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35¢

ED LACY

# Blonde Bait



SHE HAD  
TO BUY  
PROTECTION—  
AND HER  
PAYMENT WAS  
HER BODY

78 18

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*Martin*

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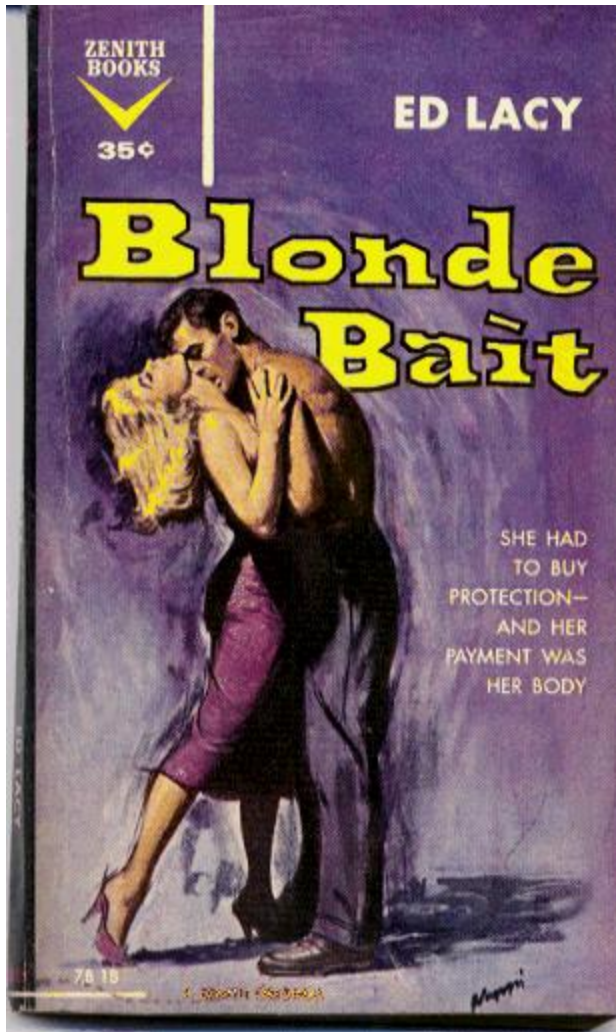
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## Ed Lacy. Blonde Bait



As this is a novel, a work of fiction and imagination, all characters, names and incidents are fictional and not intended to represent any real persons-past present.

for

Frankie and Andy Simpson, the bridge sharps

# I

Telling Hal Anderson about Rose was a mistake. I knew it even as the words spilled out. But this was one time I couldn't keep my fool mouth shut.

It was ten years since I had seen him, and I was still sore about the double-cross he'd pulled on me. So now I wanted to rub his nose in it, but good.

I was sitting in a little bar near the waterfront in Port-au-Prince, waiting while my boat, the *Sea Princess*, was taking on stores. I almost dropped my drink when the familiar, tall, white-uniformed figure appeared in front of me. "Mickey!" he shouted and began to pump my hand. "For a second I thought I was seeing things. Damn, boy, you haven't changed a bit. Still a tub of muscles, same old hat-even smell the same. Great to see you!"

"Sure. Sit down, Hal, and have a drink on me."

"You bet."

He sat down, first carefully creasing his drill trousers, and I ordered two more rums.

Hal grinned as he said, "Funny, we should be drinking together again, after all these years."

"Yeah," I said, wondering if I'd be as well off now if Hal was still my partner. Of course I wouldn't have Rose.

"What are you doing in Haiti, Mickey?"

"Man, you can see what I'm doing; drinking rum. Lazying around."

"You haven't changed."

"Nope. At least I haven't tried to. You have. Why the monkey suit?"

"I'm on the purser's staff of the *American Spirit*." He nodded at the liner down in the harbor.

"What do you do, hold hands with the seasick?"

"Cut it out, Mickey."

"I figured by this time you'd have long finished college, be a free wheeling executive."

"Stop it, Mickey," he said calmly. "I did go to college for two years. One summer I signed on as an A.B. I met a girl in Nice and married her on

the next trip. Colette and I live in New York City, got us a house there, and two fine kids. She's something, a wonderful girl, an artist, and a..."

"So you got hooked."

"You're nuts. I'm a very happy guy. What the hell have I to regret? I eat regularly, don't work hard, send my salary home, and see my family every five weeks. Like a honeymoon each time. It isn't a bad deal. My having been an ensign helps and some day I'll..."

"Some day, will you ever be able to stop saying 'sir' to the clucks?"

He fanned his face with his hat and laughed. "My God, still the same old Mickey. Hell, sir is only a word. You used to..."

"No, that was your department."

He finished his rum, then he said, "It wouldn't have worked, Mickey. Even with the new boat. I'm not made for that kind of life. You see I like having a wife, kids, a home, worrying and plugging for the future. I'm not built like a..."

"A bum," I added. "Yeah, maybe that does take a kind of talent." I finished my drink, motioned for another round.

"Still have the Sea Princess?"

I nodded.

"Lord, not with the same rusty converted Essex motor?"

"Nope. I have two turbo Diesels now."

Hal gave a mock whistle. The rum was making him sweat and I could see how badly he wanted to open his tight collar. "Sea Princess," he laughed. "What a name for that clumsy double-ender."

"Yeah?" I winked at him. "You should see her now. Matter of fact, I'm going down to the dock, sailing with the tide. Want to come along?" I suppose it was then, his cracks about the first Sea Princess that made me show off. And I was a little high on rum, too.

I really enjoyed his pop-eyed look when we got to the Sea Princess. It gave me a bang to see her, too, for she's thirty-two feet of the sweetest flushdecked sloop you'll ever see. Mr. Bayard, who sold me supplies, was sitting atop the cabin, his linen suit stained under the armpits, fanning himself with a newspaper. His sun glasses seemed to be the same color as his dark brown face. He waved and came over and told me in French everything was loaded. I owed him a balance of forty bucks and casually handed him a fifty-dollar bill, told him to keep the change. He was so

excited he began to sweat more. We shook hands and as he walked down the dock he shouted his thanks again.

Hal was running his eyes all over the Sea Princess as if she were a lush woman. "On the level, Mickey, is this *your* boat?"

"Want to see my papers?"

"My good Lord, what a job! Why she must have cost twenty-thousand. Or more."

"More," I lied.

"She's pure dream."

"Yeah."

"Fellow could sail around the world in this."

"I may try it some day. Want a drink?"

Hal looked at his watch. "Okay. I have time."

"I have a half hour," I said, as he followed me down into the polished mahogany cabin. He came in stooped and I told him, "Straighten up, plenty of head room here," and wondered why I'd asked him aboard. I had this desire to brag so strong, I couldn't help myself. And all the time I knew it was a mistake.

I broke out a bottle of Canadian rye, to impress him, and some ice. The cabin was jammed with crates-tins of fancy food, books, magazines, a new hi-fi set, and many other things.

Hal inspected the galley, the head, the shower, the bunks, even opened the refrigerator. Then he took inventory of all the boxes and crates. He glanced at me with a slow smile, his eyes asking what was my racket. Then he said it: "Smuggling?"

"Come off it. What's there to smuggle these days?" I gave him his drink and glanced at the wall clock. Actually, catching the tide didn't mean much to me except a little saving in fuel.

"Heading back to Miami?" His eyes were still racing around the cabin. They finally found the snap of Rose over my bunk. The camera had caught her running toward the waves in a bikini. It was my favorite picture.

"Nope," I said, waiting; a kind of inner voice telling me to let it go, shut up.

He bent forward a bit to see the snap better. "Havana?"

I shook my head. "I bum around, do a lot of island hopping."

"Mickey the beachcomber!" There was sarcasm in his voice.

"That's me." Maybe it was the snotty sarcasm that made me forget caution. "And that's my wife."

"No? I can't believe *that!*" Hal stepped across the cabin and took a close look at the snap, as he'd wanted to do. "Wow!"

Hal turned to stare at me, his face bewildered. He yanked his collar open. "Are you snowing me?"

"Want to see our papers?"

"Aw Mickey, why in hell would a beauty like that marry a guy with your puss!"

"She's in love with my character."

"She must be after your money."

I chuckled. "She has the money."

"A boat like this and a woman like... How long has this been going on?"

"How come you're so full of questions?"

"Mickey, you know I didn't mean it that way."

"Guess you don't," I said, thinking it wouldn't do any harm telling him a *little* about Rose... and a voice in the back of my noggin screaming at me to keep my trap shut.

I refilled our glasses. I still had a good twenty minutes before full tide. I opened a box of cigars, Havana's best.

"Make sure you never repeat any of this," I began.

"Not even to Colette," Hal said. I knew he meant it. A loose tongue had never been one of his faults. At the same time I knew I'd already said too much, that it would be best to play it safe, keep still.

There was a moment of silence as I tried to think up a fast he for an out. Hal glanced at Rose's snap again. "So help me, Mick, I still don't believe it."

I took the bait like any stupid fish and told him, "One day I got fed up with Miami. The charter boat business was lousy and I'd had it with my few jerk customers. I was only getting five bucks a head and a lot of seasick women and... I sailed down to the Keys for some quiet, to relax."

"You and your moods-kept us the hungriest boat operators on the waterfront."

I nodded, thinking I shouldn't have told him it was the Keys, I'd better change it damn fast. "The Keys were full of boats, big and small yachts, so I crossed over to the Bahamas, found myself a quiet little island. A hunk of

sand and a couple of ragged bushes. No place to live and no way of getting there without a boat-a sea boat. I anchored late in the afternoon, about thirty or forty feet offshore. I didn't do much of anything but fish for my supper, put in sack time. In the morning I saw this girl on the beach. I'd never seen anything like her before, except in the movies. A tall platinum-blonde, with a face and shape... well, you see the snap. She was calmly sitting on a suitcase, peeling off her stockings and a ritzy summer dress. There was a bathing suit under the dress. I went down into the cabin and put my little telescope on her-through a port hole. Up close she looked even better. She also had a cloth-bag pocketbook, and I could see the heavy outline of a .45 automatic in the bag." I felt fine now that I was actually telling the story. I even told myself that having changed the locale and a few other items, I was playing it safe.

"But you said this was only a hunk of sand? How did she get there?"

"Hal, let me tell it. I went on deck and watched her, also wondering how in the devil she'd ever got there. There wasn't any sign of a boat. Anyway, naturally she had to see me but she wasn't paying me no mind. After swimming around a little-and she was a good swimmer-she returned to the tiny beach and rubbed herself down with oil, put on dark glasses, and sunned herself. Acted as if she was on the private sand of one of those lush Miami Beach money-trap hotels. I took my morning dip and she still didn't notice me. I waded ashore, said, 'Hello. This a private island or something?'

"'I wouldn't know,' she said. 'I'm merely here for the sun and swimming. And you?' Hal, she even had the kind of exciting, throaty voice that fitted her looks.

"I played it just as cook told her, 'I'm here for the bathing, myself.'

"So we sat for a time, not talking. Her skin was rather pale, probably her first time out in the sun. And if she was beautiful, out-of-this-world-pretty, there was also this tough cast to her face. She'd been around plenty in her thirty or thirty-five. This was a hard chick who wouldn't hesitate about picking up her bag and shooting. The cloth was so thin she could have worked the trigger without opening the purse... and she kept the bag in her hands all the time.

"So I sat there, minding my own business. You know me, I don't go for making a pass if you have to work at it. After about ten minutes I went back in the water. The tide was coming in but it wasn't over five feet deep and I walked, out to the Sea Princess, trying to kick up some clams. I made..."



"This was our old boat you're talking about?" Hal asked.

"Yeah, *my* boat," I said. That "our" boat stuff made me mad. "I made coffee and eggs, washed the dishes. I didn't even look her way. She called out, 'I haven't had any breakfast. Could you spare some, please?'"

"I said sure and she held all her clothes and the suitcase over her head and waded out to the Sea Princess. The suitcase wasn't small; I mean, it wasn't any overnight bag. When she reached the boat, she put the suitcase and her clothes on deck, then pulled herself up. During all this she hadn't let go of the purse. She held it in her right hand, pointing in my direction. I...."

"You scared?" Hal cut in, pouring himself another belt, unbuttoning his jacket.

"No. Let's say I was careful-not to make any wrong moves," I told him, knowing I was making one now, talking. But I couldn't stop, I was enjoying it too much. Not only showing-off to Hal; finding Rose was one of the high moments of my life, and this was the first time I had a chance to tell anybody about it. "I had this feeling she didn't want trouble, but she was ready for it. She glanced at the rigging, said, 'A motor-sailer. Not much of a boat, not even a radio or ship-to-shore phone.'

"That's right, nothing fancy, but a good sea boat.'

"No crew?'"

"You're looking at the captain, navigator, cook and bottlewasher,' I told her. I made more eggs and bacon and from the way she packed it in, she had skipped plenty of meals recently. She was sitting on the suitcase, her purse on her lap all the time. When she finished my chow she got a crumpled pack of butts from her dress, took one, and tossed the pack at me. I shook my head and reached over, put the pack on her thigh. It was certainly the best thigh I'd ever been that close to. Of course she knew my eyes were taking it all in and I think she was waiting for me to make a play. But I didn't. Finishing her cigarette she asked, 'Can you make Cuba in this? You said it's a sea boat.'

"Sure. I've done it plenty of times-with decent weather.'

"What do you do?'"

"This. I also take out fishing parties, but when I feel like it. Otherwise I just swim around-like you.'

"All by yourself?'"

"She looked too hardboiled for the coy routine. I told her, 'Yeah, it don't take two to swim.'

"Isn't it lonely? Don't you miss the newspapers, a radio?"

"Do you?"

"She laughed, a real warm laugh. I mean the laugh was her-the human behind all the beauty and glamour. By this time I was eyeing her openly, making no pretense of not staring at her beauty. After she finished her cigarette she suddenly got up and thanked me for the grub. She let herself over the side gracefully-careful not to get her purse wet-picked up her clothes and bag and waded ashore. She walked around to the other side of the islet, and disappeared behind the low bushes-probably went to sleep. I stretched out on the deck and thought about her-a little. I knew that under all her casual questions she had been pumping me. But she was far too pretty to take seriously.

"I slept for a couple of hours, even cleaned up the boat, somewhat. I took a swim and considered swimming around to the other side of the dot of sand, but let it go. I got a line out and caught me a good snook. I dived for clams and then broiled the fish. She still hadn't appeared and I wondered if she had taken off..."

"How?" Hal cut in.

"I had no idea. Like I had no idea how she'd landed there. Matter of fact, I didn't give that, or anything, much real thinking. I felt it was all a dream. But to get on with my story, I called out, 'Want some supper?'

"'Thank you very much,' she called back, suddenly standing up from behind the bushes. Maybe she'd been watching me all the time. She was red and oily all over from too much sun. She picked up her things and started to wade out. The tide had come in and about ten feet from shore the water was already up to her shoulders. I said, 'Best you leave your stuff on shore and swim out.'

"'I'd rather not,' she said, standing there in the water. 'Can't we eat ashore?'

"Of course I realized her problem. There wasn't anybody to steal her suitcase and clothes-no worry about that-but she couldn't swim out to the Sea Princess and take the gun without getting it wet. I called out, 'The stove is bolted down to the boat.'

"'Then I must decline your invitation,' she said, and she waded back to the sand. I untied the dink and rowed ashore. She got in without saying a word-carrying all her things. We had a silent supper on the boat, using up the last three bottles of beer I had. I washed the dishes and started a cigar

working. Finally she broke the silence by asking, 'What did you do all afternoon?'

"Nothing. Sleep and think.'

"What were you thinking about?'

"I don't know, anything that came to mind,' I said, wondering where this bright conversation was heading for.

"Like a bump on a log.'

"Could be. Something special I should have been thinking about?'

"Please don't misunderstand: I'm a bump-on-a-log thinker myself. When I was a child I used to crawl into a large old crate in our back yard and dream I was in a castle, a theatre, or wherever I wished to be. And I really was in a castle-until something snapped the spell. But if that something hadn't come up, why I would have remained in my dream castle and it would no longer be a dream. You know what I mean?'

"I'm not sure,' I said.

"It's not hard to do, once you achieve the balance. That's the big thing: the very delicate balance between thought and reality. For an example, this island is a lovely bit of even sandy beach and very clear water. We could easily imagine we were on a lonely part of Miami Beach, or Atlantic City, Fire Island, or even the beach at Monte Carlo. They are all clean sand, clear water, the sun, and various degrees of quiet. So I sit on the beach of this tiny hunk of sand and as long as I keep the balance, why for all purposes *I am* on Miami Beach, and I can stay there until a wrong move, a single false thought, destroys the balance, shatters the dream. You see?'

"Sure. Especially if the wrong move happens to be a shot from the .45 you're packing.'

"There!' she said loudly, jumping up. 'You've broken the spell! That's exactly what I mean: we were talking about sand, sun, water, and Miami Beach. Why spoil it with an ugly thought about guns?'

"Because there's plenty of guns in Miami Beach, and also because you've been covering me with that heater in your bag ever since you saw me.'

"That's so, but we could ignore it, like we must ignore that this is simply a lousy blob of sand without water, food, or a goddamn comfort! We forget it-that's the secret of daydreaming. We merely pretend this is Laguna Beach instead of an isolated spot of sand-and unless one of us broke the spell, we *would* be in Laguna Beach.'

"As I told you, Hal, I figured her for about thirty-three, a long way from kid games. I also knew she wasn't a nut: this was a selling pitch. But I still didn't know what she was putting in the showcase. I said, 'I'll go along with you. Far as I'm concerned we are now dining on a yacht off Cape Cod, or wherever you wish.'

""You're making fun of me! Thank you for supper. I'd like to go back to the beach, now.'

"I pulled the dink in, gave her an old GI blanket. 'You better take this along. The mosquitoes and sand fleas here lack imagination; forget this ain't Venice.'

"I rowed her ashore and when I returned to the Sea Princess I was full of two thoughts. The first was, I ought to get up sail and get cracking because whoever had put her ashore-or whoever she was carrying the gun against -would probably return. She looked like a big time goon's girl. The other idea was, she was throwing herself at me. I mean, well, I couldn't leave her there to starve- or rather, I didn't want to. You don't get to know a gal pretty as her once in a lifetime. Remember those carbines we won in a crap game?"

Hal nodded, his questioning eyes impatient.

"I checked and cleaned 'em, put in clips. I left them within easy reach under a canvas near the engine hatch, and went to sleep. Early the next morning I heard this tapping on the side of the boat. The tide was low and she had walked out, ferrying all her stuff on her head again. She asked could trouble me for breakfast again, added, 'I'll be glad to pay you for it.' Her left arm was up holding the stuff on her head, the right was holding the gun in the purse.

""Don't spoil the balance,' I said, kidding her. ""I was a millionaire all last night.'

""Then at least let me do the cooking.'

"She went down to the galley, taking her things with her. I kept calling out, telling her where to find the bread and eggs, but she didn't answer. I figured she was using the head. Finally I looked in and she was punishing a pint she'd found. And when she looked up, saw me, there was a hell of a tough expression on her face. Then she flushed, or maybe it was the cheap gin, said coldly, 'I'm sorry. I needed this-needed it damn badly.'

""Okay,' I said. Booze wasn't any stranger to her- she'd killed the pint and didn't look drunk. 'But how about getting the coffee and the last of the

eggs working?'

"She cooked and we ate up on deck, without talking. But she kept watching me, kind of judging me. I knew she was working up to the real pitch. She lit the last of her cigarettes, threw the box over and we both watched it drift out with the tide. She said, 'It's so red, it could be a flower floating in the sea, a rose. About what we were saying last night: do you realize if we play it smart, we can really carry this dream on, make it a reality-forever?'

"'Slower. You lost me. Play *what* smart?'

"'It's quite simple. Let us start with the fact we're alone on this boat. Your eyes have been feeling me up ever since we met, and you'll do for me. Let us suppose I'm Nancy and you're Joe and...'

"'I'm Mickey.'

"'... and here we are with nothing holding us back- once we forget everything except ourselves and the boat. The boat will make our dream workable. This lousy hunk of sand is nothing, but there are other islands. Right this second we can pull anchor and head for Cuba. We stock up on food and gas, sail around until we find the right island for us: one where too many nosey people won't spoil our dream, our balance. For the rest of their lives Nancy and Mickey do nothing but take life easy. We can do it hands down if we both keep that balance in mind and remember to think only of the present. Our own little world starts as of now. It hasn't any past-and tomorrow is what we make it. Will you buy that?'

"'Glad you mentioned buying. What about the dream-busters like food, gas, clothes? Or do we use dream bucks?'

"She was sitting-as usual-on the suitcase. She stood up, stepped away from it, told me, 'Mickey, open my bag -slowly.' She pointed toward it, and me, with her purse gun. I opened the suitcase. It was packed solid with bills: hundreds, twenties, fifties.

"'It's our magic carpet, Mickey. If we live modestly, but comfortably, there's enough there to last us from now on. Money won't be our problem, it will be up here.' She touched her blonde head. 'As long as we have sense enough to only think of the present, and that may not be easy all the time, we can make it. In other words, Mickey and Nancy are born as of this second!' She held out her arms.

"'You mean the three of us: you, me, and your gun?' "She dropped her arms so fast I thought she was set to throw a punch at me. She said, "There

you go, spoiling things! You must learn to stop that, if we are to have balance. I mean really stop it, not even a joke or a small wisecrack. You could have sailed away last night, no one made you stay, or come here. I'm not forcing you to live with me, I'm *asking*. If you say no, that's it. Why must you always bring up my gun?'

"'Because it's always with us, a part of the present.' "She shrugged. 'You have a couple of rifles under that canvas. And I saw a fighting knife in your cabin. I didn't say anything about *them*. In time the gun will go-I'll throw it away. In time.'"

"That's the story, Hal," I said, nodding at the wall clock as I stood up. "Time and tide, and all that-I have to go. The point is, I bought the dream deal and it's worked ever since. It was kicks seeing you and perhaps we'll run into each other again. But do me one favor. Don't ever ask around about me."

"Mickey, I never saw you," Hal said, following me up and out to the cockpit, his face ready to bust with questions. I didn't say a word but started the Diesels. Hal nodded as he listened to them, said, "Good clean power."

Making sure the sail tracks and slides were clear, I started to untie the main sail from the boom, had the halyard ropes ready. I pulled the fenders on board as Hal jumped on the dock without my telling him, and tossed me the bow line. He couldn't hold his curiosity in any longer. As Hal untied the stern line he asked, "Mickey, how long ago was all this?"

"It wasn't yesterday."

"But you're still able to tell it word for word?"

"Don't put me on the witness stand, Hal. I'd hardly forget something like this, or any of the details."

"What happened to the first Sea Princess?"

"Rammed by a freighter and went down," I said, lying smoothly. "Good-bye, Hal. Stern line."

He threw me the line as he asked, "But Mickey, what happened?"

"We made Cuba after a rough trip," I said, and put the wheel over as the Sea Princess pulled away from the dock. I waved at him.

"But the girl?" he shouted. "Where did she come from? How did she ever get on the island? And the gun and the money? Why was she on the run?"

The satisfaction I felt at this moment was almost childish. I knew it, yet I was enjoying it to the hilt. As the Sea Princess swung out to the

harbor, headed for the channel, I called back, "You want the truth, Harold?"

"Of course," he yelled.

"You forget that balance," I yelled back.

He cupped his hands in front of his lips. "Mickey, you said the truth!"

"Okay," I shouted back, giving the motors the gun. "This is the truth:  
*I never bothered asking her!*"

I didn't have the nerve to turn around and look at his stunned face.

## II

For the last nine months or so Rose and I had been living in the Cayman Islands, about five hundred miles from Haiti. I went to Cuba for supplies every two months, or to Port-au-Prince, or to Kingston. Of course I could have bought most of what we needed in Georgetown, on Grand Cayman, but Rose was leery of us attracting attention, insisted I go elsewhere.

It usually took me about a week to make the journey to Haiti, and less to Cuba. I always anchored at night because there was a lot of boat traffic, and also I didn't know the waters well enough to take a chance on lashing the wheel while I got some shut-eye. I had mixed feelings about these little trips. I like to travel so I looked forward to them as a change from our little island, and I was also jittery. Rose would never go along and I was always surprised to find her when I returned, somehow expecting her to vanish as mysteriously as she had appeared. I think in the beginning she had the same feeling about me, that I might be taking off with the money she gave me for supplies. The money was a big problem with us for a time. In fact it took a hurricane to straighten Rose out about me and money. But I left the money with her when I went for supplies and that made me nervous, figuring she might be robbed or killed if anybody else got wind of the dough.

Now, as I sat by the wheel, waving at beat-up fishing boats, keeping the Sea Princess down to her sailing lines and racing toward Jamaica, I kept thinking about Hal. I'd lied to him. While that grandstand exit of mine was true- I never *had* asked Rose what she was running from-still, I sure wanted to. Not because I gave much of a damn as to what she had done. I was very fond of Rose and a man likes to know his woman's life almost as well as he knows her body. In time, piecemeal, she had told me much about herself, her childhood... but when it came to how and why she'd been on that two-bit Florida Key, Rose clammed up tight.

I never saw a woman, or a man, so terribly frightened. They-or he-or she-had really put fear into Rose. And it wasn't the type of fright that eased with time. Like I wanted her to sail with me to Haiti and Cuba, to see the sights, the towns, but she had this deadly fear of being around Americans, or tourists of any kind. On "our" island with Ansel and his family, the other



islanders, she was at ease. But let her see a stranger, especially an American, and Rose went stiff with fear.

It was crazy because generally Rose is like me: an easygoing character too dumb to worry about things. Her fear didn't worry me-it annoyed me. I was getting a wee bit bored with the life we were leading. We had money and Rose was a beautiful woman and at times I would get to thinking how we could live it up-for awhile-in Miami or New York. I'd never lived big in my life and now the money gave me the itch.

But it was out until I knew the kind of jam Rose was in, for I sure didn't want to risk anything happening to her. That was what she couldn't understand-if I knew what the trouble was I might be able to protect her better. Like my showing off for Hal instead of buttoning my lip. Of course Hal was okay, but unless I knew what the score was, I could easily talk out of turn without even knowing it. A guy can't make like a dummy all the time.

But after one or two indirect attempts, I gave up asking Rose what she was running from. Merely asking could send her into a rage. In a way it didn't make sense; even if she had killed somebody, Rose shouldn't have been so scared outside the USA.

Once in Trinidad I met up with a retired army officer from Chicago. He was under forty-five and a real angle sharpie. He had retired on physical disability-"something" wrong with his back-and we met while racing underwater. Once a month he received the Chicago papers and had about a year's backlog in his bungalow. Since murder is generally nationwide news, I told my swimming buddy I wanted to check an old track bet and spent a few hours thumbing through the papers-starting two weeks before I found Rose on the Key. All I came up with was bloodshot eyes.

Of course, in various ways, I found out a great deal about Rose. Sometimes I was blunt about it. The day we sailed from the Key for Cuba I asked, "What's your name?"

"I told you, I'm Nancy and..."

"Honey, remember the dream-busters? We may be stopped by custom and/or the Coast Guard in Cuba, or anyplace else. My papers are okay: I have to keep them that way."

"Can't you put me down as your wife?"

"Sure, but what's my darling wife's name?"

"Rose Marie Brown."

"Brown? Come on, papers are the one thing on a boat that can throw..."

"It happens to be true! There *are* people named Smith, Brown, and Jones."

"Okay. You're now Mrs. Mickey Whalen. We were married this morning in Key West but left the license and other papers at 'home.' The name is spelt M-i-k-i but pronounced Mickey. I'm part Greek and Portuguese. My grandpop came out of the Cape Verde Islands."

"Whalen isn't a Greek name."

"I once asked my old man about that. He said his father was a sailor and called Whalen because he was always on long whaling voyages. Anyway, it's my legal name. My old man was born and died in the USA with it. He was a sponge fisherman."

"My Dad is dead, too. He was a streetcar conductor. When I was a kid, I'd spend some afternoons riding up front with him. It was a charge."

The trip to Havana was rough and most of the time she stayed in the cabin, seasick. I tried to explain she would do better stretching out in the cockpit but she kept to my bunk.

As we neared Havana I went below and told her, "There's an even chance customs will board us. Open your suitcase and put some clothes over the money. Keep it open and sloppy looking."

She groaned and mumbled, "I've only the clothes I have on. Can't we hide it in the bilge, or someplace?"

"If they're looking, the first place they'll search will be the bilge or the rope locker. In the drawers, under the bunk, you'll find some of my shirts and stuff. Use them."

She groaned again, put her hand over her mouth.

"I'll do it," I said, glancing up through the hatch at the wheel.

Rose staggered to her feet, shaking her head.

I said, "Okay, you do it. And don't make with the suspicious eyes, you can handle the money."

We slipped into the port of Havana without any trouble. It was late afternoon and the water smooth as glass. Rose came on deck, feeling fine and hungry. I said, "Let's get washed and see the town."

"You go. I'll stay here."

"Look, stop worrying about the dough. I'll put it in a safe place and get a kid to watch the boat. A kid I know. Nobody would think of robbing a tub like this."

She shook her head, staring at the lights on the streets beyond the dock-fright in her eyes. She said, "My dress is wrinkled and dirty."

"Rose, this ain't no tux I'm wearing."

"There's too many Americans in Havana-for me!"

I shrugged. "We need food and supplies."

She turned abruptly, went below. I wondered what she had steam up about. Rose came back on deck, holding a roll of money. "Here's \$200, buy what you need. I'll wait."

I went ashore and shopped fast, certain I'd return to find her gone. But I came back to see her underwear, stockings, and dress, drying on the boom. It was a warm sight. Rose popped out of the cabin with one of my sweatshirts over her bathing suit. She was sure a big woman, the shirt wasn't too loose on her.

We ate the meal I cooked, then sat up on deck, smoking. Glancing at the lights of the city, I said, "Tomorrow night we ought to step out. Havana is noted for its night life. Castro is lifting the lid."

Rose tossed her cigarette over, watched it fizz out in the water and then went down into the cabin. In the dim light of the one bulb I watched her take off the sweatshirt, peel away the bathing suit. She stood at the steps of the hatchway, her body sun-red and white, shivering slightly, beautiful as every man's dream.

"Can't we make our own night life, Mickey?" she asked.

I tried to be casual as I flew down into the cabin.

We sailed from Havana late in the morning and spent the next few weeks working our way around Cuba. If we saw more than one American tourist in a town, we took off. In Matanzas Rose purchased shorts, jeans, a few plain dresses. Then we sailed to Cabanice Bay, Baracoa, skipped the US navy station near Guantanamo, went on to Manzanille and Cienfuegos. Of course, being a big woman-especially a big platinum blonde-Rose stood out like a Rolls-Royce in these little towns. But when I pointed this out she didn't seem disturbed. In a few weeks I learned her hair was dyed and its natural color was a mild, dirty-brown, which the sun soon bleached to a sandy tan.

In a tiny port called Banes we came across a wonderful cabinet maker. For fifty dollars he came aboard and made a false bottom in the cabinet on which the old alcohol stove rested, and fitted this with a concealed combination lock. Rose put the money in there and seemed more at ease

once she had burnt the suitcase. It didn't take me long to make the combination. One morning while she was poking the boat pole in the sand for turtle eggs, and I was supposedly fixing the old motor, I counted the dough. There was \$63,500-along with several pads covered with foreign writing: a tight, stingy, and neat penmanship. I thought it was Dutch or Swedish. I couldn't make it out. Rose had this and the money wrapped in oilskins.

Aside from that fast count I never touched a buck she didn't give me. There wasn't any need to. And the loot had me more than a little worried at first-if it was hot green, a place like Cuba is an absolutely wrong spot for passing it; they've seen too much queer money. But the money seemed okay, although often I found myself wondering what my story would be if the police ever came down on us. Not that I worried myself sick over this: most days I'd wake up with the sunlight flooding through one of the portholes and look at Rose sleeping in my arms, and nothing mattered very much.

Rose seemed happy. Unless we were in a fairly large town, or she saw an American man (she wasn't afraid of any women tourists) she didn't seem nervous. Of course living on an old tub like the Sea Princess wasn't exactly luxury. The cabin was cramped and lacked headroom. When it rained it was like being cooped up in a damp cell. Twice I saw her break down and bawl.

But to make up for any hardships, we had many fine days. It would be sunny and dry and we'd wake up and horse around in the bunk, enjoying each other and then maybe sleeping away the whole day. We both loved to sleep. We also enjoyed the same corny jokes and sometimes we'd get off on an old one and laugh all day like kids as we lounged around and maybe killed a bottle. Or we might get up at dawn and fish all day, or when we got the swimming lungs, swim and spear-fish until we were dead tired. We'd anchor off miles of perfect white beach and have it all to ourselves as we swam and made love. Except for this business about what she was running from, we hit it off, really got to know each other. I guess it was like one of these puzzle pictures-bit by bit as I put the pieces together I got a bigger and clearer picture of Rose.

We were resting on the beach outside Camechuela, broiling some rock hinds we'd just reeled in. I'd managed to open several drinking coconuts without hacking off my fingers and Rose was sitting near the fire, combing out her long hair. Suddenly she began to sing.

It was one of these old and always popular torch songs, "Melancholy Baby," I think. For a second-the clean beach, the mild sun, the fire, a beautiful girl singing-it was all one big movie scene. Except, what was a mug like me doing in the scene? Her voice was okay. I said, "Honey, I never knew you could sing."

"I really can't sing for Dooley's squat."

"For-what?"

She smiled. "Expression my Pop used a great deal. It means: for nothing. But I've sung with a few small bands, worked as a solo in some so-called hot spots, and even had a singing number in a movie once."

"Hey, you been in the movies?" I figured she'd probably been a chorus girl, or a cigarette gal.

Rose laughed. "Take the awe out of your voice-you sound like a true movie fan. Yes, I've been in several movies. Mostly roles one step above extra bits and usually ended on the cutting room floor."

"Keep singing. I think you sing real fine."

She laughed again. "Would you think I sang 'real fine' if I was a plain chick, didn't have breastworks?"

"What kind of a crack is that?"

"Don't get sore, I didn't mean it as a crack." She slid over beside me. "I want you to know something, Mickey: the way we were thrown together-it didn't have to work out so good. But it has. I mean, I knew you'd go for me, for a time, because of my looks. But it's been so much more than that. Honestly, I like you. That's something I haven't told a man in a long, long time, if ever."

I kissed her as roughly as I could-glad she wasn't a delicate chick. Feeling the cool warmth of her big body next to my hairy chest I knew she was right.

"Rose, honey, sure I go for your looks. How often does an average slob like me get to hold something like you? But..."

"You're not a slob, Mickey. Believe me, I'm an expert on slobs."

"But that isn't all of it. I like you. Really."

"You're the beautiful one, Mickey, after a gal gets to know you. Now don't laugh, I'm serious. You're so homely and powerful and good. You're not a phony, which is about the highest compliment I can give a man. The way you just said you liked me. Didn't try to corn me with any love pitch."

"Could be I love you. I don't know what love actually is."

"It's hot air, a knife in the back." Rose pulled out of my arms and jumped to her feet. She walked a few steps and suddenly did a cartwheel on the sand.

I didn't know if that was her way of changing the conversation, or what. I sat there open-mouthed. She motioned for a cigarette from my shirt pocket. Sitting down beside me again she blew smoke at me as she said, "The fish need turning. And don't make with the pop-eyes like a hick. I've been a show girl, too, and for that I had to learn ice skating, dancing, tumbling, and a dozen other things. I've been a stripper, and not only in burlesque. And of course, an 'actress.' I used to be a real ambitious kid, until I learned better. Ambition is a bum sales talk."

"I went through that routine myself-once."

"If you have talent I suppose you need the push of ambition. The trouble was, I'm a big no-talent girl."

"But with your looks?"

"My looks! Know something, Mickey, often I've wished I'd been born plain. Sure I have all the curves and whistle stops and they gave me dreams, ambitious dreams that ran me up a couple of roads-all the lousy ones."

Turning the fish over carefully, I squeezed wild limes on them as I said, "I know, I've been through the same wringer."

"No, you haven't, Mickey. You don't know what it means to be so positive you'll make it because you have the talent, and then the awful empty let-down when you find you're rather average. That would be tough enough, but there's an even bigger kick in the heart when you see talent doesn't matter much anyway; it's connections. Talent you're born with, but connections are made. That makes you drive harder. You push yourself until... It made me a bitch. Oh, I snapped out of the swindle when I finally realized that. Or I could be kidding myself, I was only getting old."

Rose stared at the sand for a moment, then she said- almost to herself, "My Dad did it for me. He was the greatest guy. He told me something I've never forgot. 'Marie-' that's my middle name and he liked it best, 'Marie, the secret of happiness is to go through life without being a pain in the neck to anybody, including yourself.' Think it over and you'll see it's quite a philosophy. World would be smoother if everybody followed that.

"It was only when I realized life wasn't my oyster because I had looks, that I was becoming a stiff pain-to myself then I was able to relax, stop

driving. It's the reason I enjoy living like we do. I think you would have liked my father. He would have hit it off with you."

"Yeah?" I said politely, washing a couple of palm leaves in the surf, serving the fish on them. We ate like pigs and didn't talk for a while.

Full of food, I stretched out beside Rose and puffed contentedly on a cigar. "Rose, you and I are more alike than you know. I had that driving bug, too. You had your body, your looks, and I had my muscles and dreams of being a big time pug."

"One look at your face tells me that."

I tried blowing a smoke ring. "Never got my face from boxing. Of course at no time was I ever a pretty boy. The ring gave me the scar tissue over my left eye. Wrestling presented me with the tin ear, the busted nose."

"You were a *wrestler!* That's a crazy racket."

"I was even a honest one-as an amateur. From my kid days all I could think about was muscles. It was my religion. My old man had a Greek buddy who'd been a wrestler in the old country and he showed me a lot of holds. Wrestling won me a college scholarship-only they went football crazy in my freshman term and cut out wrestling. I was a third team tackle but gave it-and college-up because you could get hurt easily and by this time I saw myself fighting Louis some day. My legs and punch were going to bring me to the big paydays. But I lacked connections, ended up as the local ring cop."

Rose gave me a quick glance. "What's a ring cop?"

"This was before the war, before TV, and there were small fight clubs in every big city. They had a kind of syndicate running most of them. I had a sharpshooter for a manager, a guy trying to climb himself. As he explained it, I had to wait my turn and play ball. So I'd fight every month or so, getting about twenty bucks a fight for myself. Sometimes I'd win, sometimes I'd go into the tank-which ever way I was told. If one of the other pugs got out of line, they'd match me with him and I'd flatten him. That was being a cop."

"Oh."

"I was twenty when the war came and had about that many bouts. I was twenty-four when they gave me my ruptured duck and I knew I couldn't wait much longer. All the time in service, I kept in shape. So I came back to find my manager is hanging around the top and I thought I was set. He had me take three dives in a row against stumblebums who'd

been making it while I was overseas. He kept telling me my break was coming. It never did.

"Anyway, when I finally realized I was just another two-bit fighter, I became a wrestling clown. I grew my hair long and they dyed it bright red and had me sporting a devil's costume in the ring. But there wasn't any money in it, I was wrestling five times a week for ten bucks a night. It wasn't any snap. You had to be an acrobat, have perfect timing, and I was clumsy. Those falls hurt if you landed wrong, and I got my features scrambled. Also I felt like a freak walking around with the long red hair. My old man had died while I was overseas and the boat was mine, so I began going in for charter fishing... and taking it easy."

Rose rolled over and fondled my tin ear. "We are alike."

"Aha. You ever been married?"

My hand was resting on her stomach and I felt it stiffen. "Twice. It never worked." She jumped to her feet. "I'm going in for a dip. The fish left me greasy."

"Let me finish my cigar, first," I said. "Then I could use a swim."

I watched her walk to the water and dive in-feeling very proud this big and beautiful woman was mine. So she'd been married twice. She must be on the run from one of her husbands. Still, she had a lot of dough and a lot of fear. Running away wouldn't make her *that* scared. Had she killed him?

That might explain the fear, and the money-if she had knocked off a big racket guy. Sure, that could be it.

Her husband was a racket biggie and she killed him, lifted his loot and the rest of the goons were looking for her.

It made sense-maybe. I killed my rope in the sand and walked leisurely toward Rose and the sea.



### III

I anchored in a small cove not far from Port Antonio shortly before dusk. I'd been here once before with Rose in the old Sea Princess. I suppose at one time or another we'd dropped anchor off most of the Caribbean ports-which isn't covering too much territory.

I took a sounding by throwing a large conch shell I'd been keeping for no reason overboard and watching the number of circles it made as I turned the boat into the slight wind. I figured I was in about sixteen feet so I lowered the Danforth and let out thirty feet of chain, waited for the anchor to set. The wind increased and the Sea Princess began to buck and bounce a little. I stripped and dived over to make sure the anchor was really holding. Although I wasn't wearing a face mask, I could see pretty good. Underwater swimming always bugs me, gives me a sort of religious feeling.

What I enjoyed about it was the constantly changing picture, the various new shades of color. Rose was that way: there were so many sides to her mind. Sometimes she'd be so moody and low I figured she was fed up with me, ready to take off. Then for days on end she'd be a ball of fire, full of her own pep as we ran along the beach, rowed, or took long swims. She could be as simple and gentle as a young girl, and most times hardened and tough. I liked the hardboiled times best, for that was the real Rose. And in this very cove I'd learned how tough she could be.

A tiny girl on skinny legs, and a belly swollen from a steady fruit diet, had stopped to squat on the sand and solemnly watch us digging canals in the sand like mad. We were "busy" letting water out of a deep tide pool high up on the beach. A dark-skinned child of about six dressed in a ragged, white flour sack, she watched without a single smile, refused to join us. Rose got very motherly, took the kid out to the boat for a decent feed and a tin of candy. She played with the child all afternoon and at night the kid simply disappeared, only to be waiting on the beach again next morning at the first crack of sun.

For the few days we anchored here, Rose was a busy mama. She and the girl played house in the dink or cooked supper with a beach fire. Rose seemed to enjoy it more than the kid. One hot night as we were trying to sleep on deck I asked, "You ever think about having a kid?"

Her short, harsh laughter chilled the humid night. "Me? That motherhood bit is for the birds. This isn't the best of worlds to ask any kid into."

"I've never had any desire to make a kid, either. You know, fish and crabs-most sea animals-they spawn thousands of eggs and perhaps five per cent of them survive. Sometimes I think it's getting to be like that with us humans. All this sickness in the air, kids cutting each other up, increase in accidents--"

"Cut the damn lecture! My kid will be sixteen years old this August 25th."

I turned to stare at her in the moonlight. "*Your* kid?"

"What's the matter, don't you think I can have a baby? Well, I had one and I gave it away!"

"Boy or girl?" I asked like a cluck, as though it mattered to me.

"I had a boy and he was a beautiful big baby. I was a real dumb broad then, didn't know how to take care of myself. I was three months gone before I knew it. I was dancing in a flea-bag club and started growing big as a house, so they bounced me. I managed to work as a sales girl for a few months, then it got rough. You never saw anybody as big as I was-a regular sideshow character. But no jobs. I was going to a clinic for medical care and a sweet doc there got talking to me, arranged everything. Some couple I never saw paid my room and board, then the hospital bills, and gave me five hundred dollars. I took a bus to Hollywood, did some movie work."

I counted stars and didn't say anything.

Rose suddenly sat up and cursed me. "Don't be so goddamn smug about it! I did the right thing!"

"What? Look, honey, it was your business so whatever you did was the right thing."

"I agreed with the doc, what could I offer the child? I'd seen too many dumb babes who in the name of 'mother-hood,' or 'love,' or some other phony tag, dragged their kids around with them. It doesn't do a child any good to be alone, live out of a damn suitcase. This couple that took him, they had everything to offer, money, a regular home. If I dragged the kid around with me, he'd only grow up knowing his mother is a tramp. I did the right things by.... Oh, Mickey, why am I lying to you? The true reason was I thought the boy would interfere with my lousy 'career.'"

"And the poppa?"

She faced me, said fiercely, talking right into my eyes, "What about him? I didn't even give that miserable male bastard the satisfaction of knowing he had a child!"

Grabbing her shoulders I told her, "Now take it easy, Rose."

"Keep your hands off me!"

I held her shoulders down. She tried to twist out of my hands, brought up her knee. I pinned her legs with mine, pushed her down to the sleeping mat; pushed hard. "Cut it out. I wasn't a part of any of that. I didn't even ask you about this. Let's forget it."

She relaxed suddenly. "Of course, Mickey, you didn't ask." She was silent for a long time and I went back to examining the stars. "I was certainly a simple tomato then. I wasn't even sure who the poppa was."

I towed myself down and started supper. The Sea Princess was bouncing pretty bad. I always carry a big cinder block—a hangover from my old man who insisted a rock was the best anchor ever made. I tied about sixty feet of rope to this, pulled the dink around and rowed out, dropped it ahead of the anchor. It cut the bouncing a lot.

I had some eggs and watched a beat up old boat about fifteen feet long and with a wide beam come into the cove.

It had a single sail of patched sacks and the mast was the trunk of a young sapling which had never grown exactly straight. An old black man with kinky white hair was at the tiller. His pants and shirt were ragged and he was in good shape for a guy his age. He came alongside, asked if I wanted to buy any bananas. I didn't but gave him a BWI dollar for a handful. As an afterthought I invited him aboard to share my dinner. He was quite pleased and when he sailed he gave me some coco plums, and fresh water prawns the Cubans call *langostinos*.

After listening to the radio for a while, I checked the anchor chain and stretched out on my bunk. I was tired but I didn't sleep: I thought about Hal and the greasy rooking he'd given me.

I suppose it was rough after being an ensign to return to being another hustler, working the docks. Hal was on this college kick and steamed because his papers had somehow become fouled-up and by the time they were straight, it was too late for that college term. Maybe the fact I'd been to college for a couple of months and then didn't bother using my G.I. Bill steamed Hal all the more. As I told him, I only wanted to live calmly and happily, and they can't teach you that in any school.

While I'd known Hal since we were kids, we weren't pals. For one thing I was a couple of years older. We met at the "Y" and later Hal worked out with me at times. He was a dancer, cute and fast with his mitts, but he had no stomach for the ring. He must have known I was going into the tank. He never said a thing about it except after one bout when I'd gone down from a left hook which wouldn't have busted a wet paper tissue, he told me, "I lost a buck on you last night." He said it as if I owed him the dollar.

But he was handy with motors and the Essex was about breaking even-she was on the fritz as often as she ran. Also he was good at selling. Hal didn't mind scouting the bars and hotels, drumming up trade. Without saying it we became kind of partners on the Sea Princess. Not legally; I mean, no papers or anything signed. Slobs who had hidden folding money during the war were flying down to Florida for a whack at big game fishing. For a short time we did okay. We were getting a hundred a day and could have made real money except I couldn't take most of our clients. Aside from being uncomfortable with jerks who looked upon me as a servant, I don't buy "sport" fishing. Having been around the sea all my life I only fish to eat. I suppose I drove Hal nuts by either insulting the customers, or when I didn't feel like going out, saying the hell with it. He was trying to scrape a few bucks together for college, but if I had a gut-full, I liked to sleep.

We put our money back into fishing gear and by the time we were completely equipped, the Coast Guard was releasing some of the fancy cabin cruisers and even PT boats, so our tub only picked up the crumbs. We couldn't be a party boat and take out a dozen guys at ten dollars a head because the Sea Princess didn't have a walk-around deck. In fact the mast and boom left so little room the best we could do was crowd four or five into the cockpit- and it became quite a crowd when a dame or guy took sick. But we slept on the boat, ate plenty of fish, and managed on very few bucks a week.

And without trying, we hit the jackpot. Two rich jokers named Wicker and Decker missed the better charter boats and had to hire us. They were trying to put over some business deal and each was trying to impress the other. Hal was taken in by this big executive swindle and broke out a bottle of Haitian rum for them. So these two loons forgot fishing as they got their gauge up on the rum and start talking about their "yachting" days and wanted to take the wheel. I became fed up with this drunken horseplay and took them back to the dock, told them to sleep for a while and we'd go out

again in the afternoon. While I was buying some chow, Hal let Mr. Decker take the Sea Princess out and after cutting circles all over the harbor, he piled up on the breakwater.

The Sea Princess had half of her underbow ripped open and Mr. Decker had some skin missing and a busted arm. We took him to the hospital and managed to tow the Sea Princess to the dock where she sank in four feet. I was so angry at Hal I could have killed him. When we got around to seeing Decker in the hospital it turned out he really had the bucks. He'd rented the best room and had a private nurse. Decker was in bed, a cast over his side and right arm, and he wasn't hungover but all executive as he asked how much the boat was worth.

He was talking to me and I was too confused to answer. I'd come to ask him for a few hundred to repair the boat.

I stammered, "Fixing her will cost..."

"Take at least ten thousand dollars, Mr. Decker, to replace the Sea Princess," Hal said calmly, cutting me off.

I nearly swallowed my tongue. My old man hadn't paid over six hundred dollars for her, back in the twenties. No matter what she was worth today, we'd never get a buyer. Her kind of boat had gone out of style half a century ago.

This Mr. Decker sure was a big apple. He barked, "Parker!" and a trim little fellow, a real pretty boy, came on the run from the sitting room, pad and pen in hand. You could get a rough cut from the crease in his linen suit. He said, "Yes, sir?"

"I'm buying a boat I wrecked belonging to these boys, for ten thousand dollars. Take care of the necessary papers."

Parker was a real do-it-yourself kid and by noon the next day we signed the papers and had a certified check made out to me and Hal. We took Parker in for a few belts and he turned out to be a fairly regular joe. He told us Decker was in lots of top stuff: steel, construction, planes. He was even important enough to have been a desk admiral during the war. Parker was but one of his secretaries. I was impressed, and more impressed by glancing at the check every few minutes.

The following morning, while Hal was busy showing Parker the sights, I went looking for a new boat. Miami was a sucker's paradise and the prices were crazy. I told Hal we'd best see what could be found in the gulf ports.

Hal said, "You look for me. Wally Parker and I have a couple of hot chicks in tow. Besides, what do I know about boats?"

I put in a few days traveling around and in Mobile I found a good buy for about seven grand, including the overhaul. When I wired Hal to come for a look-see, he wired me to return. I wasn't worried; the check was certified.

I stepped off the bus at 12:03 p.m. and at 12:05 p.m. Hal let me have the haymaker. "Mickey, half the check is mine and I've earned it. I big-talked Mr. Decker into paying us ten grand, you would have settled for a grand or two, so..."

"So you'll be half owner of a fine boat that..."

"No, Mick. I would have told you sooner if I'd known where to reach you. I'm using my five thousand for college, making something of myself."

"Look, we buy this boat and you still finish college under the G.I. Bill. I'll run the boat with a kid and you help on weekends and during the summer."

"Mick, I'm going to one of the Ivy League schools. Wally told me the deal. With the money *and* the G. I. Bill, I can go first class, develop the right contacts. And James -Mr. Decker-is interested in me-after he heard about me being an ensign."

I must have looked sick for Hal said, "I know you think I'm crossing you, but Mick, my name is on the check and opportunity only knocks once and..."

"Shut up!" I walked on to the bank and he followed. We had the money a few days later. Hal took his five grand and I never saw him again until now, in Haiti.

I hunted for a cheap boat, but there weren't any worth a dime. The Sea Princess seemed to have been abandoned. Only the top of her cabin showed. When the Coast Guard threatened to tow her out and sink the old babe, I paid to have her pulled up on the ways. I found Decker's address and wrote him a couple of times but never received an answer. Then I wired I wanted to buy the boat back. Finally I hitched a ride to Chicago. He wouldn't even see me but I collared Wally and left a few hours later for home with a letter stating I had bought the Sea Princess for one buck. It took \$3100 of the \$4200 I'd left to refit her, and it wasn't until a half a year later I was back to charter fishing again.

By then there were so many boats in the racket I barely made coffee and cake money-even though the Sea Princess was a better sea boat than most of them. But she still looked like hell.

## IV

In the long twilight the sky was a thin, milky light spotted with a few pale stars on the horizon. The sea was running choppy but it looked like a good night. Tuning in some fair music on the radio, I lit a cigar and sprawled on my bunk again to read a New York City paper I'd bought in Port-au-Prince. It was only three days old. I'd hardly started the sports section when I heard the slight splash of oars and a rough voice calling, "You here, mister?"

I went on deck and there was my old man buddy I'd had on board earlier. He held up a pint of cheap rum and gave me a large grin. I motioned for him to come aboard and he tied up, careful not to bang against the Sea Princess. I didn't mind company. We sat in the cockpit and he wanted to know how the radio ran. I explained about the Diesels charging the batteries when I was under power. I wasn't giving a very clear explanation and he didn't understand a word of it, but he nodded and patted the knee patches on his pants, as if agreeing with everything. I changed the subject by asking if I could drink from his bottle. He said most certainly. The junk burned on the way down and then made a blast furnace of my stomach. And I'd only taken a polite sip. It was like *guaro*, the coarse sugar cane rum of Central America. I knew what the old guy was sucking around for, and that was okay, too.

I asked if he would care to try some of my whiskey? After the proper hesitation he said he would-as a favor to me-and slipped his bottle into his pocket. We had several shots of Canadian with crackers and sharp cheese. The old man discussed my boat, and the advantages of whiskey as against rum. We were quiet for a short time, drinking more whiskey. Islanders love to talk and soon the old man pointed at the cloudless sky and said it would most certainly rain by morning. I told him he was wrong, gave him the radio weather report. But he rubbed his knees, said his joints knew better than any radio.

He had been eating steadily at the cheese and crackers so I broke out another tin and he insisted I have a shot of his rum. It didn't burn as much this time. I tried it with ice, and so did he, and it wasn't too bad. Then we went back to the Canadian and he told me about fishing in his youth.



By the time we'd finished the Canadian, and the rum, I realized we were both drunk. The old man assured me he could row ashore with ease despite the choppy sea. Outside the cove it was really blowing. But I pulled in my dinghy and tied it to his heavy boat. While he was admiring the teak planks of the dink, I got the outboard over without falling on my face and attached it to the stern of his boat. He was delighted and I let him steer and we made an extra run around the cove, taking on spray and water, before we hit the beach. While I stood in water up to my can and fastened the outboard to the dink, the old man staggered around in the shallow water and asked how much the motor cost, what was the best make, and the amount of gas the tank held. I answered him with drunken carefulness, as if he would ever be able to buy one. I helped him beach his boat and we shook hands solemnly and he said he would bring me some mangos and fresh fruit in the morning. That he had meant to ask if I had an extra pair of old pants I could spare?

I said I was sorry but I didn't. I waved and headed back for the Sea Princess. The dink was full of water and even though I was soaking wet, I was still drunk. I hadn't been this high in a long time.

I tied the dink securely, put the outboard in its rack, and checked the anchors. I went below. Usually liquor is a sleeping pill for me-not that I need anything to make me sleep. But now I was feeling wide awake and I dried myself, stretched out in the bunk and went back to reading the paper. Not the news, but the ads. The show and Broadway ads, the pictures. I'd never been to New York and I wanted to see it. Right now I wanted to very much.

It didn't make sense, night life never meant a thing to me. But with Rose's money and her looks, I had this desire to taste big time spending. The feeling had come up several times in the past months.

Of course that was out-at least until I knew what kind of trouble Rose was in. It wasn't anything that worried me. I had no lack: a woman like Rose, the Sea Princess, money. Only I'd get to thinking we weren't putting the money to its fullest use. If I only knew what she'd done, we might be able to see New York, Canada, maybe even take a crack at Paris.

I studied the few pictures of Broadway in the paper, read the gossip column. I turned to the sports section again, then the news. There was a piece about some slob who had knifed his girl friend because she hadn't given him money. The paper said he didn't deny he was a "kept man." As I

folded the paper and put it away carefully-Rose loved to read the papers but flew into a temper if they were torn or wrinkled-I turned off the light and wondered if I was a "kept man." I didn't give a damn if I was. But I told myself I was really working hard for whatever I spent. For one thing I would be an accomplice to whatever she was jammed over. Yeah, I was earning my keep... and it certainly was damn nice work.

The boat was bouncing when I awoke. It was dark out and I had a big head. My wrist watch said it was a few minutes after five. It was raining hard. I listened to the rain awhile, then sat up. I felt creepy. Then I noticed the hatch door was pulled shut. I went up on deck and even the cove was full of white caps rolling before a strong wind. The rain felt good on my face and chest. As I turned to relieve myself over the side, I saw the old man's boat tied to the dink. I looked around and he was crouched up near the bow, wrapped in part of the jib sail, watching the anchor ropes.

I went forward and he turned and waved a dark hand at me. He said something that was lost in the wind. I put my face next to his and he said he had never seen a man sleep so hard, that he had been trying to awaken me all afternoon.

"Afternoon?" I repeated stupidly, glancing up at the dark sky.

I couldn't believe I'd slept the day away but the old guy insisted he had come out with fruit before noon, then took up an anchor watch when he couldn't shake me awake. He thought the storm would blow over during the night. I hated losing a day away from Rose and it wasn't a big storm. If my head felt better I probably would have started the engines. But you can't play catch-up with time and there wasn't much point in going now- if it was this dark in the afternoon the night would be pitch black.

The anchors seemed okay and I told the old man to come with me. He sat and marveled at the cabin, felt of the bunks and the galley metal, while I dressed and cooked a good meal of eggs and bacon, toast and plenty of coffee. I had some of his bananas and when we finished he said he had work to do ashore. I wanted to give him a pair of pants but I couldn't after telling him last night I didn't have any. He asked if I wanted him back later but I said it was too rough. I thanked him and held out a ten dollar bill. He shook his head and stuck his hands in his pockets. There was a kind of angry dignity about him as he said he'd sat anchor watch both as a friend and as a man who admired a good boat.

I finally gave him a new sweat shirt and a large box of tinned meats, making sure to explain it was merely in exchange for the fruit.

I helped him load it into his bouncing boat. We both knew I couldn't leave the Sea Princess to ferry him ashore with the outboard. I watched him row, kneeling in the boat to get all the leverage of his body behind each stroke. Once ashore I could dimly see him pull the boat up, wave to me, and disappear among the Woman's Tongue trees, carrying the stuff I'd given him. The seed pods on the trees must have been really chattering in this wind.

For want of something to do I took a rain shower on deck, soaping myself good, and when I dressed again and put on oilskins, I felt sober and okay. I spent the rest of the night listening to the radio, checking the anchors every half hour. I still thought about Rose and myself dolled up, living it big on Broadway.

By early morning the storm died and the stars were visible. At dawn I started the motors, noticed the oil temperature shot up too high. I had a little trouble raising the anchors, but once out of the cove I ran up sail and keeping a good mile out to sea, followed the Jamaica coastline. I considered putting in at Green Island, which is a town and not an island at the tip end of Jamaica, for a few hours sleep. I had a good twenty-hour run to Grand Cayman. But I kept sailing because now that I was a day late, I missed Rose more than ever. The fact is, at the moment I even looked forward to seeing my landlord, Ansel Smith, and his sharp puss. I had a big box of the Havana blunts he prized so much.

Old Ansel could-and generally did-talk your head off but he had been a break for us.

After hauling anchor from port to port like sea-going gypsies whenever Rose got her wind up because she thought a man might have looked at her suspiciously, we had lucked up on Ansel's island. If it wasn't much of an island, most of the land actually was his and free of tourists. I'd vaguely heard of him years ago-a small time operator interested in smuggled bolts of cloth or anything else he could sell at his rundown general store. Ansel lived in a fine wooden bungalow within sight of our hut and the whole island was about a half a mile of land many hundred yards off one of the "bigger" Cayman islands, on which his store stood. While I've never been to the South Pacific, I suppose we had the closest thing to a South Sea isle. It has white sandy beaches, colorful and heavy-

smelling flowers, coconut palms, and we live in a large thatched hut facing a small reef. This same reef wrecked the first Sea Princess, but actually our cove is a protected and safe mooring, with plenty of water to cross the reef at high tide.

Although I'd heard of Ansel, we had sailed into his cove by pure chance and when we found the hut had running water-it had been his house before he built the bungalow to celebrate his newest and last child-we decided this was for us. I explained we were on a prolonged honeymoon-but under wraps because Rose had a husband who didn't think much of our honeymoon idea. Ansel took the lie and assured us he was a man of the world and understood perfectly. The only time I've actually seen him amazed was when we installed a bathroom in the large hut at our expense.

Ansel's a little man in his late fifties with a dark skin, sharp features, and very proud of his thin, silky-white hair. His wife is a large tan woman who rarely speaks and probably can pick him up with one hand without straining. They have a son who runs the store, and two married daughters living in the islands. The baby boy was a change of life child and as Ansel says over and over, "We knew she have de child in her and we squeeze him out just in time."

The first time he told me this I made the mistake of asking what he meant. "When Cecil, de first born, come, de old lady have four knots in navel cord. All islanders know each knot signifies de number child woman have inside. Then we knock out two gals a year apart, and den nothing. As years go by, Mrs. Smith say to me, 'Come on, mon, come on, de last baby awaiting.' Mickey, I wear meself out trying for that baby. But we bring him in right under de wire. You bet!"

Ansel himself is not only a dreamer but a tremendous liar. Although he sometimes lapses into the island dialect-for my benefit, I think-he's widely read and self-educated. His hobbies are the history of the Cayman Islands and sex. Over a beer he'll tell anybody Columbus first called the islands Las Tortugas, or the turtle islands. Ansel claims Columbus reached the Caymans first-before he sighted Dominica, which would make old Cris a hell of a cockeyed navigator. Later Ponce de Leon thought the islands were a continuation of the Florida Keys -or cays-named them Cayman Islands. Old Ponce must have had a queer sense of distance, too. Once the Caymans were the center of the turtle industry-there still are turtle pens around-and Ansel loves to lecture about them.

On sex Ansel is the local Dr. Kinsey. In an open and scientific manner, and in great detail, he asked how Rose was in bed. Of course he considers her the most beautiful woman in the world-and so do I. In exchange he told me about the women he'd slept with-which seemed to number millions-and gave me local pearls of wisdom concerning birth. If a crawling baby looks under the mother's skirts the woman is pregnant again, "for the baby is hunting for de new child." Unless a pregnant woman works hard, the baby will be lazy. A woman will certainly be sterile if the after-birth of the first born isn't buried with a silver coin in the yard outside the house, and facing East. The nana or midwife should tie a tight cord around the waist of a pregnant babe to keep the child from leaping from the womb into her lungs and suffocating her. Half the time I didn't know if he was kidding me or not. Ansel knew a lot about Obeah-a kind of ancient voodoo-but frankly refused to discuss this with me.

He talked about sex and birth with Rose. At first she was sore, until she realized he was merely talking. I know she's fond of him and his wife. Often Rose and Mrs. Ansel Smith (we never knew her first name) have fierce arguments over the baby boy, mainly on matters of sanitation. But Mrs. Ansel is a good listener and they get along fairly well. Most important, from the start Rose completely trusted them.

If Ansel suspected we had more money than we should, that we were on the run, he never said a word. And Rose felt safe there, or as safe as she ever could feel then. Every few months we would sail out for a day or two, then come back to Georgetown, register as new arrivals to get our temporary tourist permits.

At one time, I thought we were going to be stuck on Ansel's hunk of land. Eight months ago a hurricane came ripping through the West Indies, heading for Florida where it did a lot of damage. Of course it also kayoed plenty of huts in the islands, too. We had ample warning and I had the boat securely anchored. The hurricane came in over the reef and hit us without doing much damage. Then one of those nutty things happened: the wind suddenly did a complete about turn. It came raging back-without warning, blowing *away* from the reef and out to sea. The Sea Princess swung around so sharply she broke one anchor rope, and dragged the other anchor... landing on the rusty brown reef. Crouching behind some trees that had been flattened the first time around, we watched the Sea Princess breaking up on the reef-with all of Rose's money in the hidden drawer. I clawed my way to

the hut, grabbed an aqua-lung, and let myself be blown toward the water. Rose was screaming at me to stop, frantically trying to get her hands on me. I finally had to knock her down with a shoulder punch.

The water was rough and soupy with sticks, leaves, boxes, and any other loose junk. But once I submerged it was calm and a snap to make the reef. I got cut up a bit around the legs trying to climb aboard the Sea Princess. I made a raft and tied the oilskin bags of money- and the bag with all that foreign writing-to it, lashed everything securely-and started back, towing the raft. The coral ripped a large hunk of skin from my left thigh as I jumped into the raging water. It was rugged swimming against the wind, losing a lot of blood, and the salt stinging the hell out of the wound. I tried staying just below the water but it was hard going and soon the air in my tank gave out. So I had to battle the wind and the waves, duck a thousand objects being driven over the water with bullet speed. I collapsed when I reached the beach. When I came to, I crawled up to an old overturned rowboat-a hulk that had been lying on the beach for years and far too heavy for the wind to move. I dug through the sand, cutting my fingers on a big coconut crab hiding there, and shoved the oilskin bags under the boat... then refilled the hole. It was about the hardest work I'd ever done in my life and when I was finished I was too bushed to move. I lay there, protected by the boat from the wind, listening to the wild beat of my heart which seemed to be louder than the roar of the hurricane.

The next thing I knew the wind had started to die and there was Rose dragging me toward the hut, my body leaving a bloody track in the sand. She was hysterical and I could dimly hear her cursing as she washed me down and bandaged my cuts as best she could. Then the bed felt like heaven. I awoke several hours later. The sun was streaming through the window and for a moment I couldn't even recall what had happened. I tried to sit up and then Rose was at my side, her eyes red with crying, pushing me back into the wonderful softness of the bed. I pulled her head down, mumbled about the money being under the old rowboat, and slipped off into sleep.

I slept around the clock and when I awoke I felt weak but okay-except for the cuts on my legs and body. I asked her if she'd found the money and she nodded and began crying again. Talking was as tiring as lifting a barbell, but I asked, "What's the matter? Why the tears?"

"You money-hungry bastard!" Rose shouted.

"Look, I got it for you," I said, talking very slowly, to save my strength.

"You damn near got yourself killed! You think I wanted that? Or any money is worth having you dead!"

"I told you, I did it for you. Want... to count it?"

"You greedy louse!" she said, walking away from the bed.

I was too weak to get it. When I awoke later that night and had some food, I felt strong enough to argue. She was still mad as a boil and I asked, "Honey, what the hell is the matter with you? Getting your dough wasn't any pleasure swim or..."

"Of course it wasn't! You were willing to take a chance with your life for some lousy money! If I didn't have the dough, if I lost it, what would you do, throw me aside!"

"Rose, did the storm scare you crazy? Do you realize what it means for a couple of... well, for us, to be flat broke in the islands? Sooner or later we'd be deported, have to go to the authorities for help. That what you want? That's the reason I swam out for the money. Hell, it's your dough, doesn't mean a thing to me."

"I bet!" Her face was suddenly ugly with a horrible sneer.

I turned over and looked at the wall, finally went to sleep. I didn't understand what was eating her and a day or so later when I was up and around, she was cold and abrupt. We never talked about the money for some time, and after a week or so she forgot the whole thing.

There wasn't a stick of the old Sea Princess left on the reef, not even the old Essex engine. After she'd broken up, everything had been carried out to sea. Later that month, when I was completely healed, Rose agreed we had to have another boat. I borrowed an old double-end catboat from Ansel, a typical island boat with an oversize sail of sugar sacks that swelled out like a racing spinnaker, and made the forty-mile run to Georgetown. There wasn't anything worth buying there but through a yacht broker I heard of a boat in the water at St. Croix in the Virgin Islands. I cabled for more information and it seemed worth looking at. I sailed back to our island and told Rose, suggested we both take the boat to Kingstown and then a plane to St. Croix. Of course she was afraid to step into a USA port. I finally asked her to give me ten grand and I'd buy the boat. There was a long moment of hesitation-I knew damn well what was running through her mind. But then we had to have a boat, and she knew that too.

Rose got crocked the night she handed me the money and I told her, "I should be back in about ten days, or sooner."

"I'll keep a fight burning in the window for you."

I grabbed her and shook her hard as I said, "I don't like what you're thinking. I don't need a fight to come back to you. Remember that."

She gave me a long kiss and we put in quite a night.

I felt like a big shot stepping off the plane in St. Croix with all that money in my pockets. The boat was a dream. Some rich joker who must have been a little like Mr. Decker had her custom-built abroad, and because he didn't have too much confidence in sails, had installed the two Diesels so she could cut water like an express cruiser. The guy and his wife, along with a friend, had taken her down the inland route from New York, then island-hopped to St. Croix, where he'd had a heart attack. They flew back to New York and left the boat with a broker. They were asking \$18,000, claiming the boat had cost \$25,000. I offered six grand in cash, came up to eight thousand and told the broker that was all I had. Glancing at my clothes, he must have been astonished I had over two singles in my pockets. Perhaps because it could only sleep four in double bunks-and only two comfortably-there hadn't been many offers. After a day of cabling back and forth, I had the boat for eight grand.

I took her to San Juan to register her as the new Sea Princess with the Coast Guard station. Exactly eight days later I sailed the new Sea Princess over the reef into our cove.

Rose swam out, followed by Ansel and his wife in their rowboat. I showed Rose around and saw she was crazy about the ship. Giving her \$1675, I calmly said, "Here's your change," like a kid returning from the store.

She cooled it, too. "What took you so long?"

"Had to straighten out my Coast Guard papers in San Juan. I registered her in my name. Okay?"

Grinning at what her wet bathing suit held, I pulled Rose to me. "See, I didn't run off with the dough-you can put out the light in the window."

There was a slight odor of stale whiskey in her kiss, and then we had to go back on deck because Ansel and Mrs. Smith were climbing up the ladder.

I had an uneventful sail to Georgetown, crowding on all the canvas I could handle and making good time. But after the usual early morning chat



and drink with the custom officials, I wondered what I'd been rushing for. True, I was in a hurry to see Rose, but I was punchy from being up nearly twenty hours, and what I wanted with Rose... well, being bushed wouldn't help. I tied up at the dock and called a pretty good mechanic over to see why the oil temperature had shot up so high, and hit the sack for a few hours of deep shut-eye. When I'm not drunk I can wake up whenever I want to. I was up at noon and found the mechanic sleeping in the cockpit.

I shook him awake and he said, "I was waiting for you. I have found the trouble. I checked the water jacket cooling, the fuel circulation, the timing, and the crankcase for..."

"I know you worked yourself to death," I cut in. "What's wrong?"

He wasn't to be rushed. He stuck a cigarette into his dark face and took his time lighting up. "All these things, and a clogged oil cooler, would account for the overheating of your port engine. The oil cooler is clogged."

"What's that mean, bad news?"

He blew smoke up at the bright sky. "In time. You can use the engine for several months without danger. But it should be taken care of. If you like, I can send to the States for a new cooler and install it. Or, you might be able to get one in Kingston, although I doubt if anybody in the islands carries parts for these particular Diesels. Maybe in San Juan. I'd like the job, but easiest thing would be for you to sail to Miami and have a new cooler installed."

I paid and thanked him, hoisted sail, and started the final two hour run to our cove. When I dropped anchor I was surprised Rose didn't swim out and for a bad second I had this uneasy feeling I'd never see her again. Mrs. Ansel rowed out with the baby to tell me Ansel was over at the store, and to see what I'd brought. I asked where Rose was as I handed her some copper pots I knew she wanted.

"Oh, my beautiful, beautiful pots! Look at the bottoms. Rose-sick woman."

"Sick? What happened?" I had a feeling of trouble.

"Nothing. Bad stomach-too much worry about you. The storm and you a whole day late. That woman get most nervous. My Lord, I very glad when she try get drunk. I swear I never see no woman worry about one man so much. She carry big love you, very big. You lucky fellow."

"Where is she?" Big love-like when I'd gone out after the money in the hurricane, Rose was afraid she'd lost her boy. There'd be so much

explaining-and looking-if she had to start all over again with another John.

"She best place for gal wait for mon-in de bed. I tell her, it really not bad storm. Rain and lightening and de sky breaking wind. All we lose is few hands banana."

I put the outboard on the dink and towed Mrs. Ansel and the baby boy ashore. I ran to the hut. It was cool and dark inside, full of the smell of Rose: a great perfume. Opening the bedroom door, the streak of mild sunlight following me through the front door seemed to spotlight Rose's tumbled hair, her beautiful face on the crumpled pillow. Blinking, she sat up. "Mickey?"

"Yeah." She was sleeping nude as she always did, and the sheet half fell away from her big body. We stared at each other-a grin of relief on her face. I don't know what was on mine. Maybe wonder. I didn't care what I was to her. How many men come home to see a half-naked movie queen smiling at them from their bed? In the odd lighting, almost as if it was staged, Rose looked fantastically desirable.

"What happened to you, Mickey?"

"I had to wait the squall out. And I overslept. Also some motor trouble. We'll have to get a new oil cooler..."

"I've been sick with worry."

"Come on, you knew I'd be back. Relax." I sat on the edge of the bed, aware of her warmth on the sheet. I reached over and touched the soft hair tumbling to her good shoulders.

She put her hand over mine, stroked it. "I had a nightmare. All sorts of wild nightmares about you being..."

"But I'm back, everything's okay, babes."

She gave me a long look as she nodded slowly. And suddenly Rose did something I'd never seen her do before. She began to *weep*. I'd seen her cry with anger and frustration plenty of times, but this was a kind of tender, happy weeping.

"No tears, honey," I said, taking her in my arms. We kissed fiercely and I thought what a lucky character I was to come home to a moment like this. Even if I ended up in the chair, it was well worth it.

Later as I was sleeping, a tired and contented sleep, Rose shook me awake. I sat up fast. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter," she said softly, pushing me back on the pillow, snuggling against me. "Mickey, can I tell you something?"

"Of course."

Her lips formed words but nothing came out. Then she blurted: "Listen, I think I'm in love with you! Don't wisecrack, I'm serious."

"I'm not wisecracking."

"I think I knew it last night. I almost went crazy worrying about you. I was scared I'd never see you again and I suddenly knew I'd go off my rocker if that happened. And just now, oh, Mickey, I never felt so... so... good. For the first time I know what a man and a woman can be to each other. You must think I'm nuts, but it's the truth. I've told you I've been with a lot of men. But... what I'm trying to tell you is, up to last night-just now-you were only another guy to me. Kinder than most I'd known but... I hated all men. Sex didn't mean a thing to me but a way of getting something from a male slob. It had to be that way, Mickey, otherwise... well, if each guy had meant the smallest... I'd have gone crazy. I'm able to say this to you now because when you walked through the door a little while ago, I was excited as a teenager. Mickey, I've never known anything so wonderful!"

She threw herself at me, giving me a strong hug. I held her tightly, not sure I believed all this. Sleeping with Rose had always been great-for me. But even if this was some kind of sales talk it didn't matter: I was happy to have Rose on any terms. I'd have been glad merely to have her picture on the wall. It was that way with me.

She whispered, "Oh, Mickey, Mickey, I do love you! I'll love you always and only you. Darling, I-I want to do something for you. Take all the money, hold it for us. It's yours, every dollar!"

"I like the set-up the way it is," I said cautiously. She'd never offered me the dough before.

"Don't you get it, Mickey, I want to do something... *important* for you. Anything you want. Do you want a child? I'll make a baby for you."

"No, I don't want a kid." I kissed her cheek.

"You must let me do something for you! Let me be as good to you as you've been to me."

"Okay, Rose, there is... one thing." My fingers played with her ear.

"Honey!" She went over my face with hot little kisses.

"Rose, tell me what you're running from."

It was a sickening thing-to feel her body turning stiff and cold, the way she recoiled from me as if I'd become a snake-and I was sorry I'd popped

the question. From the other end of the bed she asked harshly, "Goddamn you, why did you have to spoil it?"

"I'm not spoiling anything. You're the one who wants to make our dream world a real one. Look, Rose, I'm willing to let things be as before but if you want to make it real... it has to be down the line. You have to trust me all the way. I have to know what you did."

"*What I did?* You miserable bastard, what makes you think *Idid* anything? I didn't do a damn thing!"

She started to jump out of bed. I yanked her back. For a moment we wrestled but that was my racket and she didn't have a chance. Pinning her to the bed, one leg across her belly, I told her, "It's not mere curiosity on my part to know the full score-it will help me protect you. You're a stand-out chick. Everyone in these islands will remember you. For all I know, we ought to clear out of the islands. In Port-au-Prince I ran upon an old buddy. That can happen again. I have to know how much to tell him, or whether I should have ducked him. There's also..."

"*What did you tell him?*" She was breathing hard into my face, fear back in her voice.

"A pack of lies. You don't have to worry about Hal, he..."

"How the hell do you know what I have to worry about!"

"That's it, exactly. I want to know-for your own good."

"Damn it, why did you have to tell him anything?"

"Because I couldn't duck him and he saw me on the Sea Princess. Boats like ours don't come in crackerjack boxes-I slipped him a crook of bull about being a yacht captain for some rich cluck. Don't you see, if I'm going to lie-and I don't mind doing it, or anything else for us-I at least have to know what I'm lying around. There's this other thing: I like it okay here on Ansel's island. You do too-at times. But if I knew the score... well, there might be other places for us. Maybe, well... might even live it up in a big city for a few weeks or..."

"No!"

"Why must you alone decide this for us? If the cops get you they'll throw the book at me, too!"

"I haven't done anything wrong."

"Then why the big fear, being on the run? Rose, wanting you as I do, I wouldn't do anything to... to spoil what we have. But I have to know." Kissing her, I rolled to the center of the bed.

She stood up and walked around the room. Then she stood at the side of the bed, a calendar girl staring down at me with hard eyes. She was shaking a little.

There was a long silence. Closing my eyes I said in a matter-of-fact voice, "I bought everything on the list. Soon as I rest we'll unload the boat. The new records you wanted, the newspapers and magazines. I spent \$419.67. The change is in my wallet. I even have some ice cream for you..."

She reached down and slapped my face. I caught her hand. She said, "Stop talking like you're a hired hand."

I pulled her down on top of me. "Isn't that all you trust me to do?"

The tears came again and she was all over me, soft and warm and big, kissing and hugging me, moaning my name. "Mickey, it terrifies me to even talk about it."

"Honey, there's only you and me here-no dream-busters. We talk and see what it adds up to. I have to know-if you want it the way you said."

For a few seconds she seemed limp, almost lifeless. I felt her take a deep breath and then she sat up as she said, "Okay, I guess I knew I'd have to tell you some time. As you said, I have to trust you all the way. Get me a cigarette, please, and I'll tell you... all of it."

# V

"I was down on my luck in Philly. Way down and a couple hundred bucks in debt. Finally I landed a strip in a two-bit night club. Some club. It was really a crummy bar with a few tables and a junkie piano player who'd been lost in orbit before they invented satellites. It was the kind of dump where I had to use the owner's office for my dressing room. At the end of the first week he paid me off with a rubber check so we worked out a deal where I would strip only on weekends and work as a barmaid the rest of the time-with a cash pay-off every night. Along with the tips I was doing kind of fair, averaging about a hundred a week. I planned on holding down the bar for a few months, until I got straight with my debts. It was a break for the owner; business picked up. Most of the customers had seen me strip and told their friends. Somehow they got a bang having me serve them drinks. You know how it was, the joint full of whispered snickers and X-ray eyes all the time.

"Well, the owner had me wearing a low-cut dress, one of those bare shoulder deals that made the lads jump when I bent over to put their drinks down. Only the bar was in line with the door and about ten days later I caught a cold, soon I was in bed with a fever. Then I heard the owner had lost his cabaret license because entertainers aren't supposed to work in the joint, too. So I was back to being out of work again, only this time I was sick enough to die and stuck in a flea-bag hotel. Josef came up to see me, the only person who gave a damn. He took care of me, sent up a doc, and..."

"Who's Joseph?"

"Josef, not Joseph. Josef Fedor. He was a guy about forty-five or fifty who..."

"Was?"

Rose gave me an annoyed look. "Yes-was. He was a stocky, kind of squat man, a quiet fellow with a large head and weird bushy grey hair that stood straight up. One of his eyes looked odd-later I learned it had been shot out and he was wearing a glass one. He was a foreigner who spoke with a thick accent and hung around the bar every night, sipping wine, watching the other regulars as though it was all a show. He chain-smoked cigarettes in a little gold holder. He wore a European suit and overcoat, with belts in

the back, and heavy shoes. Never did more than nod at me, or slip me a buck tip at the end of the night, that's why I was surprised when he came to see me. But then, he was full of surprises. One night he sat at the piano and played like he was on the concert stage. When one of the bar-lushes yelled for jazz, he played a real hot piano, too. Yet no matter how often he was coaxed he'd never play again-at the bar.

"He was a mixture of charm, manners, and toughness. Like one night in the bar a clown made cracks about foreigners getting all the jobs here. You know how any sort of stuff can build up in a gin mill. It started as a joke but the clown began getting nasty and then Josef knocked him flat with a terrible punch. Okay, most guys would have left it at that. But Josef gets this funny look in his good eye. He picked a beer bottle off the bar, broke it, and damn near stabbed the unconscious guy in the guts. The bouncer got to Josef first. The bouncer was an ex-pug, bigger than you, and at least a foot taller than Josef. He clipped Josef on the chin and Josef used Judo or something, threw him clear across the room. Then he stood in the center of the joint, muttering something nobody could understand-the broken bottle still in his right hand as if challenging the whole crowd. A cop came in with his gun out. Cool as ice, Josef walked over and shoved the broken bottle over the barrel of the cop's pistol. Then he stood there, waiting, this crazy smile on his big face. When the cop yelled for him to get his hands up, Josef took his time, even gave the cop a mock bow, and let the policeman frisk him. He was packing a gun on his hip, too, a very small automatic. More cops came and they took him away, but within the hour Josef was back at his usual place at the bar, drinking his wine as if nothing had happened. He was one tough little son of a..."

"This Josef your husband?"

"Aha. I told you he had this kind of charm about him, like bothering to see me when he heard I was sick. And he was generous, took care of my bills. When I was well, I moved into his room-in another cheap hotel. A week later he woke up one afternoon, said he was headed for Chicago, did I want to go? It always took me a while to understand his broken English, but I said yes damn fast. I hardly had any choice. Then he gave me a speech with a smile, a line about conventions and moral hypocrisy in America, and ended with saying if I wanted to marry him, he would do it. I told you, he was a surprise bag. I couldn't see what I had to lose and we were married.

Although I always had the feeling nothing mattered a heavy damn to him, and he probably had wives all over the world.

"We found a small furnished apartment in Chicago and I saw another side of Josef, he was a master with wood. He made a complete dinette set for us, as good as anything in a store. Or while he'd be listening to the radio-we never had a TV set-he'd start whittling on some old hunk of wood and soon have a chain, or perhaps a figure of a..."

"What did he do for pork chops?" I cut in.

Rose shrugged. "He didn't work. He'd sit around all day and read these foreign papers, and my Lord, he could speak enough languages, but not English. He used to have a lot of dizzy pet names for me. 'Mila,' and 'lieblich.' I never knew what they meant. Josef wasn't a big spender but seemed to have ready money. I never saw him go to a bank or receive any mail; he carried his green in a money belt. I don't know where he got it."

"Didn't you ever ask?"

"Yes, One day, after we were married, I did ask. In his busted English he told me, 'Grosser blondine, I have done too much work in life already. I am retired from this crazy world.' Of course I asked what he used to do, what he had retired from? He knocked me down with an open hand slap. I flip when a man roughs me up. I went at him with a pair of scissors that happened to be on the table. The next thing I knew he'd dropped me hard on the floor and was holding the scissors. He was kneeling beside me, smiling kind of odd-like that time in the bar; he put the scissors near my throat. I was too scared to say a word. He said, 'You are brave, lieblich, not a cry. I am an expert at slicing. Never make me angry again. I am not a beast unless I am pressed. As we all are.' I never asked again and that was the last and only time he hit me; I got that message to him. The weird part is, he was talking pretty good English then."

Rose stood to light a new cigarette. I watched her move in the faint light. "Why did you stay with him?"

"I knew exactly what I was to Josef, merely a gal to have around. But what would I leave him for? For men to make big-eyes at my body in some filthy night club? Was that any different? And if Josef acted loony at times, living with him was easier than scratching for a job. He was a good thing." She turned toward me. "Does it shock you to hear me say that?"

"No." I wondered if, in a sense, she was merely something very beautiful to have around for me too. But how many jokers ever have



*anything* beautiful around?

"Yes it does, Mickey, I see it on your face. I'm glad, I want it to shock you because that life is over for me. I have plenty of good years left for you."

"Okay, it does shock me," I said, because she wanted to hear it. "Now tell me about Josef."

Rose sat on the foot of the bed, her figure in silhouette against the light of the doorway, slowly smoking the cigarette. "There isn't much to tell, I never was able to know him. He carried a gun at times, yet he wasn't any racketeer or punk. He was tough and had been through a lot... had scars all over his body of nasty looking wounds. On one shoulder there was a tattoo of a tiny blue and yellow bird. It was pretty. He told me it had been done in Indochina. Josef had an odd build. His legs and hips were nothing but he had a powerful chest and shoulders, arms bigger than yours. We slept in twin beds because he'd often get nightmares. In a whisper he would scream and curse, moan, punch the air, and wake up in a sweat. When he awoke he might start laughing, check the door lock, and maybe take a pill. I used to listen but most of what he said was in some foreign language. One name he'd repeat often was 'Sour the German.' Willie Sour. It was the only time he ever used a first name and I remember it because I kept thinking of sauerkraut. And there was a girl's name, probably some Oriental chippy. He used to say her name with a sigh, so she must have been a hot number. He'd say, 'Me-Lucy-Ah.' But I never asked him about these people. I didn't want to know."

Rose crushed the cigarette in the chair ashtray, stretched out on the bed next to me. For a few minutes she didn't speak and I thought she had dozed off. Then she said, "I want to be fair. Josef didn't give me a hard time. Mostly he left me alone. I'd cook for him and sleep with him, and that was it. The rest of the time he'd be reading his papers, often chuckling. He might talk aloud, but rarely in English. Once he roared with laughter at something in the papers and said, 'So they got Listro, that swine. The Devil will have a tough soul to roast now.' But as I said, mostly he'd read or fool around with his hunks of wood. In the evening if I wanted to go to a movie, he'd take me, but he was always laughing at the wrong places. Sometimes he took me to concerts, longhaired junk. If I wanted money, or seemed bored, he would pull out ten or twenty bucks-more if I asked- and say, 'Grosser blondine, you are restless. Buy yourself something.'

"Often we would bar-hop, but he never drank anything but wine. I never saw him loaded. Josef didn't have any friends-neither did I-but in bars he would talk to strangers. He liked to argue about music. Once he met a guy who'd been an army officer and they talked all night in French, I guess, about wars, making diagrams on the napkins. When he was in the mood, he was a great cook. Especially in the summer. How he loved the sun! All summer we'd stay on a beach, even camp out for a night there. He couldn't swim and didn't care for fishing, but he loved the sun. Didn't seem to have nightmares in the summer either. That's when he cooked, knocking out fancy pastries like a chef.

"The January before I-saw you-we moved to New York. For no reason I knew of. I suppose he liked to be on the go and always in a big city where he could buy all those foreign papers. We rented a furnished apartment-Josef never spent money for clothes or decent rooms. In New York he started muttering to himself a great deal. Once he looked up from a paper and mumbled, 'Ah, mila, the world is very sick. There is no peace. Sakiet makes me sad.' I said, 'Just tell this Sac-it-guy to leave you alone.' Josef gave me a sad look and told me I was sick, too. About this time he started writing every night, studying maps in a cheap atlas he bought. He told me he was writing letters. I thought maybe to his Oriental chippy. He'd scratch away all night, often staring at the wall for a long time, then writing like mad. He didn't give a damn if I was around or not. One afternoon, I ran into a small-time booking agent I knew. He had a singing job for me in a mid-town bar. I took it for something to do.

"Josef didn't mind. He'd usually come around at about two in the morning, to sip his wine, and take me home when I'd finished. This was strictly a small time joint, no names out front or anything. I didn't have a police work permit for New York, but the owner didn't care. Only me and a kid who played a good organ. Josef even gave me money to buy a couple of dresses, never asked for a dime of what I made. This went *on* for a few months. He was writing all the time, or going to the library.

"I guess it was in May-I know it was getting warm- when I came home from shopping one afternoon and there was this little man with a completely bald head and an evil face-part of his nose had been eaten away at one time-having tea with Josef. I gathered this was Willie Sour. I also knew Josef was upset that I'd returned so soon. Sauerkraut looked like the original creep and he gave me the once-over, made some laughing crack. I

didn't have to understand the language to know what he was saying. He left a few minutes later. Josef seemed on edge. He was packing his gun again and strapped an ugly knife up his sleeve. I didn't ask what it was about but he told me, 'Liebling, soon I have much money. We travel far. There is nothing to worry over.'

"When I finished my midnight number I found him waiting in my dressing room-which was a part of the greasy kitchen screened off from the wino cook. Josef seemed gay but when he put his arms around me I felt the sleeve knife. He stayed in the kitchen while I went on, yakking with the cook in Italian, or something. When he took me home that night in a cab-usually he liked to walk-he asked what I was doing the next day. I told him I was going to have my hair done." Rose paused. "I'm going into details because this is the important part."

"Go ahead," I said, wondering how much of what she was telling me was the truth.

"Josef asked what time I had to be at the hairdresser's. I told him at one. You see, I think even then he was trying to make sure I'd be out of it. In the morning, he..."

"Out of what?"

"I'm coming to it-listen. He was up early the next morning. Everything seemed okay except I noticed he had packed his carving tools. He was very fond of them. He told me to leave the flat by eleven and wait at the beauty parlor for him. No matter how long it took, I was to wait there. I didn't ask any questions. I used an hour window-shopping and having a bite. I was in the hairdresser's by noon and read the magazines. They were done with my hair at about two and I sat around. I was bored. I'd already finished the magazines. At three-thirty I phoned the super. He had an office on the ground floor since he rented flats by the week. When I asked him to see if Josef was home, he wanted to know where I was. I told him, not realizing what a queer question it was. He said to hold the phone while he went up to look. I waited a few minutes and this radio car sired to a stop in front of the beauty parlor and two cops came in-for me. They rushed me to a police station. Josef had been stabbed to death. I..."

"They hung it on you?" I'd always figured she was running from a murder rap.

"No! Why are you always accusing me of something?" "I just thought... it would add that way." "The police knew exactly when Josef

died-at twenty-two minutes after one in the afternoon. The super had seen a man with a deformed nose go up to our flat at a few minutes after noon when he was polishing the door brass. Then at twenty after one, as the super was talking to the mailman, they heard this brawl going on in the flat and two minutes later Josef opened the door and fell down the stairs, practically landed at their feet. He was bleeding like a pig and died as they were bending over him. A cop came a few seconds later, but the guy who did it had left by the fire-escape. Naturally the first thing they checked on was me. I could prove I was in the beauty parlor between twelve-thirty and three-thirty; a half a dozen women saw me..."

I sat up. "Then you're in the clear! What are you running from?"

"I told you I hadn't done anything," Rose said coldly. "But I'm on the run. From the law. *The law wants to kill me.*"

"What do you mean the law wants to kill you?" "Exactly what I said. I don't know why, but they've tried to murder me several times. By 'they' I mean the police, Johns with badges."

"But you said they checked your alibi, knew you couldn't have done it?"

"I keep telling you, they're not after me for the killing. I don't know what they want of me. You asked what I'm running from. Let me finish telling you. The cops didn't get rough with me-at first. They not only had my alibi, but they also knew a man had done the knifing; the super hadn't seen this guy leave our flat. The police started asking me about boyfriends, thought jealousy might be the motive. I told them how I'd met Josef, why I'd married him. Everything. All this took a couple of hours. When I thought they were finished with me, there was a good deal of whispered conversations among them, as if something entirely new had turned up. I was left alone in a dusty little room, merely a chair and me. Soon some new detectives came in, younger and better dressed than the police. They said they were from Washington. They..."

"Washington? Were they FBI?"

Rose shook her head. "I don't know. They were just from Washington. They didn't ask a single question about the killing, but where we'd lived, who Josef's friends had been, even the restaurants we ate in, and what we did all day. I told them all I could, which was about what I've told you. When I mentioned his writing these letters the past few months they wanted to know what was in the letters and where did he keep them? Did he have

much money? I gave it to them straight; that most of the time I had no idea what he was reading, saying, or writing, because it was all in this foreign tongue. I tried to help, told them about hearing Sauerkraut's name, and this Oriental babe Josef yelled in his sleep. But these fellows kept grilling me. I became frightened. I had a headache. I knew they thought I was holding out on them. But I was telling them all I knew -or almost."

"What do you mean, almost?" I asked.

"Well, one thing I didn't tell anybody was about my working. Since I didn't have a permit, why get the bar owner and myself in a jam? The job had nothing to do with Josef's dying and once an entertainer is on the wrong police list-she's had it. These Washington men kept hammering away at me to remember names, places. They simply refused to believe I didn't know a thing. They drove me back to the flat and it was a bloody mess. Everything was ransacked. Then they started searching; going through the torn mattresses, pillows, even tore up the lousy flower wallpaper. The weird bit was, they never told me what they were hunting for. Finally they hauled me downtown-not to a police station but to a regular office, a big office. Without names on the doors. By this time it was night and I was so hungry I was sick. And I was mad. They started questioning me all over again about money, his friends. When I said I was starved they told me to talk and I could eat. Some of the men were tough with me, calling me a dumb blonde, a whore. Others tried to be friendly, letting me have a smoke, saying I was in a jam and to tell them everything I knew. I did, but I didn't know whatever it was they wanted. Again, I told them the addresses we'd lived at in other cities, tried to convince them I didn't have any friends, never saw any of Josef's except that Sauerkraut character.

"When I said Josef carried his dough in a money belt, never had a bank account that I knew of, they told me he only had a hundred bucks on him when he died. After a time I became plain angry and kept asking if I was under arrest. Then I said I wouldn't say another word, demanded the right to call a lawyer. Maybe ten or fifteen minutes later they suddenly said I could go. Said it like we'd just been passing the time of day. That was the start of it."

"The start of what?"

"Of my being followed, hounded, attempts on my life. When I left their office, which was far downtown, the first thing I did was stop in a bar for a shot and a sandwich. You know how it is with a blonde, she can't go

into a bar alone without a dozen jokers thinking it's an invitation to a rumba. I left there and took a cab back to the flat to get my clothes. A guy there flashed a fast identification card at me, or maybe it was a badge, said I couldn't touch a thing. He was a tall, handsome guy, well set-up, but with a thin-mouthed, mean face. Seemed to me I'd seen him for a second in the offices downtown. He told me to stop acting dumb, start getting smart and work with him, that I was in real trouble. I asked what trouble I was in, how could I work with him? He pointed around the ransacked room, asked if *it* could still be hidden there. When I asked what was hidden, he said to cut the dumb act and yanked out a gun. He was going to shoot me, he told me so: said he'd kill me if I didn't come clean. I was alone in the flat with him and I was scared crazy. I said it was someplace inside the kitchen oven. While he was kneeling and poking around the stove, I busted a chair over his head and ran. It was about eleven at night and I had twenty-seven dollars on me. I took a cab downtown, checked in at a small hotel. Along with the room key I got the usual stares from the slob of a clerk-a flashy blonde without baggage asking for a room for the night. I was dead tired and went right to sleep. But I kept having phone calls all night. I couldn't sleep and was a nervous wreck by morning, so I..."

"Who was calling?"

"I'd answer and the phone would go dead. Finally I took the receiver out of its cradle, but every hour or so there would be a knock at my door and no answer when I asked who was there. I was terrified and didn't know who to turn to. Certainly not the police. Soon as it was light I went out for breakfast and knew I was being followed. Two clucks with dick stamped all over their beefy faces. They didn't even try to be clever about it, openly tailed me. Over coffee I read the morning papers. I expected headlines but there wasn't a word about the killing. Returning to the hotel, the room clerk told me I had to be out by noon, hinted I was whoring.

"I tried hard to get a few hours sleep, but I was too jittery. I left at noon, still being shadowed by the flat-footed beef. I walked around, half nuts with worry. All these years I'd moved around so much, I didn't have any friends I could turn to. A swarthy little man brushed against me right out on the street, said something I couldn't understand. When I told him to beat it, he slapped me and ran. The two tons following me saw it all, didn't do a damn thing. But a woman being slapped on the street drew a curious crowd and a cop came along. When I told him what had happened, he took

me to a police station. A few minutes later one of the Washington guys showed and had a private talk with the desk officer. The officer came back and told me if he ever saw me in the precinct again I'd be sent up for being drunk and disorderly. Then the Washington lad got me aside and asked when I was going to stop being stubborn and cooperate? I wanted to scream I'd told them all I knew, but instead I ran out of the station house. I went into the first lawyer's office I passed, started telling a shifty-looking little man what had happened. He thought I was crazy. While I was talking he had a phone call and then he told me to get out of his office.

"My nerves were red hot wires. I tried to shake the men following me, but I'm easy to follow, being so big. Crossing a street a car deliberately tried to run me down-came right at me and I had to jump back on the sidewalk. It was a detective car, one of those plain Fords or Chevys they use. The two men in it sure looked like dicks. I kept walking. A big guy roughed me up, walked into me so hard I nearly fell. He didn't say a word, kept walking. I was out of my mind with fear. I went into a cafeteria to eat and couldn't hold my food down. I had to get some sleep. I tried several hotels but by this time I was looking pretty tacky. Also I was running out of money. I'd wasted ten bucks trying to lose my shadows by changing cabs. Then I purchased some fresh under-things, changed in the ladies room of a bar. The owner of the place where I'd been working owed me a week's pay but I didn't know how to reach him without first shaking the beef. A guy pretending to be drunk propositioned me-right on the street. Started following me. Then he got sore and threw a punch at me. I kicked him where it did the most good and ran. There was only one thing left. I knew I had one... uh... weapon they couldn't match."

"What was that?" I asked, stupidly.

"Come on, don't be dumb," Rose said, her voice hard. "I'd read in a detective story how a crook shook the guys following him by riding in the first car of a subway train. At each station he would step out and look down the length of the train to see if anybody else got off-then he jumped out as the doors closed at an empty station. I was going to try that but I finally got a break. I had a token in my bag and the two clowns tailing me were still coming down the stairs when I made a train closing its doors. As we pulled out of the station I saw them leaping the turnstiles, flashing badges at the token seller. I got off at the next station and hid in the ladies room for a time. The platform was empty when I came out. I..."

"What's this have to do with your secret weapon?"

Rose became mad. "You're the one wanted to hear all this, so damn it, listen! I went up to the street, only had to stand on the corner for a few seconds. A young fellow not twenty stopped his car. My luck held, he had his own room way up in the Bronx. I spent two nights and a day with him, managed to rest and catch up on my sleep. He must have thought he was in heaven, I didn't ask him for money or anything. He only left me to bring in food and the papers. There still wasn't a word about Josef. While this kid was in the bathtub I scrambled, used my last dollars to taxi down to the bar where I'd worked. I was shaking as I walked in.

"The owner acted normal, wanted to know where I'd been, said the least I could have done was phoned. I told him I was sick and had to leave. He paid me the \$35 I had coming. Almost as an afterthought, in fact the owner reminded me of it, I went down to the kitchen to pick up my suitcase. I used it to hold cosmetics, a wrapper, stockings, and an old dress. The bag was far too heavy. I opened it and saw all the money. I didn't know what to do."

"That was the first you knew of the dough?"

"Yes. I pulled out a bill and took another cab back to the kid's room, gave him a bull yarn about I'd gone for my things. I had him drive me to Boston the next day. Poor kid, he probably lost his job, taking off all that time-but he had what he wanted. We spent the night in a flea-bag and I gave him the slip, boarded a plane to Miami. I registered at a tourist house, bought clothes and dyed my hair. I kept reading the out-of-town papers carefully. Still not a peep about the killing. I rested up for a week. I had this money-knew this was what the police had been searching for-but I was afraid to go to the cops; they'd think I'd had it all the time because I hadn't said anything about working at the bar. I figured I'd stay put and later try to make it to Mexico. On the ninth day I was in Miami I saw a car waiting for a light-that evil-faced guy with an eaten-away nose at the wheel. I didn't know if he'd seen me or not. I got panicky.

"I took the bus to Key West and changed my hair color again. I had a plan, a desperate one. I bought a boat and an outboard for \$580. I made certain to give the boat yard owner my real name and Josef's address in New York. I told him I wanted to do a lot of fishing. He flirted with me, warned about going out too far. I had him paint ROSE MARIE on the bow and there was a metal plate with the name of his yard in the cockpit. I took



the suitcase, some food, extra gas, and asked for fishing tips. I went out to an isolated key, turned the boat over and let it drift away. I figured in a few days the authorities would think I'd drowned and in the meantime I'd be picked up by a yacht or a fishing boat and..."

"And talk the guy into taking you to Cuba," I finished for her.

She nodded. "There it is, the truth you wanted, Mickey." Her hand played with the muscles of my right arm, a habit of hers. "I never lied to you. I mean when we started, I put things on the table, face up. I thought I'd leave you the first time you became curious, but you never did-until now. Sure, I hardly expected things to turn out as well as this, that I would fall for you. But I'm so very glad they have!"

Rose kissed me hard and it took a small struggle to get my mind back to my spinning thoughts. Holding her close, I asked, "You think this Josef was an international crook wanted by the cops?"

"I don't know what he was, but I'm sure the police weren't after him. He never seemed afraid of the law."

"At no time did they accuse you of the killing?"

Rose sat up fast. "How many times do I have to tell you *no*? Change your record, you're getting me nervous."

"Honey, when I first picked you up, or you picked me up, I had to feel you were running from the law and I didn't give a damn. What I'm trying to do now is think the way the police must have thought. And we have to talk about this, so don't be touchy."

"Sorry I flew off the handle, Mickey. All the police and Washington wanted was to know where the money and his letters were. I didn't know he'd left it in my dressing room the night before. I told you, I only went there by chance."

"The letters must be all that writing you have with the money."

"I suppose so. I can't read them or... How did you know about it?"

"Come on, Rose, it was a breeze to open that lock on the old Sea Princess."

"That was almost a year ago. All this time... you could have taken off with the money any time you wished. You knew I couldn't yell for the cops?"

"I didn't wish."

She let out a kind of shrill laugh and gave me a big kiss. "You're the boy for me, all right! This only proves how much we love each other." She

gave me another quick kiss, slipped out of bed, and said, "Are you hungry? Can I fix anything?"

"No, but I'll buy a few hours of shut-eye. Tell me one last bit: it seemed the Feds didn't want you to go to a lawyer. They let you go when you mentioned calling one. Since you had nobody to turn to, why didn't you see what a mouthpiece could have done?"

"I told you one lawyer threw me out."

"But there are others?"

"I was flat, and lawyers mean money, especially if they're expected to fight City Hall. After, when I found the money, I was too scared to stop running. Now you get your sleep. I'm going to take a wash-swim, read some of the papers on the boat."

I watched her slip into an old red bathing suit, and put on her sneakers, blow me a kiss, and run out. I lay spread-eagled on the hot bed and tried to think. Was Rose handing me a snow job? It seemed that way. Still, the part about missing me, loving me, that had to be real: she'd said it before I'd asked about her past. The trouble was, her story sounded nutty-but so crazy I couldn't see her making it up. And she didn't have to tell me a word, could have let things stand as they were.

I went to the John and through the window screen saw Rose sunning herself on the deck of the Sea Princess, reading a newspaper. I moved the bed and raised a cracked floor board. She had the money in a fireproof metal box under the floor. Naturally I knew the combination. I took out the letters. There were about a hundred pages of ruled paper, the writing precise and stingy. Old Josef sure must have a steady hand. I couldn't make out a word-the pages seemed to be a combination of German and some other language. I could show a single page to Ansel, he knew a few languages, see what the letters were all about. But that was risky. I thumbed through the papers and didn't see any diagrams or figures. I had an idea it might be stuff about an invention, a new atom bomb, or something. I wrapped them back in oilskin and put the box away.

I started a cigar and went back to bed. Weird as the story was, somehow seeing the letters again clinched things. I had to go along with the idea Rose was leveling with me.

I concentrated on my cigar for a few minutes, waiting for my alleged brains to settle down. I told myself, "You have to read between her lines. Maybe she really went for this Josef and became hysterical, thought the

whole world was after her. Or if she didn't care for him, she was hysterical because it meant the end of her meal ticket. But what was Josef's real racket? He had to be doing something beside reading foreign papers all day. All this dough. Suppose he had cased and held up a bank? And how come not a line about Josef's death in the papers? But you never know what the cops want to keep under wraps. Could be Josef and this Sauerkraut did the bank job and the cops were afraid Sauerkraut would hole up if the papers had it?

"Hell with all this guessing, let's stick to Rose. They didn't have a thing on her or they wouldn't have released her. She's shocked, broke, bewildered... and then she finds the loot Josef stashed in her dressing room. Rose has only one idea-to run. Suppose the cops do get her-*if* they're even looking for her now. What could they charge her with? The money was her husband's and he's stiff, so it's hers. And if it was stolen loot, Rose had no way of knowing that. They didn't tell her a thing. Worst could happen to us would be she'd have to return the rest of the money. Little chance of even that. All this was over a year ago, longer, and she's Rose Whalen now, a boat bum. And the trick she pulled in the Keys-wasn't so corny as it sounded- after all these months they might think she drowned, close the case. We're safe. That's the big deal-we're safe."

I killed my cigar and stood up and flapped the sheets to cool them off. Then I jumped back in the sack and went to sleep.

I awoke late in the afternoon and felt so good I took a shave. I swam out to the boat, the salt water a bracer on my face. Ansel was sitting with Rose, both of them busy reading the magazines and papers I'd brought. Ansel's pot-belly was hanging over an old worn pair of khaki trunks almost the color of his skin.

Rose looked great, her big body relaxed, hair blowing slightly with the little breeze. She had this habit of moving her lips as she read. I was swimming out to a great boat-which was mine-and to a babe who was also mine, and probably one of the most beautiful women in the world. What more could I ask of life?

I went below for a sandwich and cold beer. The trouble was I did want something else. I wanted to know if Rose's story was true. I told myself I *had* to know because of the way she'd acted on my return, all the tender mush. I'd probably be living with her for the rest of my life. Before I'd figured Rose would run out on me, sooner or later. But if she wanted to

make it forever, that was fine, except I *had* to know the truth. Of course I was aware I was kidding myself. All this was mixed with my yen to see New York with Rose. It would be a rugged deal to ask of her, and her terror, but the answer was too simple: I'd insist we go. If she was lying she'd flatly refuse. But if she'd told me the truth, I could convince her she had nothing to fear or...

I went on deck. Rose grinned at me from behind the fashion mag she was reading. Ansel cut open the last of the drinking nuts I'd tied to the rigging in Haiti. In his usual talkative mood he slipped off into a lecture on how history books under-rated the poor coconut. They called bread the staff of life while the coconut not only provided food for a good portion of the peoples of the world, but also clothing, plates, oil, boats, mats and building material.

Ansel was knocking himself out. I wasn't listening; I was watching Rose.... my favorite hobby. Not studying her directly but staring at her reflection in the calm water. Schools of tiny chrome colored anchovies raced by now and then, making it a cracked mirror. Rose was in a happy mood, commenting on the new movies -which should reach the island theatres in about ten years-laughing at the fashion news.

The trouble was, if I told her about going to New York it would be obvious I didn't trust her and she might be mad enough to walk out on me. That I didn't want-ever. I might work the motor repair deal as an excuse for returning to the States. But if I was a clever fellow-and I wasn't-I'd work things around so it would seem as if New York was her idea.

I watched the water, pleased with what I saw. Then the sky clouded and it grew muggy. What breeze there was died. I turned on my back, stared up at the thin clouds. Ansel announced it would rain before morning. Rose said we'd better start ferrying the stuff to the hut. While she was busy in the cabin, Ansel helped load the dink and managed to get some stuff I'd brought for him into his battered rowboat. As he was about to shove off he asked if I was interested in hunting pacas before supper? Some had been seen in a nearby swamp. A paca is about the size of a small dog, sort of large rat with brown and white spots. It's very tender when roasted and I like it, but Rose won't touch it because it's a rat. I told Ansel I was too tired. The islanders are so crazy about it that when one was known to be around so many people went hunting a guy could get himself shot. It would be a dumb accident like that to keep me from seeing New York City.

After Ansel left, Rose started ferrying the stuff ashore. I washed down the decks, cleaned out the cabin, and made the Sea Princess ship-shape. I took care of the engines and the sails, then I helped Rose. It was twilight and the air thick with heat by the time we got everything into the hut. We were both sweating and as we started for the water and a final swim, the rain hit. We stripped and took a fresh water shower.

I thought it was going to be a long rain but in the morning, or rather at noon, when we awoke, the sun was out bright. I still hadn't caught up on my sleep. Rose started opening cans and we stuffed ourselves with tins of tongue and beef, even caviar, along with fancy cakes, corn-anything else we felt like eating. We went back to bed and slept some more. Some time in the middle of the night we got up and took a dip. The sky was lousy with stars and we returned to the hut and started playing the new records, keeping the sound down, drinking a little. We awoke in the middle of the next afternoon. It was hot and sunny and we did a lot of swimming and some spear fishing. Rose decided she wanted pancakes so we cooked and ate stacks of them, finished with ice cream, and went through the records again. Rose sang with some of the older numbers, told me about the time she lost twenty-six pounds in a week for a part she never got. She didn't eat a thing but drank coffee all day long and by the end of the week her nerves were so raw she was ready to be put away. She said, again, "I sure was a simple broad, in those days."

When we got up the following morning it was raining, hard. It rained steadily for the next five days. I didn't mind, I can sleep fine in the rain. Rose started playing her records, but the hi-fi set would hardly work: too many people were using the island current. At Ansel's store you had to play the rundown jukebox during the day, when the single island generator didn't have much of a load.

On the second day of the rain, the lights were too dim for reading. Also gnats and other bugs came to life in the muggy weather and made us miserable. We ate up most of the canned goods-all the fancy stuff making us slightly sick-so we got a little drunk and went back to the damp bed. It was raining just as hard when we awoke early in the morning, and I could see Rose was getting the blues. She never can get accustomed to being cooped up. Twice a day we ran to the water to check on the boat, take a bath, and get some fresh vegetables and fish at Ansel's house. Then we'd return home, our feet covered with mud. There wasn't enough juice to read

by or even play the radio. I wanted to go out to the boat, run the motors and get some music, but Rose said the bay looked too dreary. Instead we went up to Ansel's and by candlelight played whist. Mrs. Ansel acted like she had a fortune going on every card, which made a dull game even duller.

On the way home Rose slipped in the mud and cursed when I laughed. We took a swim and she was still in a bad mood, snapping at me. Sleeping was a Turkish bath and when I suggested I go out to the boat to sleep, she said she didn't want to be alone. I told her on the next trip I'd see if I could pick up a generator for our own use, but Rose wasn't listening. In the middle of the night I heard her get up and kill a bottle, then reread the papers by the light of a single candle.

Most times I could bring her out of these moods but now I didn't try. I had a plan going for me and the rain was my sidekick. I wished it would rain for a month, as it did in the rainy season.

Instead of keeping out of her way, I yelled back at her, acted like a real pain. I was waiting for her hysterical tears, a sign she was truly down in the dumps. It made me feel like a heel, but I had to do it-or so I sold myself. The next morning she got into a huff and we didn't talk all day. I thought that would do it but Rose didn't seem to mind. The thing that broke her up was this: Mrs. Ansel came to the hut and Rose whispered to me she wasn't going to play another boring game of whist or checkers. But Mrs. Ansel only asked if we had some cotton to spare. The baby had the measles. Rose said we must immediately sail the kid to a doctor in Georgetown: but Mrs. Ansel said nonsense, she wanted the cotton to rub the boy down with bay rum and keep the fever from rising. She was quite calm, said to let nature take its course and the sooner the kid had the measles and got over them, the happier he would be.

We went up to the house and Rose helped her sponge the kid, who was running 102 and looked sick. I smoked a cigar with Ansel and said maybe I should get a doctor. He said it was nothing, the spots and sores were coming and in a week it would be all over. In the kid's room I could hear Rose arguing with Mrs. Ansel, their voices growing louder. Ansel winked at me as Rose screamed-Mrs. Ansel didn't know or care what she was doing-and ran out of the bungalow. I left a few minutes later. I found Rose sitting on the steps of the hut, wet and muddy... and crying loudly. I took her inside and undressed her, toweled her down, and turned on the gas boiler for a hot bath. She took a big shot of whiskey and in the faint light from the gas

range I started reading the night club ads from one of the old New York papers, innocently asking if she'd ever been in this and that club, what did it look like, how was the food and music, and all the rest of the jive. I read most of the ads and nothing happened. Then all of a sudden she became hysterical and savagely tore the paper to bits.

This was the right time to pull the string. I told her to relax and she told me where to go. I asked, "Honey, how about getting away from here? For a few weeks? Be a change."

Running a hand over her wet face Rose mumbled, "What's the diff? Raining all over these goddam islands."

"I don't mean island-jumping. I mean a *real* change. How about sailing north, putting in at cities like Jacksonville, Charleston, Atlantic City, or even New York?"

"Are you punchy? I can't show my face anywhere."

"Listen, we'll only spend a few days in each town. Buy us some new domes, live in hotels, see all the shows and movies we..."

"You want to get me killed?" she asked coldly, forgetting the tears. "I told you..."

"Rose, honey, we haven't a thing to worry about, if what you told me is true."

"*If?*" She screamed, picking up a kitchen knife and viciously sticking it into the table top.

That was okay, it was merely the first thing she could put her hands on. "Take it easy, Rose; if I didn't believe you I wouldn't suggest this. Island living is great, but it takes time to get used to the slow pace. It's fine for Ansel, he was born here. It works out for us- except for a few short days like now. If we could spend several weeks each year in a big city, get the... the desire for excitement out of our systems, we could live here the rest of our lives and do it well. But if we don't-we have nothing here if we blow our tops."

"I can take this."

"Can you? Look at yourself, hysterical, almost on the verge of flipping. And my nerves are ragged, too. For all we know it might rain for another week or more." My voice was as smooth as a salesman's.

"Don't worry, I won't break. I was in a mood but that's over."

"Maybe I need a change."

"You just came back from Port-au-Prince. If you want to go for another trip, get the hell out-but alone."

"Honey, in Port-au-Prince I walked the streets with crowds, I ate in a few restaurants, took in a movie. And all the time I felt more jittery than I do now. It doesn't mean a thing if you're not along. Don't you know that? Times Square would be a drag without you."

For a long moment she stared at me, her face changing-losing its hardness, its tension. For a second I thought my plan was backfiring. I didn't care, it was worth something to see her smile again. Rose came over and sat on my lap, kissing me, whispering, "That's the sweetest thing a man ever told me, Mickey."

I held her tightly and wondered what I was knocking myself out for. But under all my feelings this desire to find out if her story was true, to live big, began bubbling up again. "I've been thinking about what you told me the other day. About Josef and..."

"Must we talk about that?"

"Yeah. I've had a chance to give it some thought. Babes, I think you've been running from nothing, being chased by your own shadow. For example when..."

"Nothing? They were out to kill me!"

I kissed her cheek. "Rose, don't tighten up. I'm not out to hurt you, scare you. There's only you and me talking in this hut, so relax. Talk can't hurt us. Let me tell you what I've been thinking and then you show me where I'm wrong. Okay?"

Her fingers were back to feeling the muscles in my arms as she said, "I got you into all this, you have a right to ask questions."

"Don't talk about 'rights.' This isn't a courtroom. I'm only thinking how we both can be happier-and I'm pretty happy as we are. Now let me go over what you told me. Remember, when all this happened you were upset and shocked, which was natural. Josef was your husband and..."

"I never loved him."

"Honey, if we found out Ansel had just been murdered, wouldn't you be upset, in a whirl?"

"All right, say I was upset. What are you trying to prove?"

"Rose, Rose, stop acting like a cross-examiner. It's raining, we haven't anything else to do. I'm making words pass the time. Now, the first time you had any idea they were out to... to kill you, was when this Federal guy



began fingering his gun while talking to you in the flat. That's an old cop's trick to put the fear of God into you. Once when I was a kid the police were trying to stop us from swimming bare-butt. Two cops came over to the dock to warn us. One cop kept hitting his blackjack against the palm of his hand as he talked. An act. They wouldn't have sapped a bunch of ten-year olds for swimming...."

"Mickey, what are you trying to tell me, that I'm nuts?"

"Of course not. Listen, when that cop played with his sap, believe me, every one of us was scared, *really* scared. You also said you were shadowed on the street, annoyed at the hotel. I certainly believe all that happened, but maybe it was more police tricks to keep you on edge. A guy hits you on the street, another cluck propositions you, and your shadows don't act like cops seeing a citizen annoyed. Remember, that could be part of their job; if they were tailing you they may have been under orders not to show themselves. I also imagine a gal with your looks has had street clowns leer and whistle at you plenty of times. You said two men who 'looked' like detectives tried to run you down. Could be, and it could have been a couple of drunks. Finally, you think you saw this Sauerkraut guy in Miami. Maybe you did and maybe he's one of the thousands of tourists that flock there. Or in that brief second you could have seen some other fellow with a deformed nose. Let's consider a few other angles: the police didn't want you, but the money. Now, they don't even know you have the dough. And suppose they do, the most they can ask is you return it. You took some money your dead husband left in a suitcase-is that a crime?"

"You risked your life in the hurricane to get the money. Remember what you said then?"

"Yeah. I'll say it now: it's always convenient to be loaded. All I'm saying is, you're in the clear-all the way down the line. Another thing, this was almost two years ago and if your overturned boat stunt worked, the police have you dead and forgotten by now."

"What do all your words add up to, Mickey?"

"That you have no reason to hide, no reason for us to stick ourselves away on this island for the rest of our lives."

"You didn't believe what I told you the other day, did you?"

"I know *you* believed it. You magnified things, blew them up in your mind until they became a living nightmare. Wake up, honey, we're safe. At

the time you were merely so hysterical that if you'd been given a traffic ticket, or a wrong phone number you would have thought...."

"Mickey, I pray that you'll never be that frightened, for then you'll never be able to dismiss it with a 'merely!'" Rose stood up, walked away. "You know what you're really saying: you don't trust me."

"Babes, I'm the guy who didn't ask questions when I was convinced you were in deep trouble with the law. And remember, if you are in a jam, so am I-so I'm not saying stick our necks out to make small talk. Rose, get the picture in focus. A moment ago you were hysterical, probably thought I was a louse, that we never hit it off. Hysteria can distort anything. I say we have nothing to fear, why jail ourselves on this island, or some other one? If we had to, we could take it. But we don't have to!"

"How do you know? Will my dead body convince you you're wrong?"

I went over and tried to put my arms around her. "Do you think I'd risk a single hair of yours? Have I ever? Stop acting like I'm trying to turn you in."

For a second she still looked away, then stared into my eyes-almost on a level with them-and I was proud she was such a big woman. When she kissed me, fingers digging into my back, she sobbed, "Mickey, I'm so scared!"

"Of what? I'm not talking big. You know I never bull. I don't say you're wrong, merely that you've sold yourself a bum bill of goods. I believe right this moment the police couldn't care less about you. If we were trying for Paris, say, there might be some risk in getting a passport. But we have the Sea Princess, we can sail... Honey, I'm certain I'm right, the way things will work out. Besides, we *have* to go to the States!"

"I don't have to."

"The boat and the oil cooler. Look, sooner or later I'll have to get a new cooler. A mechanic in Georgetown said it would be impossible to get the part in the islands, so we have to sail her to the States. No getting around the fact we need a boat."

"You sail her over."

"Hon, listen to me; we sail the Sea Princess into Tampa, or New Orleans. We take care of the motor, and who will know we're there? Cut your hair short, dye it. You won't be Rose Brown but Mrs. Mickey Whalen. We have to try it."

"I don't believe in pushing my luck."

"Rose, you're my luck, the only good thing in my life. I wouldn't suggest this-even if it meant losing the boat due to overheating and a fire-unless I was positive it's a sure thing. Why go batty here? We sail to the mainland and spend a few days in any big port city we wish. We'll take a month or two, then return here. Believe me, we'll appreciate the island then, be a change of pace. Honey, I wouldn't ask you to go to Havana or Kingston, we'd stick out there-a couple of tall Americans. But in Charleston or Savannah, who pays any mind to a couple off a small boat? We won't live big or flashy."

She shivered in my arms.

"Any time you even feel there's the smallest sign of trouble, we run up sail and take off. Honey, it's a tonic we both need-aside from the engine cooler. When we first came to the islands a rainy season didn't get us down. But we're stale now: a few damp days and look at us. Think it over for a couple of days. You still say no-I'm with you. I'll go for the oil cooler alone."

"No, I don't want you to leave me. Mickey, I'm frightened."

"Plenty of times you were scared stiff of the sea, but we always came through okay. Honey, think it over -and remember I'd go nuts if anything happened to you." I knew I meant that and for a moment I was full of chilling doubts. *Was I risking losing Rose? We did have it made, why chance anything?* Hell, testing to see if she was telling the truth wasn't that important...

"Of course I'll think about it-but not now. I have a splitting headache. Guess I need some chow."

"Sure, forget it-for now."

Rose went to the refrigerator, which was barely working due to the lack of current-pulled out a crock of cheese we'd opened for lunch. Placing the cheese on the table, she opened the cracker jar. She ate in the dim light and suddenly spit out a shower of crumbs. Cursing savagely, Rose lit a match and pointed at the cheese -it was already moldy. I told her, "Easy, hon, we can always open a fresh tin."

Rose wiped her lips with the back of her hand, somehow a terribly weary motion. Then she shook her head. "No, no. You're right, Mickey. Another few days of this lousy rain and I might flip. No sense kidding ourselves about the engine-we can't get a new oil cooler out of thin air. We'll leave here. We'll leave... but... *oh it scares me!*"

## VI

When we dropped anchor in Jacksonville, Florida, it was exactly seven weeks from the time Rose and I had it out in our hut on Ansel's island. The odd thing was, even talking about leaving had been a tonic: the rain had kept up for another few days but we were no longer bored-we argued. But without much heat. Rose tried to make me understand I'd be risking her life by returning to the States and I kept saying she was in the clear-if she had told me the truth.

After a few days we switched sides. I didn't care if we left the island or not. All the gamblers I'd ever known had yanked the rug out from under themselves when they had it made-never knew when they were well-off. I was troubled by the thought that if Rose wasn't telling me the truth, why chance the ideal set-up we-or I-had? But Rose now had a sort of fatalistic outlook, said she had no right to stick me in the islands for the rest of my life and anyway-what was going to happen was going to happen no matter what she did. So, crazy as it may seem, she was the one insisting we leave.

We both agreed on a few precautions. We'd register at hotels as Mr. and Mrs. Mickey Anderson of Tampa and I had cards printed, stating I was in the wholesale shrimp business-along with a few "identification" papers -a phony Lions Club card, and an old novel-of-the-month card I fixed up with ink eradicator. Rose cut her hair short and colored it black, wore plain eye-glasses, and was to dress simply and a bit on the sloppy side. We made a list of the three names Josef had mumbled in his sleep: William Sour, Me-Lucy-ah, and Gootsrat -which sounded like "Good rat." The first thing we'd do on landing would be to check the phone books for these names. We'd live modestly and never carry or flash much money-leave most of the loot locked up in the Sea Princess. Rose flatly refused to go to Miami but the general idea was to work our way up the coast and then back to the island. We told Ansel we were sailing the Gulf of Mexico and would return in a few months, or sooner.

It was a cold, rough crossing. Rose was so tense every time we even passed a boat flying the USA flag, I felt lousy. But when I suggested we turn back, she said we'd already thrown the dice and had to see what came up. Our first night in Jacksonville we quickly ate in a waterfront restaurant,

checked the phone book, and slept for over fifteen hours aboard the boat. Rose acted lovey-dovey and coy, trying to keep me in her bunk, but we finally went ashore in the afternoon. Replacing the oil cooler was a snap. Then we bought clothes and bags, checked into a modest hotel. It was the first time I'd worn a suit and tie in years.

That night we kept to our room, Rose hitting the bottle. But she couldn't get juiced enough to overcome her jitters. The next day we took in a couple of movies, watched TV in a bar, and returned to the hotel to sleep like tops. I awoke first and soaking in a tub of hot water, I decided all this was wrong. Certainly not worth Rose having a breakdown over.

To my surprise, when she awoke Rose seemed very calm. When I mentioned heading back to the Caymans, she said we might as well stay a few days at least and get our fill. We did about all there was to do in Jacksonville, and Rose was in such a sudden good mood she told me the suit I'd bought was a double for an undertaker's helper, and we went into a swank men's shop and bought me a mild sport jacket and slacks. She wore a formless dress that made her look a big hick.

After two days we sailed up to Charleston and then on to Wilmington. In each city we had a ball, especially in Charleston, where we took in the night life, and of course all the movies. Rose seemed at ease. One night in bed she told me I'd been right, all her fear could have been her shocked imagination. Of course we still checked the phone books, avoided talking to people in bars, and didn't live too big. If Rose had lost her tenseness, I had a new bug in my head. Now that we were back in the States, what had I proved-except Rose's cock and bull story had been exactly that? I not only felt I was farther than ever from her real story, but I became nervous if she was out of my sight for a few minutes. I had this feeling that since she thought she was safe, Rose might leave me and go back to wherever she'd come from-to the guy who'd given her the loot. The fact she didn't want to go back to Ansel's made me suspicious.

I told her we'd gone far enough North; we'd had it. I'd given up any idea of going to New York City. I practically insisted we go back to the island. But I had one other idea in my empty head. I was very proud of the Sea Princess, felt she could go anywhere in the world. As a sailor I'd heard what a rough place Cape Hatteras was and I wanted to give it a try. Don't ask me why. I was like a clown trying to see if his car can make a hundred miles an hour and forgetting what a blowout would mean.

We agreed to sail around the Cape to Norfolk, then head back to the Caymans, stopping at coast towns we hadn't visited on the return trip. I carefully checked the charts and the weather, listened to the bull stories fishing boat men told me, and even Rose was fairly excited about trying the Cape. We set out for Norfolk and the ocean off the Cape was so calm I nearly laughed.

We didn't like Norfolk very much. For one thing it was March and so cold we had to buy coats. So after two days we ran up sail again and headed South. We'd about rounded Hatteras with the water merely choppy, when a hell of a storm hit us, knocking the Sea Princess on her beam ends. The lousy storm came out of the Southeast full of sudden fury, snow and sleet. While the radio had warned of a "possible squall," this was far worse than the hurricane. Waves higher than our mast pounded the Sea Princess badly and Rose was terrified. I was scared dumb myself. I tried going out to sea, afraid we'd hit the reefs and rocks near the coast.

I kept Rose in the cabin while I sat at the wheel with a rope around my chest to keep from being washed over.

The icy water went through my oilskins and I thought my fingers were breaking off as I close-reefed the mainsail. But the storm grew worse; the only thing to do was turn and run before the wind. The battens in the big sail had snapped, and the backstays and rigging were in a crazy dance. I managed to furl the mainsail and even with only the jib up, we went down the wind-and North-like a speed boat. The radio rigging was carried away, the dinghy smashed and yanked off the cabin top.

We went roaring before the wind all night and I was numb with cold. In early morning the jib went to pieces -I didn't know how it had stood up so long. I figured we were far enough at sea to lash the wheel and put out a sea anchor. Anyway, there wasn't anything else I could do. After locking the hatch, I went below. The cabin was a mess; broken dishes and junk all over, Rose in her bunk moaning and screaming with fear. I told her to shut up and had some food and whiskey. I felt human again even if we were bouncing around so it felt as if we were living inside a soccer ball.

I forced Rose to kill a bottle but it didn't knock her out. She crouched in her bunk, stiff with fear. I sat on my blankets, holding on to the bunk, sure we were going to die.

Toward dawn we stopped bouncing-a little. I went on deck and the wind was dying. The rigging was mostly okay and steering by compass, for

a change, I headed due West with both engines; thankful we had the power - as I wondered how long our fuel would last-we were still running in a full sea. I started the pumps, happy to find we hadn't taken on much water. The sky cleared and a few planes passed. I made Rose come on deck where she felt better, the raw wind acting like a shot in the arm. Several hours later we crossed the wake of a rusty freighter, watched some sailors calmly waving at us. Perhaps they thought I was a rich yachtsman out for a sail.

We began passing more ships-all of them work boats-soon we saw the coastline. Rose had to make the usual crack about kissing the ground. Within two hours we were tied to a dock in Asbury Park, New Jersey. The storm had blown us that far North. Except for the loss of the dink, the jib, and some shrouds, the boat was okay.

It was a sunny day, but cold, with a thin layer of snow on the ground. Going ashore for lunch, we read in the papers that a "freak" squall had pounded the coast, damaging plenty of boats and summer homes. When I said we had to go back to the Sea Princess, Rose flatly refused. I told her to wait in the greasy spoon. I found a boatyard, arranged for the boat to be hauled out at once, the rigging repaired, her bottom scraped and painted.

We took a room in a cheap hotel. Rose was all for selling the Sea Princess, flying back to the islands and buying another boat there. I told her to shut up-we'd see. We hit the bed and pounded our ears for sixteen straight hours. I was feeling good, cocky. I'd been sailor enough to ride out the storm.

The next few days we hung around the boatyard, I even helped out with the overhauling-I didn't want to be too far from our dough with men working on the ship. The owner of the yard was impressed with the Sea Princess' lines, and of course he could tell, I think, by what came off her keel that we'd been in the Caribbean. Rose spent most of her time in various movies, and at night we took long walks on the cold boardwalk, and then watched TV in some bar. I began working on her, pointing out how well the boat had stood up, that it was really my fault for not paying the radio storm warning any mind, and except for the bouncing giving us a hard time, we hadn't suffered any real damage. The point was we had to sail the Sea Princess back to Ansel's and there wasn't anything to be afraid of.

After a few days Rose was able to laugh at the memory of the two of us lying on our bunks like scared stiffs, and I knew she really admired me for having pulled the ship through single-handed.

When the Sea Princess was back in the water with a new dink and other repairs, all told costing us \$569, we decided to stay in Asbury for a few more days. There was another storm on the way. I tied her up to the boatyard dock and locked the cabin. There's little chance of robbery at a private dock, so Mr. and Mrs. Anderson took a room at a hotel and the next day we decided to give Atlantic City a fling. We registered at the biggest hotel we'd stayed in thus far and Rose bought a new dress that clung more to her figure. We had a steak dinner, saw a movie, and then dropped into a good night club. Rose was a bit nervous when we first hit Atlantic City, she'd once worked there, but felt at ease again when she found the club had been torn down and replaced by a small apartment house.

We were sitting in this swank night spot, laughing at a wiseguy comedian who had a sharp tongue. Rose was giving me the lowdown on about what the guy was making and how much the members of the band were paid... when I suddenly felt her thigh stiffen against mine under the table. I turned and she was staring down at the table cloth, her face sickly pale in contrast to the dark frames of her phony glasses, her black hair. She was so pale even the remains of her sun tan seemed to have vanished. I asked, "You sick?"

"Oh, God! Mickey, it's *him!*"

"Who?" I asked, looking around wildly. "Hon, what is it?"

"It's him... the Federal man who tried to shoot me!"

"Where?" I asked, my guts full of a chill-mainly because I thought Rose was off her head.

"That table over in the corner, by the post. The big guy with the redheaded girl. Oh God, I knew we shouldn't have come to the States!"

"Take it easy," I said, glancing around casually. I had no difficulty making him. He was staring hard at our table. He was a handsome cuss, well set-up and lean, and with a mean face. He looked like a guy who could handle himself, a nasty joker in a brawl. Younger than me, too. Maybe five or six years since he was the star halfback.

Toying with a spoon I asked a dumb question. "Rose, are you sure?" The way the guy was looking at us told me how sure *he* was.

"Of course!" Her voice had the shakes.

I pressed her thigh as I told her, "Listen to me: we're going to sit right here and play it cool. For one thing, with your glasses and all, he can't be



positive. If he comes over, we're a couple of tourists named Anderson, so don't get excited."

"No. He's the one... he'll try to kill me!"

For a second I realized how jerky I was acting. What was I getting tense about? Even if this proved Rose's weird story was true, Rose was in the clear. I squeezed her hand under the table-and it was cold as death. "Don't worry. If he starts anything I'll handle him."

Rose turned and gave me a tight smile-a tender tiny grin that somehow seemed a farewell smile. "No, Mickey, stay put and be careful. Say I'm a pick-up and you don't know a thing about me. I'm going to the head. If he tries to... don't let him stop me. And don't get yourself hurt."

Before I could argue, or ask what she meant, Rose stood up. Holding her small pocketbook in one hand, she gave me a light, phony smile, and started for the ladies room, which was located just inside the entrance to the club. The fur trimmed coat she'd bought a few days before was still on the back of her chair.

While I was wondering why the speech about going to the can, I saw big boy get to his feet. From different angles he and Rose headed for the same point. I got up and crossed directly toward him. Rose was almost running and he wasn't even watching me.

As Rose reached the few steps leading up into the tiny lobby, I saw his hand go to his back pocket and with the flap of his jacket raised for a split second- *he was reaching for a gun in his hip pocket holster!*

I raced over and walked into him hard with my shoulder. He stumbled and I went into a little jig I practiced when I was wrestling. I brought my left foot down on his right instep and as he bent over my right knee came up into his stomach. He dropped to the carpet, doubled over. He wasn't out, only numb the way a belly wallop gets you.

I was all one silly grin as I put on an act that it was an accident. A couple of waiters rushed over to us. Rose wasn't in sight. She'd made the ladies room. I bent down as if helping big boy to his feet. There wasn't any doubt about the gun, I could feel it in his back pocket. I wanted to go through his pockets and find out who he was, but the waiters were on us. I gave them a dumb grin and said something about being clumsy. A beefy character, obviously the bouncer, helped me lift him to his feet. People were standing up but the bouncer and the waiters were old hands: before I knew

it we were walked into the manager's office. While I was explaining what a clumsy clown I'd been, a cop appeared.

The manager was a smooth baldie in a tux and as he was assuring the cop things were under control, big boy got his wind and flashed a card or something at the cop, then ran limping out of the office. The cop took off, too. I started after them and ran into a solid line of waiters. I asked, "What the devil is this?"

"Now, now, no trouble, please," the manager said. The bouncer moved closer.

I said, "I don't want trouble but my girl went to the John and she'll wonder where I am and..." I could have bitten my fat tongue. Why did I say Rose was in the can? Could she be hiding in there, waiting?

The cop returned, growled at me, "You, sit down!" He had a firm grip on his night stick.

I sat on the edge of the manager's desk, wondering what to do. For a few minutes we were all silent, then big boy limped in, looking very mad. He held a whispered conference with the cop while glaring at me. The cop told the manager and the rest of the help to leave. The manager said, "Now George, I don't know what this is all about, but the club doesn't want any trouble."

George, the cop, nodded and ushered him out, then he shut the door and leaned against it, one hand on his holster.

The clammy feeling in my guts said I was in for a beating. A couple of wild thoughts flashed through my mind. In a straight rough and tumble I might take these two. And if they went for their guns I'd be dead. What did Rose expect me to do, stall them? Was she still in the ladies room? Hiding there, or plain sick? Or was she waiting for me outside? Did she want me to clout these...?

Big boy limped over to stand in front of me, hands loose at his sides. "What's your name, mister?" he snapped.

I decided to bluff, do a little shoulder talking of my own. I asked, "Who are you? What is this?"

"I'll ask the questions!" His hands were itching to clout me.

With a calmness which astonished me I heard myself saying, "If you're a police officer I'm asking you to identify yourself." I glanced at the cop holding up the door. "Officer, this man is carrying a gun."

"He's a Fed," the cop said.

"Oh." I was completely rattled. I was in great shape -I'd flattened a Federal cop! But then Rose's story about the police trying to kill her *had* been true!

"What's your name?"

"Is walking into you, accidentally, a Federal crime?" I asked.

"I'm asking for your name, mister."

"My name is Mickey Anderson. I'm a visitor here, stopping at a boardwalk hotel. I don't know what this show of force is about, but I demand the right to phone my lawyer before saying anything else. His name is Jackson Clair, in New York City." That was the name of a big time lawyer I'd been reading about in the papers.

A slight change came over the Fed's face. Almost politely he said, "Mr. Anderson, I'm only asking for your cooperation, as a citizen. I want to talk to you about the woman you were with, ask..."

"What's she wanted for?"

"I didn't say she's *wanted*. I merely wanted to chat with her, see if she could give me some information."

"Chat with her? Is that how you talk to people-by pulling a gun on them?" I asked.

The cop said, "Pulling what gun?"

The Federal man said, "Pulling my gun? Why I wanted to make sure it wasn't loose in my holster. Sitting down and jumping up to.... Did you walk into me on purpose?"

"No sir," I said, going for dumb. "I was on my way to the John when I saw you touch your holster. I was so busy watching your hand, I guess I didn't notice where I was walking. That's all."

"Where's the woman you were sitting with?"

"Isn't she here?" I asked brightly.

"She ran out, disappeared in the streets."

"Yeah?" I hoped the relief I felt didn't show. "Said she was going to the ladies room, so I figured I might as well go myself. Officer, I certainly don't want trouble. I mean, I came here to see the sights and... I got into a conversation with this gal on the boardwalk and one thing became another and I made a date to meet her outside this club. Told me her name is Jane and..."

"Where's she staying?"

I gave out with a silly grin. "I don't know, we didn't have time to reach that plateau."

"Where do you come from?"

"Me? I told you I don't want any trouble. I know from nothing. Officer, I'm a married man. I've told you all I know about the dame. You want to talk about me, I insist upon calling my lawyer first."

Big boy hesitated; he didn't quite believe me. Then with a shrug he snapped, "Get the hell out of here! Mister, you don't begin to know how lucky you are. I could put you in jail for assault, for... Get out!"

As I walked toward the door the cop pulled out his notebook. "I'd better take your name and hotel for my report."

Big boy jumped ahead of me, still limping, whispered something to the cop. He had one hand on the policeman's shoulder, the other opened the door for me. Walking out I saw the cop put his notebook away as he said, "Okay, if that's the way you want it..."

I stood in the night club lobby, looking around-as if waiting for Rose. The manager came over and when I asked what I owed, he told me to forget it-on my way out. Taking my coat from the hat check gal, I asked if she'd please go into the ladies room and see if "Jane" was there. She was a young kid with a doll face and too much make-up. She said, "If you're talking about the big woman, she never went in. She went right out to the street."

"Are you certain?"

"As I told that detective, I don't keep track of the patrons going to the ladies room. Only I remember her because she was so big and because she left without her coat. That's all I know."

I dropped a ten buck bill on the counter. "Any idea which way she went?"

"Mister, my eyes ain't periscopes. I'm way inside here, how could I possibly know which way?" She glanced down at the ten spot. "I could have lied and given you a line about she went toward the boardwalk, or away from it But I play it straight."

"Okay, keep it and the sermon too."

It was damp and chilly outside. Without her coat Rose would... Where was she? Where could she have gone to? There were a couple of cabs at the curb but I figured it would be a waste of time asking them. Certainly big boy had. Glancing around like a ham actor I strode to the corner, walked a block, and turned down a dark quiet sidestreet full of silent houses. I waited

in the middle of the block. I didn't seem to be followed. Turning into various sidestreets I went back to the hotel. I was feeling rather cocky about the cool way I'd handled Mr. Washington. Almost as good as the way I felt on bringing the Sea Princess through the storm. I had to find Rose and get her safely away... and then she was going to tell me the *real* story behind this cops and robbers deal.

The key was at the desk but I went up to our room expecting Rose to pop out of a doorway in the hall any minute. The empty silence of the room was a letdown. I sat on the bed and lit a cigar. The only thing for me to do was wait. Rose would either come to the hotel or phone. But it was nasty outside and her minus a coat.

I took off my coat and tie and turned on the radio.

But I was far too restless to merely sit and wait. I told myself that whatever mess we were in was her fault-if she'd told me the truth at the start, we never would have left Ansel's island. Or did what had happened at the night club prove Rose *had* told me the truth? But for crying out loud, if all that stuff she'd given me was true -it made less sense than before. A Fed, a government man who hasn't seen her in at least two years and couldn't have been positive she was Rose, goes after her with his gun ready! What could Rose possibly have done to get that kind of treatment? Would he have gunned her down if I hadn't clobbered him? Or was it an act? Then he let me bluff him with the mere mention of calling a lawyer, and he wouldn't let the local badge make a report. Why? Another thing, he told me Rose *wasn't* wanted. I'd hate to see this joker in action if she was wanted!

The whole thing didn't make a bit of sense. This Fed knew damn well I hadn't kneed him by "accident." He could have hustled me down to the nearest jail and beat my brains out-yet he'd been almost polite to me. Why?

I kept chewing it around in my mind and all I came up with was a headache. Even my cigar tasted bad. The radio disc jockey said it was 2:00 A.M. I had to do something beside sitting on my rusty. Suppose Rose was hiding someplace on the beach, waiting for me-and freezing for almost two hours now? But if I left the hotel, how could she contact me? What if I went to the police, loud-talked them-or the Federal agent here, into giving me the whole story of why this joker had gone for his gun on Rose? Or would that bring the house down on us?

Hell, I was wasting time sitting here like a silly jerk.

Two hours gone. Rose could be dead by now or.... No point in losing my head. Rose would figure I'd had to give them the phony Anderson handle and this hotel... and that the place was probably crawling with dicks. But at least she could phone me and say... Say what? I was a fool: if they were watching the joint they were certainly keeping an ear on the switchboard.

I lifted the phone from its cradle to see if it was working. It was. Did a tapped phone sound any different? I saw several phonebooks and it suddenly came to me we'd been so smug we hadn't even checked the Atlantic City book for those names. I went through the book. Nothing. There was a Philly book and a thick New York City one, too.

For lack of anything better to do I checked the Philly book. No William Sour or Gootsrat. Or in the New York directory either. To kill time I went through all the G's and S's in both books. In New York there was a William Saure on West 113th Street and a Willy Sowor on Cork Avenue. I felt excited for a moment-either of them might be our boy and a lead to Rose. But the lonely hotel room gave me the blues again. The devil with whether Rose's story was true or not-*where was Rose!* Had big boy picked her up? Could she be waiting for me near the night club?

The thing sticking in my mind was-why had Rose told me she was going to the ladies room and skipped out instead? Leaving her coat didn't make sense. If she was going to run, why didn't she tell me so? Didn't Rose trust me any longer? Had she really been using me all this time? Or had she been on her way to the powder room when she saw big boy come after her, and decided to flee on the spur of the moment? But she'd told me to say I'd just picked her up. And one thing I couldn't doubt: Rose had been terrified.

At 3:00 A. M. I couldn't sit any longer. I slipped the desk clerk a five buck bill as I told him, "If Mrs. Anderson phones, or when she returns, tell her I'll either call or be back within an hour. She's to wait or leave a message."

I knew how it sounded. He let me have a small, understanding smile, as he said, "Of course, Mr. Anderson."

I was so edgy I wanted to smack the smirk off his thin face. But playing the great detective I returned his jerky grin, added, "I... er... got a big bagged tonight and she turned huffy."

"She'll get over it," Mr. Lonelyheart said smugly.

"I'm going out for some fresh air. Give her message, if she phones."

I walked through the deserted streets to the night club. It was closed and through the glass door I saw a young fellow in old army fatigue clothes starting to clean up. By twisting my neck I could also see the manager at the bar, checking the cash with the bouncer and barkeep. I circled the block slowly, looking for any place where Rose might be hiding. I also kept looking over my shoulder to see if I was being tailed. I tried thinking of a story in case I ran into the local cop, but my mind wouldn't come up with anything. There was a big old house with a glass enclosed porch and a TOURIST sign over the doorway, around the corner from the club. The place was completely dark. I rang the bell a few times.

After a couple of minutes a light snapped on inside and a moment later a guy in an old-fashioned nightgown came to the door. He was about thirty-five and still half-asleep. Long, stringy dark hair seemed to be sticking straight up from his head and the bony legs at the other end of the nightgown were shaking with cold. He was an odd looking guy with a drawn face and a long lantern jaw. He asked, "You ring my bell?"

"Did a tall woman check in here around midnight?"

He blinked and rubbed his arms against his sides. "Nobody has checked in here all month, officer."

"I'm not a cop. Are you sure...?"

"Geez. You got me out of my bed to ask that? I ought to bust you one on your nose!"

"Skip the tough chatter, you're not built for it," I said, waving another five dollar bill. "Here, buy yourself some salt water taffy. Nobody checked in at any time tonight?"

He opened the door wide enough to take the money. "I don't know if this is worth getting up for. We ain't had a guest in months. Summertime is when we get people." He held the bill up to his face, saw it was a five spot. "Anything else?"

"Forget it and sleep warm," I said, turning away. One thing: in "detective" work, flashing money was better than showing a badge.

I went around the block in the opposite direction and even poked under the boardwalk. I sat on some stone steps and shook the sand out of my shoes, watching the waves breaking, the crests foamy clean and white in the darkness. Away out I saw the dim lights of a ship, a big one. The ocean seemed so safe. I cursed myself for ever being stupid enough to leave the islands, for not realizing we had life in the bag.

I walked back to the club. There was only a single light deep inside the place. I banged on the glass door with a coin. It made an awful racket. After a moment the porter in the army fatigues came up and asked through the door what I wanted. I said I'd lost something in the club. He told me to come back tomorrow afternoon. Pressing two ten dollar bills against the door, I said, "I want to look for it now."

He hesitated. He had a worn RANGER shoulder patch on his fatigue jacket. It seemed wrong for him to be working as a porter. He also had a sort of holster full of tools hanging from the back of his belt. He took out a big wrench as he unlocked the door with his left hand, told me, "Make it quick, I've a lot of work ahead of me. What did you lose, a lighter?"

"No, a girl," I said, stepping inside. The sight of my face worried him.

Backing away he asked, "You the guy who caused the roughhouse tonight?"

"Roughhouse?" I repeated, talking fast. "Buddy, my girl ran out on me. She isn't at her hotel and she left her coat here. I think she might be hiding around in the club, in the building. All I want is to make sure she isn't here."

"And *if* you find her here, then what? I don't want any trouble."

A wild feeling of joy raced through me: Rose was here! "Buddy, she wasn't running from me. I think she saw her husband and took a powder. I'm only trying to help her."

I added another ten to the two in my mitt. He shook his head. Up close I saw he was older than I'd first thought. I told him, "Buddy, if I was here for trouble do you think that wrench would stop me? I worked with a Ranger team in Italy so I know you're tough. But look at my puss. I have a big edge on you in muscle and experience. Believe me: I'm only a guy hunting for a girl, afraid she's in trouble."

"I'll chance it and believe you. Walk ahead of me, into the club."

There was a single light on a stand in the center of the small stage. It was a big bulb but didn't seem to give out much light-the club looked smaller than I'd imagined, trashy and drab now. Two waxing machines stood on the tiny dance floor and with the chairs turned upside down on the tables, the joint seemed a weird forest of plain chair legs. The porter said, "Wait here while I get my keys," and stepped behind the bar. He took something out of a drawer. It was a very black .45. He said evenly, "Maybe you're telling the truth, maybe not. I have a permit for this and know how to use it. So don't fool around."



"Only an idiot talks back to a .45."

Waving the gun at me like a pointer he told me to lean over the bar with my hands out. I did it, watching him in the bar mirror, expecting to have my head split open any second. All he did was give me a fast frisk, then he asked, "All right, what you want, her coat?"

"Okay if I stand up?"

"Go ahead. Only remember-no matter how tough you think you are-I have the difference in my hand. And don't try coming too close to me. Whatcha want?"

I dropped the three tens on the bar. "The hat check girl was sure my girl ran out of here. But I-have an idea she must have doubled back. There's a service alley outside, where does that lead to?"

"The kitchen. Be impossible for her to have returned there without being seen."

"How about upstairs?" Rose might have returned and gone home with the cook. She was desperate enough.

"You blind? This is a one-story building. No way of reaching the roof from the outside."

"How about the cellar?"

"There's a door from the outside but she'd have to be able to pick a tough lock. We'll look. Walk ahead of me. I'll steer you."

The cellar was a clean, well lighted place with neat stacks of liquor cases and other supplies. I called out, "Rose, this is Mickey." The sound echoed back sadly and faded into the plain silence. I nodded at a locked door in one corner.

"The oil burner. She couldn't be in there."

I asked, "Can we look?"

He walked me over and unlocked the door. There were only a couple of big tanks and the burner. We went back upstairs and through the kitchen, looked in the refrigerator room. Standing in the center of the dance floor I called Rose's name again and didn't even get the weary echo.

He asked, "That about ends the tour. Satisfied?"

"Let's stop horsing around: where is she?"

"Jack, the first thing I do when I report is check the place. We do find a drunk sleeping around now and then. She isn't here. I would have called the police if she had been. I don't take a chance with female drunks."

"When I first came in you said something about *if* she was here. Sounded to me like you knew she *was* here."

"Mister, I had to know the play in case she returned while you were here. I don't stand still for a guy walloping a dame but I ain't going to risk my life over it either. You want her coat, take it. Hanging over there. Let me get back to my work. I have to finish by morning."

"Forget the coat." I headed for the main door. We passed two doors cleverly marked STAGS and MARES. "Let's look in here."

"If it will make you happy, but be careful, the floors are slippery. I've already hosed down the toilets so..."

"You did what?"

He gave me a cautious look. "Hosed down the toilets. I always start with them. You want to make sure, let's go."

"No, it's okay. I guess she'll get in touch with me. Sorry I bothered you." I tried not to walk too fast toward the door.

"Jack, you'd better get a decent night's sleep," he said, unlocking the door with his left hand.

"Yeah. You know how it is, I just met her and thought we'd... you know."

"I don't know, I'm happily married."

"Lucky you," I said, rushing out. He locked the door, waved his gun at me, and went back to work.

I walked toward the center of town, hunting for a phone. Even though as a detective I was a good sailor, I felt cocky again, for I knew where she was. In fact Rose'd told me where she was going. Although I'd made a mistake back there, calling her name-after I'd told the Fed she was "Jane," still, that didn't matter now.

As Rose stood up at the table she'd said, "I'm going to the *head*." Rose had been on boats enough to call the john a head.

I'd been sitting around like a dummy while Rose had somehow gone back to Asbury Park and the Sea Princess... the only place she could go to.

## VII

I couldn't find an all-night restaurant so I headed back for the hotel area and walked into the phone booth in the lobby of a large hotel. It was a few minutes after four and I had to tell the operator to keep ringing before I awoke anybody in the boat house. I answered a sleepy, "Hello?" with, "This is Whalen off the Sea Princess. Has my wife gone on board yet?"

"Nope."

"You sure?"

"Mr. Whalen, I didn't get to sleep until two because I was watching the late late show. No way she could have got on the dock without me opening the gate."

"When she comes, tell her I called and that I'll phone again." I hung up and sat in the booth for a moment, started a cigar working. Now I didn't know what to think.

I'd always seen in the movies how a guy made sure his call couldn't be traced by making a second one. That worked-in all the movies. The Sea Princess was our ace in our sleeve and I had to cover any tracks leading to her... There was a middle aged man with a real pot belly and detective written over his wide face watching me.

I opened the booth door and for a moment we both stared at each other, then I asked, "Something on your mind?"

"You." He had a mild voice and his hands were in sight. I wondered if this tub of old lard actually thought he could take me. "Kind of late to walk in, camp in the booth."

Of course he was the house dick. Still, even if I had the face of a goon I was dressed respectably. Also I had to make that cover-up call. I pointed up at the sign over the booth. "It says public phone and doesn't list any hours."

"So it does."

"I'm going to make another call."

"I'm not stopping you, merely standing here."

I shut the door. All the change I had was three quarters. I put one in the phone, asked information for the number of the hotel desk. I dialed that and told the clerk to give me the house man and make it snappy. Using two-bits

for a dime call made me feel very wealthy, for some reason. The desk clerk asked, "Who is calling, please?"

"The police!" I snapped.

My watching buddy took a wave from the desk and as he waddled over, I hung up and walked out. I could suddenly understand all of Rose's fears: a house dick comes over to eye a guy making a phone call in the middle of the night... a guy with a face like mine... and I became jittery. It was a normal move for the house man. Or was it?

I sat on a boardwalk bench and finished my cigar, watching the stars and the waves breaking on the beach -longing to be out there with Rose on the Sea Princess again, away from all this mess.

I went back to our hotel and with a little smirk the desk clerk informed me Mrs. Anderson hadn't called. I took the key and went up to our room. Opening the door, I saw the place was a wreck. The mattress had been cut open, suitcases turned upside down, drawers out. Like a prize fool I walked straight into the room and heard the swish sound of a blackjack cutting air a split second before the ceiling fell on me. As a curtain of darkness came over my eyes I thought I saw a pair of legs making for the door-one leg limping a bit.

I came to with my head throbbing like a bad motor. The top of my noggin was puffed and touching it made me scream. My side was on fire, too. The bastard had kicked me. It took a long moment to get the room in focus. I made it to my feet and staggered over to the bed, my knees shaking so it reminded me of my wrestling days and the hammy way I'd go rubber-legged. I sat very still for a long time, waiting for my head to land, praying I didn't have a concussion. I went through my pockets. My wallet and the dough was still there.

Going to the bathroom I ran cold water over my wrists. I touched my head tenderly. No blood. I opened my shirt. My left side was an angry red but the ribs seemed okay. I urinated and except for a small pain in my kidney, things were in working order. I held a towel full of cold water to my face and head. My wrist watch said a half hour had passed, but most of that had been sitting on the bed.

I locked the door and asked the elevator operator if he'd taken a man down who limped? He said no and his was the only car working in the early morning. Of course I wasn't *sure* I'd actually seen the limping legs.

In the lobby I asked the clerk and he said, "No one has entered or left here in the last two hours, except you. Any trouble, sir?"

"No."

I started for the door and he called after me, "Your clothes are unbuttoned, sir."

I buttoned my shirt and coat and went out. There was a pale line of light on the horizon and the cold sea air was what the doctor ordered. I was full of a lot of feelings: fear, bewilderment-and for the first time since I'd hooked up with Rose, *I was damn angry*. I walked toward the center of town and found the bus terminal. I got some change and phoned the boat house again. The same sleepy voice answered and when I said, "This is Whalen...." he said, "Aw now, Mr. Whalen, I don't like to complain but... I told you about the late late show. I hardly ever stay up to watch 'em because I'm a guy who needs his sleep. First you get me up and then about the time I'm closing my eyes again your wife comes and now..."

The only feeling I had was one of pure sweet relief. I cut in with, "Listen, it's worth ten bucks if you'll get her to the phone."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Whalen. Hold on."

It took fifteen minutes for Rose to walk the dock and reach the boat house phone. I sat there, almost humming to myself. I felt cocky again. It would be a snap for me to reach Asbury, only about thirty miles away. Hell, I could even buy an outboard and make it along the coast. I turned to see if anybody in the bus terminal was watching me. The sudden movement of my sore head made me dizzy.

A couple of other ideas came bubbling to the surface of my cocky mood. I was still angry about the clout on the head, wanted to pay somebody back. Since Rose was safe on the boat, I could go to New York and look up the two "Sour" jokers I'd found in the phone book, perhaps get to the bottom of all this. The other idea was: I *had* to solve things, or at least give it a good try. Now that I was certain a Federal man was after Rose, I'd best damn well know what sort of mess she was in. Not that I was really frightened. I mean, no matter how badly she was wanted by Washington, I'd never leave her. Still, it was better knowing what I was facing and this would be my last chance. I *had* to go to New York, follow even a slim clue like the phone book names that... Rose's voice interrupted my thinking.

The words coming fast, she asked, "Where are you phoning from?" Her voice was hoarse but full of the warmth I knew.

"A public booth. Don't worry, it won't be traced. I promised the boat house guy a ten spot, give it to him. Are you okay, honey?"

"Yes." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And you?"

"Fine. Maybe pooped from looking for you..."

"Where are you?"

"Still in Atlantic City."

"Oh God, what's keeping you? Mickey, I expected to find you waiting here for me. We must sail at once."

"It took me some time to get your message," I wisecracked. "Look, I'd like to get to the bottom of all this. Long as we're here and..."

"No, Mickey!" Hysteria was back in her voice. "We've had it! Promise me you'll come directly here, and be very careful."

"Okay, but it will take time. I don't want to bring any company. Are you certain you weren't followed?"

"Yes. I managed to get a bus to Philly, a train to New York. Then a subway to Newark where I hired a cab to drive me to Elizabeth, and a few more cabs to here."

"Damn," I said, full of admiration. "Now listen, sit tight and don't worry. I'll be along. But it will take time. I mean, I'll have to do all that twisting and turning, too, and at this hour in the morning there may not be any trains. No matter what happens, you wait on the boat."

"I will, but hurry. Darling, you're really not hurt or in trouble?"

"No. I won't try to call you again, too risky. I'm leaving here now and I should be with you by late afternoon."

"Be careful, Mickey."

"Yeah. And you stay put and wait."

I hung up and called the other hotel, asked for the house man again, and hung up. To be even safer, I phoned our hotel and asked for their rates. With two cover calls, we couldn't be traced-unless the movies were liars.

I was in luck, there was a direct bus to New York leaving in five minutes. I watched the people boarding it and didn't see anybody looking like a dick. But then I didn't know how to make a tail. Obviously big boy had been following me around ever since I left the club last night. Although he could have easily checked the hotels for a Mickey Anderson.

It was a four hour ride to New York on the turnpike and I had a headache most of the way. But when I walked out into Times Square I had coffee and felt better. I couldn't comb my hair so I bought a hat. For a few

minutes I wandered around Broadway, and seeing the rushing people, the big buildings, was a charge. I glanced around like a hick, somehow expecting Hal among the crowds. I had to find out about train and bus schedules and the safest way was the phone. It turned out to be a snap to reach Asbury Park almost any time I wanted to. And now that Rose was safe, what did I have to lose by digging around a little? Maybe Rose had been telling the truth-I was sure she had- but her story was so weird there had to be *more* to it.

Really wasn't much looking I could do, except checking on the "Sours" in the phone book, and that wouldn't take more than an hour.

I rode a subway uptown, to say I'd been on one, and when I got off and asked for the address on West 113th Street, a street cleaner told me I'd taken the wrong train and I finally took a cab.

I found myself in a colored neighborhood and William Saure turned out to be an elderly brown man who thought I was a cop and had never heard of any Willie Sour or Josef Fedor, and was quite relieved when I told him it was all a mistake.

That left Willy Sowor on Cork Avenue-whatever that was. A cab let me off in front of a seedy looking brownstone rooming house in a block of old houses and swank new apartments. I rang the basement bell and when I didn't get any answer, trotted up the stoop steps, rang another bell.

A little old guy who could have been a retired jockey answered the door. He wore a dirty grey turtle neck sweater, stained slacks, and slippers. His face was too narrow for his features, causing them to look wrinkled and tense. When I asked for Willy Sowor he gave me a blank look and whispered something. He didn't seem to have any voice. When I asked what he'd said, he cupped his ear and told me to step inside. We were in a little hallway which looked a hundred years old, but at the same time this must have been a ritzy house a hundred years ago. A neat carpeted stairway with a fancy polished wooden banister ran up to the next floor. Several closed, thick wooden doors, with fancy scrolls and designs on them, opened on the hallway. The house sure looked far better kept on the inside.

The little man made this whispering sound again. When I asked, "What?" he opened his mouth to show he didn't have any teeth. I asked loudly, "Does Willy Sowor live here? S-o-w-o-r?"

He nodded.

"The guy has something wrong with his nose?"

He worked his head in another nod.

"Where is he?"

Motioning for me to bend down, he put one arm around my shoulders-and let it fall to my hips-as he whispered hoarsely, "He-out." A strong blast of stale food went with the words.

I had an idea he was frisking me. "Well, when will Sowor be back?"

"Him... return... one hour. You wait?"

I straightened up. "I'll be back in an hour. One hour." I held up a single finger like a loony. "You tell him it's important, to be sure and wait."

The old guy gave me a gummy smile. "Me tell. Who you?"

"Friend." The pidgin English gave me a brilliant idea. I winked at the little guy and told him, "I want to see Willy about some gals. Rose and a doll called Lucy. You know her, Me-lucy-ah?"

"I tell."

"Good. I'll be back in an hour. Tell Willy to wait."

"He wait."

I went out and wondered how to kill an hour. Despite the jockey's breath I was still hungry. There was a stool joint on the corner. I had eggs and toast, juice and coffee, felt like my old self again. I was sitting so I could watch the house through the window-and see what Willy looked like. My side ached and the top of my head was still floating, but I'd felt worse than this after some of my wrestling acts.

Above all, I was quite pleased with my luck in finding Willy-boy. The quiet private house was a break, too. If Sowor didn't talk straight I'd either bribe or beat some info out of him. One way or another, in an hour I'd know the score. I bought a cigar and sat there, watching the house and belching, feeling like a stuffed Sherlock Holmes. I didn't know exactly why I was watching the house. I suppose it wasn't so much I wanted to see what Sowor looked like walking up the steps, but I had an idea he was home all the time and might *leave* the house.

The joint began to fill up with construction workers, all of them wearing plastic helmets and full of loud, corny talk. It was noon and my stool was being eyed, so I went outside to take a little walk, buy a roll of tape and put it on my sore side. As I stood on the corner, looking around for a drugstore-debating about being out of sight of the house-two big kids stopped and asked if I could spare a match. They looked like college



students and the one with the cigarette in his mouth was as tall and thin as a basketball player.

The last thing they looked like were pros. The tall one with the cigarette stood in front of me, while the other one, a tweedy, stubby character wearing heavy frame glasses, stood at my side and back. I took out a pack of matches and started to say he could keep them-when I felt guns pressing my stomach and back. The basketball type said softly, "No trouble, please. We will not hesitate to use these."

I was so astonished I couldn't talk. This kid could be nineteen or twenty and he wasn't hard looking or a nut, yet his eyes said he wouldn't worry a second over plugging me. Whoever they were, they weren't cops. I asked, "What is this?"

Tweedy at my back said, "Don't go for dumb." He had a deep, rough voice.

The basketball player held his right hand in his pocket and with his left gently pulled my cigar from my mouth, lit his cigarette, and shoved the cigar back between my lips. It was a simple movement, and it gave me a helpless feeling. He said softly, "Walk with us." He suddenly laughed and putting his arm around my shoulder, kind of pushed me up the avenue. His gun was on the wrong side, away from me, but deep voice walking behind us warned, "One false move and you get it. Be smart and we won't hurt you."

We walked up the avenue, the tail one talking loudly about baseball, slapping me on the back now and then. Maybe he was an actor; the three of us looked like buddy-buddies.

We turned into a side street, walked a short block. This was where the construction workers came from and it was a startling sight-like the shelled cities I'd seen on the Italian coast during the war. For several blocks on either side of us there was this leveled area full of the rubble of torn down old buildings, with part of a wall standing here and there. A block or two over were the bulldozers and cranes but where we walked was deserted. The one at my back said, "Let's get to work. Where is it?" He ran his hand over my clothes.

"Where is what? I don't know what you jokers are talking about. What is this?" A punch in the long gut of the basketball player would take him out but there wasn't anything I could do about tweedy behind me.

The tall one said, "You asked for Sowor. We don't know who you are or on what side. We have no desire to kill you, but we will if necessary. That's up to you. Where is it? Where's the girl?"

"What the hell is 'it?'" I wished I had on one of the construction helmets, another crack on my sore head would...

Basketball whipped out his small automatic and tried to push it through my belly. "Who are you? What do you want to see Sowor about? Did she send you?"

I didn't know what to answer.

Tweedy growled, "Come on, where is it?"

One gun seemed to be cutting my stomach muscles. I said, "I only wanted to ask Willy about some Oriental chippy named Me-lucy who I understand is a good number in the hay. A buddy told me to ask..."

Tweedy said, "Don't go for cute, mister!"

The tall one added, "Please don't make us prove we are serious. Where is it?"

"Look, boys, since you're holding the guns stop talking in riddles. At least tell me what you want?"

Tweedy's deep voice hit me like a club. "My God, he's playing it cute! I get nauseous when anybody feels they have to be coy. For the last time, cut the..."

A bullet whistled by us. We turned to see a short swarthy man coming over the bricks at our left-across the street-a sawed-off carbine in his hands. He yelled something I couldn't understand. The two boys turned from me and let go a wild volley of shots, sharp barks lost in the air. I saw his carbine flashing and then there was the sound of a car coming down the street toward us, and a guy had his hand out, firing as he drove. From the distance the driver might be big boy from Atlantic City. The boys were firing in all directions now as they started to run. I wheeled to my right and hit the ground. Making like a frightened lizard I crawled over the rubble, heading for the street on the other side.

I crawled, stood up and ran, dived into a gully between piles of stones. Crawling, running, falling-A basic training star-I reached the other street and lay behind half a stoop, my lungs pumping. The air was quiet, the heaving of my own chest the only sound. I slowly stood up behind the stoop and looked back; the other street was empty. I studied the rubble for a few minutes. No sign of any movement and not many hiding places.

I was a mess. My coat and one pants leg were torn and there was a long mild gash on my thigh. I'd lost my hat and I was covered with various kinds of dirt and dust. I moved away from the stoop, still watching the bricks and stones. I was alone. In fact I felt as alone as I would on the moon. Trying to brush myself off, I saw my pants' pocket had been ripped open and my wallet was gone. I'd only crawled about a hundred yards but there were a million crevices in the block of rubble into which the wallet could have fallen.

I waited another few minutes, then started back-not even sure I'd crawled in a straight line. It was worse than finding that needle in a haystack. But I had to have money and there wasn't anything to do but look and hope my college gunmen didn't return. I started walking, stooping down to push bricks aside, every muscle stiff and hurting. I'd covered about fifty feet when a voice called, "What are you doing in there?"

A young cop was coming down the middle of the street, swinging his night stick. I couldn't have run if I'd wanted to. I climbed back over the junk and reached the street. My left shoe was sliced open on one side.

The cop had a freshly scrubbed baby face, clean and neat as his blue uniform. He was compactly built, not very tall, and didn't look over twenty-one. This was my day for kids. He ran his eyes over me, made sure he didn't come too close, as he said, "You're in a bad way. Don't you know you're trespassing?"

"I know I lost my wallet with all my dough crawling over this stuff. Listen, two big kids walked me down that street over there, covering me with guns. Then a guy with a sawed-off rifle came firing at us, and a fellow in a car drove up, also banging away. I hit the dirt and crawled over here." I heard my voice dying: I could hardly believe the story myself!

The cop let me have a good natured grin. "You must have been on an all night binge. What were you guzzling, pure King Kong?"

I moved toward him, blowing my breath. "Smell any liquor?"

He jabbed me lightly in the stomach with his stick. "That's close enough."

"You smell any booze on me?"

"No. What happened to all these... er... gunmen?"

"I don't know. Maybe one of them is wounded or dead?"

"Let's look."

I started over the bricks but he said, "Come on, we'll walk around- using the street."

As we walked he asked, "Was it a stickup? How many men were shooting?"

"Four, that I saw. No, it wasn't a stickup."

"What were they... eh... shooting at you for?"

"I don't know. Two kids stopped me on the avenue over there, asked for a light. Looked like college boys- no older than you. Then they throw guns on me and walk me here, where the shooting started."

The cop glanced over the deserted streets, gripped his night stick. "You been sick recently, mister?"

"Look, you think I crawled through that crap for exercise? I'm telling you straight! Lord, there was a small war going on, didn't you hear any gunfire?"

We'd reached the spot where it had started, there wasn't any blood, no body, not even an empty shell. Babyface stared at me. "I turned the corner from over there about three minutes ago. I didn't hear shots. Have you any identification?"

"Told you, I lost my wallet. See how my pocket is ripped? Damn it, do you think I cut myself up like this as a practical joke!"

"Don't shout. Got a home?"

"Yeah. That is, I came into town this morning to see the sights and..."

"No sights around here. What's your business?"

"I'm a shrimp buyer down in Tampa."

"Your clothes are a mess but you don't look like a bum. Let's go to the precinct house and call a doc to..."

"Doctor? I'm not crazy! I'm telling you the truth! There were at least a dozen shots fired, the slugs must have hit something. Find them and..."

He shook his head sadly, his eyes running over the leveled blocks. I realized how stupid I sounded: it would be impossible to find any lead in this mess, even if they might be imbedded in the remains of the few walls still standing. He said, "There's a construction office way over there, somebody would have come running, or reported shots."

The office and equipment was a good four blocks away, they couldn't have heard the shots. And most of them were at lunch. I gave up. "Officer, whether you believe it or not, I'm telling you the truth. I'll go back to my... hotel and change."

"Nothing I can hold you for. Sure you're feeling okay?"

"Yeah.". I glanced at my wrist watch. The crystal was smashed but the watch was still ticking. Sowor would be back by now. I'd sure *killed* an hour!

The cop pulled out a notebook. "Give me your name and address, list of any papers you had in the wallet, and how much money. In case it's found you'll be able to claim it."

"There was over six hundred bucks in the wallet; nobody will turn it in. I'm late for a business appointment. So long, officer." I headed toward the avenue. He didn't stop me. Turning the corner I glanced back to see the young cop still standing where I'd left him, swinging his club vigorously. For a second I wondered if he wasn't *too* young to be a policeman. Passing a store window I saw my reflection. My face and shirt were dirty, my clothes torn. All told I looked like the wrath of God.

There was this dull little bar and I went in and asked the fat bartender where the men's room was. He pointed to a narrow door, asked, "You been playing potsy with a truck?"

"I fell in the remains of the houses around the corner," I said, making for the John. I heard him call out, "Then sue 'em."

The men's room wasn't much bigger than a coffin but I was able to clean up my face and hands, brush most of the dirt off my torn clothes. I still looked terrible, a few bruises on my face, and my hands full of cuts. I tried to comb my hair with my fingers and felt blood on the matted hair. When I came out the barkeep said, "You look like you need a belt. What will it be?"

"I sure need something. Rye neat... Wait." I felt of my pockets. I didn't have a cent on me. "Never mind, I lost my wallet in the bricks. Unless you want to take a slightly busted wristwatch in payment?"

The barkeep glanced at my watch and shook his head. A little guy wearing a stained butcher's white coat and a battered straw hat who was reading a track tip sheet and sipping a brew at a table said without looking up, "I'll pay for his shot, Jim. If he needs one half as bad as he looks, be inhuman not to give him a taste."

I thanked him. He winked as he told me, "I know how you feel. I go on a bender for a couple days myself. Anyway, soon as they build this project, all us storekeepers are going to be rich. That's why they jack up my rent

now, when they're just tearing down the houses and ain't even started the project foundation. Darn shame..."

I gulped the rye and thanked him on my way out. I didn't have time for bar chatter. The drink didn't work any miracles, I still felt sore and hurt, but it cleared up some of the fog. I knew one thing. Rose hadn't been imagining a single incident. I also knew I was going to get to the bottom of this fast, and on the way I'd get hunk with somebody for the beatings I'd been taking the last dozen or so hours.

Reaching the brownstone I went up the steep stairs, rang the bell. The toothless old jockey in the dirty turtle-neck gave me both gums in a smile-which vanished as he took in my torn clothes. I asked, "Sowor here?"

He nodded, pointed toward one of the heavy wooden doors, and whispered, "You go-in there."

I suppose in the old days this must have been the sitting room. I slid the big doors open and it was still a sitting room. Two burly men were sitting there. They scrambled to their big feet and one of them flashed a small badge. "We're detectives. We'd like to talk to you."

"About what?"

"A few questions. Nothing to worry about. Come with us." One of them took my arm at the elbow, the other walked with his hand brushing my free arm. They certainly looked like cops, yet I had a hunch it was phony - too fast and pat. Turtleneck opened the front door and we went down the steps and toward a plain car. I stopped walking, shook my arm free. "Where are we going for this talk?"

"Just to our office."

"I want to call my lawyer before I go any place. Let me see your badge again."

"No need to be alarmed. I said we only want to ask you a few questions. May be a good deal for you..."

"The badges!"

The guy at my elbow said, "You've nothing to get 'em in an uproar about," and flashed a badge in a leather case. I knew what had hit me as wrong before. The badge seemed too small. I grabbed his wrist and read enough of the tin to know he was a private snoop!

I spun him against his partner and, lunging backwards, kicked out with both my thirteens. It was the old drop-kick, only we used to be careful to kick the other guy on the shoulder or chest, and as he was expecting it, he'd

be falling away and wouldn't get hurt. Now, one of my shoes caught a dick on the side of his head-and I could feel it up to my knee-while the other clown stopped a shoe on his arm. He had good reflexes. He stumbled back, then turned and ran. His partner dropped to the sidewalk-out cold.

I saw all this in a flash as I was in mid-air. In the ring you broke the fall by landing On your shoulders and rocking forward on your backside. I never found a ring canvas soft but compared to the sidewalk it would have felt like a foam mattress. I hit on my back with a thud that knocked all the air out of me and sent my sore head spinning like a drunken rocket.

For a long time I couldn't get up. I wasn't out, merely lying on the hard sidewalk in a kind of dizzy comfort. A few people began to gather on the other side of the street. They looked like a distant horizon to me. I sat up and held the sides of my face to keep my head together. The dick I'd kicked in the head was still crumpled near me. The crowd came into focus, it had more people. I heard the sound of running feet, a voice asking, "What's going on here?" The voice sounded slightly familiar.

I looked up into the baby face of the young cop. He said, "You cover my post better than I do. Now what happened?"

"This lump and another guy claimed they were police officers and tried to force me into that car over there. They're private detectives and I refused to go with them."

"You been knifed-your neck is full of blood," the cop said as he knelt beside the private eye. "I hope this one is alive. What did you slug him with?"

"My foot."

"Cut the jokes and tell me a straight story."

"I am. Listen: I came to this house to see a man. Some old little guy in a turtleneck sweater who doesn't speak much English told me the fellow would be back in an hour. I was walking around when two young fellows pulled guns on me-all that stuff I told you happened back where they're knocking down the buildings. When I left you I returned to this house and these two jokers were waiting for me. When I found they were private peepers, I refused to go with them."

"Where were they taking you? What did they want?"

"Beats me."

The young cop sighed. "Everything happens to you." He pulled out his notebook. "What's your name and address?"

I told him Mickey Anderson, a phony address in Tampa. A radio car drove up and two more cops came over, went into conference with Babyface. The private eye finally sat up, groggy as hell, a little blood on his ear. I managed to stand and the young cop grabbed me as I started for the snooper. "No more roughhouse, Anderson."

"I'm getting fed up with it myself. I'm too old for these falls. But I want to ask this character what the devil this is all about."

The other cops were helping him to his feet and *my* cop told me, "They're going to take him to the station house, see if he needs a doc. You can use a medic yourself, your neck is all blood."

I put my hand to my neck and stared at the blood on my palm. "I'm okay. That's from the bump on my head. I was slugged last night."

"You really live dangerously. What business you in?"

"Shrimps."

"That hooked up with the rackets?"

"No. I keep telling you I don't know what this is all about. I'm only up here for a vacation. Where are they taking him?"

"I told you, to the precinct house. If you feel okay, let's you and me talk to the old man you claim you saw in this house, then we'll go to the station."

"Fine."

When we rang the bell the little old jockey opened the door immediately and said, "Officer, I'm glad you're here. This man has been a ruddy nuisance!" He had a mouthful of perfect teeth and spoke with a clipped British accent.

The cop gave me big eyes. "This the fellow you were looking for?"

"No. He's the one I talked to, who told me to come back in an hour."

"I thought you said he spoke broken English?"

"He didn't have his teeth in then."

The little man drew himself up. "What sort of bloody nonsense is this? Officer, do I have to be insulted on my own property? This creature has been making a pest of himself for..."

"Who called those two private bulls waiting for me in the living room?" I cut in.

"I haven't the smallest idea what you are raving about. I run a respectable rooming establishment and resent these thugs scuffling in front of my property."



"Let's start from the beginning. Did this man come here an hour ago?" Babyface asked, pointing his night stick toward me.

"Indeed he did. He seemed to be under the weather, too. He asked for a former tenant. I tried to explain that Mr. Sowor no longer lives here. He returned minutes ago, obviously after having imbibed more liquids and having been in a drunken brawl. He again asked for Mr. Sowor. I again informed him Mr. Sowor no longer is a tenant here and shut the door in his face. The next thing I knew, there were sounds of scuffling and I looked out to see him and another chap stretched out on the sidewalk."

"He claims two men, including the one on the sidewalk, were waiting in your house when he returned," Babyface said.

The little man threw back his head and laughed, showing all his too-white teeth. "One only has to glance at him to see a drunken..."

"Where is Willy Sowor?" I cut in.

"Poor Mr. Sowor died many months ago. He was run down by a car on the avenue on a rainy night not far from here. I must say Mr. Sowor also imbibed a great deal."

"What kind of business was he in?" I asked.

Turtleneck blinked. "You have your blasted cheek! All I ask of my tenants is for them to pay their rent on time and respect my privacy-and I certainly respect theirs!"

The cop wrote down his name and the address of the house and as we walked down the steps I said, "That little clown is lying in his store teeth!"

"Maybe. Only two things in your favor: you weren't drunk when I saw you on the brick pile, and the old man *is* wearing false teeth. We're three blocks from the precinct, can you walk it?"

"Sure." People were turning to watch us. I wiped the blood from my neck with a handkerchief and threw it in a trash can, turned up my coat collar.

"What was your business with this Sowor fellow?"

"No business. A girl I used to know once mentioned him. Being in New York, I looked him up in the phone book, wanted to ask if he could tell me where this girl is now."

"Why didn't you phone him?"

"Come on, a guy doesn't give out personal info over a phone. If he's dead, how come he's still listed in the book? Anyway I can check to see if he's really dead?"

"Since the accident was in our precinct, I can find out. As to the phone book, they can't change a listing until a new book comes out, and I think that's once a year. Have you ever been in trouble before, Mr. Anderson?"

*"Before? What kind of trouble am I in now?"*

"You know what I mean, any police record?"

"Nope."

He sighed. "Your story sounds so fantastic I almost believe it. Also you don't look smart enough to think up a lie this big."

I said, "Well, thanks, officer," my voice full of sarcasm. "When we talk to that private dick, we'll find out what this is all about. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"You'd better. You're looking worse every time I see you. That's some tin ear you're sporting. I've heard of 'em but you don't see them nowadays. When were you a pug?"

*"I did some amateur boxing years ago."*

Reaching the police station Babyface took me before the desk lieutenant and saluted. He started to explain what had happened when the desk officer, a dapper fellow of about forty-five dressed in a pressed white shirt and plain black tie, cut him off with, "I know all about the case, officer."

Babyface went to the rear of the police station. The desk officer studied me for a moment, like a judge, then he said, "This is your lucky day, no charges were pressed against you."

*"Against me?"*

"You could have been rapped for assault, disorderly conduct."

"Lieutenant, haven't you got all this a wee bit rump-backwards? I was the one attacked-or maybe kidnapped is a better word. Where's the private eye? Will it be okay if I talk to him in his cell-through the bars?"

"You can talk to him wherever you wish, but not in here. Since he didn't press charges, we had no reason to hold him," the desk officer said, his voice sounding bored.

*"Are you telling me you let him go?"*

He nodded. "You look in rough shape. Want me to call an ambulance doc?"

"Of all the... I have to speak to that guy!" I yelled, refusing to believe what I'd heard. "What's his name and address?"

The desk officer looked thoughtful. "Let me see... Joe... or Jack... I had a fast peep at his credentials but you understand, I have a thousand details to take care of and so I..."

"Look, are you sitting up there and saying you didn't even take his name down, that you haven't any record at all of this?"

"What do you think the blotter is, an autograph album? Mister, a guy is brought in dazed, beaten up. Against my advice he flatly refuses to press charges, or even medical aid. I have no reason to book him or..."

"Damn it, how come you couldn't at least wait until I came here! I was the one attacked!"

The lieutenant gave me a buddy-buddy grin. "On the contrary, he told us you had kicked him--without provocation--as he was walking along the street. I figured you for a slim type--to kick that high. The officers who brought him in said you acted like you were bagged. I asked him to press charges but he refused, so I could hardly detain him."

"Of all the goddamn...!"

"Don't raise your voice, this is no gin mill!" he snapped. "You look like a brawler but we tranquilize rougher punks than you every day. Let me see some identification."

"I lost my wallet."

He gave me a cynical smile.

"He reported that to me, sir, before this... latest incident."

I spun around, hadn't heard Babyface return. He told the desk officer about finding me walking around among the leveled buildings, my story about being shot at. Then seeing me stretched out on the sidewalk in front of Sowor's house, his conversation with the old man with false teeth. "I've called downtown, sir. A Willy Sowor was killed by an unknown hit and run driver last November. Also, there's no yellow sheet on this man."

The lieutenant shook his head. "That's the worst crock of bull I've heard this week. Roll back your sleeves and pants legs."

"What?"

"Come on, do what you're told."

I showed him my arms and legs and he said, "You looked too-healthy for a junkie. My advice to you is, go home and sleep it off. Keep on talking like this and I'll send you to Bellevue for observation."

I started to say something but didn't. I had a feeling I was not only wasting time here but that I was dealing with the enemy. The only thing was

to go back and have a talk with the old jockey. The desk officer must have been a mind-reader. He said, "I'm going to give you a break, let you go. But get this straight, haul your hips out of this precinct and fast. You annoy anybody else around here and I'll put you in a straightjacket!"

I hesitated for a moment. The place seemed to be filling up with uniformed cops. I felt trapped. I shrugged and headed for the door. Suddenly I wasn't as much angry as plain tired. All I wanted was to get out of this rat trap, return to Rose and our boat; get the hell back to Ansel's island where the only problem was whether we'd sleep all day or go underwater fishing. I don't know, maybe I was nuts. Or everybody else was.

Walking outside, I wondered what to do: I didn't have one cent on me. I didn't even have a cigar butt. I could phone Rose and reverse the charges, but I needed a dime to do that. And suppose I did call, Rose would have to come to New York to get me. Or wire some money, and wire it to where? I could wire her collect and wait for the money at a Western Union office, only-would they give it to me without identification? For all I knew, in this weird setup we found ourselves in, a telegram might lead *them* to Rose and the boat. I couldn't risk our last out.

But along about now Rose would begin to worry, might even set out to find me, and that would be a mess. How could I travel the hundred miles, or whatever the distance was, to Asbury Park? The way I looked, nobody in their right mind would let me hitch a ride.

Two columns of cops smartly marched out of the police station and stood at attention on the sidewalk. A sergeant dismissed them and as they broke ranks and walked away, more policemen began to approach the station house. They were changing tours. I watched like a hick until I told myself to snap out of it. I didn't have a friend in town, least of all the cops, and I had to borrow money to reach Rose. But wait-I did have one buddy in the big city.

Hal Anderson had said he lived in New York. If he wasn't at sea I could borrow from him. I walked into a drugstore and looked in the phone book. There were three Harold Andersons in Manhattan, two in the Bronx, and four in Brooklyn and Queens. I racked my brains but couldn't come up with the name of the steamship company Hal worked for, and even if I knew, they probably wouldn't give out his home address. When I asked the druggist if he could spare a hunk of paper and a pencil, he gave me a nervous look and mumbled he was busy. I didn't blame him. I saw myself in

a shaving mirror on the counter and I looked like a goon who'd been worked over.

I walked out to find another store. I'd tear the pages out of the phone book. A highschool kid with a brush crewcut and wearing an old windbreaker was crossing the street toward a parked car. He waved at me and walked my way. It took me a second to recognize my young cop. He grinned as he said, "Better not hang around here, Mr. Anderson. The lieutenant can be a wild hair, and give you a hell of a rough time, when he feels nasty."

"How come he let that guy go without getting his name and address?"

"Well, it was a bit unusual. He should have waited until I-as the investigating officer-showed up. I've covered myself in my memo book, though."

"You know the dick's name?"

"No. But I wrote that upon reaching the precinct house I found the alleged assaulter, an 'unknown male,' had been released. Maybe the lieutenant was hasty, but consider things from his side, your story sounds fantastic. He..."

"Bull! He let him go before he ever heard my story!"

Babyface shrugged. "Strictly between us, the private badge must have been from a big agency. I shouldn't be telling you this, but the locker room grapevine says the dick was working for an oil company. Big stuff."

"Oil? What's an oil outfit got to do with this?"

"You tell me. The point is, the lieutenant can't buck the big wheels. Nor can I buck the lieutenant. As I said, perhaps he did act too fast, but that's all. We police have to follow the law, too."

"Don't talk to me about the law. In less than twenty-four hours I've been slugged, shot at, and rooked-mostly by jerks sporting badges of one kind or another!"

"I don't know what you're mixed up in, Mr. Anderson, but here's some straight advice. Don't hang around here or you'll have more badge trouble."

"I've had my fill. Look, when I lost my wallet I also lost all my loose change. I haven't a penny, can't even board a bus or subway. Can you lend me a buck? Give me your name and address and I swear I'll mail you back five tomorrow. Or take this busted wrist watch. I broke it on those damn bricks."

The cop dug in his pocket. "A buck? You must travel in style. A subway token costs fifteen cents. Here's thirty cents, which will get you any place in town. Don't worry about returning it. You're better than a cops-and-robbers movie. Now keep moving, chum."

I took the quarter and nickel. He headed for his car, stopped, and called out, "I can drive you part of the way downtown."

"Thanks, but I have to make a call. I don't exactly know where I'm going. I mean, I have to see which of my friends is in town." I knew it sounded stupid but I didn't trust any cop now.

He said, "You're a real case, buddy," and got in his car.

For a split second I wondered if I could make a deal, have him drive me to Asbury and give him fifty or a hundred bucks? But I couldn't afford *that* risk.

I walked down a few blocks and into a candy store, looked up the Harold Andersons in the phone books again. I had three chances out of nine of hitting the right one: three to one odds were rough. It seemed to me Hal had said something about a house and from the little I'd seen of Manhattan, it was all apartment houses. I decided to risk my money on the Bronx and Brooklyn. When I asked for change I thought the fat lady behind the counter was going to scream for help. But she gave me three dimes, even if her hand shook.

I dialed the first Hal Anderson in the Bronx, working the dial carefully—a wrong number would ruin me. A man answered and told me he certainly wasn't a ship's purser and hung up. Next I tried a Brooklyn Harold Anderson and didn't get any answer. I went through a bad moment waiting for the dime to return. I picked another Anderson number in Brooklyn and a woman's voice with a warm accent said, "Oui," when I went into the ship's purser bit. I realized she had to be Hal's French wife and I couldn't have felt better if I'd hit the daily double. I said, "My name is Mickey Whalen. I was a friend of Hal's down in Florida. We had a boat together."

There was a brief silence and I had a chill. Suppose Hal had never mentioned me to his wife?

"Ah, yes. He often talks about you."

"Is Hal home?"

"No. His ship is not due for another week. Too bad, he would want to see you."

"Mrs. Anderson, I'm in a kind of trouble. I know this sounds odd, but I fell down and lost my wallet. I need a few dollars and don't know a soul in the city but Hal- and you. I have no one else to turn to."

"Well..." There was another silence, then she asked, "What was the name of the boat you two had?"

"The Sea Princess. Did Hal tell you he saw me down in Haiti a month or two ago?"

"Yes. How much money do you need, Mr. Whalen?"

"A few dollars. I arrived in New York this morning and had this accident with my wallet. Can I come over to your house, now?"

"Of course. Have you...?"

The operator cut in to ask for another nickel.

Hal's wife asked, "Have you a car?"

"No."

"Where are you?"

"In Manhattan."

"Then take the D metro, the subway marked D to..."

The operator demanded her nickel again and I said, "I'll be out, Mrs. Anderson, but I have to walk. Wait for me."

I hung up and used my last dime to dial the Anderson who'd been out, to erase the call in case I was being followed. I was getting worse than Rose, didn't put a thing beyond whoever was after us. The party was still not home. So I had a big fat dime, and the subway cost fifteen cents.

Stepping out of the phone booth I wiped the sweat from my face as I asked the old lady behind the counter, "Which way is Brooklyn?"

In a thick accent she said, "Walk two blocks down and turn right. That's the subway. Get on the downtown side and then ask the conductor for..."

"I'm walking. Which way is it, please?" I knew I was talking too much. If I was being followed and this plump lady told them about Brooklyn-but then Brooklyn must be a big place.

She shook her head and all her chins danced. "Walk?" She chuckled. "You funny enough to be on TV. Brooklyn is maybe ten-twenty miles from here. My God, Coney Island must be fifty miles. Better you take subway."

"Sure it would be better but I have to walk." I held up the dime. "I was in an accident, lost my money. This is all I have going for me, at the moment. Which way do I start walking?"

"Two blocks down and turn right, to subway," she said, placing a nickel on the counter. "Take this. And please, no wine."

"Thank you. I'm not a wino, no matter how I look. I'll return this by mail soon as..."

The chins did their dance again to another short chuckle. "No bother, I don't ask for it back. What's a nickel today? Penny is almost useless, five cents hardly buy anything. I used to have big display of nickel candy. Soon a dime be the same way, then quarter... all very bad. Frightens me. You use subway and be careful, no more *schnapps*."

At the door I waved and said, "Madame, for a few hours today I was convinced people are no damn good. May a good life be yours." I gave her a little bow, too.

Walking toward the subway I wondered if I was batty. Over a lousy jit I was starting to talk like a professional beggar. Me, the joker who'd been straining his wrist tipping everybody ten bucks last night.

On the downtown platform I asked a subway guard which train went to Brooklyn. He said, "Brooklyn covers a lot of territory. What address you want?"

"All I want is to get to Brooklyn," I snapped, full of suspicion.

"Take any train on this express track," he said, running his eyes over my clothes and turning away.

I boarded a near empty train and sat down, realizing how bushed I was. A little girl sitting across the aisle started to giggle. Sitting, the big rip in my pants showed most of my leg and everybody could see the torn shoe. I tried covering my leg with my overcoat but that was ripped too. I walked over to a map pasted on one window of the car to find the street Hal's wife lived on. I've studied some complicated sailing charts but I never saw anything like this map of the city. Finally I got a fix on an avenue that crossed Hal's street-after I figured out which subway I had to be on.

The farther downtown we went the more crowded the car became. I worried about whether I was being followed: I didn't want to bring my troubles to Hal or have the clowns chasing me have the opportunity of learning my real name. I remembered what Rose had once told me-how when she was on the run she had stepped out of the first car and waited to see if anybody else stepped out farther down the train.

I'd been keeping track of the stations on the map and had a long way to go, so I walked through the train, keeping my coat collar up and my bloody



neck from frightening anybody. Reaching the first car I stepped out at the next stop and glanced down the length of the train. More people than lived on Ansel's island seemed to be getting in and out. However, a few stations later it was better-the platform was almost empty. I stepped out and waited. Several cars down a pretty girl came out, then a guy in a windbreaker, and farther down an old man. I made a feint at stepping back in but all of them kept walking toward the exit. I jumped back into the train as the doors started to close.

I did this at every other station, felt pretty sure I wasn't being tailed. We went under a tunnel. My ears popped. And four stations later I reached my stop. I did my on and off number. It seemed to me a guy stuck his head out in the car next to mine. When the doors started to close and I made like I was jumping back in, I saw this guy pull in his head. All I could see was the back of a brown pork-pie hat and when the train went by I had a flash of the hat again-with a fancy red feather stuck in the band. It could have been my imagination.

Going up the steps I came out on an area looking like many small cities in the south, rows of private houses and a few stores, most of the streets lined with trees.

Afraid to ask, I walked in circles until I found the avenue I was looking for. I got my direction and started walking. They weren't kidding, Brooklyn is big. A half hour later I was still walking, my feet sore and all of me dead tired. My cut shoe seemed ready to fall apart. I stopped at a trash can and poked around until I found some string. I bound the shoe together across the instep and looked up to see a horse-faced woman staring down her big nose at me and making tsk, tsk noises. The string worked okay. I walked for another half hour, stopping to look into store windows, or turning down quiet side streets. I didn't see anybody following me. I'd be an easy make with my size and torn clothing.

It was almost six and starting to get dark when I passed another subway station and realized if I'd been able to ask I would have saved myself all the walking. Of course there were buses passing me all the time, going up and down the avenue, which didn't help my tired feeling. I was killing myself for a lousy fifteen cents. Even in the old days I'd never been *this* broke.

I finally reached Hal's street. I walked down it and looked at the numbers, knew I wasn't more than a block away from the house. To be on

the smart side I went back to the avenue and up another block. And then I got sick because I saw a stocky fellow walking behind me, *a red feather in his hat!* I stopped to glance at a grocery window and he went by me, and damn if he didn't stop to stare into a hardware window. I walked slowly by him and casually glanced around. There he was, following me.

When we reached the corner I stopped, pretended I was hunting for something in my pockets. Of course he couldn't simply stop and stand there, so he turned into this empty side street, walked slowly ahead of me. I followed him, waiting to see what he'd do now.

He walked along as if he didn't know I was there and when we started to pass a modest apartment house, he suddenly ducked down the service entrance. I jumped after him, determined to settle one badge's hash!

We were in a narrow concrete alleyway, dimly lit by a single bulb. He half turned as I rushed him, dropped when I clubbed the side of his head with my fist. He crumpled into an odd heap, legs corkscrewing under him. Then he fell forward on his face, the hat with the loud feather rolling away. I quickly frisked him. He was clean. I took out his wallet. There were three singles and some identification cards. One said he was a member of a hospitalization group. Another card said he was certified to operate an oil burner. The last identification card stated he was the superintendent of a building. For a moment I was puzzled, then with a horrible sickened feeling I read the address on the card. I ran out to the sidewalk- saw the same street number on the apartment building.

If my shoe wasn't busted I would have sprinted. I walked as fast as I could, heading back toward Hal's street. Several thoughts were thundering around in my sore head. The guy was okay, or would be in a few minutes. I'd dropped the wallet at his feet so they couldn't arrest me for robbery. But was suspicion driving me crazy? I'd flattened a harmless janitor minding his own business, all because he wore a colored feather in his hat band!

Lord, if anybody had seen me, if the cops ever bagged me, they'd let me have the book, if I didn't land in a padded cell. I'd deserve it. Who would believe my story? Not even me! No wonder Rose had been flipping with fright: *suspicion and caution can be harder on your nerves than dope.*

But there was little chance the super saw me, would be able to identify me, so I was in the clear. But if I was caught... damn! Why had I insisted upon coming to the States? How much of a clown can one guy be?

## VIII

Hal's house was a shingle and brick job with big picture windows, neat and new, like all the other houses on the block. The street seemed empty and, making as sure as I could that I wasn't seen, I quickly ran up the few steps. For the first time I noticed it was a two family house. I rang the bell with ANDERSON above it, and didn't hear a sound.

A man turned into the street from the avenue. I pressed the bell again. No sound. I had to get off the street but fast. I tried the door. It was open. Stepping into a two-by-four hall I was confronted with two doors. I cleverly pushed open the door which had a mat with a large "A" before it, walked up a sharp flight of stairs to another door. I knocked. A child's voice said, "My goodness, you know it's open, Mommy."

Opening the door I saw a little girl of about five with long colt legs standing naked in the middle of a large and shabby living room. There were many paintings on the walls, a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, a sewing machine, a typewriter. And in one corner a big chair in the process of being reupholstered. Part of it was down to the frame with chisels and planes and a pot of glue beside it. It was a large, low-ceilinged room, shabby only because of the beating the modernistic furniture had taken-from the little girl, probably. I expected the kid to yell when she saw me, instead she asked calmly, "Are you the company Mommy is expecting?" She had a cute pixy face.

"I hope so. Where is your mother?"

"Close your eyes."

"Why?" .

"My goodness, you should know boys must not look at girls without their clothes on. I am ready to take my bath. You close your eyes."

I shut my eyes. "Where's your mother, honey?"

"Got ya covered!" a shrill voice at my right said. I jumped and my heart seemed to explode. I spun around to see a boy of about seven standing behind the couch with a toy machine gun in his hands. I gave him a sickly grin. He looked so much like Hal it was startling. He said, "Gave you a scare, didn't I?"

"Yeah. Where...?"

"Please close your eyes until I get into the bathroom," the girl said.

I turned away from her and faced the boy, who gave me a burst of sparks. The little girl said, "Your eyes are still open!"

Shutting my eyes I told her, "Why don't you go to the bathroom and stop talking?" I half opened my eyelids.

"You are not my Daddy. I don't have to do what you say," she said.

The boy gave her a burst. "You'd better be in the tub before Mama comes back, Bessie."

"You shut up, Francois. Mommy told you about pointing that gun at..."

"You'd better call me Frank!" He advanced toward her with another burst of sparks, and with mock screams she ran into the bathroom and slammed the door. All the racket didn't help my head. The boy came back and gave me a man-to-man grin, showing a couple of buck teeth. "Girls are a pain. Gee, I wish I had a face as tough as yours. Did you bring me any presents, Mickey?"

"Well, I'm going to send you both presents in the mail. How did you know my name?"

"Pop talks about you a lot. He has a picture of you as a boxer. Gee, I don't know, can you send anything big through the mail? Like a wagon, or a sled? We almost had some snow the other day and I told..."

Somebody was rushing up the stairs and we both turned to face a small, woman, racing into the room, she was young, her face serious and sort of fleshy, with big bright eyes, and wild dark hair cut close to her head. She was wearing old jeans spotted with paint and a blue sweatshirt. On second look she was fairly stocky.

Holding out a small hand she said, "Ah, you have to be Mickey! I am Colette."

I shook her hand and she rattled off some French which I think meant she had about given me up, then added in English, "What took you so long? I was afraid you were lost. I went down to see if the bell is working. It is not. I stopped in to tell them downstairs. Ah, I was sure you had gone away after receiving no answer." All her words came out in an eager rush.

"Mister Johnny lives downstairs. He owns the house," the boy said. "He has a real gun and he's a police sergeant."

In French Colette told the boy it was bad manners to talk so much and to get ready for his bath. He said, "Aw, talk American, Mom," and ran out of the room as she raised her hand.

In my best Haitian French I said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs.-Colette." While I knew I couldn't waste much time here, it was a relief to feel really welcome.

"I shall call you Mickey because I have heard so much about you. Some place I have pictures of you and my Hal. Every time we see the horrible fights on television, Hal talks about you, wondering where you are. You made a big impression on him."

"Yeah, that's good," I said with a foolish grin. Since she was talking English I gave up my bastard French. That I'd ever made any sort of impression on Hal was news to me. "I hate to-that is, I'm in a hurry, so..."

Her eyes took in my torn shoe, my ripped clothing and she asked calmly, "What happened to you?"

Her calmness did it, helped me type her. Colette was one of those take-charge babes, the sweet and very efficient gal who can do everything. That kind would drive me to drink, but I suppose if you only saw her one week out of five, or whatever Hal's schedule was, it wasn't too bad. I said, "The question is, what *hasn't* happened to me. I've been in a series of accidents ever since I hit New York this morning. I'm the original accident-prone slob. I won't even bother telling you about them, you'd only think me a liar. The main point is, I lost my wallet and every cent I had. Can you lend me about ten bucks? I'll return it by mail in a few days."

"Of course. But take off your coat and rest. You look tired. I shall fix you some food."

"That would be great, but I'm in a big rush. I have to make a phone call right away, so if you'll give me the money..."

"Use our phone," she said, pointing to it.

"No, I think it best not to."

"Ah, so it is like that." She looked at me with renewed interest, as if I was another problem for her to solve.

"Nope, it isn't anything crooked. The real trouble is I don't know what it's all about. If you'll let me have the money, I'll be on my high horse."

"You can't go out like this. Your shoes. I think you wear about the same size as Hal. At least come and see if a pair of his will fit you."

The little girl opened the bathroom door wearing a pink robe. Colette said, "You are to watch TV in your room and not to disturb us. Tell Francois. Both are to stay in your room."

The kid nodded without saying a word and marched off. Colette told me, "Please excuse the state of our house. With my painting and the children, I have little time for household work."

"All those paintings on the wall yours?"

"But of course. You like them?"

"Sure."

"The house is a mess. We are fixing the chairs."

"I didn't know Hal was so handy with wood," I said, following her into the bedroom.

She laughed. "He is all thumbs. I do that myself. So much to do. We couldn't have two boys or two girls. Soon we will need an extra room and rents are terrible. Maybe when we move, I shall be able to have a studio of my own. Here, sit on the bed and try these on."

The bedroom was more of this modern furniture that looked as if it would stick you any second. I sat on a hassock and opened my coat. I suppose we both wore startled expressions. She was staring at the blood on my neck and I was staring at a framed photo of several teenage boys and girls, all wearing armbands and holding machine guns. The pig-tailed gal with the burp gun cradled in her arms was Colette.

She dropped a pair of Hal's shoes she'd taken from the closet and came running over. "You are hurt!"

"Hit my head in falling," I said, still staring at the wall photo. "Were those real guns?"

"We must..." She turned and followed my eyes to the picture. "Oh, that, I was with the Maquis-the French underground-during the war. Off with your coat. And your shirt."

"Don't bother. It's merely a bruise."

"Nonsense. I will fix it. I teach First-Aid to the mothers at the school. Undress!"

I peeled off my things, stripped down to my pants at her urging. She said, "You are also big and strong, like my man. Wait, I will get the boy from the bathroom. You are certain you do not need a doctor?"

"No."

"One second, then."

She dashed out of the bedroom and I went over and examined the picture. You got the feeling this wasn't any posed shot: these kids had used the guns.

Colette called to me and I passed the boy, now in a neat blue robe, and he asked, "Do you have to take a bath every night, too?"

I winked and he said, "You can float my atomic submarine, if you like."

Colette had me bending over the tub while she expertly cleaned the bump on my head, even shaving some of the hair away. Then I sat on the John as she took off my shoes and socks, taped the blisters my torn shoe had caused. All this attention was embarrassing.

While I washed, Colette brought in shoes, socks, an old car coat, a heavy shirt, and a pair of slacks. Even the shoes fitted and when I dressed I looked my old self. I topped things by using Hal's razor for a fast shave. When I stepped out of the bathroom she clapped her hands. "You look like the new man! Here is some brandy and I will make supper..."

"I have to leave, make that call," I said, sipping the brandy slowly. It was rich and smooth.

"I forget, here is money. Enough?" She pulled four five dollar bills from her pants pocket.

"Swell. I will send the money and the clothes..."

"It is of no matter. Are you sure you are not in real trouble? You can sleep on the couch for a few days if you like, wait until Hal comes home."

The brandy was a tonic and I felt almost good again. "No. And thanks-for everything. I'm not in real trouble. I became a busybody, involved in trying to find a sour ball, it seems." I suppose what really made me feel so good was the twenty bucks. There wasn't anything to stop me from reaching Rose. I was done, forever, playing detective. I could even joke about it now.

*"Comment?"*

"A kind of inside joke. I wanted to find a clown named Sowor. A German. Sounds like sauerkraut. But it turned out he's dead. Really a crazy story-there's some Oriental chick, Me-Lucy-ah, also in..."

"She is a girl?"

"Sure, sort of a pidgin-English babe. You know, Me-Tarzan? In her case she must be a hot number, you say Me-Lucy and add a sigh."

"How do you spell it?"

"Come on, Colette, I can barely say it. Why?"

"The dead man, how do you spell his name?" There was a new eagerness in her voice.

"My trouble started when I asked for a Willy Sowor. S-o-w-o-r. Why are you interested?"

"He was a friend of yours?"

"I never saw him in my life. I only wanted to ask if he could tell me anything about a guy called Fedor, who..." I'd been feeling so good I'd let my big mouth run away with me, again. I stared at Colette, full of suspicions.

"Mickey, don't you know what *Melouza* is?"

"Some gal who... *You know?*" My guts began to tighten. Would I ever get out of this endless trap I'd walked into?

Her big eyes were bright with excitement as she nodded. "You're pronouncing it correctly, but it is not a woman. It is-or was-a village in the mountains of Algeria. A terrible crime took place there."

"A village? What crime?"

"Mass murder. Every man, woman, and child in the village was deliberately hacked to pieces. Mickey, how can you be involved in this?"

"Involved? I didn't know it was a town until now. And I can't wait to forget it. Look, I hate to cut this short, but I have to go. Where's the nearest public phone booth?"

"Go to your left on leaving the house. Turn at the corner and you will see a newspaper store. Can't you use our phone?"

I shook my head. "Thanks again for everything and tell..."

"Mickey, make your call and then return here. I must make you something to eat. I'm a fine cook. I will also give sandwiches to take with you."

"I can't..."

"I insist! I will be insulted if you do not at least try my cooking. What's another half hour or so? Don't be rude."

"Well, let me make this call and see... er... what's doing." I walked to the door and she grabbed an old cap from the closet and said, "Wear this to protect your wound. Please come back. It isn't the food alone. There is something important I must discuss with you, about Hal."

"I'll be back," I said, inspecting myself in a mirror near the door. I looked like Joe-Average-Citizen in Hal's old clothes. But I couldn't disguise my size.

It was very dark outside and that helped my nerves, until I realized the darkness could be a cover for whoever was after me. Had the



superintendent reported to the cops that he'd been slugged? He must have. The police might still be checking the neighborhood. But I was too excited at the thought of talking to Rose to think of anything else. Not even the astonishing news that Me-Lucy-ah was a city in North Africa. Like the rest of the merry-go-round I was on, it didn't make much sense. Of course, Colette could be wrong, too.

I cased the newspaper and candy store as best I could, walked in and bought a couple of cigars to get some change. Dialing long distance and the boatyard, I waited anxiously for the guy to call Rose to the phone. It seemed to take an awfully long time. I sat there restlessly; an icicle of uneasiness growing inside me. It melted in a flood of warmth with Rose's throaty, "Mickey?"

"Yeah. Honey, I'm in the big city and on my way...."

"Oh Mickey! I've been worried out of my living mind! You should have been here hours ago. Anything wrong?" There was a kind of thickness in her voice. Maybe it was the phone connection. Or, Rose had hit the bottle and was cranked-up.

"No, no, everything is jake. I had a small accident I..."

"You're hurt!"

"No, honey, I lost my wallet. I had to scrounge around to get enough money to even phone you. But I'm set now and I'll be on my way in a few minutes. How're things at your end?"

"Quiet, except for worrying about you. Please, Mickey, make it fast. Darling, I want you to be near me so. Oh, Mickey, I'm lost without you!"

"Sit tight, babes, and don't get lost in a bottle. We're not in the clear yet, for all I know," I said, maybe blushing-I was that pleased. For some silly reason I told myself Hal could have his Colette with all her bright efficiency. She could never be half the woman Rose was.

After telling her to stay on the Sea Princess and be careful, that I should be out by midnight, I hung up. I started to dial the bus terminal when I saw a short squat man standing to one side of the booth. He kept glancing at me. I got this sudden lump of suspicion until I noticed he wasn't wearing a tie under his overcoat. He looked as if he'd rushed out of his home to make a call.

Still... I thought of the poor janitor I'd clobbered. I'd been pure lucky, but another slugging and I could be jammed-up. I decided to bluff, play 'em

like you got 'em, as poker players say. When I got the bus terminal I hung up and opened the booth door. "You waiting for the phone?"

"I certainly am!" he shrilled. "I have an important business call to make but that doesn't stop my daughter from tying up the phone. It's a plain outrage when a man can't use his own phone for..."

I stepped out of the booth. "Make your call. I have to use the phone again."

"I have to make several calls. I shall make one and let you..."

"That's okay, I can wait." I lit a cigar and walked over to the phone books, figuring they might have a map of New Jersey in them. They didn't. When Shorty left the phone I dialed the bus terminal and found the last bus to Asbury had left a half-hour before. The clerk was a talker and when I said I had to get there, he gave me directions for taking a train to Newark, then connecting to a train or bus going to Red Bank. A cab from Red Bank he said would only be a few bucks. I phoned the train station and found I had ninety minutes before the next train to Newark, and after that, they seemed to run every half-hour.

I sat in the booth and smoked. I had enough money, it would be safer for Colette and myself if I didn't return. She was making this food, and Lord knows what she expected me to tell her about Hal. I didn't want to be a crude jerk but this wasn't the time for playing at manners. But I did have time and hanging out at her place was better for me than the streets.

I thought about buying her kids a box of candy: that might be like a guy borrowing money to bet against you in a crap game. I walked toward her house slowly, looking up and down the street to see if I was being followed, and feeling like a guy who hasn't the smallest idea of what he's doing.

She had some long-haired junk on a record player and said the food would be ready in a moment. I studied the chair she was fixing, and wondered why you never heard of women carpenters. She called me into a kitchen full of a hundred gadgets and I sat down to a plain cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee. She had also packed some food in a bag for me to take, which was fine-it would make me look a working stiff on his way to the night shift. When I finished the sandwich she insisted I have another cup of Java but I said I had to go.

"Your call. Everything is all right?"

"Sure. Listen, I'll send you the money."

"Mickey, you can't leave! A few more minutes, please."

"Colette, I'm a lousy gossip. I don't know what you think I can dish out about Hal, but I don't know a thing that..."

"That was a lie to make certain you returned. Mickey, you must stay a few more minutes. It's very important! Somebody wants to talk to you. He's on his way here."

"Somebody is coming? How did...?"

"I phoned Jacques. You must talk to him about Melouza. You can trust him."

"Aren't you the real live doll!" I said, trying to keep my voice down, remembering the cop downstairs who owned the house. "I don't trust anybody! In the last dozen hours I've been shot at, slugged, and pushed around. From now on my sole hobby in life is keeping my nose clean! Did you tell him my name?"

"I think I said Mickey. You can trust him, trust me. You must!"

I could see the red line of danger streaking toward us; once they knew my name and the boat, we were finished! I started for the living room. Colette flung herself on my shirt. She said fiercely, "I trusted you! When you came here I didn't ask if the police were after you, or if you were bringing danger to me and my children! You are Hal's best friend, why should I harm you?"

I stared down at her for a moment without talking. I mumbled, "You don't understand, I can best help you and your kids by taking off-now."

"Mickey, you are the one who lacks understanding. I don't know if you are only pretending or you really don't know what this is all about. Jacques is a good man, very smart, a member of one of the French diplomatic staffs. He will know what to do."

"Do about what? Colette, if you have any sense, let well enough alone."

"No, no, you see I know a little-about Willy Sowor, and more about Melouza. Mickey, you may have something very big for us."

"Who's 'us?'"

"The decent people of the world. The true story of Melouza is so important!"

"Important? I don't get your message-what are you trying to sell me?"

"To wait for Jacques, he can tell you much more than I know. Mickey, you have nothing to fear from either Jacques, or myself. Believe that!"

"Damn it, how do you know what I have to fear?" I asked, pushing her away, wondering if Hal had mentioned what I'd told him in Haiti about Rose. Two other ideas were rattling around in my sore head. I had wanted to see Sowor to find out what Rose was in. Strange as it seemed-and nothing about this set-up could actually surprise me any more. Colette and this Jock could give me the info. The other idea, the bigger one, was that if I ran now, Colette might give this Jock my real name. And then he would trace me to the boat, the island. Ruin our last hiding place.

Colette was standing with her back to me, blocking the door neatly. I said, "Sure I trust you, I have to. But one thing I insist upon: under no circumstances are you to tell this Jock, or anybody connected with him, my full name or anything about me. I have my reasons. A deal?"

"Deal? Of course, anything you wish. Mickey, I would no more hurt you than I would expect you to harm me or my children. I..."

"But you can be hurting the hell out of me without knowing it! Like now, asking this Jock in without first even asking me."

She looked away for a moment. "I simply refuse to believe you are on the other side."

"The other side of what?"

"Of humanity and everything that makes life worth living."

I never was good at riddles. "I don't know about sides, but let's settle two things: no mention of my real name, and I'll wait ten minutes for this..."

There was a knock on the downstairs door. Colette actually raced down the stairs and returned with a compactly built guy dressed like a conservative fashion-plate. His face was vaguely familiar as he took off his homburg and black overcoat with the velvet collar. He stared at me, blowing on his finger tips, as Colette talked to him in runaway French. His hair was completely white and the tired eyes had tiny wrinkles around them, yet I had an idea he wasn't much older than me, maybe younger. He nodded as Colette talked, now rubbing his thin hands together slowly. I once knew a knife thrower who had hands like that; sort of delicate but strong, like thin steel wire. Sitting on the couch, he pointed toward a chair and said, with a kind of clipped, and perhaps phony, British accent, "Now let us talk, Monsieur Mickey."

As I put it down, the accent reminded me of the old man in the turtleneck. This Jock was staring at me and I looked him smack back in his eyes. And knew where I'd seen the face before: he was one of the Maquis in

the snap on the bedroom wall, although his hair hadn't been white then. And from the way he'd been standing in the picture, he'd been their officer. I said, "Okay. You do the talking."

He gave me a weary smile. "As you wish, Monsieur Mickey...?"

"Mouse," I added, brightly.

"Ah, yes, Monsieur Mouse," he said without a smile. "Very good. He is a jovial chap who tries to make the world laugh. But enough of small talk. It will save us both time, and I understand you are in a hurry, if you will kindly tell me why you were trying to contact the late Monsieur Sowor?"

"Nothing to it: I was looking for a gal I once knew. She'd mentioned Sowor. As I told Colette, it was an easy name to remember, being she said the guy was a German... Sauerkraut. Of course I thought it was spelt s-o-u-r, but took a chance this Willy Sowor might be the same guy, might know where this gal is now. Or where Me-Lucy-ah is and she might know. I thought she was an Oriental gal. Colette says she's-it's-a town. Very confusing."

"Indeed. It is hard to believe anybody could be that naive in these times. But the woman you look for, why do you want to see her?"

"Talking about being naive-what does a fellow generally want to see a babe for? We spent a hot week together in Canada last year. I'm all for an encore, if I can find her."

"Is her name Rose and was her husband Josef Fedor?"

"Her name is Mary and we didn't talk about a husband."

He waved his manicured hands as if clearing the air, and I thought I saw the outline of a shoulder holster. "Was she a tall, statuesque woman? Beautiful? An actress?"

"She was a big blonde and very pretty. Come to the point. What's this all about?"

"Basically it is about good and evil, right and wrong, Monsieur Mouse. In the early summer of 1957 while civil war was being waged in Algeria between the French army, the *colons*, and the Algerian 'rebels,' the world was shocked to learn the entire population of an obscure village of *mechtas*-the mud huts found in the Algerian mountains-had been ruthlessly slaughtered. It was the village of Melouza. Over three hundred people, including children, had been literally butchered: throats slashed, bodies hacked. Paris claimed the 'rebels,' or the FLN as they are known, were responsible for this madness because the people of Melouza were said to

lean more toward the Algerian National Movement, a group far less nationalistic than the FLN. Understand, I merely state what was charged, not what happened."

"Sure," I said, wondering how this could possibly have any tie-up with Rose. She was neither French nor Arab. If she'd ever been in Africa, even with a USO show, she would have told me.

"The FLN charged Melouza was a village of no known political sympathy or importance. They claim French soldiers in the uniform of the FLN were the mass killers, that it was done to terrorize other Algerian villages from aiding the FLN. They said that in a raid on an Oran cattle fair the year before, French soldiers were alleged to have been captured disguised as FLN guerrillas. These are all mere charges. To this day the truth is unknown."

"But what's all this to do with me, or the gal I knew?"

Jock held up a thin finger. "Monsieur, let me first fill you in on the European scene before 1957. There were many stateless men roaming about. Ex-Nazi soldiers and the victims of the Nazis still snarled in the red tape of rehabilitation camps. There were exiles from various countries. There were many decent men, along with out-and-out adventurers, and scum. All had one thing in common: they were desperate and hungry. Many such men enlisted in the French Foreign Legion and fought in Indochina, in Algiers, wherever they were sent. Being desperate they fought bravely, ruthlessly, and many of them died. Now it is known that a unit of *chasseurs*, about a dozen Legionnaires, were in the area of Melouza, which *proves* nothing, you understand, and is merely a fact. Among these Legionnaires were Willy Sowor, a former tank driver in Rommel's Afrika Korps; Josef Fedor, who had been an officer in the Hungarian army; a Dutch thief named Gootsraat; a Turkish carpenter known as Subec; an Italian called Massina, born in Libya; and an Egyptian thug known as Lister. There were others, but these names we know. The Algerians accused this squad of the Melouza massacre. This has never been proved. It has also been established that several detachments of FLN were in the area at the time of the killings, too.

"In giving you a detailed picture, I am trying to stick to as many facts as we know. The duty tours of the men mentioned expired shortly after the Melouza incident and they were discharged from the Legion. They were said to be well fixed. However, it is possible they had found jewels or money—a great deal of looting goes on in these 'small wars.' The men

quickly scattered over the Middle East, Europe, and America. And within two years they had all been killed. Perhaps more than a coincidence."

"Killed or murdered?" I asked.

Jock gave me a thin-lipped tight smile. "Two were actually killed in bar brawls. Fedor was openly murdered. Sowor was killed by a car, perhaps an accident. The Turk is said to have drunk poison by mistake in Athens, and Subec was knifed by a brothel keeper in London. However it should be obvious all these men were on the run. They were constantly on the move and..."

"On the run from whom?" I cut in.

"Again, I have no proof. Certainly the agents of the FLN wanted to put their hands on them, perhaps other Arab groups. It might also be certain French officials didn't want these men to talk. Mind you, Monsieur Mouse, this is speculation on my part. That is the picture, a horrible crime and the six suspected men on the run- and dead. Some time ago it was rumored Fedor had written a book, an expanded diary. We know now it was a fact and not a rumor. This diary has never been found. The truth about Melouza may very well be in its pages, then again, it can also be pure fiction, or a pack of lies. Or it may have nothing to do with Algeria. It is said Sowor arranged to purchase this diary for \$50,000. I have no proof of where or how he was able to raise this sum of money, or what parties he was acting for. The fact is, all this could have been blackmail on the part of Fedor. We are certain Sowor gave Fedor the money and then Fedor somehow doublecrossed him and never handed over the diary. It is assumed this was the reason Fedor was stabbed to death. Now we also know Fedor married a minor American actress. As the situation stands, his wife, the diary, and the money have vanished. For a time we thought she and the diary had vanished into the sea last year, and the search for the diary was given up- only to be revived today."

"Why?"

"From several indirect sources we have learned various groups have a sudden, renewed interest in the diary. It is rumored Rose Fedor was seen last night, with a beefy man. You could be easily called beefy, Monsieur Mouse."

"I guess so. And so could about twenty thousand other guys within shouting distance," I said. "I don't get this bit about the various groups. Why should so many people want this diary?"

"I told you, the diary can prove a bombshell-or a dud. A great many people are interested in finding Rose Fedor-with the hope she will lead them to the diary."

"Of course I still don't know what this is all about, but-are you one of the people looking for this-! what's her name-Rose?"

"I am."

"Do you, or they, think she killed her husband?"

"Oh, no. Fedor's death is of no consequence, it is the diary we all seek. Of course, we are not positive she has it, but she must know more about it than anyone else. To get on, Monsieur Mouse, I am certain that this Mary you met was Fedor's wife, Rose. No one else would know about Sowor and Melouza."

"From what you've said, gangs of people know about them."

Jock gave me a patient tiny smile. "Perhaps. Let me put it this way: no other American woman would know. Sound better?"

"Maybe," I said cautiously. Having gone this far I wanted to pump him for all the info I could get. "We were only together for a week and crooked most of the time. But I did have an idea she was jumpy."

"Did she have money?"

"Hard to say. We didn't live big and I paid the tabs."

"Did she ever mention what she was 'jumpy' about?"

"She gave me a cock and bull story about the rough time the police and some private dicks were giving her. I didn't pay much attention, figured it was drunken chatter. I mean, the police don't chase you if you haven't broken the law and Mary didn't act like a crook."

He offered a pack of cigarettes around, then lit one himself, as he said, "I imagine she has been having a rough time of it at the hands of various law agencies."

"But you just said they don't want her for her husband's murder? This stuff about cops chasing you for the hell of it... well, you know, that really doesn't happen outside a bad movie," I said, knowing I was doing a good job of playing the jerk.

Jock laughed politely. "Monsieur Mouse, you have the layman's faith and naivete concerning the 'law.' There is such a thing as the unofficial law. A crude example; there isn't any actual law stating a rich man's house shall receive more police protection than a poor man's shack. Yet we all know that without being ordered to, the police will keep an eye on the rich house,



perhaps even look in on it several times a day. Another raw example: a policeman would hardly give a traffic ticket to a known politician. Yet I am certain there is actually nothing in any police manual the world over ordering this. Nor would the politician even have to suggest any possible consequences to the police officer. In brief, that is the unofficial law, and in various forms you will find this in all law agencies, no matter at what level. There are unofficial government... eh... moves, which would account for the 'law' harassing Fedor's wife if..."

"Say, while I don't know if Mary is the babe you're talking about, I do recall that when she was gassing about being pushed around, she mentioned a Federal man pulling a gun on her. Of course, that's so much hot air, but-well, it's odd she mentioned it."

"My dear chap, that may not be hot air-as you quaintly call it-at all, but the unofficial government I am attempting to explain. It works the same way in all countries. I believe Colette has told you I am in the French government, yet at this very second I am acting in a completely unofficial capacity."

"But a Federal dick?"

Jock held up a hand. "Another simple example: you are a Federal agent and let us assume I am a high official in a friendly foreign embassy. We meet at a cocktail party. In the course of conversation I say my government is much interested in having a talk with a Rose Fedor. That is all. A harmless request. Oh, I might even butter up the request by saying it concerns an internal problem in my country. But you see, no official orders or requests are made, nothing on paper. If you are such a high law or police official, you will pass the word along, pick up Rose Fedor, and your men will do so without having the slightest idea of what it's all about."

"Look, Mr. Jock, take it easy. Sure, I can see you- or anybody else-buying off some local cop to do a favor. But isn't it a little far-fetched to think of a big Washington official starting a manhunt merely because of some bar conversation?"

"On the contrary, only a national figure could do it, or would be in a position to meet a high foreign official! Nor did I say a manhunt was started. They would merely send out a routine check for the whereabouts of Rose Fedor."

"Routine? With a gun?"

"I don't believe the gun part," Jock said, "Unless it would be used to frighten her. Remember, our high embassy man might have become friendly with an ordinary government law agent. He might even tell this policeman there's an under-the-table reward of a few thousand dollars for finding Rose Fedor. Or the law agent will try very hard to find her-on his own time-because he feels a word from an embassy will help his promotion. I assure you the same thing would happen in my country if an American official talked to a French police officer. What you must understand is that the police officer is not necessarily delinquent in his duty. On the contrary, he may feel he is doing the 'right thing.'"

I shook my head, said innocently, "That's hard to swallow."

"For you, yes. In fact you may be sure the imaginary police official we talk about will feel the same way. Being a layman he-and you-will never question *why* Rose Fedor is wanted, because in his own mind he can not conceive of a government doing anything 'wrong.' Unfortunately, 'good' or 'bad,' 'right' or 'wrong,' are by themselves actually meaningless words. But I am wandering from the subject. Yes, I am looking for Mrs. Fedor, although not with a gun. But certainly in addition to possible law agencies hunting for her, there are also the FLN and other Arab parties, and there probably are fanatics in most of the groups involved. Neither last nor least are the hired hunters, or investigators, the private police, in the pay of some oil companies."

I was impressed: Jock knew his stuff, was giving me a rundown of what I'd been through. I said, "Geez, this is getting involved. What's an oil company have to do with all this?"

Colette threw back her head and said something in French that could have been a couple of cuss words. Jock motioned for her to be still. "My dear Monsieur Mouse, you do seem to have been living in a hole. Do you never read the papers? In the Sahara desert, oil deposits have been found which may well surpass anything in the Middle East, by-pass Suez. And it fits. Again, let us suppose such a private detective informs the police he is working for one of the large oil companies, do you doubt the local police-without receiving any instructions or orders to do so-will heartily cooperate with the private investigator?"

"Could be," I said, wanting to shout he was darn well right. "But, somehow, after all this time, Mrs. Fedor and the diary... I mean, why are they still important?"

Jock gave me that slightly annoying laugh of his. "The search for Rose Fedor has become an international, if unofficial, *cause celebre*. The diary will be of prime importance as long as Algeria remains unsettled, and that can be a matter of years. As I told you, the search had practically died down, until yesterday."

I nodded and kept pumping. "About the importance of this book: are you saying the French army knocked off this village and are now trying to hush things up?"

"Jacques does not know," Colette said, as if to keep in the conversation.

He shook his head. "Colette is correct, we have no proof of the killers' identity. When you say 'the French,' or 'the English,' or 'the American,' by themselves the words are also without meaning. It is the same as saying the sky is blue, which it is not, for the sky is composed of many shades of color, even of blue. Democratic governments likewise are a mosaic of different shades of political opinions. While this is a 'good' thing, it may also result in some government official doing terrible things in the name of 'righteousness,' and without it being an official policy of the government. We live in complex times and ironically, as the power of weapons increases, in the same ratio so does the power of the individual. A lieutenant piloting a plane with a bomb can start a world war at his whim. For all we know, Budapest was the result of a trigger-happy Russian tank driver, or Korea caused by a frightened machine-gunner. It is frightening but true that a drunken officer at a guided missile base can set the world afire. The military mind is such, the world over, that they cannot admit an error, a mistake, and feel they must either back up or bury any such action of then-men. It is possible Sowor, Fedor, and the others wiped out Melouza in a moment of drunken rage. The idea may have been entirely their own. But for me, that is far too simple a view."

"What's that mean?"

"It is also possible, if they were involved in this horror at all, they were *ordered* to wipe out the village by a superior officer. What one must understand is: that such an officer although doing a monstrous act is not necessarily a monster. Indeed, he can be a sincere person convinced his act of terror is for the 'good' of his country. Do not smile, sir, in the history of your own country Indians were massacred and robbed, and not always by scoundrels. Some men, fine family men and upstanding citizens, felt that

only by taking-stealing-the Indian lands could America win the West and grow powerful. Many Indian chiefs, far from villains, were just as certain the slaying of settlers and wagon trains was best for their tribe. In our complex world, nothing is all black or entirely white. Everything depends upon the point of view. A murder to one man can easily be a matter of necessity to another. Am I clarifying the picture or fogging it for you?"

"I'm kind of mixed up. Maybe because it's hard to believe this cloak and dagger stuff, officially or unofficially. Do you think the Algerian rebels killed the people in Me-Lucy-ah?"

"We all have opinions on the subject, but no *proof* of anything, hence the importance of the diary. Let me try again to clear the air. Myself, I am a liberal in my politics, I respect all humanity. Now let us imagine I am an officer sent to Algeria, in command of an area. Regardless of my orders, I would make an unofficial effort, completely on my own, to understand the problems of the Algerians, perhaps seek out a compromise. I am not doing this for power, or glory, or greed, but with what is known as the best intentions. The net result may be success, the saving of many lives. Then again, I could also be making a tragic mistake. If my opposite number among the FLN is a brute, a fanatic, my act could cause the death of hundreds of my men. Reverse the coin. I am a rockbound reactionary, I am a *colon* raised in Algeria, fearing and hating the Arabs. To me, then, the Arabs seem to threaten the very life of my beloved France and thus the rebels are but rascals and savages to be given no quarter. Therefore, I might, on my own, and with the most sincere intentions, order the massacre of a village. All this is the consequence of individual action. History is full of men who did horrible acts in the guise of patriotism. No doubt many of Hitler's concentration camp beasts felt they were doing a dirty job but one necessary for *their* Germany's survival. Trusting one's judgment can be a bad gamble for others."

I sucked on my cigar; it was dead. Relighting it, I asked, "How did Sowor and Fedor get into the USA?"

"Perhaps as tourists, or they might have smuggled themselves across the border. Again, they may have been special guests."

"Now what does that mean? Are you accusing Uncle Sam of playing potsy in this mess?" I asked.

Jock let me have another weary smile. "I am not insulting your country. The truth is, in my own way, I greatly admire the USA. What I

meant is this: assuming the men were involved in this and whether their higher officers agreed with their action or not, if the army backed them, then it would be a simple exchange. I do you a favor and you do me one. These are dirty times with dirty wars and incidents going on all the time, involving every big power. Your CIA is authorized to bring in a hundred aliens per year into the USA, regardless of quotas or immigration rules. France has about the same set-up. So I, if I represented a high army department, might ask the USA to do us a favor and let two or three men into the country, no questions asked. In return, France allows several of your men to live in Paris-also no questions asked. In short, the USA knows nothing of what Fedor and Sowor might have done, and doesn't ask. Mind you, this is merely a supposition on my part, I have no proof."

I told him, "Suppose you find the diary and it says your country did the killing. What will you do with the book?" I wanted to get his "in"; his pitch.

"Whatever the diary may say is nothing. It must *prove* a Frenchman, or French policy, was responsible. If that should be the case, I assure you we moderates would use it as a weapon to oust the fascist element among the *colons* and the government. We would insist the guilty be punished. Naturally, in such a case, if the diary landed in the hands of the other side, they would be anxious to destroy it."

"Suppose the Algerians got it?"

Jock shrugged. "Monsieur Mouse, the Algerians, like the French-and all peoples-are also made up of various political elements. It would again depend on what the diary proved and which faction possessed the book. As I have told you, no country is entirely good or bad. As for myself, we moderates, we haven't any selfish motives in this. It is my belief that such a massacre, no matter how high or low the reason, was a terrible crime. Those guilty, whether French, Algerians, or men from the moon, must be exposed and punished. To prevent any other such killings."

"And for that, for what the diary *may* say, all this cops and robbers stuff has been going on? After all, the massacre was years ago, who gives a damn now?"

Colette said, "You do not mean what you say, Mickey!"

Jock said sadly, "I trust you are not that cynical, Monsieur. Or so ignorant you do not understand the power this expose will have. The leveling of Lidice, another obscure little town, did as much toward the eventual defeat of the Nazis as did all the strategic bombing by the Allies.

World opinion is a tremendous weapon. *That* is the great importance of the diary."

"Then how come the oil companies are so hot after it? They're not in politics."

He waved the stub of his cigarette in the air, as if pointing out my nose to me. "Obviously, since they are interested in the oil concession, they must play all sides to insure ending up with the winner. They would use the diary to blackmail, if necessary. Even de Gaulle wants..."

As he talked on, I tried not to smile. Poor Rose. Poor me. Running all this time and carrying the hot potato with us in those "letters." Like a mutt trying to escape the clatter of a tin can-tied to his tail. There was such an easy and simple solution. All Rose had to do was drop the letters-publicly-and we'd be safe.

Glancing at the clock on the desk, I stood up, cut Jock off with: "Well, if I ever see this Mary again and if she is Rose, and if she has the diary, I'll try to..."

He gave me a sharp laugh. "Monsieur Mouse, do not be insulted when I say, frankly, I think you are a liar. I also think you know very well where Rose is. Here is my card. I want you to please..."

"I don't give a damn what you think-I don't know where she is, or that Mary is this Rose!"

He gave me a mock bow. "Let me put it this way: keep my card. If you should ever come across such a diary... well, I've tried to impress upon you its importance to the world-to the safety of mankind. All I ask is *if* you do come across it, bring or mail it to me. I am a true Frenchman, and what is more important, above all else I consider myself a true humanitarian- in the fullest civilized meaning of the word. If the diary proves anything, I swear to you, I will see justice done, in any case. You must trust me to do that. As we are strangers, you must take Colette's word for my character, for my..."

"Save the pitch. I keep telling you I have no idea where Rose or such a diary can be."

"All we ask is *if* you do see her," Colette said, "to convince her to send the diary to us, to Jacques. It can save many lives and in the wrong hands result in much misery. Mickey, you must do that!"

Jock blew a cigarette ring and then a short puff of smoke through the center of the ring. He was good at it. He said, "There is one other thing you should know, the diary is worth \$10,000 to me."

"How come the price has gone down?" I asked.

He jumped to his feet. "So! You have the diary and have been offered more!"

"Relax, I know from nothing about any diary, or girl. You said before Sowor had once given \$50,000 for it, so I made a wisecrack. That's all."

Jock made with the mock bow again. "If I ask you to believe me, of course I must also return such trust in you. Frankly we are not as rich as the others. Ten thousand dollars is all we can gamble. Remember, the diary may be only hot air."

I pocketed his card. "I'm not selling anything. I mean, I haven't anything to sell. But as you said, if should luck up on this gal you think is Rose, I'll give her your card," I said, sure of one thing: Jock and Colette were do-gooders out to save the world... and I was too. I wanted to save the little island world Rose and I had. The only way to do that was to mind our own business, and keep the boat and Ansel's island our secret. "But as the horse players say, this is all very 'iffy.'"

Jock shrugged. "We ask no more than that you try."

There was a moment of silence all around. I picked up the bag of food and headed for the door. "Thanks for everything, Colette. You'll have the money back in a few days." I waved at Jock.

He said, "I have a car outside. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"No thanks." I opened the door.

He said softly, "Please do not forget me, Monsieur Mouse. As for Rose, at least tell her to come and talk to me. What sort of a person is this Mary, who I am sure is Rose?"

Walking down the stairs I called back, "She's just a girl who doesn't want to be a pain in the neck to anybody."

## IX

There was a black Caddy waiting outside with a conservatively-dressed but hard-looking joker behind the wheel. The license plate said something about diplomatic corps. The driver gave me a casual glance. A bodyguard looks the same the world over. For a fast moment I wondered if it would be an idea to let him drive me to downtown Manhattan. At least I'd get there without being hurt, maybe.

I walked along the dimly lighted streets for a few blocks, then cut over to the avenue. No one seemed to be following me. To confuse somebody, perhaps myself, I rode a bus past the subway station, then got off and stood in the doorway of a locked store for several minutes, watching the street. There were very few people or cars out. When a police radio car cruised by I decided it might be best if I left the neighborhood; all I'd need now would be to run into the super I'd slugged.

The subway platform was empty. I rode in the first car and went through the routine of looking-jumping-out-the-door at every other stop. Now that I knew the score, *if* I could believe Jock, I wasn't worried. All I wanted was to reach the Sea Princess-alone. I stopped jumping out of the first door of the subway when a voice at my back asked, "You sick, buddy?"

I spun around to see the motorman leaning out of his window and grinning at me. Maybe it was all my imagination but he looked a lot like the basketball player who'd thrown a gun in my side and walked me to the demolished buildings. At the next stop I got off and waited for another train. I left this at 34th Street for a "tube" running under the Hudson River to Newark, according to a sign. The damp and dreary station gave me a weird feeling as if I was in a vast tomb where anything could happen, like me being shot. I was the only person on the platform so I left there fast and crossed the street to the big railway station, where I was told most trains stopped at Newark as they headed West.

It was a good deal: with all the trains it would be hard to tell where I was going. Also there were upper and lower levels, making it easier to duck anybody. A redcap said I could pay for my ticket on the train due to pull out in eight minutes. I walked to the lower level where I found a kind of



deserted tile alcove not far from stairs running down to the train track. In about five minutes I'd be on my way.

Leaning against the wall, I kept glancing around carefully, certain I must look like a guy making the late shift. A man passed carrying a big bundle of morning papers on his shoulders... tossed the bundle at me. About a hundred pounds hit my chest and by the time I recovered my balance I was looking into the grim, lardy-face of the clown who ran when I drop-kicked his partner. He held a thin billy in his right hand, "Don't make me lump you, wise guy," he said. "No rough and tumble act."

I figured his partner had to be scouting another part of the station for me, and would be along any minute. "Don't you jerks get tired of all this stuff?"

"Don't act up," he said, waving the blackjack.

"I don't want you combing my hair with that." I heard steps coming toward us. I glanced in their direction but didn't see anybody. "Beside, I haven't a chance. Here comes your partner."

My left and his eyes moved at the same time. I felt the numbness spread along my knuckles as I hooked his big jaw. He sat down hard, fell backwards in slow motion. Yanking the billy out of his hand, I saw a pair of blue pants walking faster toward us. Bending down, as if feeling the dick's head, my other hand raced through his pockets until I found the little leather holder with his badge. The cop was coming on the run now.

I stood up, pushing the billy into the sleeve of Hal's auto coat. "Sure glad to see you, officer. Private investigator." I flashed the badge, gave it to him. "Working for Transworld-wide Oil. You've heard of 'em, biggest oil outfit in the world."

"Transworld-wide Oil? Yeah," he said, handing the badge back. "Trouble with this guy?" The cop pointed at the dick with his toe.

"Not exactly. I been tailing him for weeks. Head of the Washington office wants to have a talk with him. Big-deal stuff about oil maps. I don't know what it's all about except he's a little nuts and... Look, *unofficially*, can you keep an eye on him for a moment while I phone the front office for instructions? The company will appreciate it."

"Okay. Is he hurt?"

"Naw, I had to clout him to make him stand still. I'll be right back. If he starts raving, tell him to shut up." I ran out of the alcove and up to another level, then down a stairway, and hopped the train a few seconds

before it pulled out. I felt very pleased. Transworld-wide was a name I'd made up and I fully realized what Jock had meant by the "unofficial" law. I paid for a ticket and stepped off at Newark minutes later. At the bus terminal I had a half hour wait for the last bus to Red Bank. I found the address of the detective agency in the phone book and wrote it down on the back of Jock's card, then spent the rest of the time hiding in the men's room. Boarding the bus I was reasonably certain I wasn't being followed.

It was after midnight when I stepped off at Red Bank. I still had over ten dollars and I took a taxi to the first open bar I saw in Long Branch, had a beer, and started walking the remaining four or five miles to Asbury. Except for passing cars I didn't see a soul. It was a clear night with enough wind, and the smell of salt and the sight of the ocean made me feel fine. Yet, all the time I had a feeling it was too easy, that "*they*" were playing with me. This was the most important part of the chase. Was I leading them to Rose and the boat? I circled the block leading to the boatyard, waiting in the shadows. I didn't see anybody but I still had this strong hunch. I waited a full fifteen minutes, then sprinted the last hundred yards, jumping the gate and lumbering across the dock like a ton of bricks.

The Sea Princess looked beautiful as could be. I ran aboard, crouched in the cockpit and listened for any following footsteps. Rose stuck her head out of the cabin hatch, her face becoming a large smile of relief. As she came forward to hug me, I pushed her away, told her, "Get out the carbine and hurry it up!"

She dived into the cabin. There wasn't a sound on the dock, not even a light in the boat house. Rose came back and handed me the gun. "Mickey, are you...?"

"Are we squared away with the yardman?"

"Yes. Oh, honey, is...?"

"I'm going to start the motors. Hop up on the dock, ready to throw off the lines."

"Mickey, you don't know how happy I am to see you. I..."

"Later. Stand by the ropes," I barked, raising the motor hatch.

The engines worked on the first try. Rose loosened the lines and leaped aboard. Seconds later we were following the channel buoys out past the breakwater, the Sea Princess starting to dance to the rhythm of the waves.

"Hon, are you okay? Were you hurt?" Rose asked, a dream even bundled in a suit of oilskins. "What happened all this....?"

"Take the wheel while I raise the sails. Keep her headed as she is." I had the bow aimed straight toward Europe.

When the Sea Princess was racing along under full sail I cut the engines and sat at the wheel, watching the starlit sky for a plane, or twisting to look aft for boat lights. There was a large tug off our port but she wasn't making for us. Rose started to ask again what had happened and I told her to keep still. I was still too scared to kiss her, still afraid that something else would happen. She cried, "My God, you think I've had a cinch waiting on the boat? Going crazy with fear...?"

"Later, honey," I said, listening to the sound of the wind in the rigging, the regular gurgle and slap of the waves; straining my ears for the throb of a speedboat.

Calling me a name Rose went below. I screamed at her not to turn on the cabin lights. I sat by the wheel, feeling better by the second. The ocean was *my* backyard, the Sea Princess my home. I waved in the cold darkness as we passed the tug, hundreds of yards to port. Feeling in my pocket for a cigar, I touched the private badge, the billy: and tossed them over with a laugh.

An hour later, when land was part of the blackness on the horizon and not a ship in sight, I lashed the wheel and went below. Rose was in her bunk and I could smell whiskey. When I touched her face in the darkness she hit my hand. I jerked her up and into my arms. Kissing her, I whispered, "Now we can talk. It's all over, baby. Nothing will ever come between us again, honey."

With a sigh she returned my kiss, warm lips demanding, her hands digging into my neck. "Mickey, Mickey, you frightened me so! You acted so hard-and strange. I was afraid you thought I was responsible for whatever happened to you. We should never have come to the States."

"Coming to the States was the smartest move we ever made. Things are going to turn out very fine. We... Easy with the fingers, honey, my head is busted-a little."

"Oh, God, Mickey, you're hurt!"

"I'm fine although I was hit with everything but the custard pie. That's why I wanted to get the boat going, be free of all the-the-mess we stepped into, before I kissed you."

"Mickey, all the time I was alone on the boat, down here in the cabin, I did nothing but remember how we had it at Ansel's. Swimming, lounging

around, enjoying each other. All I could think of was how much I wanted that again! What dopes we were to give it up, risk this."

"We'll have all that again, Rose, and even better. I know what this is all about, and soon we'll be able to stop running. Hon, let's go on deck and talk."

She tried to pull me down to the bunk, whispering, "It's cold on deck. And since when did you get to be such a talker?"

"Baby, we're only a dozen miles offshore, and there's bound to be boat traffic. After what we've been through, I wouldn't dare cross a street without waiting for the green light, much less sail blind."

We bundled up and sat beside the wheel and I was still talking when dawn lightened the sky. I went over everything that had happened to me; Jock's explanation. When I was finished Rose asked, "But how did these college kids know about you?"

"I figure they're on one of the Arab sides, and somehow they had a guy planted in Sowor's house. Maybe a roomer there. Or could be the old jockey was playing both sides of the street, tipped them off the same time he called the oil detectives. Actually not much of a deal. They tell the old guy it's worth fifty bucks or so to phone them if anybody comes asking for Sowor. Or, as I said, these kids had to live someplace, so maybe they had a room in the house. And me, shooting off my big yap about Me-Lucy, brought everybody on the run."

"If the detectives saw you at the railroad station, you think they followed you out to your friend's house and back? And you didn't believe me when I said I'd been hounded by an army of dicks!"

"No army. Soon as they got this hot tip, the agency probably put a few guys on it. When they lost me they did the obvious thing: covered the rail stations, bus and plane terminals, for that night. But the hell with that, it will be over now we know the score."

Rose shook her head. "I don't even know why I held onto those letters-the diary-except they were with the money."

"It wouldn't have made any diff if you'd known and torn 'em up. They-all of them-would still have *thought* you had the diary, still chased you. In fact, not having it would leave us worse off."

"One thing I don't understand: that Fed wanted to shoot me. And those detectives who tried to run me down with their car. If I was dead, how

would they have got the diary? What was their angle in trying to knock me off?"

"Rose, what happened to you was part real and partly your imagination. They never..."

"My God, after what you've been through how can you still go with that imagination kick?"

"It's because I have been through the mill that I can say it was part imagination-*now*. Sure, I saw that clown in Atlantic City loosen his gun, *but he never drew it* or tried to use the rod, so I have to figure he probably did it to frighten you. When you're frightened silly, everything becomes distorted. Remember I told you how I slugged an innocent janitor, all because he wore a feather in his hat? The way my imagination was cooking, if I'd been packing a gun I might easily have killed him. When you're on the run, scared stiff, the least sound or shadow becomes magnified in our hysterical minds into a million other things-most of them phony-*but all of them real to us*. Another point: as Jock said, the police in their own way, unofficially, thought they were doing the right thing. They probably didn't even know what or why you were wanted-only that some big apple asked to see you. In short, we were being hunted by a half a dozen different guys and groups, each with their own angle. With some it was duty, or their job, and with others, the fast buck. But now you have only one more decision to make and then it will be over for us."

"What's that?"

"What to do with the diary. That's the target, the hot potato we've unknowingly been carrying around with us."

"It's an easy decision," Rose said, getting up. "I'll throw the lousy thing over right this second."

I pulled her down into my lap again. "That won't help, hon. They could still *think* you have it. We not only have to get rid of it, but make damn sure all sides *know* we haven't got it. Then there won't be any point in looking for us."

"What do we do, put an ad in the paper that we've destroyed it?"

"Let's cut the sarcasm until we're way in the clear. *We sell it!* Jock offered ten grand. But if you contact the private eye agency working for the oil companies- and I have their address-you can certainly get fifty or even a hundred grand. Once the diary is put to use, we're off the hook. All you have to decide is who we sell it to."

"Shouldn't we both decide that?"

"The letters are yours."

"Stop it, you've taken your share of beatings, too. Are you sure your head is okay?"

"Hon, the way I see it, in another hour I'll change course, start heading south. In a day or two we'll put in at Norfolk, or some port. I'll take a plane to Chicago or Washington, contact the agency, and get rid of the diary. Then I'll..."

"And get yourself killed!"

"No, we're giving them what they want. Working out that part will be a breeze. The big decision is *how much* dough do we want for it."

Rose was silent for a long time. The sun started to streak the horizon. She stood up. "The sea looks pretty... and so calm. After that Cape storm-it seems ages ago- I never thought I'd want to be out here. Can you heave-to, put out a sea anchor, or something? Let's us sleep on this."

"We're too near the coast for that, much as I want to. You go down and get some shut-eye, then take the wheel and I'll get in a few hours."

I let her sleep until 10:00 A.M. and she took the wheel with instructions to call me the second another ship came in sight or the wind changed. I managed to catch several minutes sleep in the next few hours. The sun was out clean and strong as we were having an early afternoon lunch in the cockpit, both of us eating like pigs. Rose asked when we'd make port? I told her, "Sometime tomorrow morning we can be in Norfolk or Cape Charles. Why?"

"I've been thinking about the diary, how we can best wash our hands of it, return to the peace of Ansel's island. I don't mind the island now. I don't think I ever will. Once we get this done with, we can move on to the larger island town if we wish, but I doubt if I'll ever want to return to the States. Well, island living doesn't cost much, we have enough money to last us the rest of our lives. We didn't ask for the dough we have and there's no one to return it to, even if we wanted to give it back. But to... get more dough... I don't know, it smacks of blood money. You said Colette and this Frenchman are do-gooders. The thing is, Mickey, we're all do-gooders at heart. Even you, or you wouldn't have picked me up on the Key. Now it's..."

"I was only thinking of doing *myself* some good then."

"Maybe that's why people are do-gooders... all that stuff about doing unto others. Somehow I have the feeling if three hundred people were

killed, we ought to do something about it."

"Meaning?"

"Oh, at least try to see that whoever is responsible is caught, and stop another village from being wiped out. How would we feel if Ansel's island had been in a massacre?"

"Rose, are you saying you want to get involved in all this?"

She shook her head. "No, mainly I'm playing it safe. If we sell it to the oil companies we don't know what they'll use the diary for. Also we don't know how to get in touch with the other groups, say the Algerians, or which is the good one. This Jacques might be a bastard, too, but I have to go along with him. If an ordinary housewife like Colette okays him, then I have to bet on Jacques. I think we should send him the letters."

"All right, only it means a loss of about ninety grand, the kind of green we'll never have a chance at again, so be sure in your mind."

"Mickey, I don't want *any* money. For one thing it can be a trail to us, in case Jacques is a wrongo guy. And if he's on the level, then taking the ten grand is blood money. Having that kind of dough wouldn't make for happiness. If we're getting rid of a dream-buster, let's not take on another one. What do you think?"

"I'm with you. But when it comes to passing up a hundred thousand bucks, you make the decision."

"When we make port you send it to him registered mail, with a false return name and address. And a letter telling him to do what he wants, but to let it be known he has the letters, even if they contain a lot of slop. What do you think Josef wrote? The truth?"

"Maybe. Maybe it's a novel, or a bunch of outright lies."

"Happily we'll never know. I feel relieved already, sort of clean," Rose said, kissing me.

"A hundred grand bath," I mumbled.

"The big bubble bath we... You louse, you have me making the decision so you can throw it in my face when we're broke!"

I pulled her to me. "That's the idea. When we're about seventy and so ragged we have to steal a coconut for eats, I may mention it."

"Mickey, do you agree with me about giving it to Jacques?"

"Sure."

"For true? You sound too casual."

"How do you think you sound? Whatever you decide, Rose, goes for me. I mean that."

"Then we'll do it." She kissed me again. "I'm glad you see it my way."

Holding her with one hand, the other on the wheel, I really did mean it. For a guy like me to have a movie beauty for a wife and a boat like the Sea Princess: it figured I could dismiss a hundred thousand as if it was a popcorn ball... I think.