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The Flying Stingaree: A Rick Brant Science-Adventure Story



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THE FLYING STINGAREE

What's shaped like a sting ray and flies over Chesapeake Bay? This is the eerie riddle which confronts Rick Brant and his friend Don Scott when, seeking shelter from a storm, they anchor the houseboat *Spindrift* in a lonely cove along the Maryland shore and spot the flying stingaree.

The "thing," they learn, is not the only one of its kind – one is actually suspected of having kidnaped a man!

The residents of the Eastern Shore of Maryland believe the strange objects are flying saucers, but, weary of ridicule, have ceased reporting the sightings.

Rick and Scotty, their scientific curiosity aroused, begin a comprehensive investigation, encouraged by their friend Steve Ames, a young government intelligence agent, whose summer cottage is near the cove.

As the clues mount up, the trail leads to Calvert's Favor, a historic plantation house – and to the very bottom of Chesapeake Bay. How Rick and Scotty, at the risk of their lives, ground the

erie menace forever makes a tale of high-voltage suspense.

CHAPTER I

Chesapeake Bay

The stingaree swam slowly through the warm waters of Chesapeake Bay. Geography meant nothing to the ray, whose sole interest in life was food, but his position – had he known it – was in the channel that runs between Poplar Island and the town of Wittman on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The ray was also directly in the path of an odd-looking cruising houseboat, the *Spindrift*, that had just rounded the north point of Poplar Island and entered the channel.

The sting ray's color was an olive brown, so dark in tone that he looked like wet black leather. He was roughly diamond-shaped, like a kite, with rounded sides. He had a long, slim tail that carried vicious barbs along the base of its upper side. It was from the barbs, which served as defensive weapons, that the name sting ray, or stingaree, derived. The ray was harmless to men – unless one chanced to step on him as he lay resting on the bottom ooze. At such rare times, his tail would lash up, inflicting a serious and painful wound.

A tiny crab, hatched only a week before, swam upward toward the gleaming surface, his churning legs making a slight disturbance. The ray sensed the small vibrations and instantly changed course, speeding through the water like a fantastic

spaceship of the future. Intent on the crab, the ray ignored the stronger vibrations caused by a pair of outboard motors and a long, flat-bottomed hull. Not until the crab was within reach did the ray sense imminent danger. With a single flashing movement, he snatched the crab and flung himself upward through the shining surface and into the air.

Rick Brant, at the helm of the cruising houseboat, saw the ray break water and he let out a yell. "Scotty! Look!"

Don Scott, asleep at full length on the houseboat's sun deck, which was also its cabin top, awoke in time to see the dark shape reenter the calm water. "Stingaree!" he exclaimed.

Rick had never seen an area more teeming with life than Chesapeake Bay, unless it was the jungles of the South Pacific. Books, guides to eastern land and water birds, regional fish and reptiles, rested on the cabin top before him, along with a pair of binoculars. He had used them all repeatedly, identifying eagles, wild swans, ospreys, wild duck and geese, terrapin, snapping turtles and water snakes, as well as a horde of lesser creatures. Trailing lines over the houseboat stern had captured striped sea bass, called "rockfish" locally, a species of drumfish called "spot" because of a black spot on the gills, pink croakers that the Marylanders called "hardheads," and the blue crabs for which the bay is famous. He had seen clam dredges bringing up bushels of soft-shelled, long-necked clams that the dredgers called "manos," and he had seen the famous Maryland "bugeyes" and "skip-jacks" – sailing craft used for dredging oysters. The

boats were not operated during the oyster breeding season from the end of March until September.

Rick's interest in the life of the great bay was to be expected. As son of the director of the world-famous Spindrift Scientific Foundation, located on Spindrift Island off the coast of New Jersey, he had been brought up among scientists. The habit of observation had developed along with his natural – and insatiable – curiosity.

The tall, slim, brown-haired, brown-eyed boy was completely happy. He enjoyed casual living, especially on the water, and life on the *Spindrift* couldn't have been more casual. He was dressed in a tattered pair of shorts and a wristwatch. Once, in the cool of the evening, he had slipped on a sweat shirt. Otherwise, the shorts had been his sole attire while on board since leaving his home island a few days before.

Scotty, a husky, dark-haired boy clad only in red swimming trunks, came down the ladder from the cabin top and stood beside Rick in the cockpit. "Now that you woke me up to look at a fish, suppose you tell me where we are? Last thing I remember, we were passing under the Bay Bridge off Annapolis."

"That's Bloody Point Lighthouse behind us," Rick said. "Poplar Island is on the starboard and the Eastern Shore to port. That black thing sticking up ahead of us is a light buoy. When we reach it, we should be able to see the range markers into Knapps Narrows."

Scotty checked the chart on the table hinged to the bulkhead

formed by the rear cabin wall. "What time is it?"

Rick glanced at his watch. "Five after six. Time for chow. Want to rustle up something? Or shall we eat at Knapps Narrows? The cruising guide says there's a restaurant there."

"Let's eat out," Scotty replied promptly. "I'm sick of my cooking – and yours. I'd like some Maryland crab cakes like those we had in Chesapeake City."

Rick remembered with pleasure. "Suits me."

"Think we'll get to Steve's tonight?" Scotty asked.

"I doubt it. We probably could reach the mouth of the river about dark, but then we'd have to navigate up the river and into a creek before reaching Steve's. I don't want to tackle these Chesapeake backwaters at night."

The destination of the houseboat was the summer cottage of Rick's old friend, Steve Ames, who was also a chief agent of JANIG, the top-secret Federal security organization. The boys, and the Spindrift scientists, had worked on several cases for JANIG, starting with the adventure of *The Whispering Box Mystery*. Steve was responsible for Rick's ownership of the houseboat, which had been named for Rick's home island on the grounds that it was now his "home away from home."

Rick's first glimpse of the houseboat had been from the air. At the request of Steve Ames, he, Scotty, his sister Barby, and Jan Miller, daughter of one of the Spindrift physicists, had been searching the coast of New Jersey for signs of strangers in the area. Barby had spotted the houseboat, which at that time

was painted a bright orange. Later, the houseboat had played a major role in the adventure of *The Electronic Mind Reader*, and Rick had fought for his life and the safety of the two girls in the very cabin behind which he now stood. The houseboat had been impounded by Federal authorities, and recently Steve had mentioned to Rick that it was to be auctioned. After consulting with his family, Rick had entered a bid for the boat. His bid had been the only one, and he became owner at what was close to a salvage price.

It was Rick's pride that his chief possessions had been bought with his own money, and the houseboat was no exception. Like his first plane, the Cub, he expected the houseboat to pay its own way. Rick had recovered his investment in the Cub by using it to operate Spindrift Island's ferry service to the mainland. Rick flew the scientists to Newark Airport when they had to catch planes, or he flew to Whiteside for groceries, or into New York to pick up parts and supplies. The houseboat could not be used in the same way, but he was sure he could get its price back by renting it to summer visitors to the New Jersey area. He had repainted it in two shades of green with a white top, and had made a few other improvements.

Before renting the boat, however, he intended to have an extended houseboat vacation. He and Scotty had left Spindrift Island, headed south into Manasquan Inlet, and then sailed into the inland waterway. By easy stages – the houseboat could make only ten miles an hour – they had moved down the waterway into

Delaware Bay, up the Delaware River, through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, and into Chesapeake Bay. Now, some twenty miles south of Annapolis, the boys were nearing Steve's summer cottage.

Rick's parents, with Barby and Jan, were now on their way to Wallops Island rocket range operated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Hartson Brant had business there in connection with instruments the Spindrift group of scientists had designed for measuring solar X rays. The instruments would be launched in rockets. Wallops Island was near Chincoteague, Virginia, just across the Maryland-Virginia border on the long peninsula called "The Eastern Shore" that runs between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. By car, Wallops was less than two hours from Steve's summer cottage.

As soon as his business was concluded, Hartson Brant planned to drive to Steve's, where the Brants and the two girls would join Rick and Scotty for a vacation on the houseboat. There was plenty of room. The *Spindrift* was thirty feet long and ten feet wide, and had two cabins. Four could sleep in the forward cabin, and two amidships where the galley, dinette, and bath were located. Steve had agreed to drive the Brant car to Spindrift on his next trip to New York. The houseboat, with the full clan aboard, would travel leisurely back to the home island.

Rick was delighted with the arrangements. The Brants – and that included Scotty, who had become one of them after his discharge from the United States Marine Corps – were a close-

knit family whose members enjoyed doing things together. Rick considered Jan Miller, Barby's dearest friend, a welcome addition to the party.

"Range light ahead," Scotty said.

Rick nodded. The light was set atop a black piling. The color meant he would have to pass it to port, then pick up the red beacon at the entrance to the Narrows, passing the red beacon to starboard. This was in accordance with the old sailors' rule: *red right returning*, which means keep red markers and buoys on the starboard, or right, when returning from seaward. It was fun navigating in strange waters. He had never heard of Knapps Narrows a few days before, or of Tilghman Island, where the Narrows were located. Nor had he heard of the Choptank River, which lay just below the island.

The houseboat plowed ahead, its twin outboards purring. Its bow, rounded like the front of a toboggan, slapped into a slight swell. Rick passed the range light and headed for the red tower that marked the opening of the Narrows. In a few moments they were in the Narrows, passing lines of docked crab, oyster, and clam boats. There was a bridge ahead, with a gasoline dock in its shadow. Rick gauged wind and current and decided how he would maneuver into place. The current was heavy in the channel, running in the direction in which he was headed.

"I'll nose in, and you jump off with a bowline," he directed Scotty. "We'll let the stern swing around with the current. That will leave us facing the way we came, so we won't have to turn

when we leave."

In a short time the maneuver was completed. Rick edged the rounded nose of the houseboat against the seawall as Scotty stepped ashore carrying the bowline. He snubbed it tightly around a piling and held fast while the ungainly boat swung with the current. Rick stepped to the seawall with the stern line as the craft swung completely around, and the boys made the boat fast.

"Now," Scotty said, "let's gas up and eat."

After filling the gas tanks, loading the icebox with fresh ice, and topping off the water tank, the boys slipped into shirts, slacks, and shoes, then headed for the restaurant that adjoined the dock. Over delicious, spicy Maryland crab cakes and coffee, they talked with the proprietor, a friendly, heavy-set Eastern Shore man who spoke with the typical slurred accents of the region.

"Quite a boat you got there," the man said.

Rick grinned. "It does look sort of odd, but it's comfortable."

"Expect so. Thought it was a seagoin' flyin' saucer when I saw it comin' through the Narrows."

Scotty munched crab cake appreciatively. "Seen many flying saucers around here?" he asked whimsically.

"A few."

The boys stared.

The man smiled at the reaction. "Didn't expect that? It's true. We see one now and again."

"Really?" Rick asked.

"Sure as geese fly. Don't know that they're really flyin' saucers

like we read about in the Washington and Baltimore papers – we get both – but they're somethin' strange. Not natural, anyway."

The boys looked at each other. There was no doubt that the proprietor believed what he was saying. He was as casual as though reporting a catch of fish.

"Seen any recently?" Scotty inquired.

"Two nights ago. Always see 'em about dusk. Real plain, against the sky. Sun hits 'em when they get high enough. They shine, sometimes silver, sometimes red."

"Funny we haven't seen anything about it in the papers," Rick commented.

"Oh, I don't know. Used to be we'd report 'em, and the papers carried a few lines. But the way the stories got written, you'd think us Eastern Shore folks were short a few marbles. We got tired of being laughed at, so no one says much about the saucers any more."

"But lots of people see them?" Scotty asked.

"Sure. Anyone that happens to be outdoors."

"Ever report these sightings to the authorities?" Rick wanted to know.

"Did at first. Called the State Police myself. The Coast Guard boys are located right here at the Narrows, and they reported to Baltimore. Nothin' happened. The authorities aren't sold on flyin' saucers, you might say. I guess the last report was when Link Harris was kidnaped by one."

Rick's scalp prickled. "You honestly mean someone was

kidnaped by a flying saucer?"

"It's the only thing we can think of. Link went out to set his crab lines, like always, and never came home. We set out to find him, and we found his boat all right, but no Link. One of the saucers was seen by several folks, and they said later it seemed right over where he was workin' at about the time he was there."

The boys digested this startling information. "Maybe he was drowned," Rick ventured.

"In a creek? Not likely! Link's been crabbin' for thirty years in these waters. Water was smooth. Not a ripple, even out on the bay. Even if he fell over, he could almost walk ashore. Tide was out and he was settin' lines in about six feet, and he's better than two yards high. Shore wasn't more than twenty yards away."

"Maybe he hit his head when he fell," Scotty suggested.

"Possible, but even if he drowned we'd have found his body."

Rick shook his head. "It's hard to believe a man could be kidnaped by a flying saucer. Couldn't he have gone ashore and walked out of the area? Maybe he *wanted* to disappear."

"You're mighty hard to convince," the proprietor said good-humoredly. It was clear he didn't particularly care whether they were convinced or not. He was making conversation just to be sociable. "Where Link was settin' lines is just a little creek with marsh all around. No man with any sense would get out of a boat and go ashore into marshland, now would he? Besides, there's no reason Link would want to disappear. He lived all alone and did about what he pleased. Crabs netted him enough money for

his needs."

"How long ago did this happen?" Rick asked.

"Two, three weeks. Not long."

"Where?" Scotty queried.

"Few miles south. In a creek off the Little Choptank."

"That's where we're going!" Rick exclaimed.

"So? Well, watch for Swamp Creek. It's on the chart. That's where they got Link. Where you headed?"

"A place called Martins Creek," Rick replied.

"Uh-huh. Well, Martins is on the south shore, and Swamp Creek is on the north, about three miles closer to the river mouth. You'll pass it on the way. Better keep an eye open. That boat of yours might attract flyin' saucers the way a decoy attracts ducks."

Rick saw the twinkle in the proprietor's eye. "We'll set a bear trap on the upper deck," he said. "Any flying saucer tries to pick us up, the pilot will catch one of his six legs in it."

"Likely," the man agreed. "You catch one, bring it to the Narrows, will you? Always wanted to see one at close range."

"We'll do that," Rick agreed, and no premonition or hunch warned him how close he and Scotty would come to carrying out the promise.

CHAPTER II

The Flying Stingaree

Someone once said that the Chesapeake Bay "looks like the deck plan of an octopus," but the mental image created by the phrase tells but a fraction of the story. Rivers and creeks empty into the bay by the dozens, and every river, and most of the creeks, have tributaries. Even some of the tributaries have tributaries. The result is thousands of miles of navigable waters, forming a maze of waterways that it would take most of a lifetime of weekend cruising to explore.

The cruising houseboat *Spindrift* moved steadily across the mouth of one of the principal waterways of the Eastern Shore, the Choptank River. It was a good three miles across the river's mouth, and Rick occupied the time by reading aloud to Scotty, who was piloting.

"The Choptank River is navigable for large ships to the city of Cambridge, a principal Eastern Shore port. Yachts will find the river navigable for twenty miles beyond Cambridge, depending on their draft, while boats of shallow draft can cruise all the way into the State of Delaware." Rick paused in his reading and looked up. "Be fun to go up one of these rivers to the source, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe we can," Scotty replied. "Read on."

"The name Choptank comes from the Choptank Indians who lived in the area until the middle of the nineteenth century. These Indians were first discovered by Captain John Smith when he sailed into Chesapeake Bay in search of a location for what later became the Jamestown Colony."

"We're sailing through history," Scotty commented. "And we'd better step on it." He pushed the throttles forward. The houseboat accelerated to its top speed of about twelve miles an hour.

"What's up?" Rick demanded.

"Look to the southwest. That must be one of those Chesapeake Bay squalls the book warns about."

There was a black line of clouds some distance away, but Rick could see that the squall line was moving fast, crossing the bay in their direction. He swung the chart table up and studied the situation. They were close to the south shore of the Choptank River now, and the chart showed no easily accessible place of shelter in the vicinity. They would have to run for the Little Choptank, the next river to the south. The chart showed several creeks off the Little Choptank. They could duck into the one nearest the river mouth.

"Can we ride it out if we have to?" Rick asked.

Scotty grinned. "We'll find out, if we have to. But I'd rather not be in open water when a squall hits this barge. It's not built for storms. Keep your fingers crossed and hope we get to cover before it hits."

"I hear you talking. I'm going to do a little research." Rick ducked into the cabin and took the tide tables from the bookshelf. Back on deck, he leafed through the official publication and found that the nearest point for tidal data was the Choptank River Light, only a few miles away and clearly visible. High and low tides at the light were about three hours and fifteen minutes earlier than Baltimore, the data station for the area. Rick checked Baltimore data for the date, subtracted quickly, and glanced at his watch.

"High tide in about a half hour. The chart shows three feet near shore at mean low water. High tide will bring it up to four and a half at the very least. That's plenty for this barge. Get inshore and cut corners. We won't have to stick to the channel."

Scotty swung the wheel instantly, and the houseboat took a new course, leading them closer to shore. "Better keep an eye out for logs or pilings," Scotty warned. "No rocks in the area, so we don't have to worry about shoals."

The wooded shore slid by, the trees gradually giving way to low scrub and marsh grass as they neared the mouth of the Little Choptank. Rick alternately kept an eye out ahead and checked their position on the chart. They were in about five feet of water, more than enough for the shallow-draft houseboat. His principal worry was the outboard propellers. He didn't want to break one on a log that might be sticking up underwater.

The squall was closer now, and the sky was growing dark. Rick estimated that they had no more than ten minutes before

the storm would hit. He had to look up at a sharp angle to see the storm front. Visibility was down to zero directly under it. Whitecaps and a roiling sea told him there was plenty of wind in the squall. He doubted that the houseboat could head into it successfully. The wind would catch the high cabin sides and force the houseboat onto the shore.

Scotty swung around the northern tip of land that marked the mouth of the Little Choptank. "We won't make it," he said, glancing at the chart.

Rick nodded. "But the wind will be behind us. We can drive right into the mouth of the nearest creek. According to the chart, there's a cove just inside the mouth where we ought to be out of the wind." He put his finger on the place, and suddenly a chill ran through him. The nearest safe harbor was Swamp Creek, where Link Harris had vanished!

There wasn't time to talk about it. He would have to be prepared to drop the anchor quickly. "I'm going up on the bow," he said. "Once into the creek, turn as hard as you can into the wind, then cut the power. I'll heave the anchor over and the wind pressure on the boat can set it. But keep the motors turning over in case it doesn't hold."

"Got it," Scotty agreed.

Rick stepped out of the cockpit onto the catwalk. The cabin top was just chest-high, and he could hold on by grabbing the safety rails that ran along the sides of the large sun deck. He moved swiftly along the walk to the foredeck, a small

semicircular deck used primarily for docking and anchoring. The anchor line was coiled on a hook on the curving front of the cabin, and the patent anchor was stowed on the deck itself. Rick took the coil and faked down the line in smooth figure eights so it would run out without fouling, then made sure the anchor was free and ready to go.

When Rick stood up and looked down the length of the cabin top at Scotty, he saw that the squall was almost on them. The turbulent cloud front was directly overhead. He saw the wind line, marked by turbulent water, move swiftly toward the houseboat. The *Spindrift* rocked as though shaken by a giant hand, and its speed picked up appreciably. The houseboat began to pitch as the chop built up around it. Visibility dropped suddenly; it was almost dark. Rick winced as large, hard-driven raindrops lashed into his face, then he turned his back to the storm and stared ahead.

The creek mouth was in sight. He pointed to it for Scotty's benefit, but when he turned to look at his pal, the driving rain slashed into his eyes and made him look away.

Scotty had seen the creek mouth. Staying as close to shore as he dared, Scotty drove the houseboat to within fifty yards of the narrow mouth, then swung the helm hard. The wind, which had been astern, was now abeam and its force was acting on the high side of the boat. The houseboat slewed sideways, and for a moment Rick thought they would be driven on to the upstream bank of the creek. But Scotty had judged his distance and wind

pressure well. The boat shot into the creek mouth with feet to spare.

The cove opened up ahead. Scotty reversed one motor and the houseboat turned almost in its own length. Rick watched the shore through squinting eyes, and the moment he saw the boat's forward motion cease, he dropped the big anchor over. The wind caught the houseboat again and drove it backward into the cove while the anchor line ran out. When he had enough line out for safety, Rick snubbed it tight around a cleat, held the taut line between thumb and forefinger until he was sure it had none of the vibrations caused by a dragging anchor, and then hurried back along the catwalk to the cockpit. He and Scotty ran from the rainswept deck down the two steps into the cabin.

For a moment the two stood grinning at each other and listening to the heavy drumming of the rain on the cabin top, then Rick spoke. "We'd better get out of these wet clothes so we can sit down. This may last for an hour or so."

Scotty agreed. "First one into dry shorts makes the coffee."

"That's me," Rick said. He stripped off the soaking clothes, toweled quickly, and put on dry shorts. The rain had chilled the air, so he reached into the drawer under the amidships bunks, took out a sweat shirt, and pulled it over his head. It felt good.

Scotty had taken time to dry off the books and binoculars he had brought from the deck before he changed his own clothes. By the time he was dressed in dry shorts and sweater, Rick had the alcohol stove going and water heating for coffee.

"Know where we are?" Rick asked casually.

"Sure. We're – " Scotty stopped. "For Pete's sake! I didn't make the connection at first. We're in Swamp Creek, where that man got snatched by a flying saucer!"

"Right. Worried?"

Scotty grinned. "Any flying saucer that can navigate in this weather is welcome to what it gets. How's the anchor?"

"Holding," Rick said. "I hope." He looked out the galley window and watched the shore. It changed position as the boat moved, but that was only because the houseboat was swinging at anchor. "Seems all right," he added.

Ten minutes later coffee was ready. The boys sat at the dinette table and sipped with relish, listening to the storm outside. It seemed to be increasing in intensity.

"Picking up," Scotty said. "The guidebook wasn't kidding when it said 'sudden and severe summer storms lash the bay.'"

"Wonder how long they last?" Rick asked.

"Hard to say. Perhaps an hour."

The houseboat jerked suddenly. Rick jumped to his feet. "Did you feel that?"

The boat heeled under the lash of wind. Rick peeled off his sweat shirt. "Feels as though the anchor dragged a little. I'm going out and let out more scope. We can't take a chance of drifting in this wind."

"I'll go," Scotty offered.

"No. I put the anchor down. It's my fault if it slips. Stand by."

Rick pulled the cabin door open and winced at the blast of raindrops, like heavy buckshot on his face and body. For a moment he hesitated, then realized the sooner he got it over with, the better. He hurried to the catwalk and swung down it, meanwhile estimating his distances. He could let out another fifty feet of anchor line without getting the boat too near shore. The more anchor line out, the better the anchor could hold.

He made the forward deck and looked around, realizing that the wind direction had changed and that the blast was now coming down the creek, swinging the houseboat around. That probably was why the anchor had shifted. He knelt and took the line in his fingers. It no longer seemed to be slipping, but it was better not to take a chance. He unloosed the half hitches that held it to the cleat, threw off all but one figure-eight turn, and let the anchor line run out slowly. When he estimated about fifty feet had run through, he put on more figure eights around the cleat, then dropped half hitches over to secure the line. Once more he reached out and held the taut line. It didn't seem to be slipping. He pulled on it hard, and felt the boat move. The anchor was in solidly this time.

Rick turned and started back to the catwalk, rain lashing his back. Sudden instinct made him whirl around in time to see something huge and black rushing at him out of the storm. Rain blurred his vision. He had a swift impression of a black figure, shaped like a diamond, coming at him. He threw himself flat on the foredeck. There was a rustling sound overhead, and

something clanged off the cabin top's aluminum rail. Rick was on his feet again. Heart pounding, he looked around. There was nothing but rain and wind. He stood upright and looked across the cabin top. For an instant he glimpsed a black object above the canopy over the rear cockpit, then that, too, was lost in the rain.

Shaken, Rick made his way back to the cabin, entered, closed the door, and leaned against it. Scotty looked up, and was on his feet in an instant.

"Rick! What happened? You're white as a sheet!" he exclaimed.

"Saw one," Rick managed. He was still shaking. "It went right over the boat. I think it hit the upper rail. We'll check later. But it wasn't a flying saucer. I'm sure of that."

"What was it?" Scotty demanded.

"A flying stingaree!"

CHAPTER III

Orvil Harris, Crabber

Rick Brant awoke to the sound of a motor. For a moment he lay quietly in his bunk, listening. The sun through the cabin windows told him it was early in the morning. The sunlight still had the red quality of early sunrise. He watched the light shift as the houseboat swung on its anchor.

By the time the storm last night had ended, darkness had set in, and it was only sensible to turn on the anchor light and remain in the Swamp Creek cove for the night. In spite of his unsettling experience, Rick and Scotty had not been deeply disturbed. Neither he nor Scotty believed in flying saucers – at least, not in saucers that kidnaped people, and the object Rick had seen had not been saucer-like. It had been shaped like a stingaree.

Stingarees don't fly.

Rick smiled to himself. During another vacation, skin diving in the Virgin Islands, he and Scotty had proved that octopuses don't wail. But if stingarees don't fly, he asked himself, what looks like a stingaree and *does* fly?

He realized suddenly that the sound of the motor was louder once again. Someone investigating the houseboat? He swung out of bed. The cool air of morning was in sharp contrast to the warmth of his sleeping bag. Quickly he slipped into shorts and

sweat shirt. As he opened the cabin door, he heard the slap of bare feet on the deck behind him and turned to see Scotty regain his balance after dropping from the upper bunk.

"Go ahead," Scotty called. "Be right with you."

"Okay." Rick stepped out into the cockpit and glanced around. It was a lovely morning. The ever-present birds of the Chesapeake area were already active. A huge blue heron stepped daintily in the shallows like a stilt walker afraid of falling over. The heron was looking for small fish or anything that moved and was edible. An osprey, the great fish hawk of the bay region, swooped overhead on lazy wings, sharp eyes alert for small fish near the water's surface. In the pine woods behind the shore marsh, a bluejay called, its voice like a squeaky hinge.

The motor sound was distant now, and the shore upstream blocked Rick's view. Then, as he watched, a long, low, white motorboat came into sight. Its bow was vertical, its sides low. There was no cabin. Amidships was a single man, clad in overalls and a denim shirt. The man was surrounded by bushel baskets, and he held a long-handled crab net made of chicken wire.

Rick watched with interest. On one side of the boat was a roller that extended out over the water. A heavy cord came out of the water, crossed the roller, and dipped back into the water again. Every few feet there was a chunk of something on the cord, apparently bait. As Rick watched, a piece of bait came up with a crab clinging to it. The net swooped and the crab was caught, pulled inboard, and dumped into a bushel basket with one fluid

motion. The crabber never took his eyes from the cord. The boat continued in a straight line.

Scotty came out on deck and joined Rick. The boys watched in silence while the man caught a dozen crabs, then picked one from the bait and flipped it into the water.

"Too small, I guess," Rick commented.

"Must be. Where does the line go?"

Rick pointed. A gallon oilcan, painted blue and white, bobbed gently in the creek. "That's where he's heading."

The crabber approached the can, then flipped the line off the roller. Using a lever next to him, he turned the boat and headed toward another can some distance away. A quick pull with a boat hook and the line attached to the can was placed over the roller. Crabs appeared, holding onto the bait as the boat moved along the new line. Rick counted. The crabber was getting about one crab for every three baits.

Scotty leaned over the cockpit rail. "There's the end of his line, over near shore. He'll pass close to us."

"That's why the motor sounded loud," Rick guessed. "He moves from one line to another. Last time he came by the boat he woke me up."

"Same here." Scotty nodded.

The crabber moved methodically, his boat proceeding at a steady pace toward the houseboat. As he came abreast, he called, "Mornin'."

The boys returned the greeting.

"Looks like a good catch," Scotty called.

"Fair. Only fair." The crabber scooped up a huge blue crab from almost under their noses and went on his way.

"If it's only fair now, what must it be like when it's good?" Rick asked with a grin.

"Two crabs on every hunk of bait," Scotty said. "You count crabs and I'll make coffee."

"That's my boy," Rick said approvingly.

Scotty went into the cabin and left Rick watching the crabber. Rick tried to figure out all the details. After a short time he concluded that the floats were attached to anchors of some kind. The anchors kept the crab line on the bottom, except when it was running over the roller. He also saw that there were no hooks or other gadgets. The crabs were caught simply because they refused to let go of the bait.

The aroma of coffee drifted through the cabin door, and Rick wondered why it is that coffee, bacon, and other breakfast scents are so much more tantalizing on the water.

The crabber approached on the leg of his journey closest to the boat. On impulse, Rick called, "Come aboard and have some coffee?"

The man grinned. Without missing his smooth swing at a rising crab, he called back, "Don't mind. That coffee smell was drivin' me nigh crazy. Be back when I finish this line."

Rick leaned into the cabin. "Company for coffee, Scotty."

"Heard you. Got another cup all ready. In here or out there?"

"Out here. It's too nice to be inside."

In a few moments the motorboat, which turned out to be as long as the houseboat, came alongside. Rick took the line thrown by the crabber and made it fast so that the crab boat would drift astern. He looked into the boat with interest. Covers on four baskets showed that the crabber had collected four bushels of crabs. A fifth and sixth basket were half full, one with very large crabs, the other with smaller ones.

The crabber swung aboard. He was of medium height, with light-blue eyes set in a tanned and weather-beaten face. Rick guessed his age to be somewhere in the mid-forties. He smiled, showing even teeth that were glaringly white in his tanned face.

"Name's Orvil Harris," he announced.

"Rick Brant." Rick shook hands. "That's Don Scott coming out with the coffee."

Scotty put down the coffeepot and mugs he was carrying and shook hands. "Call me Scotty, Mr. Harris. How do you like your coffee?"

"Strong and often," Harris replied. "Plain black. Call me Orvil."

Like all visitors, Harris was interested in the houseboat. "Been hopin' for a look inside," he said in his slurred Eastern Shore accent. "Almost gave up hope. You get up late, seems like."

Rick glanced at the sun. "Must be all of seven o'clock. You call that late?"

"Been here since four. It's late for me."

Rick showed Orvil Harris through the boat, then sat with him and Scotty in the cockpit, sipping steaming coffee. The crabber talked willingly about his business.

"Not much profit," he reported, "but it beats workin'."

After hearing about a crabber's life, rising in the middle of the night, rain or shine, working crab lines and hauling baskets around until noon, Rick wondered what Harris would consider hard work. Having spent a dollar for six steamed crabs a few nights before, he was also amazed to hear the crabber report that he received only six dollars a bushel for "jumbo" crabs and three dollars a bushel for "culls," or medium ones. All under four and a half inches from tip to tip were thrown back.

Rick waited a courteous length of time before asking the question that had been on his mind since hearing the crabber's name. "Are you any relation to Link Harris?"

"Second cousin." The blue eyes examined him with new interest. "Where'd you hear about Link?"

"At the Narrows," Scotty replied. "We were talking about flying saucers."

"Flyin' catfish," Harris said scornfully. "You swallow that yarn?"

"Didn't you?" Rick asked quickly.

"Not any. That why you picked this creek to anchor in when there's so many nicer ones upstream?"

Scotty explained. "We ducked in here to get out of that squall last night. We didn't exactly pick it. Afterward, we realized where

we were."

"Why don't you believe the story about Link Harris?" Rick wanted to know.

"Oh, I believe some of it." The crabber took out a blackened, much-used pipe and stoked it. "Link disappeared, all right. We found his boat yonder." He pointed to a spot on the marshy shore.

"He didn't drown?" Rick pressed.

Harris shrugged. "Not very likely. We'd have found his body. Way the tides were that day, there was no ebb tide strong enough to carry a body out into deep water. The creek was clear. We'd have seen him."

"Then where did he go?" Scotty demanded.

"Can't say. When he disappeared, I went to Baltimore and bought every book on flyin' saucers I could lay hands on. All I know for sure is that what folks have been seein' around here ain't saucers. Shape's wrong, color's wrong, and they don't move the way the books say."

"Would you say they were diamond-shaped, dark in color, with tails?" Rick asked carefully.

Harris stopped with a match halfway to his pipe. "I would. For sure. When'd you see one?"

"Last night. Right here."

"Mmmmm." Harris got the pipe going well and threw the match into the water. "I've never seen one close. Hoped to. That's why I crab this creek. Would you say it was big enough to catch a man?"

Rick shook his head. "I didn't get a very long look, but I'd say definitely not. Unless it had some kind of powerful motor I couldn't see or hear."

Harris puffed silently.

"Any theories?" Scotty asked.

"Not one. I'm barren as the flats in winter."

Rick finished his coffee and put the mug down on the cabin top. "Would Link have gone away of his own accord?"

"I wouldn't think so." Harris accepted more coffee from Scotty. "But let's keep one foot anchored. Who knows what's in a man's mind? Any man? Sometimes there's a deep channel full of black water, and nothin' to make you suspect it. Maybe Link did walk off. It would be the easiest explanation – if you hadn't seen somethin' last night. I was about to give up. Now I'm not so sure. What you saw came from somewhere, and it was goin' somewhere. If we could find out whence and whither, so to speak, we might have an idea of what happened to Link."

Harris drew erect. "Speakin' of whence and whither, what's your destination?"

"We're visiting a friend," Rick answered. "He lives on Martins Creek on the south side of the river. Name is Ames."

Harris nodded. "I know who he is. Washington man. Has a summer place."

"You've met him?" Scotty inquired.

"So to speak. We've howdy'd, but we haven't shook."

Rick smothered a grin at the picturesque phrase.

"I'd better get back to crabs," Harris said. "I'm mighty grateful for the hospitality. You get to town, look me up, and give me a chance to return it." He shook hands with both boys, pulled his boat alongside, and stepped aboard. In a short time, he was running the crab lines again.

"Interesting," Rick said noncommittally.

Scotty chuckled. "Here we go again. Sherlock Brant's got his teeth into a nice fat mystery. Good-by vacation."

Rick had to grin. "It's not that bad," he said defensively. "I just thought we might sniff around a little."

"That's what I thought you thought. Come on, Hawkshaw. Let's get some bacon and eggs on the fire and haul anchor."

"Okay." Rick checked the chart. "We're only about twenty minutes' run from Steve's place. If we eat here, he won't think he has to feed us breakfast."

"Considerate," Scotty agreed, grinning. "I can see you now. You walk up the dock, shake hands, and say, 'Glad to see you, Steve. Don't bother about breakfast. We've eaten. By the way, have you had any trouble with flying stingarees?'"

Rick grinned back. "Not bad predicting. Actually, I was going to wait for the right opportunity, then say, 'Wonderful hunting and fishing country, Steve. By the way, when does the hunting season open for flying stingarees?'"

Scotty laughed. "Okay. Only let's get going. I want to see how he answers!"

CHAPTER IV

Steve's Place

A red buoy marked the entrance to Martins Creek. Rick, at the helm, passed it close to starboard and headed into the center of the creek. Past the wooded shores of the creek entrance, he could see fields, obviously tended, and more woods.

"Steve's place should be the second on the left," Scotty said. "The first house with a dock."

"Use the binoculars," Rick suggested. "We should be able to see it when we round the next bend."

The houseboat passed the first house, a small, modern dwelling set close to the water. A rowboat was hauled up on the shore. The creek rounded a wooded promontory and the next house came into view. Steve's!

Rick's eager eyes saw an attractive farmhouse, set well back from the water in a frame of willows and white oaks. There was an acre of green lawn in front of the house, the lawn running down to the water's edge. A small dock jutted out into the creek. Tied to one side of it was a sturdy runabout with an outboard motor.

"Pretty," Scotty approved.

Rick nodded. The farmhouse was half frame, half white brick, with a slate roof. It was apparently only one story high. On

impulse, Rick gave a long blast on the boat horn.

The front door opened and a man looked out, then walked swiftly down to the dock, waving. The boys waved back.

"Get the lines ready," Rick requested. "I'll back in."

He throttled down and let the houseboat move slowly past the dock while he yelled a greeting to Steve Ames. There were no obstacles, and just enough room for the boat. He reversed his motors and threw his helm hard over, backing slowly into position. Scotty stood ready with a line, which he heaved to Steve. Then Scotty ran lightly to the foredeck and got the bowline ready. The houseboat nestled against the dock smoothly and Rick killed the motors. Then the three old friends were shaking hands and grinning from ear to ear.

"I've been watching since yesterday afternoon," Steve told them. "That storm last night worried me some. I didn't know whether you could ride it out or not."

"No trouble," Rick said. "We ran into Swamp Creek on the north side of the river and spent the night there." He watched the agent's face closely, but Steve didn't react.

"Come on in," Steve invited. "Coffee's on. Had your breakfast?"

"We ate before hauling anchor," Scotty said, grinning.

Steve Ames knew the boys well. "Something's up," he stated. "Rick is watching me like a suspicious sand crab and your tone of voice is wrong, Scotty. Coffee first, then talk. Come on."

Rick shook his head in admiration. It was impossible to catch

Steve off guard. The agent had a deceptive appearance, athletic and good looking, with the forthright friendliness of a college undergraduate. But his trained eyes and ears missed nothing.

Steve's living room was attractive and comfortable, with bookshelves between the windows, a stone fireplace, a striped rug, and deep, restful chairs. There were lamps in exactly the right positions for reading.

The agent brought in a tray of coffee cups, with a pot of coffee and platter of doughnuts. "Even if you've eaten breakfast, you can manage a couple of these." He poured coffee and made sure the boys were comfortable, then sank into an armchair and looked at them quizzically.

"All right. Out with it."

Rick chuckled. "You're too sharp," he accused. "We had a plan all cooked up. I was going to comment on the fishing and hunting, and then ask – very innocently – when the season for flying stingarees opened."

The agent's eyebrows went up. "Flying stingarees? Swimming ones, yes. Open season any time. Flying ones, no. What is all this?"

"Rick saw one last night in the storm," Scotty explained.

"That's not all," Rick added. He told of their conversation at the Narrows and of the talk with Orvil Harris that morning. "So there's something fishy around here besides crabs and rockfish. We thought you might know," he concluded.

Steve shook his head with obvious admiration. "Leave it to

the Spindrift twins! If there's a mystery afoot, you'll unearth it. Nope, lads. Never heard of your flying stingarees, or flying saucers, either. But that's not surprising. I'm down here mostly on weekends, sometimes with a friend or two, and the only local folks we see are at the store or gas station. Usually I'm in too much of a rush for small talk. I don't get the local papers, and when I listen to the radio or watch TV, it's either a Washington or Baltimore station. So I'm not in touch with local events."

"Anyway," Rick said, "stingarees don't fly."

Steve had been in the Virgin Islands, too, and had been involved in the adventure of *The Wailing Octopus*. "You found out that the octopus didn't wail," he reminded them, "but for a while it looked as though you'd found a new species. Maybe this is the same thing. What makes the stingaree fly?"

"It would be fun to find out," Scotty admitted.

"You'll have time to make a start, and I won't be in the way with plans for fishing or crabbing. I'm sorry, boys, but I'll be in and out of Washington for a few days. Got a hot case working that I can't leave for long."

The boys protested. "You deserve some vacation," Rick said hotly.

Steve held up his hand. "Whoa! I'm getting a vacation. This case should be settled in three or four days, and I'll be with you. Meanwhile, you move in here. You can drive me to the airport at Cambridge and pick me up when I come back. That will leave you a car, and you can use the motorboat for exploring

or for fishing. If you feel like skin diving, you can try for rock or hardheads off the northern tip of Taylors Island, right at the mouth of the river. Did you bring gear?"

"The whole set," Rick replied. "Lungs, compressors, guns, and even suits."

"You won't need suits. The bay is shallow and warm. At night you can relax right here. Plenty of books, TV, radio, or a chessboard. If it gets cool, there's wood for the fireplace."

"Sounds good," Scotty agreed. "But we wanted you with us."

"I will be. Before the weekend."

"When do you have to leave?" Rick asked.

"Three this afternoon. I have an evening meeting at headquarters. I'll be back on the four-o'clock flight tomorrow afternoon, and, with luck, I won't have to go again. If I do, it will be only for a day."

"Okay," Rick said reluctantly. "We'll settle in, but we won't move in. We'll sleep on the boat. No need to use up your linens and stuff when we have sleeping bags if the weather is cold and cotton blankets when it's warm. Besides, housekeeping is easier on the boat."

Steve grinned. "I'll bet it is. If I know you two, you eat out of cans and never use a dish if you can help it. Your idea of washing a coffee cup is to hold it under running water or to dip it in the bay. Wait until your mother and the girls join you. Life will undergo a drastic change."

"Don't rub it in," Scotty said ruefully. "Now, how about

showing us over this estate of yours?"

Steve was pleased by the request. He obviously was proud of his creekside home, and with reason. There were fifty acres of land, mostly oak forest, with a private access road. Electric power came in from the public power lines, but he had a gasoline generator in case of failure, and his own artesian well. He explained:

"The house has been completely remodeled, but it's really quite old. When it was built, there was only a wagon track. In those days, the rivers and creeks were the highways, and the people traveled by boat. You'll see old mansions fronting on the rivers here. The back doors face the roads. Water transport was the reason. The landed gentry had barges rowed by slaves. The poor folks rowed their own. Of course, there were plenty of sailing craft, too. There still are."

The creek in front of the house proved deep enough for swimming, and the three went for a dip. Rick tasted the water. It was salty, but not like the ocean. The backwaters of the bay were brackish, with low-salt content.

In the afternoon, the boys – somewhat reluctantly – got into what they referred to as "shore-going clothes." These consisted of slacks, sport shirts, light casual jackets, and loafers. Steve had a bag packed. They got into his car, a late-model convertible, and headed for Cambridge.

The plane, a small twin-engine craft, was late coming from Norfolk. By the time Steve was en route to Washington, it was

nearly the dinner hour.

"Eat out?" Rick suggested.

"Absolutely. More crab cakes?"

Rick shook his head. "Crab imperial. Maybe some steamed clams."

"You're making me hungry," Scotty protested. "I'll say one thing for the bay area. The folks eat well. How about some terrapin stew?"

"Crab imperial," Rick said again. "Baked in a crab shell. Lots of mayonnaise, paprika, and butter. I'll have a hearts of romaine salad on the side, with oil-and-vinegar dressing. Maybe tarragon vinegar. A few French fries, too. But first, a couple of dozen steamed clams. What do they call 'em here? Manos, pronounced Man! Oh!"

"Just tell me where," Scotty begged. "Say no more."

"How about that place we passed just before we got to Cambridge? The one built like a Colonial mansion."

"The Bay Gourmet," Scotty remembered. "Okay. You're driving."

Rick put the convertible in gear and moved out of the airport driveway onto the highway. "We're on our own," he said. "It's up to us to entertain ourselves. But food isn't enough. Man cannot live by bread alone, the Scriptures say."

"I knew it." Scotty slumped down in the seat and sighed. "Since man cannot live by bread alone, his life must be filled with other things. And guess what things!"

Rick smiled in anticipation. "Uh-huh. Flying stingarees."

CHAPTER V

The Face Is Familiar

The Bay Gourmet was all that its outside appearance promised. A waiter, elderly and courteous, his voice soft with the Eastern Shore accent, led them to a table in a main dining room that was like something out of early American history, Maryland style. The Maryland colony had not been poor, and many of its settlers had been of the English nobility. They had brought with them furniture, paintings, and chinaware from England and France, and their homes were gracious and livable.

The restaurant followed the pattern. Rick wouldn't have been surprised to see the ghost of Lord Baltimore walk through one of the arches.

The boys pored over the menus and finally settled on crab gumbo, clam fritters, and crab imperial. While they waited, Rick opened the subject that was on his mind. "How does a stingaree fly?"

Scotty shrugged. "Easy. He climbs to the top of a tall tree, spreads his wings, and takes off. He flaps his wings to gain altitude. He steers with his tail."

"I'm serious," Rick said sternly, his eyes twinkling.

"So am I. Alternate method: the stingaree climbs on a fence and lassos a passing airplane. Or catches a ride on an eagle's tail

feathers. Take your choice."

"I've got a better way. The stingaree poses for his picture. The picture is used as a model for making a kite, probably of black plastic. The kite gets flown in the wind."

Scotty stared. "Maybe – just maybe – you've got something there. The stingaree shape would make a good kite. Could what you saw have been a kite?"

"It's possible." Rick nodded. "The wind was funneling down the creek pretty fast, and it would have carried a big kite. There's only one small difficulty. Why launch a kite that has no string?"

"You certain it didn't have a string?"

"In that wind, the string would have had to be a cable. I'd have seen it, and maybe felt it. The kite – stingaree, that is – just missed. Of course, the string might have broken."

"There's another small difficulty," Scotty said thoughtfully. "If it was a kite, where was it launched and why?"

"Up the creek somewhere. We don't know what's up there."

"True. From the looks, I'd say not much. Maybe some opossums and muskrats, which don't launch kites."

Rick spread butter liberally on a hot biscuit. "We can always take a look."

"We can. In Steve's boat, the creek would be only a few minutes away."

Rick savored the biscuit and took another bite that finished it. "I could eat a ton of these. What else would make a stingaree fly?"

Scotty accepted a pitcher of honey from the waiter and poured a disgraceful amount on a biscuit. "How about some kind of experimental aircraft?"

Rick shook his head. "The stingaree was vertical. An experimental plane in that position would have to be rising straight up, and this creature was traveling almost horizontally, with the wind. Besides, I heard no motor or any kind of power plant."

"You're as lucid as lamplight, ol' buddy. You explain everything – except what made that stingaree fly."

Rick grinned wryly. "I'll never get a swelled head with you sticking pins in it."

"Only carrying out my proper function," Scotty said virtuously.

The first course had arrived. Crab gumbo turned out to be spicy, hot, and very, very good.

"I may decide to live here," Rick said as he spooned up the last mouthful.

"I'm a native already," Scotty stated. "The Chesapeake Bay is my home, if the rest of the meal lives up to the soup."

The clam fritters were light, crisp, and succulent. "Meet a brand-new Marylander," Scotty announced.

Rick started to reply, then stopped as a party of three entered the dining room and were shown to a table nearby. He knew one of the men, but he couldn't remember where they had met.

"Scotty," he said softly, "look around at the group that just

came in. Who's the man in the plaid jacket? I know him, but I can't remember."

Scotty's napkin "accidentally" fell to the floor. He had to turn to pick it up. When he straightened, he shook his head. "The face is familiar, but I can't place it."

Rick studied the man through half-lowered lids, not wanting to be rude by staring openly. The familiar face was lean, and lined. It was not a pleasant face, although its owner would be described as a "distinguished-looking man of middle age." The lips were not especially thin, but they were tightly held. The chin was firm, with a shadow of beard even though the man looked freshly shaven. His hair was crisp, wavy, and pure white.

"Could be of French or Italian ancestry," Rick said. "Or, maybe, Spanish or Portuguese. Anyway, I'd vote for Southern European."

"On the button," Scotty agreed.

Rick's eyes dropped as the man looked their way. The eyes were dark brown, he saw, with heavy lids. The eyebrows, in startling contrast to the white hair, were dark.

The boy looked up again, his glance guarded. The man was smartly, but conservatively dressed, in dark-blue slacks, white sport shirt open at the collar, and a linen sport jacket of subdued plaid, much like those affected by some Ivy Leaguers.

The other two men were not familiar. One was almost bald, with a wisp of sandy hair combed in a pitiful and useless attempt to conceal the baldness. He wore glasses with clear plastic

frames. They sat on a nose that could have served as a golf-ball model. His lips were almost nonexistent, and his chin receded so far that Rick wondered why he didn't conceal it with a beard. He seemed like a complete non-entity. In contrast to the white-haired man's style of dress, the nondescript man wore a rumpled black suit of synthetic fabric, a regular white shirt, and a tie that a color-blind old aunt might have given him for Christmas two decades past.

The third man was the largest of the three, with an expressionless face and eyes that never stopped moving. He sat motionless in his chair, apparently completely relaxed. Rick knew that the relaxation was deceptive. Steve Ames at times looked relaxed like that, but it was the same kind of quietness one finds in a coiled spring that has not yet been released. The man had brown hair, light-brown eyes, and a heavy tan. He spoke only twice while Rick watched, and then only to give orders to the waiter. The other two men talked steadily, but in such low tones that the boys could not hear words.

The crab imperial arrived, and the riddle of the familiar face was forgotten in a new taste treat. After one luscious bite, Rick said, "I'm going to bring the folks here and order a duplicate of this meal. They'll go crazy."

Excellent food was a tradition in the Brant household. Mrs. Brant was a superb cook, and both she and Hartson Brant had taught the Spindrift young people to appreciate a well-prepared dish.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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