me about yourself."

He fingered the shotgun and hesitated. "You are from Haina?"

"*Si*. I have lived here all my life. And you?"

"Santo Domingo," he said proudly. "One more year, and I will be finished with the army. My uncle has a big store in Santo Domingo. Domsasa. Do you know it?"

"Ooh, that is a very nice store. I buy clothes there sometimes." She patted his hand. "Now I will fix our drinks. Do not worry, though. . . I will put your drink in a tall glass with ice, so it will look like lemonade."

He didn't argue. She stood up. I ran down the companionway and into the hallway. She was behind me, but I didn't stop until I got to the galley. "Victor," I said, "get two glasses of ice and a Coke."

He had them ready in the refrigerator. I dusted the sleeping powder in the taller glass and poured Coke over it. The powder floated to the top in clumps. Dolores came in. "He is ready to drink," she whispered, handing me the bottle.

I poured a healthy slug of the amber rum over the Coke and stirred the mixture with a spoon until the powder broke up and sank. I took a tiny sip, but couldn't taste the medicine.

"You think he'll see that?" I said, holding the glass up to the light. Whitish specks swirled in the bottom.

She laughed softly. "I'll make sure he doesn't." She poured a light splash of rum into her Coke. "Now?"

"Now. We don't have much time. Try to get him to drink it all."

"*Bien*. But first, my \$100. And put more ice in the glass. It will help conceal the powder."

I had her money folded up in my shirt pocket, a single bill. She unfolded it, studied it carefully, and tucked it away. Victor filled the glasses with cracked ice and she took the drinks forward. I went up to the saloon.

Dolores slid onto the hatchcover next to Adorno. She handed him the taller glass. "Sante," she said.

He held the glass up, but he was looking at her. "Sante, Mercedes. I mean, Quiti."

They drank together. She snuggled up to him. "Put your *arma* down for a moment. No one will steal it."

"Why?"

"I'll show you why." She pushed the shotgun off his lap, and he reluctantly laid it on the hatchcover. Then she reached up and kissed him. His hand wandered toward her breast, but she brushed it aside, broke free, and picked up her drink. He drank also.

"Take a man's drink," she said. "When do you get off duty?"

"At seven."

"Ah," she said. "It is six now. We will have two drinks here, then we will go to my apartment. My roommate will be at evening school."

"But. . . I must report to my sergeant before I leave. . ."

"So? I will wait for you up the hill." She rubbed his leg. "Unless I do not please you. I know you must have many girlfriends."

He licked his lips. "Not so many," he confessed. "And you? A boyfriend?"

She pouted. "He broke up with me. For another woman. A *gringa* he met in his job at the casino."

"Ah," he said angrily. "A *gringa*!"

"But let us forget about him and drink our drinks." She pushed his glass up toward his mouth. He took a drink. She held her finger under the bottom so he couldn't lower it. His adam's apple worked. She let the glass down and laughed merrily. "I thought soldiers were trained to drink!"

"I can drink," he protested, "but you would not let me breathe."

Her hand crept higher on his leg. "Later, Adornito, I will teach you how to breathe."

This time he took a long pull of Dutch courage, and when he put the glass down, it was almost empty. He took her glass from her hands and said thickly, "You are *'mosa*, Quiti."

"Then touch me," she murmured. He leaned over, went too far, and jerked himself upright.

"Oh," he said, "oh, I drank too quickly. My sergeant. . ." He slid off the hatchcoaming and fell in a pile on the deck. I ran down to the galley, got the bottle of rum, and went forward. Yussuf was already there.

"Captain," he said, "you gave him too much. He is dead."

"Bullshit." I looked around. No one was watching from shore. I knelt down and felt his pulse. It was strong and steady. "He's okay. He's sleeping like a baby." I unscrewed the cap and poured a couple of ounces of rum on his blouse.

Dolores was standing a few feet away. She peered down at him calmly. "His sergeant will give him heavy

blows for getting drunk on duty." She straightened her top and smoothed her hair in the wind. "Am I finished?"

"Yeah. Many thanks. You did a wonderful job. Maybe soon you will be an *estrella* in Hollywood."

She laughed.

"Take care you are not seen leaving. Yussuf, go with her to the fence and make sure she gets through okay. Hurry back."

They left the ship together, Yussuf keeping his body between her and the guards at the gate. I called Jhonny and told him to go ashore. We shook hands. He hurried down the gangway with his bag and boombox. I went to the hallway and hissed for help. Lionel and Ricardo came out of their cabins and stared at the fallen soldier.

"Is he okay?" Ricardo asked. At that moment the soldier blew out a long, blubbery breath and turned on his side, snoring softly.

"Just *boracho*. Drunk on duty. Come on, let's get him over by the gangway. We'll leave him onboard until we're ready to go."

Yussuf came hurrying up. "First," I said, "you've got lipstick on your lips."

He wiped at them quickly and gave a shy grin. "She gave me her number."

"You sly devil. Now let's get going. Ricardo, go tell the chief to get oil up, but don't ring the telegraph. You can hear that thing all the way to the guard shack. Ricardo, you've got an axe forward?"

"*Si, Capitan.*"

"Lionel, got an axe aft?"

"Yassar, Cap."

"All right, go to your stations, but don't do a thing until I give the signal. As soon as the lines are cut, get into the accommodations and stay there until I call for you. Yussuf, you and Ricardo stand by at the gangway to help me get the guard overboard."

I ran up to the bridge. The wind was whistling in through the open starboard door, but the rain was still to the east. The cranes of the shipyard glowed cream-colored in the dim light. A jagged crack of lightning shot down into the sea. The air was fresh and sharp. It smelled good. Stevedores at the sally port were clamoring for motorcycles to take them to town before the rain struck.

Ian appeared at the door. "Captain, oil is up."

"Okay, Ian. I'll ring for Half Ahead. Tell the chief for God's sake don't get confused."

He ran downstairs. I swung the rudder from lock to lock, then set it amidships. I made sure the VHF was turned all the way up. I hesitated for a moment, then

went ahead and turned on the radar, even though the spinning antenna might alert someone.

A flurry of raindrops, as big as ball bearings, clattered against the starboard wing. The leading edge of the rain was over the shipyard, a gray curtain sweeping in from the misty sea. Another burst of raindrops. In the ferryboat, heading for the near shore, people were getting out newspapers and pieces of plastic to cover their heads.

The cranes of the shipyard blurred into spider shapes as the rain marched over them. I looked at the beacon towers bracketing the entrance to the river. The rain was just reaching them. The sea outside was boiling under the press of the wind.

I ran down to the deck. Yussuf and Ricardo already had the guard by the arms and feet. His head lolled heavily against the deck, the rain plastering his hair to his temples. I checked the dock, but there was no one around. No one looking from the guard shack. I slung his shotgun over my shoulder and helped Ricardo with the man's other foot. We hustled him down the gangway to the gravel surface and laid him there with his weapon, soaking wet and stinking of rum. He cried out softly.

"To the bow," I told the men. "Get ready to cut the lines."

"Captain," Yussuf said, "we've got to get the gangway in."

"No time. Cut the ropes and let it fall. We'll buy another one later." I ran up to the wheelhouse. Yussuf and Ricardo had already cut the gangway ropes and were on their way to the forecabin. I signaled them to cut the dock lines and slid down to the boatdeck. "Lionel," I called aft, "cut the lines, cut the lines. Hurry!"

There were a couple of heavy thuds forward. I went back on the bridge in time to see the bow spring line fall into the water between the hull and the dock. Another couple of whacks, the axe-blade glittering in the last rays of sunlight. The bow line fell. I ran to the port wing and saw the stern spring line and stern line already lying limp on the dock.

I was afraid the wind would pin the ship, so that I would have to grind along the rocks until we could get clear of shore, but the current was already swinging the bow out. Another quick glance at the guard shack. No one looking. Then the rain arrived, a solid mass of water pouring onto the ship and blowing across the wheelhouse through the starboard door. No time to shut it.

Now the other side of the river was almost invisible. The bow was gaining speed. The ship turned port-side to the current. I rang for Half Ahead, and

within two seconds I got the confirmation. The ship shuddered. The engine caught with three short pops, coughed, and started turning up. I gave the helm five degrees of starboard rudder, careful not to put the stern into the bank.

The bow swung past the hazy outline of the far bank. I gave the rudder another five degrees.

A yell from shore. I looked back through the chartroom windows. The lights of the port were yellow and watery in the rain. Two soldiers were running along the edge of the dock waving their hands, their rifles bouncing on their backs.

I could barely see the beacons as the bow swung past the other shore. The lights weren't lit, and while I watched the towers themselves disappeared into the mist. I stuck my head into the radar hood, but the breakwater and towers were lost in the rain clutter. All I could do was steer for the mid-point between where they had been a few moments ago.

Now, with our starboard side to the dock, I could see more soldiers running from the port office, a couple of civilians with them. The VHF crackled. "Captain of the *Erika*, Captain of the *Erika*, stop your engine at once. Your ship is detained in port."

We were still half-a-kilometer from the breakwater, rain sluicing down the windows. I caught a glimpse of the towers, but again they disappeared in the downpour. The world turned gray and hazy.

There were two gunshots from shore. I kept steering with tiny, nervous corrections. I dared not order any more speed without being able to see where I was going. Yussuf appeared in the port door, drenched to the skin. He took his station at the radar.

"Nothing, Captain," he said. "Too much rain clutter."

"Go on the wing. See if you can see the sides of the entrance. I can't see anything."

The world was white around us, gusts of rain sweeping across the front of the house. I could hardly see the foremast.

"Shit, Yussuf, we're going to hit the breakwater. I've got to slow down." I rang for Dead Slow Ahead. The chief forgot to confirm, but the engine slowed to 100 rpm. A few seconds later I saw the western side of the breakwater dead ahead, the rocks shining wet about 200 yards away. I had overcorrected.

"Captain," Yussuf cried, "port your helm! I can see the rocks."

I spun the wheel hard over. The angle indicator crept across the midships mark. The bow swung.

Another glimpse of the western side, now only 100 yards away. The beacon, still unlit, loomed out of the rain.

A flurry of Spanish on the VHF, but I was concentrating too hard to listen. Yussuf said, "It's a Navy ship, Captain. They're leaving Santo Domingo now. They're asking where we are."

"Holy shit. Fifteen miles. . .they'll be here in half-an-hour. We've got to stay in the rain or we're sunk."

We steamed through the gap in the breakwater with the western side close enough to spit on. The bow hit the first swell, rose into the air, and caught the wind. With the ship empty, the bow swung violently to starboard, but I racked the wheel over and caught it. The bow fought its way back into the eye of the wind. Now we were past the breakwater, into the open ocean, with 15-foot waves slamming into the port side. The rain continued to hammer the windows, spurting in through the casings where I'd forgotten to dog them down.

I rang for Full Ahead and turned the ship south. The engine came up to speed, shaking the ship in heavy tremors. I looked back. Only the weak yellow lights of the port could be seen. Within minutes these too disappeared, and the ship was alone in a cocoon of rain and fog.

The radio crackled again. "Haina Port, Haina Port," a Spanish voice said, "this is the Frigate *Puerto Plata*. Where is the gringo now? Can you see him?" Stupidly, they were still on channel 16.

"He is going south, going south, *Puerto Plata*. We cannot see him, but he is going south."

"We can see nothing in the radar because of the rain," the frigate's officer complained.

We steamed through a light patch, the sunlight bright above us, but again the rain closed in. The center of the storm was still ahead. I left Yussuf at the helm while I studied the chart.

"Steer 195, Yussuf," I called through the chartroom window. "That'll take us into international water in about 50 minutes."

The radio hissed. "*Motonave Erika, Motonave Erika*, what is your position? This is the Navy Frigate *Puerto Plata* calling."

Yussuf and I grinned at each other. The frigate called a couple of times more, then fell silent.

Still we steamed southward through the driving rain. A foot of water was rolling around at the aft end of the main deck, where sodden paper had clogged the scuppers. I sent Yussuf to the engine room to tell the chief to ballast down Nos. 2 and 3 double-bottom tanks.

Then we came out of the rain, suddenly, like opening a door. The dying sun shone red and huge above

the western hills. I glanced at my watch. Seven-thirty. Behind us the horizon was hidden by the storm. "What's our position, Yussuf?" I asked.

He went in the chartroom. "I can't get a satellite fix, Captain. Dead reckoning says we're 13 miles off the coast."

I slumped at the wheel. "International water. Thank God."

He came forward and pulled out a cigarette. It was soaked, and fell apart in his fingers. He tore open the pack, looked in, and threw it overboard. "We are safe, Captain?"

"Not exactly. There's still the law of hot pursuit. If the frigate sees us now, it can claim it was following us all the way from Haina, so it has the right to stop us."

He looked back. The sky was growing dark. No sign of the frigate. I checked the radar. The bottom third of the screen was bright with rain clutter, and even tweaking the gain couldn't bring out the frigate.

"Can he see us?" Yussuf asked.

"Not if we can't see him. His radar can't shoot through the rain yet."

When dark fell we were still steaming south-southwest toward Isla Beata. We never did see the frigate on radar, and never saw its lights. There was some more radio chatter, but by then we were almost out of VHF range and couldn't understand the garbled transmissions. I took a turn around the ship to check that the lights were out, then went down to the pantry to turn off a single bulb glowing in the porthole. I returned to the darkened bridge. Yussuf was smoking a borrowed cigarette and conning the ship by hand.

"Put her on the pilot," I said. "After we pass Beata, steer for the tip of Haiti."

"Aye aye, sir." His teeth gleamed in the dark. "Congratulations, Captain."

"Thank you, First. Now let's see what Dickie has to say."

I got the crew to string up the longwire antenna, which we'd dropped during discharging. Dickie answered on the first ring. "We did it," I said. "We're in international water. Where to?"

"You're safe? You got out?"

"Affirmative. Do you have the next port of call?"

"Uh, Captain, steam for Miami and call again tomorrow."

"Roger, will call tomorrow same time."

"Congratulations, Captain," he said belatedly. "And give my thanks to the crew."

"You can thank them yourself," I said, "when you pay them in Miami."