

DELL
BOOK
898

A voyage to violence and rapture...

25¢

*"One of the fastest and hardest
hitting books in a long time"**

GULF COAST GIRL

(Scorpion Reef)

CHARLES WILLIAMS



Gulf Coast Girl

by

Charles Williams

1955

Sunset

There was something ghostly about it. The mate and the two ABs of the boarding party looked at each other, unable to believe what they saw.

There were no signs of violence or even sickness aboard, and the Gulf itself had been in a benign mood for weeks. Her sails were set and drawing gently in the faint airs of sunset, her tiller lashed, and she was gliding along with serene purpose on a southeasterly course which would have taken her into the Yucatan Strait. Her dinghy was still there, atop the cabin, and everything was shipshape and in order except that there was not a soul on board. She was as mysteriously deserted as the *Mary Celeste*.

She was well provisioned, and she had water. The two bunks were made and the cabin swept. Dungarees and some odds and ends of foul weather gear hung about the bulkheads, and in one of the bunks was the halter of a woman's two-piece bathing suit. And subtly underlying the immemorial bilge and salt-water smells of sailing craft there still clung to the deserted cabin just the faintest suspicion of perfume. It would have gone unnoticed except that it was so completely out of place.

The table was not laid, as it had been on the *Mary Celeste*, but there were two mugs on it, and one of them was still full of coffee. When the hard-bitten old mate walked over and put his hand against the coffeepot sitting on one burner of the

primus stove, it was slightly warm to the touch. There had been somebody here less than an hour ago.

He went over to the small table where the charts were and opened what he took to be the logbook, flipping hurriedly through to the past page on which anything was written. He studied it for a moment, and then shook his head. In forty years at sea he had never encountered a log entry quite like it.

. . . the blue, and that last, haunting flash of silver, gesturing as it died. It was beckoning. Toward the rapture. The rapture . . .

Before he closed the book he took something from between the pages and stared at it. It was a single long strand of ash-blond hair. He shook his head again.

"Holy Jesus, Mate, look at this!" one of the seamen exclaimed behind him.

The mate turned and the man was holding open a black satchel that had been lying on one of the settees. He stared. It was jammed with green blocks of American currency, paper-banded sheafs of twenties, fifties, and hundreds. What next? he thought.

"Salvage, man, salvage," the AB said ecstatically. "Must be a hundred thousand—"

"You want to spend it now, or wait till the court counts it?" the mate asked. "You're pretty far from a gin-mill out here, anyway." He took the bag from the other's hands and snapped it shut.

Sticking the logbook under his arm, he jerked his head for the two to follow him back on deck. He jabbed a forefinger toward the mast.

"See that big rag up there? It's known as a sail. We used to drive ships with 'em. So if you'll start pulling it down and just sort of bundling it up, I'll go back to the ship where I won't have to torture myself by watching how you do it, and we'll pass down a towline."

A few yards away in the red sunset the master of the American tanker *Joseph H. Hallock* waited on her bridge while the mate pulled back alone. He saw the two sailors begin taking in the sloop's mainsail and jib and, realizing

what that meant, directed the bos'n to break out a line and start getting it over.

Outward bound from Tampico for Bayonne, they had come up behind the small craft on a converging course some half hour ago and had hauled up a point or two to pass astern of her. The mate, watching through the glasses, had noted there was no one on deck and that the helm was lashed, but had not been greatly concerned. In weather like this a man sailing alone could well have gone below to cook supper. But when no one had come on deck in answer to the bull-throated hail of the whistle, he had called the master.

Swinging, they had come back, easing up close aboard her to windward and blanketing her sails. When no one came on deck then, with the headway off her and the mainsail slatting idly as she came about, they had acknowledged there was something ominous about it. Backing down fast on the engines to remain there and hold her captive, they had put over the work boat to investigate. There was no need to launch a lifeboat. It had been flat calm for days, and the slight breeze which had sprung up in the afternoon was scarcely enough to ripple the gently heaving pastures of the Gulf.

Freya, of San Juan, P.R., it said under her stern, and the master of the tanker studied her curiously while he waited for the mate to come back to the bridge. She was a long way from home. He wondered what she was doing this far to the westward, in the Gulf of Mexico, and why a small boat from Spanish Puerto Rico should have been named after a Norse goddess.

The mate came up on the bridge carrying the big ledger and the satchel. "Sick?" the captain asked. "Or dead?"

"Gone," the mate said, with the air of a man who has been talking to ghosts without believing in them. "Just gone. Like that. Remember the *Celeste*?"

"Two of 'em, as near as I can figure it," he went on, sketching it tersely. "A man and a woman. One or both of 'em was there not over an hour ago."

"Well, as soon as you get that line on her we'd better go back and see," the captain said. "Anything in the log?"

"Gibberish," the older man replied. He passed over the book, and then the satchel. "Take a gander in that, Cap. Whatever was botherin' 'em, it wasn't financial trouble."

The captain pursed his lips in a silent whistle as he opened the bag to stare briefly and incredulously at the bundles of currency. He looked outward at the *Freya*, where the men were making the towline fast, and frowned thoughtfully. Then he opened the big journal at the page the mate indicated and read the last entry.

He frowned again.

The rapture . . . the rapture.

Something nudged gently at his mind. He groped for it, and found it. He was a studious and reflective seafaring man who had read Conrad, and the thing which had struck him was the odd, reverse-English similarity to Kurtz's agonized death cry in *The Heart of Darkness*. "The horror. The horror."

Flipping back, he hurriedly read the last five or six pages of the handwritten journal. Then he closed it gently and walked to the wing of the bridge to stand looking down.

"When you get your men aboard," he said slowly, "you can resume your course, Mr. Davidson."

"We're not going back?" the mate asked incredulously.

The captain shook his head. "There's nothing to go back for."

"But, Cap—That coffee was still warm. And she couldn't have been logging over two knots. We might find 'em."

"No." The captain gazed back over the flat surface of the sea that was red now in the afterglow. "No. You'd find nothing. Nothing at all."

But in the end, of course, they did go back, with a lookout on the foremast with the big Navy glasses. They served the sea, and the sea demanded it. And they found nothing but the empty and darkening prairies of the Gulf.

When there was no longer any light at all and they had given up and resumed their course, the captain counted the money in the presence of two of the ship's officers and locked it in the safe. It came to eighty-three thousand dollars. Then he sat down alone in his office and opened the journal again.

He pulled the long strand of ash-blond hair through his fingers and held it up to the light. *Freya*, he thought musingly; *Freya, the Viking goddess of love*. He wished now he had boarded the sloop himself. The mate was a superb sailor, and intelligent, with a sharp eye for detail and clues in a thing like this, but he wasn't a particularly sensitive man.

Maybe he could have felt it if he had stood there in the cabin where it had been. The span of time it took a pot of coffee to cool was not a very long one, and whatever was there must have been powerful, and magnificent, and perhaps even terrifying. Emotion was intangible, of course, and should leave no traces after the people who had felt it were gone, but—who knew? Perhaps even now, eddying in lifeless air in the corners of that deserted cabin—

He opened the journal at the first page and began to read.

One

23.50 North, 88.45 West

It was a hot, Gulf Coast morning in early June. The barge was moored out on the T-head of the old Parker Mill dock near the west end of the waterway. Carter had gone to New Orleans to bid on a salvage job and I was living on board alone. I was checking over some diving gear on the forward deck when a car rolled out of the end of the shed and stopped beside mine. It was a couple of tons of shining Cadillac, and there was a girl in it.

Or maybe a better way of putting it would be to say a girl came out of the shed, wearing a Cadillac. You'd see her first.

She got out and closed the door and walked over to the edge of the pier with the unhurried smoothness of poured honey. "Good morning," she said. "You're Mr. Manning, I hope? The watchman out at the gate—"

I straightened. "That's right," I said, wondering what she wanted. It might be possible to look more out of place on a water-front than she did, but it wouldn't be easy.

She looked me over quite deliberately, and I had an odd impression she was trying to size me up for something. There wasn't any basis for it really except that she took a little too long at it and didn't look like a woman who normally went around staring at people. I was suddenly conscious of the beat-up old dungarees and my hairy and sunburned

nakedness from the waist up, and was a little burned at the same time because I was conscious of it. What the hell? I was at work, wasn't I? What was this, a State Department tea?

"What can I do for you?" I asked curtly.

"Oh." She was a little flustered for a moment. "I—I'd like to talk to you. Could I come aboard?"

I glanced at the spike heels and then at the ladder leaning against the pier, and shook my head. "You'd break your neck. I'll come up."

I did, and the minute I was up there facing her I was struck by the size of her. She was a cathedral of a girl. In the high heels she must have been close to six feet. I'm six two, and I could barely see over the top of the smooth ash-blond head.

Her hair was gathered in a roll very low on the back of her neck and she was wearing a short-sleeved summery dress the color of cinnamon which intensified the fairness of her skin and did her no harm at all in the other departments. Maybe by some bean-pole standards she didn't save enough ground on the turns, but not by mine. I'd never seen any reason women had to look like boys.

Her face was wide at the cheekbones in a way that was suggestively Scandinavian, and her complexion matched it perfectly. She had the smoothest, clearest skin I'd ever seen. The mouth was a little wide, too, and full-lipped. It wasn't a classic face at all, but still lovely to look at and perhaps a little sexy. No, that wasn't it exactly. Just intensely female, like the rest of her. The eyes were large and gray, and very nice. And scared, I thought. It didn't make sense, but she was afraid of something.

It was hot in the sun, and quite still, and I was a little uncomfortable, aware I was too damned conscious of her and that I'd been doing the same thing I'd been angry at her about. Staring. Maybe we could just stand here the rest of the morning and look at each other like a couple of idiots.

"What can I do for you?" I asked again.

"Perhaps I'd better introduce myself," she said. "I'm Mrs. Wayne. Shannon Wayne. I wanted to talk to you about a job."

We walked over in the shadow of the shed by her car and she opened the door and sat down on the end of the seat with a hand on the window frame. She wore no jewelry except the

engagement and wedding rings and a thin gold watch that looked fragile and useless enough to cost a young fortune. Her fingers tapped nervously against the metal.

"What kind of job?" I asked.

She glanced at my face, and then away. "Recovering a shotgun that was lost out of a boat."

"Where?"

"In a lake, about a hundred miles north of here—"

I shook my head. "It would cost you more than it's worth."

"But," she protested, the gray eyes very near to pleading, "you wouldn't have to take a diving suit and air pump and all that stuff. I thought perhaps you had one of those aqualung outfits."

"We do," I said. "In fact, I've got one of my own. But it would still be cheaper to buy a new shotgun."

"No," she said. "Perhaps I'd better explain. It's quite an expensive one. A single-barreled trap gun with a lot of engraving and a custom stock. I think it cost around seven hundred dollars."

I whistled. "How'd a gun like that ever fall in a lake?"

"My husband was going out to the duckblind one morning and accidentally knocked it out of the skiff."

I looked at her for a moment, not saying anything. There was something odd about it. What kind of fool would be silly enough to take a \$700 trap gun into a duckblind? And even if he had money enough to buy them by the dozen, a single-barreled gun was a poor thing to hunt ducks with.

"How deep is the water?" I asked.

"Ten or twelve feet, I think."

"Well, look. I'll tell you how to get your gun back. Any neighborhood kid can do it, for five dollars. Get a pair of goggles, or a diving mask. You can buy them at any dime store. Go out and anchor your skiff where the gun went overboard and send the kid down to look for it. Take a piece of fishline to haul it up with when he locates it."

"Don't you want the job?" she asked. "Why?"

I wondered myself. I wasn't doing anything, and I hated sitting around. It would be easy, and she didn't mind paying for it, so why the reluctance?

I shrugged. "Well, it just seems silly to pay a professional diver all that travel time for something a kid could do in half an hour."

"It's not quite that simple," she said. "You see, it's about three hundred yards from the houseboat to where the duckblind is, and we're not sure where it fell out."

"Why?" I asked.

"It was early in the morning, and still dark."

"Didn't he hear it?"

"No. I think he said there was quite a wind blowing."

It made a little more sense that way, but not much. I still hesitated. Maybe I only imagined it, but I could feel a tension inside her that she was trying to hide and it had to be caused by something more than a lost shotgun. And I was too damned aware of her. I could feel her, even when I wasn't looking at her. I realized this was stupid, but it didn't change the fact. Maybe I'd been living too long alone.

She turned her head a little then and I got those eyes full in the face. She said only one word. She said, "Please."

If the shotgun had been under the Arctic ice pack it wouldn't have made a bit of difference. "When do you want to start?" I asked.

"Right now," she said. "Unless you have another job."

"No. I'm not doing anything."

"That's fine. We'll go in my car, if it's all right with you. Will your equipment fit in back?"

"Sure," I said.

I went down the ladder to the barge and stowed away the gear I'd been working on, and got the aqualung and diving mask out of the storeroom. I set them on the dock and returned for some swimming trunks. While I was in my quarters I put on some lighter shoes and changed into white linen slacks and a sport shirt. I checked all the doors to be sure they were locked and went back up on the pier. She handed me the car keys and I put everything in the trunk.

"I think this is fun," she said, smiling for the first time. "It'll be fun watching you work."

I shrugged, and said nothing. I wondered a little irritably if she really wanted that gun back, or if this was just her idea of a lark. After all, if it was lost during duck season it had been lying there for six months now. Maybe she had so much money and was so bored that hiring a diver came under the heading of entertainment, like ordering a clown for a children's party.

Then I asked myself morosely why I was so intent on picking her to pieces. She hadn't done anything, and so far as I knew there was no law against looking like a Norse goddess, even a slightly sexy one.

Norse? With a name like Shannon? It was odd, though, because she did look like a Swede.

I asked her to stop at the watchman's shanty for a moment while I told him I'd be gone the rest of the day in case anybody called. The mill was abandoned now and the pier was seldom used for anything, but the place was still fenced and a bored watchman put in his hours reading in a little shack beside the gate.

As soon as we were out the gate she fumbled in her bag for a cigarette. I lit one for her, and another for myself. She drove well in traffic, but seemed to do an unnecessary amount of winding around to get out on the right highway. She kept checking the rearview mirror, too, but I didn't pay much attention to that. I did it myself when I was driving. You never knew when some eager type might try to climb over your bumper.

When we were out on the highway at last she settled a little in the seat and unleashed a few more horses. We rolled smoothly along at 60. It was a fine machine, a 1954 hardtop convertible. I looked around the inside of it. She had beautiful legs. I looked back at the road.

"Bill Manning, isn't it?" she asked. "That wouldn't be William Stacey Manning, by any chance?"

I glanced quickly around. "How did you know?" Then I remembered. "Oh. You read that wheeze about me in the paper?"

It had appeared a few days ago, one of those interesting-character-around-the-water front sort of things, written by a rather intense girl who oozed her dedication to capital-J journalism all over the pier and was determined to pump me up into a glamorous figure for at least a column if it killed her. It had started over the fact I'd won a couple of races out at the yacht club, handling a friend's boat for him. I wasn't even a member; he was. But it had come out I'd deck-handed a couple of times on that run down to Bermuda and was a sailing nut; hence the story. Then she made the fact I'd gone to M.I.T. for three years before the war sound as if I were a South Seas beachcomber with a title. I didn't get it myself. Maybe she thought divers ate with their feet. It was a good thing I hadn't said anything about the four or five stories I'd sold. I'd have been Somerset Maugham, with flippers.

Then an odd thought struck me. I hadn't used my middle name in that interview. I hadn't used it, in fact, since I'd left New England.

She nodded. "Yes. I read it. And I was sure you must be the same Manning who'd written those sea stories. Why haven't you done any more?"

"I wasn't a very successful writer," I said.

"But I thought they were awfully good."

"Thank you."

She was looking ahead at the road. "Are you married?"

"I was," I said. "Divorced. Three years ago."

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry. I mean, I didn't intend to pry—"

"It's all right," I said. I didn't want to talk about it.

It was just a mess, but it was over and finished. A lot of it had been my fault, and knowing it didn't help much. We'd fought until we wore it out, and it takes two to do that. I'd owned the boat before Catherine and I were married, and I insisted on hanging onto it in spite of the fact she cared nothing about sailing and the upkeep on it was too much for a married man on the salary I was making in the steamship office where I worked. She wanted to give parties, and play office politics. None of the office brass sailed; they all played golf. I should sell the boat and join a country club. The hell with that, I'd said; I didn't care what the brass did. I spent my leisure time sailing, and trying to write. I didn't have any

ambition, and I was antisocial and pigheaded. Who the hell did I think I was? Conrad? It folded.

We even fought over that, over money again. We sold the house and the boat at a big loss in an outburst of mutual savagery and split the whole thing up like two screaming kids in a tantrum. I had learned diving and salvage work in the Navy during the war, and after the wreckage settled I drifted back into it, moving around morosely from job to job and going farther south all the time. If you were going to dive you might as well do it in warm water. It was that aimless. I'd tried writing again, but nothing came out right any more and everything was rejected. I was 33 now with nothing much to look forward to and not much behind except an increasing list of "ex-'s"—ex-engineering student, ex-Navy lieutenant, ex-husband, and ex-aspiring writer.

She slowed going through a small town, and when we were on the open highway again she looked around at me, her face thoughtful, and said, "I gathered you've had lots of experience with boats?"

I nodded. "I was brought up around them. My father sailed, and belonged to a yacht club. I was sailing a dinghy by the time I started to school."

"How about big ones, out in the ocean—what do they call it?"

"Offshore? Sure. After the war I did quite a bit of ocean yacht racing, as a crew member. And a friend and I cruised the Caribbean in an old yawl for about eight months in 1946."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. "Do you know navigation?"

"Yes," I said. "Though I'm probably pretty rusty at it. I haven't used it for a long time."

I had an odd impression she was pumping me, for some reason. It didn't make much sense. Why all this interest in boats? I couldn't see what blue-water sailing and celestial navigation had to do with finding a shotgun lost overboard in some piddling lake.

We went through another small town stacked along the highway in the hot sun. A few miles beyond she turned off the pavement onto a dirt road going up over a hill between some cotton fields. She was watching the mirror again. I looked back, but there was nobody behind us. Then I asked myself

abruptly what I cared if there were. This was only a job, wasn't it? What the hell, her husband had just lost his shotgun in a lake—

Hadn't he?

We passed a few dilapidated farmhouses at first, but then they began to thin out. It was desolate country, mostly sand and scrub pine, and we met no one else at all. After about four miles we turned off this onto a private road which was only a pair of ruts running off through the trees. I got out to open the gate. There was a sign nailed to it which read: *Posted. Keep Out.* Another car had been through recently, probably within a day or two, breaking the crust in the ruts.

I gathered it must be a private gun club her husband belonged to, but she didn't say. We dropped on down the hill into swampy country where big oaks festooned with Spanish moss met above the road. I could see old mudholes here and there through the timber, the silt cracking into geometric patterns and curling as it dried. It was quiet and a little gloomy, the way you imagined a tropical jungle would be.

We went on for about a mile and then the road ended abruptly. She stopped. "Here we are," she said.

It was a beautiful place, and almost ringingly silent the minute the car stopped. The houseboat was moored to a pier in the shade of big moss-draped trees at the water's edge, and beyond it I could see the flat surface of the lake burning like a mirror in the sun. There was no whisper of breeze. I got out and closed the door, and the sound was almost startling in the hush.

She unlocked the trunk and I took my gear out. "I have a key to the houseboat," she said. "You can change in there."

It was a lot larger than I had expected, and looked as if it must have four or five rooms. It was moored broadside to the pier which ran along parallel to and just off the bank under the overhanging limbs of the trees. A narrow gangplank ran from the bank out to the pier, and another shorter one onto the deck of the scow.

She led the way, disturbingly out of place in this wilderness with her smooth blond head and smart grooming, the slim spikes of her heels tapping against the planks. I noticed the

pier ran on around the end of the scow at right angles and out into the lake.

"I'll take the gear on out there," I said. "I'd like to have a look at it."

She came with me. We rounded the corner of the houseboat and I could see the whole arm of the lake. This section of the pier ran out into it about thirty feet, with two skiffs tied up at the end. They were about half full of water, and there were no oars in them. I put down the aqualung and mask and looked around.

The lake was about a hundred yards wide, glassy and shining in the sun between its walls of trees, and some two hundred yards ahead it turned around a point.

"The duckblind is just around that point, on the left," she said.

I looked at it appraisingly. "And he doesn't have any idea at all where the gun fell out?"

She shook her head. "No. It could have been anywhere between here and the point."

It still sounded odd, but I merely shrugged. "All right. I might as well get started."

She started to turn, and then froze. She was listening to something. Then I heard it, very faintly, over the immense hush all around. It was a car, somewhere a long way off. Her face grew very still and I could see the color go out of it. The sound of the car faded away; I couldn't tell whether it had stopped somewhere or gone on.

We were standing very close together on the end of the pier. Our eyes met. "What's the gag?" I asked roughly.

"Gag?"

"You've been looking for a car, or listening for one, ever since you picked me up. Is somebody following you?"

She didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, "I hope not."

"Your husband?"

Her face jerked up toward mine and I could see the ruffling of an Irish temper in the eyes. "My husband? And why would my husband be following me, Mr. Manning?"

I was a mile off base, and realized it. "I'm sorry," I said. It had been a stupid thing to say, and I wondered what there was about her that made me so uncomfortable and ready to jump down her throat at the slightest excuse. She wasn't bothering me, was she? The hell she wasn't bothering me.

She smiled, a little shakily, and I knew she was still scared. "It's all right," she said. "You really didn't mean it, anyway. You're very nice, you know."

"Maybe we'd better get started looking for that shotgun," I said.

"Would it help if I went, too, in one of the boats?" she asked. "I'd like to watch. And I thought perhaps, if you had something to guide you—"

I looked around. It would help, all right. The water was fairly clear and the visibility should be pretty good with the sun directly overhead, but still I'd have to come to the surface every few yards to get my bearings.

"Sure," I said. "But you can't go out in a skiff the way you're dressed. I can bail one out, but it'd still be dirty and wet."

"I think I've got an old swimsuit in the houseboat. I could change into that."

"All right," I said. We went back around to the gangplank and walked aboard. She unlocked the door. It led into a big living-room which was well-furnished and even had a fireplace. There was a rug on the floor, a sofa, some overstuffed chairs, a bookcase, and two or three framed pictures along the walls. The windows were closed and curtained. It was in the center of the deckhouse structure, and two doors led off into other rooms at each end. The air was dead and still, and smelled faintly of dust.

She nodded to one of the doors at the right end of the living-room. "You can change in there. I'll see if I can find my swim-suit."

I went in. It was a bedroom. There was a double bed in it, and a dresser, and the floor was carpeted from wall to wall. So this was roughing it in a duck camp in the wilds. I took off my clothes and got into the swimming trunks. It was hot, and I was shiny with sweat. I wondered if she had found her suit, and then wished irritably I could quit thinking of her.

I took a cigarette out of the shirt and lit it before I went out in the living-room again. The doors at the other end were closed, but I could hear her moving around in one of the rooms. It sounded as if she was changing clothes. I located a pair of oars and went down to the end of the pier.

Hauling one of the skiffs up alongside, I began bailing with an old can. There was no shade here, and the sun beat down on my head. In a moment I heard the whispered padding of bare feet behind me and turned around.

She could make your breath catch in your throat. The bathing suit was black, and she didn't have a vestige of a tan; the clear, smooth blondness of her hit you almost physically. A few inches shorter with the same build and the same legs and she would have been downright voluptuous; as it was there was something regal about her. I looked down and went on bailing.

I fitted the oarlocks and held the boat while she got in and sat down amidships. Setting the aqualung and mask in the stern, I shoved off.

"Pull out about twenty yards," I directed. The water was only about five feet deep around the pier and I could see the bottom from the surface. The gun was nowhere around there.

"All right," I said in a moment. "Hold it right there while I go over. Row very slowly toward the point, just as if you were going to the blind, but don't get too far ahead of me. You'll be able to tell where I am by the bubbles coming up. I'll have to cover fifty or seventy-five feet on each side, because it was dark and he could have wandered that much off the course."

She nodded, and watched with intense interest while I slipped the straps of the outfit over my shoulders and put on the mask. I bit on the mouthpiece and slid over the stern. The water was only about ten feet deep and the visibility was good. I went down and brushed bottom. It was soft, and my hand raised a cloud of silt.

That was the only thing I was afraid of. In all that time the gun might have sunk completely out of sight in the mud. But still it should leave a track, an outline, where it disappeared, as there were no currents to disturb the bottom and erase it. I looked up and could see the boat directly above me on the ground-glass screen of the surface. The oars dipped once, scattering bubbles. I swam to the right, just above the mud

and not disturbing it, made a wide swing, and came back to cover the other side. Here and there an old log lay on the bottom. I searched carefully around them.

She moved the boat slowly ahead. Time went by. I saw an empty bottle, two or three beer cans, and an underwater snag festooned with bass lures. Now and then bass and perch would stare at me goggle-eyed and slide away.

We couldn't have been over seventy-five yards off the pier when I found the gun. If I'd been looking ahead instead of staring so intently at the bottom I'd have seen it even sooner. It was slanting into the mud, barrel down, at about a 60-degree angle with the stock up in plain sight. I pulled it out and kicked to the surface. I was some twenty feet from the boat. She saw me and rowed over.

I caught the gunwale and lifted the shotgun out of the water so she could see it. Her eyes went wide, and then she smiled. "That was fast, wasn't it?" she said.

I set it in the bottom of the boat, stripped off the diving gear, and heaved that in, too. "Nothing to it," I said. "It was sticking up in plain sight."

She watched me quietly as I pulled myself in over the stern and sat down. I picked up the gun. It was a beauty, all right, a trap model with ventilated sighting ramp and a lot of engraving. I broke it and held it over the side, swishing it back and forth to get the mud out of the barrel and from under the ramp. Then I held it up and looked at it. She was still watching me.

"It's a pretty gun, isn't it?" she said self-consciously.

I stared at it again, and then back at her, feeling the silence lengthen out. It was the stock that gave it away, the stock and she herself. She was a lousy actress.

The barrel could conceivably have stayed free of rust for a long time, stuck in the mud like that where there was little or no oxygen, but the wood was something else. It should have been waterlogged. It wasn't. Water still stood up on it in drops, the way it does on a freshly waxed car. It hadn't been in the water 24 hours.

I thought of that other set of car tracks, and wondered how bored and how cheap you could get.

Two

She pulled us back to the pier. I made the skiff fast and followed her silently back to the car, carrying the diving gear and the gun. The trunk was still open. I put the stuff in, slammed the lid, and gave her the key.

Why not, I thought savagely. When had I become such a priss? I couldn't understand myself at all. If this was good clean fun in her crowd, what did I have to kick about? Maybe the commercial approach made the whole thing a little greasy, like an old deck of cards, and maybe she could have been a little less cynical about waving that wedding ring in your face while she beat you over the head with the advertising matter that stuck out of her bathing suit in every direction, but still it was nothing to blow your top about, was it? I didn't have to tear her head off.

I didn't know. All I was sure of was that I was sick of the whole lousy thing and of her most of all. Maybe it was just the sheer magnificence of her, paradoxically, that made it seem even junkier than it was. She didn't have any right to look like that and work the other side of the street at the same time.

"You're awfully quiet," she said, the gray eyes faintly puzzled.

This was the goddess again. She was cute.

"Am I?" I asked.

We walked back to the pier and went into the living-room of the houseboat. She stopped in front of the fireplace and stood facing me a little awkwardly, as if I still puzzled her.

She smiled tentatively. "You really found it quickly, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. I was standing right in front of her. Our eyes met. "If you'd gone farther up the lake before you threw it in it might have taken a little longer."

She gasped.

The storm warnings were going up the halcyons, but I was too angry to see them. Angry at myself, I think. I went right ahead and reeled my neck out another foot.

"Things must be pretty tough when a woman with your looks has to go this far into left field—"

It rocked me, and my eyes stung; a solid hundred and fifty pounds of flaming, outraged girl was leaning on the other end of the arm. I turned around, leaving her standing there, and walked into the bedroom before she decided to pull my head off and hand it to me. She was big enough and angry enough.

I was shaking. I choked with anger, and I choked thinking of her, and at the same time I told myself contemptuously I was acting like the heroine in a silent movie and that I ought to lean against the closed door with my hand on my chest. Why didn't I call a cop, or faint?

I stripped off the wet swimming trunks and slammed them on the bed and began furiously dressing. I was buttoning the shirt when it finally occurred to me to ask myself the same question I'd implied to her. Why? Even if she did like her extra-marital affairs rough, ready, and casual, she didn't have to chase them this far. With the equipment she had—even with that wedding ring showing—all she had to do was stumble. But what other explanation was there? She'd deliberately thrown the gun in the lake. I gave up.

I was reaching for a cigarette when I suddenly heard footsteps outside on the pier. I held still and listened. They couldn't be hers. She was barefoot. Or even if she'd already changed and put her shoes on, this wasn't the clicking of a woman's high heels. It was a man. Or men, I thought. It sounded as if there were two of them. They came aboard and

into the living-room, the scraping of their shoes loud and distinct in the hush. I stiffened, hardly breathing now.

Detectives? Wayne himself? Suddenly I remembered the way she'd doubled all over town getting out on the highway and how she'd kept watching the rearview mirror. I cursed her bitterly and silently. This was wonderful. This was all I lacked—getting myself shot, or named correspondent in a divorce suit. And for nothing, except having my face slapped around under my ear.

I looked swiftly around the room. There was no way out. The window was too small. I eased across the carpet until I was against the door, listening.

"Well, it's the scenic Mrs. Macaulay," a man's voice said. "You don't mind if we look around, do you?"

Mrs. Macaulay? But that was what he'd said.

"What do you want, now?" Her voice was little more than a whisper, and it was scared.

"The usual," the man replied easily. "Tiresome, aren't we?"

"Can't you ever understand that I don't know where he is?" she said passionately. "He's gone. He left me. I don't know where he went. I haven't heard from him—"

"A bit tiresome yourself, if you don't mind my saying so. We've heard the routine. But to get back to the present moment—we found your making two trips out here in twenty-four hours rather intriguing, and thought we'd look into it. Might even take up nature study ourselves. Now, where's Macaulay? Is he up here?"

"He's not up here, and I don't know where he is—"

Her voice cut off with a gasp, and then I heard the explosive impact itself. It came again. And then again. She apparently tried to hold on, but she began to break after the third one and the sob which was wrung from her wasn't a cry of pain but of utter hopelessness. I gave it up then, too, and came out.

There were two of them. The one to my left lounged on the arm of an overstuffed chair, lighting a cigarette as I charged into the room. I saw him only out of the corners of my eyes because it was the other one I was after. He was turned the other way. He had her backed up against one end of the sofa and off balance with a knee pressed into her thighs while he

held her left wrist and the front of her bathing suit with one hand and hit her with the other. He wasn't as tall as she was, but he was big across the shoulders. It was utterly methodical, efficient, and sickening.

I caught the arm just as he drew it back again. He dropped her. She fell across the sofa. He was blazingly fast, and even taken by surprise that way he was falling into a crouch and bringing his left up as he stepped back. But I was already swinging, and it was too sudden and unexpected for even a pug to get covered in time. He was still moving back and off balance when it landed, and he kept going. He bounced off the arm of another overstuffed chair, and rolled. He brought up against a three-legged wall table near the door. It fell over on him.

I started for him again, but something made me jerk my eyes around to the other one. Maybe it was just a flicker of movement. It couldn't have been any more than that, but now instead of a cigarette lighter in his hand there was a gun.

He gestured casually with the muzzle of it for me to move back and stay there. I moved. There was something about him.

He smiled. "Damned dramatic," he said, almost approvingly. "Hell's own shakes of an entrance." Then he looked boredly at the gun in his hand and dropped it back in the right-hand pocket of his jacket.

I was ten feet from him. And I remembered how fast it had appeared in his hand before. He was safe enough, and knew it. I watched him, still feeling the hot proddings of anger but beginning to get control of myself now. I'd come out without even stopping to think because I couldn't take any more of the noises coming from in here, and now I didn't have the faintest idea what I'd walked into, except that it looked dangerous. I couldn't place them. They weren't police. And they obviously weren't private detectives hired by her husband, because it was her husband they were looking for. Somebody named Macaulay, and she'd told me her name was Wayne. It was a total blank.

The one I'd hit was getting up. Pug was written all over him, in the way he hitched up his trousers with his wrists and the heels of his thumbs, shook his head to clear it, and began advancing catlike on the balls of his feet with his hands out.

He was a good six inches shorter than I was, but he had cocky shoulders and big arms, and I could see the bright, eager malice with which he sized me up. He was a tough little man who was going to cut a bigger one down to size.

"Drop it," the lounging one said.

"Let me take him." The plea was harsh, and urgent.

The other shook his head almost indifferently. He was long and loose-limbed and casual, dressed in a tweed jacket and flannels. It was impossible to tab him. He might have been an intercollegiate miler or a minor poet, until you ran into that cool and unruffled deadliness in the eyes. He had that indefinable something about him which enables you to tell the master craftsman from the apprentice in any trade, whether you know anything about it or not. There was something British about his speech.

"All right," the pug said reluctantly. He looked hungrily at me, and then at the girl. "You want me to ask her some more?"

I waited, feeling the hot tension in the room. It was going to be rough if he started asking her some more. I wasn't any hero, and didn't want to be one, but it wasn't the sort of thing you could watch for very long without losing your head, and with Tweed Jacket you probably never lost it more than once.

Tweed Jacket's amused gaze flicked from me to the girl and he shook his head again. "Waste of time," he said. "He'd scarcely be here, under the circumstances, unless the rules have changed. Might go through the rooms, though, and have a dekko at the ash trays. You know his brand of cigarettes."

The pug went out, managing to bump against me and push me off balance with a hard shoulder as he went past. I said nothing. He turned his face a little and we looked at each other. I remembered the obscene brutality of the way he was holding and hitting her, and the yearning in the stare was mutual.

There was silence in the room except for Shannon Wayne's stirring on the sofa. She sat up. The whole side of her face was inflamed and her eyes were wet with involuntary tears. The bathing suit was one of the old ones with shoulder straps and one of them was torn loose so the front of it slanted downward across a satiny breast. She fumbled at the strap,

watching Tweed Jacket with fear in her eyes. The button was gone. She held it together and went on enduring.

Tweed Jacket apparently found us tiresome in the extreme. He crushed out his cigarette, whistling a fragment of the "Barcarolle" from *The Tales of Hoffman*. The pug came out of the last room.

"Water haul," he said, spreading his hands.

Tweed Jacket's eyebrows raised. "Beg pardon?"

"Nothing. Nobody here for a long time, from the looks of it."

"Right." Tweed Jacket unfolded himself languidly and stood up.

The pug looked at me, his hazel eyes bright with wickedness. "How about Big Boy? We better ask him, hadn't we?"

"Rather unnecessary. I'd suggest you stick to business, old boy."

There was no longer any doubt as to who was boss, but the pug wanted me so badly he tried once more. "This is a quiet place to ask, and he might know Macaulay."

Tweed Jacket waved him toward the door. "Quite unlikely," he said. His eyes flicked over the girl's figure again with that same cool amusement. "I'd say his interest in Macaulay was vicarious, to say the least. *Vive le sport*." They went out.

In the dead silence I could hear their footsteps retreating along the pier, and in a moment the car started. I breathed deeply. I was pulled tight and soaked with sweat. Tweed Jacket's urbane manner covered a very professional sort of deadliness, and it could easily have gone the other way. Only the profit motive was lacking. He simply didn't believe Macaulay was here.

I turned. She was still holding the front of the bathing suit. "Thank you," she said, without any emotion whatever, and looked away from me. "I'm sorry you had to become involved. As soon as I can change, I'll drive you back to town."

I walked over in front of her, so mixed up now I didn't know anything. "It's all right," I said. "But I wonder if you'd tell me what this is all about? And why you threw that gun in the lake?"

She looked through the place I'd have been standing if I had existed. "Really," she said coldly, "I thought you had that all figured out."

She was about as beautiful when she was angry as at any time. I tried to filter that out of my mind and look at her objectively. It wasn't easy.

What had changed the picture? Nothing had really happened to prove I was wrong about it, but I was suddenly very ashamed of myself. It was odd, especially when I still didn't know why she'd done it, or why she had told me her name was Wayne while they'd called her Macaulay. All I was sure of was that I'd jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"I'm very sorry," I said. "I'd like to apologize, if it's worth anything."

Her face brightened a little. Then she smiled. With the eyes still full of tears that way, it could catch hold of you right down in the throat.

"It's all right," she said. "It's my fault, anyway. I don't know how I could have been so stupid as not to realize that was the way it would look. What else could you think?"

I was uncomfortable. "I'd like to forget it," I said, "if you could. But what in the name of God did you do it for?"

She hesitated. "I'd hoped I would have more time to make up my mind before I told you. If I told you at all. But you were too observant."

"Make up your mind about what?"

Her eyes met mine simply. "About you."

"Why?" I asked.

She stood up. It was obvious she was under a strain. "Would you—excuse me a minute? I'd like to change, and maybe if I had a chance to think—"

"Sure," I said. She went out. I sat down and lit a cigarette. There was no use trying to guess what it was all about, or what she really wanted. I thought of the two men who had just left. There was something deep and probably quite dangerous going on under the surface here, but I couldn't see what I had to do with it.

I switched back to her, and as usual I couldn't get my thoughts sorted out. I was conscious of being happy about

something, and in a moment I realized it was simply knowing I'd been wrong about the whole thing. That made no sense at all, of course. *Maybe I ought to see a psychiatrist*, I thought sourly.

She came out in a few minutes, dressed and looking as smooth as ever. She had put on fresh make-up, and the ugly redness was gone from the side of her face. She touched it gently.

"I want to thank you again," she said. "I don't know how much more of it I could have taken."

I stood up. "Then you do know where he is?"

She nodded quietly.

I began to understand then what she had been trying to make up her mind about. But I still didn't see why. What did they want with me? We went out. She locked the door and we walked out to the car.

She got behind the wheel, but made no move to turn on the ignition. She slipped around facing me, with her elbow on the back of the seat. It was very quiet, and her face was deadly serious. She had made up her mind.

I gave her a cigarette and lit it, and lit one for myself. I dropped the lighter back in my pocket.

"There's one thing," I said. "Maybe I don't want to know where he is."

She gave me a quick glance. "You don't need a lot of explanation, do you?"

"It was just a guess," I admitted. "But I'm still not sure I want to know anything Tweed Jacket is trying to find out. I don't like that efficient look of his."

"You won't have to know," she said. "At least, not until we're ready to go. I'm just offering you a job."

"Before we go any further," I said, "what kind of jam is he in? Not the police?"

"No. You've seen two of them. They didn't look like police, did they?"

"Hardly," I said. "But what does he want with me?"

"He needs help. Specifically, a diver."

I took a puff on the cigarette and looked out through the moss-hung dimness of the trees. "The world is full of divers. They run into each other nowadays, spearing fish."

"A diver is not quite all," she said. "Remember—"

I began to get it then, all the questions about boats and offshore sailing and navigation. He needed several people, actually, but in a thing like this the fewer you told, the better.

"So that's why the gun business?" I said.

She nodded. "I'll admit it was rather theatrical, but you understand, don't you? When I read that story about you in the paper I thought you were just the man we were looking for, but I had to be sure. Not only that you could handle the job, but also just what kind of man you were.

There are a couple of reasons why a mistake could be absolutely fatal. That seemed like a good way to do it. It would give me most of the day to size you up, and in a place where we wouldn't be seen together. Unfortunately, I was wrong about that. I knew I was being followed, but I thought I'd gotten away from them. However—" She blushed slightly and looked away from me in confusion. "I don't think there was too much harm done, since he took it for something else —"

I was ill at ease myself. Tweed Jacket hadn't been the only one.

"What is it you want me to do?" I asked. "Don't forget, I'm merely an employee of a salvage company. Any job negotiations are supposed to be handled by the owner—" She shook her head emphatically. "No. That's out. We don't want a corporation, or a committee, or an expedition. It has to be one man, and one man only, and it has to be one who'll keep his mouth shut for the rest of his life. If you do it, you'll have to quit your present job, giving some other reason, of course —"

"It doesn't involve breaking any laws?"

"No," she said. "But I'll warn you. It could be quite dangerous. Even afterward, if they found it out." She stopped suddenly, frowning a little. "No. Wait. Since you've brought up the question, I'll be perfectly frank with you. There is one aspect of it that probably isn't quite legal. That is taking a boat into the waters of a foreign country and landing two

people secretly. But there'd be no chance of your getting caught, and it doesn't sound like a particularly reprehensible crime—"

"Depends on what they were being landed for," I said.

"Simply," she said, her eyes somber, "so they could live in peace. And go on living."

I nodded, thinking about it. I had a hunch she was telling it to me straight. She and her husband were running from Tweed Jacket and God knew how many more for some reason, but somehow I couldn't connect her with anything criminal. Of course, I didn't know anything about him at all, but I was beginning to like her very much. I tried to warn myself. It hadn't been twenty minutes since I'd gone off halfcocked in the other direction. Maybe there was just something about her that precluded objective appraisal, at least as far as I was concerned. "What is the deal, specifically?" I asked. She took another drag on the cigarette, and crushed it out very slowly in the ash tray. She looked at me. "Just this," she said. "That you buy and outfit a seaworthy boat large enough to accommodate three people but which can be handled by one seaman with the help of two landlubbers. We'll furnish the money, of course, but the whole thing is to be done under your name or an assumed one, and we have no connection with it, for obvious reasons, until the very hour we go aboard. Secretly, and without being followed. That isn't going to be easy, either. Sail us to a place off the coast of Yucatan and recover something from a private plane which crashed and sank—"

"Wait," I said. "In how much water? Do you know?"

"Just roughly," she replied. "About sixty feet, I think."

I nodded. "That's easy. The depth, I mean. But finding the plane is something else. You could spend years looking for it, and still never locate it. Planes break up fast, especially in exposed positions and shallow water."

"I believe we can find it," she said. "But we'll go into the reasons for that later. After we recover what my husband wants from the plane, you sail us to a spot on the coast of a Central American country and land us. That's all."

"What Central American—" I started to ask, and then stopped. The vagueness had been intentional. "I land you? What about the boat?"

"The boat is yours. Plus five thousand dollars."

I whistled softly. There was nothing cheap about this deal. Then two thoughts hit me at exactly the same time like two slugs of Scotch. *The boat is yours* was one of them, and the other was *Ballerina*. It was like hearing somebody had left you a million.

"Wait," I said eagerly. "How much do you plan to spend for a boat?"

"Could we get an adequate one for ten thousand?"

"Yes," I said. I considered swiftly. The last I'd heard they were still asking twelve thousand for *Ballerina*, but they might go for an offer of ten cash. Sure they would. And if not I'd add the rest myself out of the five thousand.

Then I thought of something else. "You mean, I just land you on the coast of this country, whatever it is, and that's it? You realize, don't you, that without papers you'll be picked up and deported inside a week?"

"That part is all taken care of," she said.

It was none of my business. She could even say that nicely.

We were both silent for a moment. I turned, and she was watching me. "Well?" she asked. "What do you think?"

Manning of the *Ballerina*, I thought. I could see the lines of her. But, still, what about this? I didn't know anything.

"Look," I asked, "this whatever-it-is in the plane. Does it belong to your husband?"

She nodded. "It's his."

"Which is his real name? Wayne or Macaulay?"

"Macaulay," she said simply. "You don't make it as easy for them as looking you up in the telephone book."

"Who is Tweed Jacket?"

"His name is Barclay. You might call him a killer, though I prefer executioner. It describes his attitude as well as his profession."

"And your husband is running from him?"

"Barclay's only one of them. Running, yes. In the past three months we've lived in New York, San Francisco, Denver, and Sanport."

"Couldn't he get police protection?"

"I suppose so. But it isn't much of a way to live."

I still hesitated, without knowing why. What was I afraid of? I believed her, didn't I? Maybe that was it. I was too eager to believe her.

Suddenly she reached out and put her hand on my arm. The gray eyes were large and unhappy and pleading. "Please," she said.

You couldn't look at her and refuse her anything. "All right," I said. "But I'd like to have until in the morning before making it definite. Suppose I call you?"

Three

She sighed with relief and reached for the ignition key. We started back. I lit another cigarette and thought about it. I still wasn't too sold on the thing. I was sold on owning that boat and I was practically panting to believe anything she said, but she hadn't said enough.

"Listen," I said. "I don't want to know where he is, or what's in the plane, as long as it's really his. We can skip that. But don't you think you're asking me to make up my mind with damn few facts to go on? It's a queer-sounding deal. You'll have to admit that yourself."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. I guess it is. And I can understand your wondering if it's entirely aboveboard, without knowing any more than you do.

"But maybe this will help. My husband's full name is Francis L. Macaulay. He is—or was, rather—an executive in a firm of marine underwriters in New York. The name of the company is Benson and Teen. If you'll call either them or the New York police they'll assure you he isn't in any kind of trouble with the law, and never has been. The only people he's hiding from are gangsters. I'd rather not go into it any further than that, because it's his business, and not mine. But that's what you really wanted to know, wasn't it? That this wasn't something that might get you in trouble with the police?"

"That's what I wanted to know," I said.

Something still puzzled me a little, though. And that was the fact that hoodlums seldom bothered to hunt down and kill some perfectly innocent law-abiding John Citizen who was hardly aware they existed. As a rule you'd been connected with them in some way, been near enough to have a little of it rub off. But an executive in an insurance firm? That didn't make sense at all.

But where did the plane come in?

"You'd better warn your husband that if he can't pinpoint that plane crash within a mile he's just going to be wasting his money," I said. "It'll be impossible to find it."

"That's all right," she said with assurance. "He knows right where it is."

"He's sure, now?"

"Yes," she said. "It was right off the coast. And he was in it when it crashed."

"I see," I said.

But I didn't see much.

Where had he been going? What was in the plane? And how had he got back here, assuming he was here?

I could tell, however, that she was reluctant to talk about it any more than she had to, so I quit asking questions. There'd be time enough for that when I gave her definite word I'd take it.

But why was I holding back? It puzzled me. I'd have given my left arm for that auxiliary sloop *Ballerina*, and here it was being tossed in my lap. The job was easy, the pay was fantastic. I believed she was on the level. What did I want, anyway?

Of course, I didn't have any desire to look down the end of Barclay's gun again, but that was calculated risk, and besides he probably wouldn't have any reason to connect me with it until it was too late and we were already gone.

Something kept bothering me, but that wasn't it. I gave up.

It was a little after five when we began to get back into the outskirts of the city. We hit the peak of the traffic rush right on the nose and crawled through the downtown district a slow light at a time. After a while she pulled into a parking lot

and we walked up to the corner to a cocktail lounge for a drink. That was where the odd thing happened.

It was one of those too-utterly-utter places I usually avoided, dimly lighted, with blue-leather-upholstered booths and a soulful type who needed a haircut playing Victor Herbert on an electric organ. We sat down in the last booth and ordered Scotch and water.

After the drinks came she wrote down her telephone number for me. "You're sure it'll be all right?" I asked. "They haven't tapped your phone?"

"It's not likely," she said. "But you never know for sure. Just be careful what you say; tell me you want to see me again, or something like that. I think it'll be all right if we meet just once more, to give you the money, but beyond that it's too risky."

"Yes, it would be," I agreed, knowing she was right but still feeling let down about it.

We both fell silent, listening to the music. A moment or two went by. I was looking at her face when she suddenly raised her eyes and saw me.

"You're quiet," she said. "What are you thinking about?"

"You," I said. "You're probably the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life."

It was completely unexpected. I hadn't intended to say a thing like that. It startled me, and I cursed myself for an awkward idiot.

She was startled, too, for an instant. Then she smiled, and said, "Why, thank you, Bill."

She was probably wondering when they'd flushed me out of the hills and put shoes on me.

We finished our drinks in silence while I tried irritably to figure out why she affected me that way. God knows I wasn't a particularly smooth type, but I'd never had this many thumbs and left feet around a woman before. She was married, I had known her exactly one day, and yet in less than four hours I'd managed to insult her and then startle her out of her wits with a piece of off-the-cuff brilliance like that. Maybe it just wasn't my day.

We walked back to the car. She offered to drive me out to the pier, but I vetoed it. "You'd better stay away from places like that," I said. "They're not safe with those people following you."

She nodded. "All right." We shook hands, and she said quietly, "I'll be waiting to hear from you. You've got to help me, Bill. I can't let him down."

I watched her drive away. Restlessness seized me, and I didn't want to go back to the pier. I went into another bar and ordered a drink, nursing it moodily. Twice I started to the phone to call one of the girls I knew for a date; both times I gave it up. I tried to think calmly back over the day, to pull it into perspective, and I kept bumping into Shannon Macaulay at every turn. She ran through it like a brilliant silver thread through a piece of burlap.

Look, I asked myself, what was with Shannon Macaulay? I didn't know anything about her. Except that she was married. And her husband was on the lam from a bunch of mobsters. So she was tall. So she was nice looking. So something said sexy when you looked at her body and her face, and sweet when you looked at her eyes. I had seen women before, hadn't I? I must have. They couldn't be something entirely new to a man 33 years old, who'd been married once for four years. So relax.

I left the bar.

I remembered after a while I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. I went into a restaurant and ordered dinner. When it came I wasn't hungry.

It was an easy job. It probably wouldn't take a month altogether, if he really knew where that plane was. A month—Just three of us at sea in a small boat. I shook my head irritably. What the hell difference did that make? It was just a job, wasn't it?

I'd own the *Ballerina*. After I landed them I'd sail her across to San Juan. I'd go to work for the Navy, at least until the hurricane season was over, and then cruise the West Indies. Why, with that much money I could sail her around the world. I'd try writing again.

I pushed the food back and looked around for a phone booth. I dialed the yacht broker's office. There was no

answer. It went on ringing. At last I remembered to look at my watch. It was nearly seven.

I went out in the street and bought a paper, standing on a corner while I rustled impatiently through it to the classified section. She was still listed among a dozen others in the broker's ad. *36 ft. aux, slp. Ballerina. Slps 4.* Now there was a description, I thought sourly. The poet who dreamed it up would probably call the Taj Mahal an *oldr. type bldg, suitbl. lge. fmly.*

I walked out to the beach and prowled for miles along the sea wall. It was after ten when I finally caught a cab and went back to the pier. The driver stopped at the watchman's shanty.

"This will do," I said, and got out.

While I was waiting for my change the watchman came out. It was old Christiansen, who was always eager for a chance to talk. "Fellow was here to see you, Mr. Manning," he said. "He's still out there."

"Thanks," I said. I put the change in my pocket and the cab left.

"Maybe he's got a diving job for you, eh?" Christiansen said. "That's what he said, anyway."

"I suppose so," I answered, not paying much attention. "Good night." It was late for anybody to be coming around about a job, but maybe he'd been waiting for quite a while.

I crossed the railroad spur in the darkness and entered the long shed running out on the pier. It was velvety black inside and hot, and I could hear my footsteps echo off the empty walls. Up ahead I could see the faint illumination which came from the opened doors at the other end. There was a light above them on the outside.

I wondered what kind of man Macaulay was. There was no picture of him at all. An executive in a marine insurance firm who was being hunted down by a mob of gangsters didn't make even the glimmerings of sense. I thought of being hunted that way, of never knowing when some utter stranger might shoot you in a crowd or when they might get you from behind in the dark. It had never occurred to me before, but I began to realize now how helpless and alone you could be. Sure, you had the police. But did you want to live in a

precinct station? What was left? They could catch and prosecute the man after he'd killed you, if that was any comfort, but they couldn't arrest him for wanting to.

Then I thought of something else. The girl herself. He must love her very much. If you were trying to hide, having her around would be like carrying a sign with your name on it, or a lighted Christmas tree. And in Central America? Murder. Any kind of scrawny, washed-out blonde led a parade down there, and she'd stick out like the Chartres cathedral in a housing development.

But maybe that didn't matter so much. It wasn't as if they were running from the police. A mob looking for them wouldn't have any connections that far away, and if they got out of the country without leaving tracks they should be all right.

Then, for no reason at all, I remembered the thing she'd said when we had parted there at the car. "I can't let him down." At the time it had seemed perfectly normal, the thing any woman would say if her husband were in trouble. But was it? *I* can't let him down. It puzzled me. There was an odd ring to it somewhere. He was her husband; presumably she was in love with him. And from the little I'd seen of her I knew she wasn't given to stating the obvious. There wouldn't be any question of letting him down, nor any necessity for mentioning it. When you put it into words, even without thinking, it wasn't love, or devotion. It sounded like obligation.

I came out the doors at the end of the shed. Off to my left, just at the edge of the illumination from the small bulb over the doors, I could see the ladder leading down onto the barge. Only a little of it stuck above the level of the pier now, and I remembered absently that the tide had been ebbing about three hours.

I started over toward it, and then suddenly remembered old Chris had said somebody was waiting out here to see me. I looked around, puzzled. My own car was sitting there beside the doors, but there was no other. Well, maybe he'd gone. But that was odd. Chris would have seen him. There was no way out except through the gate.

I saw it then—the glowing end of a cigarette in the shadows inside my car.

The door swung open and he got out. It was the pug. There was just enough light to see the hard, beat-up face, and the yearning in it, and the bright malice in the eyes. He lazily crushed out his cigarette against the paint on the side of the car.

"Been waiting for you, Big Boy," he said.

"All right, friend," I said. "I've heard the one about the good little man. And it's put a lot of good little men in the hospital. Hadn't you better run along?"

Then, suddenly, I saw the whole thing over again, saw him holding and hitting her like some vicious little wasp systematically destroying a butterfly, and I was glad he'd come. A cold ball of rage pushed up in my chest. I went for him.

He was a pro, all right, and he was fast. He hit me three times before I touched him. It was like one of those sequences in an animated cartoon—*boing-boing-boing!* None of the punches hurt very much, but they sobered me a little. He'd cut me to pieces this way. He'd close my eyes and then take his own sweet time chopping me down to a bloody pulp. These raging swings of mine were just his meat; I didn't have a chance in God's world of hitting him where it would hurt, and they only pulled me off balance so he could jab me.

His left probed for my face again. I raised my hands, and the right slammed into my body. He danced back. "Duck soup," he said contemptuously.

He put the left out again. I caught the wrist in my hand, locked it, and yanked him toward me. This was unorthodox, and new, and when my right came slamming into his belly it hurt. I heard him suck air. I set a hundred and ninety-five pounds on the arch of his foot, and ground my heel.

He tried to get a knee into me. I pushed him back with another right in his stomach. He dropped automatically into his crouch, weaving and trying to suck me out of position. He'd been hurt, but the hard grin was still there and his eyes were wicked. All he had to do was get me to play his way.

He was six or eight feet in front of the car, with his back toward it. I went along with him, lunging at him with a looping right. He slipped inside it, pounding that tattoo on my middle. He slid out again, as fast as he'd come in, only now

he was three feet nearer the car. I crowded him again. He didn't know it was there until he felt the bumper against the backs of his legs.

I moved in on him fast. He didn't have anywhere to go, and he was already too far back and off balance to swing. I caught his wrist and the front of his shirt and leaned on him. The right crashing against his face had an ugly, meaty sound in the night. This was exactly the way he had held and beaten the girl. I slammed him again, savagely, punishing him.

"Different when you're catching, huh?" I said. I rocked him again.

He twisted away at last, but he was a little groggy now and his timing was off. A trickle of blood ran out of his mouth, and my hand hurt. I was conscious I had blood on my own face, too, because it was getting in my eyes. There was no sound except the labored breathing and the rasp of our feet against the concrete of the pier. He circled me, a little more warily now, and we moved out of the cone of light above the doors. He slashed in suddenly and made my head ring with a hard right to the jaw, but left himself open long enough for me to counter. He rocked back on his heels. I swung again. He dropped. I looked down at him. There wasn't even any satisfaction in it now. "Better beat it while you can," I said, gasping for breath. "I'm too big for you. I lean on those arms a few more times, they're going to weigh three hundred pounds apiece. And when they come down, the lights go out."

He had no intention of quitting. His eyes hated me as he got up. I was a bigger man, and I'd knocked him down when he was off guard; there could never be any peace for him until he'd humiliated me. He retreated evasively, trying to stay out of reach until his head cleared. I crowded him, but I could never hit him solidly. He was too much the pro for that. We were farther away from the light now, near the ladder going down onto the barge. He was beginning to recover a little. He came in suddenly, jabbing at my face. I tied his arm up and swung at his middle again. It hurt him. His hands fluttered helplessly. I swung once more, moving in with it.

He shot backward, trying to get his feet under him. His heels struck the big 12-by-12 stringer running along the edge of the pier and he fell outward into the darkness, cartwheeling. I heard a sound like a dropped cantaloupe and

jumped to the edge to look down. The deck of the barge lay in deep shadow. I couldn't see anything. I heard a splash. He had landed on the afterdeck and then slid off into the water.

I jumped, taking a chance of breaking a leg. It was a good eight feet down to the deck at this stage of the tide. I landed safely, and clawed in my pocket for the keys. Then I remembered. The aqualung was in the trunk of the girl's car. There was another in the storeroom, but the cylinders were empty.

It didn't matter. I could do it without diving gear, but I had to have a light. I ran to the storeroom door, frantically jabbing at the lock. I got it open at last, wild with the necessity to hurry, and plunged inside. I was sweating. I bumped into something, and cursed. My hands located the big underwater light and its coil of cable. I ran aft, groping for the plug at the end of it. Holding that in one hand, I threw the rest over the stern into the water. It took only a second to plug it into the receptacle and turn the switch. I could see it glowing faintly thirty feet below on the mud. I ran back to the storeroom for a diving mask, kicked my shoes off, and dropped over the stern. I didn't know how long it had been now. All I knew was that if he was knocked out he'd drown almost instantly.

Water closed over me. I kicked downward toward the light. The shadowy columns of the pilings seemed to drop away endlessly off to my right. They were encrusted with barnacles which could cut like razor blades. I passed a big lateral timber, and then another. It was like going down in a freight elevator.

I was on bottom. He should have been right there beside the light. He wasn't. I looked wildly around. There was no sign of him anywhere. I swam along the edge of the pilings, searching. I tried to think. Unconscious, he should have settled straight to the bottom, like a dropped anchor. Maybe he hadn't been knocked out after all, and was above, swimming. Then I saw I was in among the pilings. They were all around me. I knew what it was now, but it was too late. I had to go up. I was running out of breath.

I kicked diagonally upward, avoiding the pilings. My lungs hurt. I wondered if I'd misjudged the time, stayed under too long. I began to be afraid of the barge. If I miscalculated and

came up under it I might not get out. Then my head broke surface. I took two deep breaths and went under again. Maybe he was already beyond help. It had taken me too long to realize that with the tide ebbing he would have gone down at an angle and was lying somewhere back under the pier among that tangle of pilings.

I picked up the light and swam in with it. A whole jungle of pilings began to grow up around me. I thought of those barnacle-encrusted lateral timbers above me, and the bottom of the barge itself. If I lost my bearings I'd never get out. Then I saw him. He was lying beside a pillar with the side of his face in the mud as if he were asleep. I dropped the light and reached for him.

I was trying to get a grip on his shirt collar when I saw the plume of dark smoke drifting out of his head to thin out and disappear downstream in the tide. I reached around and put my hand on the back of it. It was like a broken bowl of gelatin.

He was dead. It was only the pressure that was making him bleed. He turned a little as I jerked my hand away, and settled on his back in the muck. His eyes were open, staring at me. I fought the sickness. If I gagged, I'd drown.

Four

I don't remember coming out, or how I did it. The next thing I was conscious of was hanging to the wooden ladder on the side of the barge, being sick. I'd left him there. The police could get him out; I didn't want to touch him.

I climbed up to the deck and collapsed, exhausted. I was winded, and water ran out of my clothes as from a saturated sponge. The cut places on my face were stinging with salt. My right hand hurt, and when I felt it with the other it was swollen.

I had to get out to the watchman's shanty and call the police. Then I sat real still and stared at the darkness while the whole thing caught up with me. This wasn't an accident I had to report. I'd killed him in a fight.

I hadn't intended to, but what difference did that make? I'd hit him and knocked him off the pier, and now he was dead. It wasn't murder, probably, but they'd have a name for it—and a sentence.

Well, there was no help for it. There was nothing else to do, and sitting here wasn't going to bring him back to life. I started wearily to get up, and then stopped. The police were only part of it. *What about Barclay?* And the others I didn't even know?

I'd already come to their attention by being with that girl. Now I'd killed one of their muscle men, and strangely enough

just the one who'd wanted to beat me up and question me about Macaulay in the first place. They wouldn't mind, would they? Forget it, Manning; it was just one of those things. Drop in and kill one of us any time you're out our way.

Then, suddenly, I realized I wasn't thinking of the police any more, or of Barclay's mob of hoodlums, but of Shannon Macaulay. And the *Ballerina*. Why? What had made her come into my mind at a time like this? Of course, the whole thing was off now. Even if I didn't get sent to prison, with those mobsters after me and convinced I had some connection with Macaulay I was no longer of any use to her.

No. I wouldn't do it. The hell with reporting it. Sure, I regretted the whole thing. And those sightless eyes would probably go on staring at me for years. But I was damned if I was going to ruin everything just because some vicious little egomaniac couldn't leave well enough alone. Leave him down there. Say nothing about it—I stopped.

How? Christiansen knew he was in here. There was no way out except right past the watchman's shack. I was all marked up from the fight. In a few days, in this warm water, the body would come to the surface, with the back of his head caved in and bruises all over his face. I didn't have a chance in the world. He'd merely come in here to see me, and had never come out. That would be a tough one for the police to solve.

It was the beautiful simplicity of it that made it so terrifying. Of all the places in the world, it had to happen on a pier to which there was only one entrance and where everybody was checked in and out by a watchman—No. Wait. Not checked in and out. Just questioned as they came in. They didn't have to sign a book or get a pass. And the watchman only waved them by as they went out.

It collapsed. It didn't mean anything at all, because *nobody* had gone out. There hadn't been anyone else in here. One man had come in; nobody had left. Christiansen would never have any trouble remembering that when the police came checking.

There *had* to be a way out of it. It was maddening. I looked across the dark waterway. Everything was quiet along the other side; there was nothing except an empty warehouse, a deserted dock. Nobody had seen it. Barclay probably didn't even know the pug had come out here. He'd done it on his

own because he couldn't rest until he'd humiliated a bigger man who'd knocked him down. That was the awful part of it: there was nothing whatever to connect me with it except the simple but inescapable fact he'd driven in here to see me and had never driven out again—I stopped. *Driven?* No. I hadn't seen any car. But how did I know there wasn't one out there? The shed was dark.

My mind was racing now. I sprang up and ran around to the storeroom door, still barefoot, dripping water out of my sodden clothes. I found a flashlight and leaped onto the ladder. I ran across to the door of the shed and threw the beam into the darkness inside. There it was, back in a corner. I was weak with relief. Maybe he'd parked it there in the dark to keep me from seeing it and being warned. But that didn't matter. The big thing was that he did have a car in here.

All I had to do was drive it out past the watchman, and the pug had left here alive. It was as simple as that.

Out at the gate the light was overhead, and the interior of the car would be in partial shadow. The watchman's shack would be on the right. I could hunch down in the seat until I was approximately the size of the pug. All the watchman ever did was glance up from his magazine and wave. He wouldn't see my face, nor remember afterward that he hadn't. It was the same car, wasn't it? The man had driven in, and after a while he had driven out.

But wait. There was something else. I'd still have to get back inside without Christiansen seeing me. He knew I was in here, and I couldn't very well come in again without having left. But that was easy, too. It must be nearly eleven now. Chris went off duty at midnight. All I had to do was wait until after twelve and come back in on the next man's shift. He wouldn't know where I was supposed to be, or care.

I walked over to the car and flashed the light in, and the whole thing fell in on me again. I realized I should have known it if I'd been using my head. You always removed the keys automatically when you got out of a car. It was worse than ever now.

I leaned wearily against the door. I knew where the keys were, didn't I? It would take only a minute. Revulsion swept over me. I thought of what it was like down there, the light shining among that surrealist forest of dark pilings while

grass undulated gently in the current and a dead man watched you with smoke coming out of his head. It was something out of a madman's dream.

But it had to be done. I walked back to the barge, dreading it, and stood on the afterdeck where he had landed and slid in. I could see the faint glow of the light below me, back under the pier, and began taking off the wet trousers and shirt. There was no use being hampered by them this time. In the deep shadows beside me I could just make out the form of the big steel mooring bit. That was what had killed him. He'd been wheeling vertically as he fell, and his head had crashed down onto the top of it with force enough to brain an ox. I felt queasy, and tried not to think about it.

Then, suddenly, the whole plan began to take form in my mind at once. I'd had only part of it before; this would clinch it. Men had been found floating along water fronts before with their heads broken in, and usually their pockets were empty. And I didn't merely take the car out; I parked it among those dives in the tough district between here and town. It wouldn't matter where he was actually found. Bodies drifted erratically with the tides as they began to grow buoyant.

I was ready. Then I hesitated, thinking coldly. I didn't know much about law or the workings of courts, but I had sense enough to realize that what I was about to do was deliberately criminal. The other hadn't been, even though it had killed him. I could still go call the police and report it, and everything would be on my side. A half dozen generations of lawyers and New England clergymen leaned over my shoulder and whispered fiercely that that was the only thing to do.

And on the other hand? Once I did this it was irrevocable, and I was on my own. If they caught me then there'd be no evidence of a fight or accident. They might convict me of deliberate murder, because I'd tried to cover it up. Even there in the hot night I could feel the chill run up my back.

I waited, trying to make up my mind. I didn't have all night. Which was it to be? Then, strangely, there was nothing in my mind except that girl, just the way it had been before. There was an odd feeling of finality about it, of inevitability, as if I already knew what I was going to do because there wasn't

actually any choice. I didn't try to understand it. That would have been futile. On the face of it, it was crazy. For hours I'd been fighting against taking her job, and now that something was in the way which might stop me I knew I wouldn't let anything stop me. I put the mask over my face and dropped over the stern into the water.

I went straight down until I was below the last of the horizontal timbers and then cut in among the pilings. There could be no lost motion. Thirty feet down and thirty back used up a lot of precious air, and I'd cut it too fine those other times. The light grew stronger. He was still lying there beside it. I looked away from his face. I swam down and took hold of his belt. Revulsion shot through me as I pushed a hand into the first pocket. It yielded nothing but a handkerchief. The next held a pocketknife and a package of contraceptives. The desire to hurry, to run from him and get back to the surface, was almost overpowering now. I had to fight it. I turned him over. Mud sucked at him. A cloud of silt lifted and obscured the upper part of his body, drifting down the current. I felt for the hip pockets.

The leather key case was in the first. Then I had the wallet. I slid back a little, looked at them in the light to be sure I made no mistake, and then rammed the wallet down into the muck beyond my elbow. I withdrew my hand and closed the hole. I swam out, following the light cable. I went up. My head broke surface. Darkness and the clean night sky had never looked more beautiful.

I went around to the ladder, still shaking a little, and climbed aboard. My right hand hurt against the rungs. I hoped I hadn't broken any bones. I stood naked and wet in the night, thinking furiously. One of the bad moments was over now. But there was still another. No, I told myself reassuringly, there'd be nothing to it. Was I losing my nerve now that I was actually going to do it instead of just thinking about it? The chances were a thousand to one he'd merely glance up and wave me on as I went past in the car.

I walked around to the other side of the deckhouse and set the key case to drain beside the ladder where I could find it. Then I went aft, unplugged the light, and hauled it aboard, coiling the cable. I put it away in the storeroom, along with the diving mask, and locked the door.

I wrung out the wet clothes and hung them in the bathroom. Glancing hurriedly at my watch, I saw it was ten minutes of eleven. I had plenty of time. Then I did a double take, realizing how bad the strain had been. I'd had the watch on all the time, three trips to the bottom of the channel, without even noticing it.

It was supposed to be waterproof, but that didn't mean much. Five fathoms down was a lot different from standing in the rain. I held it up to my ear. It was still running. I took it off and dried it.

Splashing myself with a pail of fresh water, I dried off and looked at my face in the mirror. There was a discolored lump above my right eye, a cut in the corner of my mouth, and another bad bruise on the side of my jaw. There was nothing I could do about it now except try to keep anybody from seeing it. I examined the hand. It was badly swollen, but I couldn't feel anything broken.

I dressed, putting on a white sport shirt like the one the pug had been wearing. It was just eleven o'clock. Plenty of time, I thought, beginning to feel tight in the chest. But I didn't want to cut it too fine. Sometimes the graveyard man came early and they sat out there and talked, two lonely old men who had only their jobs and bleak boarding-houses to fill their time. I couldn't take a chance on two. I'd better go, even though it meant more time to kill outside before I could come back.

I locked the door, picked up the key case, and went up on the pier. The wet trail I'd left before was still there on the concrete. I remembered the car was a green Oldsmobile. That was good. Mine was a tan Ford. He'd remember all right; there couldn't have been any mistake. I didn't have the flashlight now, but I groped around until I found it. I got in and started the motor. I was nervous. Suppose he was standing outside the shack where he could see right into the car? I wouldn't know it until I'd come out the doors at the other end of the shed, and then it would be too late.

I thought of the answer to that. Switching the lights on, I turned the car around until it was headed for the door at the far end, and turned them off again. As soon as my eyes were accustomed to the darkness I went slowly ahead. There was no danger of running into anything, and I could see the door

just faintly ahead of me. When I was within thirty or forty feet of it I eased to a stop and got out. Slipping up to it on foot, I peered around the edge. It was all right. There was only the empty gate with the hot cone of light above it, and the vacant lots beyond. He was inside. I turned and ran lightly back to the car.

Remembering to slouch low in the seat, I eased the door shut, flipped the lights on, and went ahead. My mouth was dry. It was a hundred miles. I was outside now. I turned left, crossed the railroad spur. Not too fast. Slow down a little approaching the gate. The car was right in front of the shack now. Lifting a hand, I looked just once, out of the corners of my eyes.

He was sitting on a stool at the desk just behind the window, pouring coffee out of a Thermos. He glanced up casually, waved a hand, and then looked back at the cup. I was past.

The tension gave way, and I felt as if I'd flow out over the seat like spilled water. Every nerve in my body relaxed. There was nothing to it now.

I turned left at the next corner and went down a dark street toward town. It was about fifteen blocks to the honky-tonk district. Parking the car in a dark spot a half block from a gaudy burst of neon and noise, I looked quickly around and got out, taking the keys and locking it just as he would have. No one had seen me. I went up to the corner and turned right, away from the water-front. As I passed a vacant lot I threw the keys far into it in the darkness. I was free of him now. I thought of him and shuddered. The poor, vicious, unfortunate little bastard. *Why couldn't he have stayed away?*

I didn't know how far I walked. It must have been miles. I avoided lights and kept to the quiet residential districts, going away from the waterfront all the time. At twelve-thirty I was near an all-night drugstore. It was late enough now. It would be around a quarter of one by the time I got back. I went in a side door and back to the telephone booth and called a cab. When it came I was waiting out at the side in the shadows. I got in without the driver's getting a look at my face. Everything was all right now. I sat back in the corner, where he couldn't see me in the mirror.

We passed the last street and were approaching the gate. No one was in sight. "Just slow down there so I can tell him who I am," I said to the driver. "You don't need a pass to drive in."

"Right, chief," he replied.

He braked to a stop in front of the shanty. The 12-to-8 watchman was looking out the window. "Manning," I called out, keeping my face in shadow. He lifted a hand.

"All right, Mr. Manning."

The driver shifted gears and started to move ahead. Then he stopped. Somebody was calling out from the shack. "Mr. Manning! Just a minute—"

I looked around. The watchman was coming out. "I almost forgot to tell you. A woman called about ten minutes ago—"

But I wasn't even listening now. A prickling sort of numbness was spreading over my whole body as I stared at the window of the shack. It was old Chris. He had just got up from a chair and was looking out, a puzzled frown on his face. Then he turned toward the door.

The other watchman was still talking beside the cab window. ". . . Chris was just about to walk out and tell you. He said you was on the barge."

I couldn't move, or speak. Chris was standing beside him now, looking in at me. "Son of a gun, Mr. Manning. When did you go out? I didn't see you."

I fought to get my tongue broken loose from the roof of my mouth. "Why—I—" It was impossible to think. The whole thing was like some crazy nightmare. "Why, I came out a while ago. Remember? When my friend left. We drove out to have a couple of beers. It must have been a little before twelve—" I'd got myself started, and now I couldn't stop. I could hear my voice going on and on. "—that's when it was. A little before twelve. I waved at you, remember? He was an old friend of mine—get a couple of beers—"

"You was in that car when it left?" He peered at me, more puzzled than ever. "Well, I'll be go to hell. I looked right at it, too, and didn't even see you. I must be gettin' absent-minded. And here I was about to walk all the way out there to the barge and tell you that woman called—"

He broke off suddenly, and then went on with quick concern. "Why, Mr. Manning. What's wrong with your face?"

That was the absolute horror of it. There was nothing happening, really. I wasn't being accused of anything, or tortured by a Gestapo, or given the third degree. I was just being clucked over by two gentle, lonely old men trying to be helpful. They took an interest in me. They had to sit there eight hours a day and guard the goddamned place and I was the only thing in it alive or moving or that you could talk to or from which you could get even the vicarious illusion of still being connected with a world where some day somebody might conceivably do something, so they liked me and took an interest in my comings and goings. That was all it was. And they would remember every word of it.

"Oh," I mumbled, feeling my face as if I were surprised at the fact of having one. "I—uh—I was getting something out of the storeroom and fell."

"Well, that's too bad," he answered solicitously. "But you ought to put something on them cut places. Might get infected. You never know. I think it's the climate around here, the muggy air, sort of—"

"Yes," I said. "Yes. Thanks."

Somehow, we were moving again. It was over. At least, that part of it was over. The nightmare itself came right along with me. The driver went on through the shed and stopped at the end of the pier. I got out under the light. It didn't make any difference now. Nothing made any difference.

He handed me my change. I tipped him a quarter, and he said, "Thanks, chief."

Then he grinned at my face and swollen hand. "Hate like hell to see the other guy," he said.

He left.

I walked over to the big stringer at the edge of the pier and put my foot on it, looking down into the shadows below me, only half conscious of the big diesel tug muscling a string of barges up the waterway ahead of me. Again, it was the simplicity of it that terrified me. It had been nothing but an old man who hated to go back to the four bleak walls of a boarding-house room.

I tried to think. How much chance did I have now? In a few days he'd float up, somewhere along the water-front, and the police would start looking. One of the first things they'd do would be to question all the guards along the piers—

Float up? That was it. He couldn't float up. I had to stop it. I looked downward again, and shuddered. Could I go back into that place once more? *Once?* It would take at least a half dozen dives to do it, to make him fast with wire to the bottom of one of those pilings. Too much precious time and breath were wasted in going down and coming up. But I could recharge the cylinders of that other aqualung. It'd be easy that way.

I broke off and just stood there, regarding the ultimate horror. What I was actually looking at was the tug disappearing around the bend above me, shoving its barges in toward the oil dock near the end of the waterway. I was a diver, and yet it had taken me all this time to realize it had just gone by here with its powerful twin screws churning up that muck and silt on the bottom. You could hold a thousand-watt light three inches in front of your eyes down there and it would look like the glow of a firefly.

The tide was still ebbing. It would be the end of the next flood before you could see your own hand under the pier. And not only that. The churning millrace from the propellers might have moved him. There was no telling where he was now.

There was just one more thing, I thought, and then we had it all. Carter would be back from New Orleans sometime this morning, here aboard the barge, and I wouldn't be able even to look.

I fought with panic. I still had a chance, I told myself.

They might never connect me with it. After all, there was no identification on him now that I'd shoved the wallet into the muck. They wouldn't have a picture of him, except possibly one taken as he looked when he came up. Chris might not have had a good look at him when he came in the gate.

But I wouldn't know. That was the terrible part of it. I'd never have any idea at all what was happening until the hour they came after me.

I had to get out of here. I was thinking swiftly now. Quit, and tell Carter I was going to New York. Sell my car, buy a bus ticket, get off the bus somewhere up the line, and come back. Buy the boat, under another name, of course. In three days I could have it ready for sea. We'd be gone before they even came looking for me. If they did.

It didn't occur to me until afterward that never once in all of it did I ever consider the possibility of not buying the boat and not taking Shannon Macaulay. That part of it was apparently foregone, and inevitable, so I didn't even have to think about it.

Suddenly I had to see her. Why, I didn't know. I had to get the money for the boat, or make arrangements for it, but that didn't account for the overpowering desire just to see her. For the first time in a self-sufficient life I was all at once terribly alone, and for some reason I couldn't define she was the one I wanted to see.

That reminded me. What had the watchman said? Some woman had called? I looked down, and I was still holding in my hand the slip of paper he had given me. It was a telephone number, the same one she had given me in the bar. Maybe something had happened to her. I turned and ran toward the car.

Five

Calling from the watchman's shack would be quicker, but I didn't want the audience. I slowed going through the gate, and the graveyard watchman lifted a hand and nodded. I noted bitterly that old Chris had gone home at last.

I turned right off the dark street, away from the waterfront. There was an arterial and a shopping center about ten blocks over. The drugstore was closed, but I saw a neon cocktail glass beyond it and a sign that said *Elbow Room*. I parked and pushed through a door into refrigerated dimness and smoke and a muted ground swell of "Easy to Love." The phone booth was at the rear, beyond the jukebox.

I closed the door and fished for a dime. The little fan whirred. I wondered uneasily how long it had actually been since she'd called. Twenty minutes? Thirty?

It was ringing. It went on.

Then it clicked. "Hello," she said. "Mrs. Wayne speaking."

She sounded all right. I breathed easier.

"Manning," I said.

"Oh. *Bill!* I was just hoping you would call—" There was a contralto delight in it that was like the brush of finger tips. Then I remembered what she'd told me: be careful what you say. She was merely cueing me. There still might be something wrong.

"When am I going to see you again?" I asked.

"Do you really want to?"

"You know I do," I said. "How about right now?"

"We-e-ll—"

"Can I come out?"

"Heavens, not here," she said, coyly chiding. "Bill, after all —"

After all, we have to be discreet. There was a strained, uncomfortable feeling in this talking to her as if we were lovers, and I wondered what she thought of having to do it.

"Where can I pick you up?" I asked.

"How about meeting me at that same cocktail lounge? In about fifteen minutes?"

"I'll be waiting for you," I said.

I was sitting in the car in front of it when she pulled up in the Cadillac and found a place to park. If she was being followed I didn't want to go inside where they might get a look at my marked-up face. I eased alongside. She saw me, and slipped out on the street side and got in. It had taken only seconds.

I shot ahead, watching the mirror. There were cars behind us, but there was no way to tell. There are always cars behind you. I was conscious of the gleam of the blond head beside me, and a faint fragrance of perfume.

"Are you all right?" I asked quickly.

"Yes," she said. "But they searched the house again, while I was gone."

I turned and headed for the beach, wondering about that. Why would they search the house? And how would she know they had, if she'd been gone? If they were looking for a man they'd hardly have to pull out the dresser drawers and slice open the upholstery, the way they did in movies. Then I began to get it.

We passed a street light. She looked at my face and gasped. "Bill! What happened?"

"That's what I've got to tell you," I said. I swung the corner and headed west on the beach boulevard. It was beginning to

darken now, at one a.m., as the crowds thinned and some of the concessions closed up shop.

The pug stared at me with his unseeing eyes, just waiting for the buoyancy nothing on earth could stop. *Tell her?* What kind of fool would tell anybody?

But how else was I going to explain what I had to do? I had to trust her. We had to trust each other. And the insane part of it was that I did. I considered that, puzzled. I'd known her less than 24 hours, she had never told me one word about herself, and yet I would have trusted her with anything. Maybe they shouldn't let me out alone.

I watched the mirror. There were still too many cars to tell. I picked up speed, checking them.

"Bill," she said urgently, "tell me. What is it?"

"That thug, the one who was beating you. He looked me up at the pier, to work me over for slugging him. There was a fight, and an accident. I knocked him off onto the barge—"

"He isn't—"

"Yes," I said.

She didn't say anything. I glanced around at her, and her head was bowed as she looked down at her hands. Then she raised it, and her eyes were bitter with regret.

"It's all my fault," she whispered. "I got you mixed up in it —"

"Stop that," I said. "It was nobody's fault, except his. He just couldn't leave well enough alone."

I told her the whole story. We came down off the sea wall onto the hard-packed tracks going west along the beach. There was no moon, and it was very dark. I could hear the surf off to the left. There were three cars behind us. One of them stopped; I kept watching the other two.

"I'll never forgive myself," she said. "But, Bill, won't they be able to see it was just an accident?"

"Not now," I said. "It's probably never an accident if you're fighting, and it's too late for that, anyway. But for God's sake quit blaming yourself. You didn't have anything to do with it. That's about as sensible as blaming General Motors for it because he drove out there in an Oldsmobile."

"What are we going to do?"

I checked the mirror again. The two cars were falling back as I picked up speed. "I'm still trying to get it straight in my mind," I said. "Legally, I'm guilty. Morally, I don't feel guilty at all; I don't think I'm any more responsible than if he'd been killed in an unavoidable traffic accident. And I don't intend to go to prison or get myself killed by Barclay's gang for something I couldn't help—"

"Of course not," she said simply.

"All right. Listen," I said. I told her what I was going to do. "There's only one catch to it," I finished. "You'll have to give me the money for that boat with no guarantee you'll ever hear from me again. The word of a man you've known for one day isn't much of a receipt."

"It's good enough for me," she said quietly. "If I hadn't trusted you I would never have opened the subject in the first place. How much shall I make the check?"

"Fifteen thousand," I said. "The boat is going to be at least ten, and there's a lot of stuff to buy. When we get aboard I'll give you an itemized statement and return what's left."

"All right," she said.

I looked back. The lights of the other two cars were far behind us. They disappeared momentarily behind some dunes. I slowed abruptly and swung away from the beach, coming to a stop some fifty yards from the roadway. We were in the edge of the dunes with the low silhouette of a line of salt cedars before us, well out of range of passing headlights. I snapped off my own lights before we had even stopped rolling.

It occurred to me suddenly that I'd done a very foolish thing in coming out here at all. We should have stayed downtown on a lighted street. If they were following her, all they'd seen was a quick transfer from her own car to one they didn't recognize. I might even be Macaulay for all they knew.

She started to light a cigarette. "Not yet," I said. One of the cars went by, and then the other. Their red taillights began to recede down the beach.

When they were gone, I said, "All right," and lit her cigarette. She took the checkbook out of her bag and held it open on her thigh. I snapped the lighter again so she could see.

"Pick a name," I said. "How about Burton? Harold E. Burton."

She wrote out the check. I held it until it dried, and put it in my wallet. "Now. What's your address?"

"One-oh-six Fontaine Drive."

"All right," I said, talking fast. "I should be back here early the third day. This is Tuesday now, so that'll be Thursday morning. The minute the purchase of the boat goes through and I'm aboard I'll mail you an anniversary greeting in a plain envelope, just one of those dime-store cards. I don't see how they could get at your mail, but there's no use taking chances. Other than that I won't get in touch with you. I'll be down there at the boat yard all the time. It's in another part of the city, and I won't come into town at all. I've only been around Sanport for about six months, but still there are a few people I know and I might bump into one of them. I'll already have everything bought and with me except the stores, and I'll order them through a ship chandler's runner—"

"But," she interrupted, "how are we going to arrange getting him aboard?"

"I'm coming to that," I said. "After you get the card, you can get in touch with me, from a pay phone. It's Michaelson's Boat Yard; the name of the sloop is *Ballerina*—"

"That's a pretty name," she said.

"It's a pretty boat," I replied. "I'm just hoping I can get her. She was still for sale last night. But if something happens and she's already sold by the time I get back, I'll make that card a birth announcement instead of an anniversary greeting, and give you the name of the one I actually do buy. There are several down there. All straight?"

"Yes," she said. She turned a little on the seat and I could see the blur of her face and pale gleam of the blond head. "I like the whole plan, and I like the way your mind works." She paused for a moment, and then added quietly, "You'll never know how glad I am I ran into you. I don't feel so helpless now. Or alone."

I was conscious of the same thing, but probably in a different way than she'd meant it. There was something wonderful about being with her. For a moment the whole

mess was gone from my mind. The sea wind blew past the car, and behind us in the night I could hear the surf.

"You were good on the phone, too," she said. "Thanks for understanding."

In other words, *keep your distance, Buster*. It was stage money, so don't try to buy anything with it. I wondered why she thought she had to warn me. We both knew it was only an act, didn't we?

Maybe I was always too aware of her, and she could sense it. I lashed out deliberately at the spell, shattering it. "All right. Now," I said curtly. "That still leaves the problem of getting him aboard. I'll have to work on that. He's there in the house, isn't he?"

"Yes," she said, surprised. "How did you know?"

"Guessing, mostly. You said they'd searched it while you were gone. They wouldn't have had to tear it up much, looking for a grown man. So maybe he told you they had."

"You're very alert. He heard them and told me."

"Why is he hiding there? And how?"

She leaned forward a little with her elbow on the back of the seat, and took another puff on the cigarette. "I've been wanting to get to this. Here's the whole story, briefly.

"About three weeks ago my husband saw one of them on the street and knew they'd caught up with us again. But for some time he'd been working on this plan for getting to Central America and losing them completely, for the last time. It was about completed. I won't go into it in much detail except to say it involved a man who'd been a close friend of my husband's in college. He lives in Central America, in Honduras to be exact, and is very wealthy. He owns a number of large plantations, and has considerable political influence. He's also a rather passionate flying fan. He's always buying planes in the States and having them flown down to him, and my husband was to take this one to him. It would get him out of the country without any trail they could follow, you see? He'd merely take off without filing a flight plan, and disappear. Of course, landing down there would be illegal, but as I say, this friend of his had quite a bit of political power.

"The only trouble, however, was that he had to go alone. It was a light plane and its cruising radius with the maximum amount of fuel was still a little short, so he'd added an extra tank. That meant I had to come later, making sure I wasn't followed. We had that arranged, however. I was to do it over the Memorial Day week-end, and it involved about five different zigzagging commercial flights with the reservations made considerably ahead of time. On a long holiday like that they'd be sold out, you see? If they were trying to follow me they might catch a no-show at one or even two of the airports, but not all of them. There was more to it than that, too, but I won't bother you with it.

"But he had engine trouble, and the plane crashed off the coast of Yucatan. My husband got off in a rubber boat, and was picked up by some snapper fishermen. And they brought him, of all places, right back into Sanport. Fortunately the boat docked at night and he managed to slip off and get out to the house without being seen. It was just two days before I was supposed to leave.

"But now they've found out where we live, and they have the place surrounded. Barclay rented the house right across the street, and they watch me all the time. They're waiting for me to lead them to him—"

"And they don't know he's inside?"

"I don't think so. You see, they searched it the first time while he was actually gone. It was disguised as a burglary, but it was pretty transparent."

"But didn't you say they'd searched it again today? Yesterday, I mean?"

She nodded. "He's in a sealed-off portion of the attic, and the only way into it is through the ceiling of a second-floor closet. He has to stay up there nearly all the time. All the time when I'm out of the house. I think they're pretty sure he's gone, but they know if they keep watching me I'll lead them to him sooner or later. I hadn't realized until what happened up at the lake that they might try beating me up. That scares me, because frankly I don't know how much of it I could take."

I thought of it, feeling the cold stirrings of anger and an increasing awareness of just how much more there was to this girl than her looks. She was cast out of the pure metal.

No whining, no heroics—she simply said she didn't know how much of it she could take and went right on with what she had to do. The next time that pug looked at me, I'd look back.

She went on. "And as to what's in the plane, it's money. About eighty thousand dollars, to be exact. All he has left. He can't take much more, Bill. That plane crash did something to him—the crash, that is—and then being brought right back in the middle of them after he thought he had gotten away. And losing the money on top of it, so he couldn't even run any more."

"But you just wrote a check for fifteen thousand—"

"I know. Naturally, he had to leave me some so I could follow him. And I sold my jewelry, and borrowed what I could on the car."

I began to catch on then. There'd been this \$700 trap gun and three fathoms of Cadillac and all the rest, so I'd been hit rather a glancing blow by the fact that she was going to trust me out of town with \$15,000 of her money. If I turned out to be a crook and ran off with it, it was such a bore to have to go down to the bank and tell them to transfer another bushel or two into the checking account. It wasn't exactly like that. She was merely handing me the last chance they'd ever have. This girl was a plunger. If she said she trusted you she trusted you all over.

"Well, wait," I said. "I can probably find a cheaper boat—"

She shook her head. "I don't want to go to sea in a cheap boat. And we'll recover the money from the plane, anyway."

"All right. But, listen. My God, do you realize the jam you'll be in if something happens to me?"

"That was the general idea, Bill, when I said I wanted time to make up my mind about you. Remember?"

"I see what you mean," I said. "Do you mind if I get a little personal?"

"Why, no. What is it?"

I tried to say it lightly. "I've been feeling sorry for Macaulay because he was up against a rough proposition alone. I'd like to amend that, for the record. I don't know of anybody who's less alone."

She didn't answer for a moment, and I wondered if I'd gotten it off as lightly as I intended. After all, this was an awkward situation for her, and she'd already shown me the road signs once.

It was almost too fast for me then. She slid toward me on the seat, murmuring, "Bill . . . *Bill!*" her face lifted to mine and her arms slipped up around my neck, and then I was overboard in a sea of Shannon Macaulay. My arms tightened around her and I was kissing her, assaulted by faint fragrance and the touch of her and the way she could overrun and flood all the last corners of consciousness, and all the time my mind was trying to regain that half second of lag and tell me it was an act and that the reason she was saying my name over and over was to keep me from having my head blown off.

It wasn't thought. You couldn't hold her in your arms and think, so it had to be instinct that told me what it was. She'd been looking beyond me, and must have seen him silhouetted against the sky. The surf and the pounding of blood in my ears drowned out any possibility of my hearing him, but he'd probably be standing at the window now, right at the back of my neck, and if she hadn't already got across the fact it was somebody named Bill she was kissing, and not Macaulay, she'd have blood all over her before she could say it again.

A voice said, "All right, Jack. Break it up and turn round."

I was so tight and the tension broke so suddenly I was conscious of an almost hysterical impulse to giggle over the idea. I knew now he'd heard her say Bill, all right, because he called me Jack.

Instead, that is, of just shooting me without bothering to say anything.

I turned. A light burst in my face, and another voice I would know anywhere remarked with urbane weariness, "I say, you people are oversexed, aren't you?"

Two thoughts caught up with me at once. The first was that they hadn't heard us and didn't suspect anything. Her reaction time had been so fast they'd caught us kissing, just what you'd have expected of two people in a parked car along the beach. That was good.

But it was the second one that pulled the ground from under me. They had that light in my face. They'd be blind if they didn't see the marks that pug had left on it.

I had never been more right. "Hmmm," Barclay said softly, somewhere in the darkness. "So that's where he went."

I didn't say anything. I could feel the hair prickle along the back of my neck.

"Came to see you, didn't he?"

"Who?" I asked, just stalling for time. I had to think of something. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't be dense, if you don't mind. Chap you hit, up at the lake."

If I denied it they wouldn't believe me, anyway, and when he didn't show up they'd go out there and ask the watchmen. They'd know then I'd done something to him. There was a better way: talk like a loud-mouthed fool, and admit it. It didn't have much chance, but at least it had more than the other.

"If that's who you mean," I said. "He did. I guess you haven't seen his *face*. And that's not all. If you don't keep him out of my hair he's going to be bent worse than that the next time you get him back."

"Where is he now?"

"How would I know?" I said. "Was he supposed to tell me his plans?"

It was creepy. I was scared and in a bad spot, trying to talk like Mike Hammer, and to nobody. There was just that light glaring in my face and a whole universe of blackness around it.

"Well, it isn't important," he said. "But there's another matter. We're about to suggest that you leave town, Manning, and do it immediately. These sylvan assignments of yours and Mrs. Macaulay's are becoming something of a nuisance; this is twice we've been led on a fool's errand just to find you rutting about the landscape. Get out of the car."

I didn't want to, but I got out. I heard her shaky indrawn breath as I closed the door. "*No. No. No—*"

It was a good, cold-blooded, professional job. Nobody said anything. Nobody became excited. I never did even know for

sure how many there were besides Barclay. I swung at the first dark shape I saw, because I had to do something; the blackjack sliced down across the muscles of my upper arm and it became a dangling, inert sausage stuffed with pain. They pulled both arms behind me and bent me back and slugged me in the stomach. At first I tightened the abdominal muscles in time to the cadenced beat of it, *slug*, swing, *slug*, but after a while I lost even the power to do that. Somewhere far off I could hear her crying out and opening the car door, but then somebody pushed her and she fell.

When they turned me loose at last and went away my knees folded and I fell forward on my face. Wind roared in my throat, and my mouth was full of sand.

Six

I tried to roll over. I was conscious she was on her knees beside me, helping.

"The animals," she said. "The filthy—unspeakable-animals —" Her voice broke.

When I could sit up I slid backward and sat propped against the side of the car while the waves of sickness subsided. My whole right arm prickled and felt numb except for the hard welt of pain above the elbow, and I couldn't move the hand. I rubbed it with the left. She sat down on the sand beside me, took the arm gently in her hands, and massaged it.

"I'm sorry, Bill," she said. "I'm terribly sorry."

"It's all right," I said. The left hand clenched, down against the ground, and sand ran between my fingers I opened and tightened it again, and swallowed, conscious of the dry, metallic taste in my mouth. After another deep breath some of the shaking went away. "There's nothing we can do about it. Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said. "I just fell down."

In a minute we got back in the car and sat down. She lit a cigarette for me; I held it in my left hand and tried to work some feeling into the right. I could hear the surf swishing dreamily behind us. All the violence had washed out of the night as suddenly as it had come. They'd given me their little demonstration and were gone. They didn't have to stick

around and tell me what would happen if they caught me again. That was understood. And in just a few more hours they were going to start wondering what had happened to that little thug. When they did they'd come and ask me.

Some of the numbness was leaving my arm now and I could drive. We started back. Neither of us said anything about the way I had kissed her when she put on that act for them. It would only be embarrassing.

"What did Macaulay do to them?" I asked.

She hesitated.

"It's all right," I said. "If it's none of my business—"

"No," she said slowly, staring ahead at the headlights probing the edge of the surf. "It isn't that. It's just that I don't know the whole story myself."

"Didn't he tell you?"

"Most of it. But not all. He says I'll be safer if I never know. It happened about three months ago. He had to go to the Coast on business, for about a week, he said. But three days later he called me late one night, from San Antonio, Texas. I could tell he was under a bad strain. He said for me to pack some bags, put as much of our stuff in the car as I could, and leave right away for Denver. He didn't explain; he just said he was in trouble and for me to get out of New York fast.

"I did, and he met me in Denver. He said it was something that happened at a party he went to, in some suburb of Los Angeles. I could see he didn't want to talk about it, but he finally admitted a man had been killed, and he had seen it—"

"But," I said, "all he has to do is go to the police. They'll protect him. He's a material witness."

"It's not that simple," she said. "One of the people involved is a police captain."

"Oh," I said.

It sounded too easy and too pat, but on the other hand there wasn't any doubt she was telling the truth. I tried to discount the fact I'd probably have believed her if she'd told me the other side of the moon was an amusement park, but it still came out the same way. She wasn't lying. But what about Macaulay himself?

"How long have you been married?" I asked.

"Eight years."

"And he's been with that marine insurance firm all the time?"

"Yes," she said. "He's been with them ever since he came out of law school, back in the thirties, except for three years in the service during the war."

I shook my head. There was nothing in that. We came into town. The traffic lights were flashing amber now, and the street-sweeping trucks were out. I stopped beside her car and got out with her. She put out her hand. "Thanks," she said. "It'll be bad, waiting for that card."

There was nobody on the street. I was still holding her hand, hating to see her leave. Then I remembered the awkward thing I'd said in that bar as a result of looking at her like this, and let it drop. "Don't go out of the house at night while I'm gone," I said. "If you have to come downtown, do it during rush hours when there are lots of people on the streets."

"I'll be all right," she said.

"If you see a car behind you on the way home, don't worry about it. It'll be mine."

I followed her out. It was an upper-bracket suburb out near the country club. She pulled into a drive and stopped under a Carport beside a two-storied Mediterranean house with a tile roof and ironwork balconies. I stopped at the curb, looking along the streets where the old, peaceful trees made shadowy patterns in the lights and all the lawns were sleek and well-kept. Violence? Here? Then I turned my head and stared at the house across the street. The windows were all dark. But they were in there, watching her as she got out of the car and fumbled in her bag for the key. She waved a white-gloved hand, and went inside.

I went on, looking the place over. It was the second house from the corner. I turned at the intersection and drove slowly down the side street. There was an alley behind the house. A car was parked diagonally across the street from the mouth of it, in the shadows under the trees, and as I went past I saw a man's elbow move slightly in the window. They had it covered front and back. There'd be one at the other end of the alley.

All I had to do was get Macaulay out of there alive. And by that time they'd be after me, too.

* * *

I drove the car out on the pier and as I got out I thought of him down there somewhere below me in the impenetrable blackness of night and silt-laden water, and for a moment he wasn't a vicious little hoodlum but just somebody who'd been alive a few hours ago looking at sunlight and feeling hungry and thinking about girls and inhaling smoke from a cigarette. I brushed it away savagely. There wasn't any time for being morbid about a dead gangster. I'd be dead myself very shortly if I didn't get out of there.

I hurried down the ladder. The waterway was dark and still, like a jungle river, and it was hot in the thick clots of shadow below the side of the pier. When I opened the door and went inside the trapped air was stifling. I looked at my watch. It was nearly three.

I went out in the galley and put some water on to heat in the big electric percolator, and then examined my face in the bathroom mirror. The puffy places were worse. That was all right, leaving here, because I wanted them to remember me, but I had to start work on them so they'd be gone by the time I returned. My stomach felt as if I'd been run over by a tank, but at least that wouldn't show.

While I was waiting for the water to heat I pulled the bag from under my bunk and began to pack. Carter was going to think I was a sad bastard, quitting with ten minutes' notice, but if I wanted eulogies I could stick around and there'd be lots of them at the funeral. I shaved, and put the toilet gear in the bag. The clothes hanging in the bathroom were still wet. I rolled them in a newspaper and packed them anyway.

The water was hot. I poured it into a pan and started a new batch heating. Sitting on the side of the bunk with the pan before me on a chair, I shoved the hand in and let it soak until it was, as red as fire coral while I squeezed out a cloth with the left and held it against the puffed places on my face. It was intensely still except for the humming of the fan, and the minute I stopped moving and planning the room was full of her. Knowing it was absurd didn't make any difference. She was everywhere.

She slid toward me and I kissed her again with that odd sensation of being suddenly overrun and flooded with her like a compartment below water line when the bulkhead buckles under pressure of the sea. One minute there'd been only that unstoppable trickle of her running through the mind, and the next I was drowning in her.

Nuts, I thought irritably. Who ever heard of anything as stupid? And there was another slight matter. She was Macaulay's wife. Maybe I should try to work that into my thoughts from time to time so it didn't elude me altogether.

Who was Macaulay? I stared at a parboiled hand in a basin of water, looking for Macaulay, and found nothing at all. There wasn't even the framework on which to start building a Macaulay. An executive in an insurance firm who was being hunted down by gangsters who wanted to kill him—what did you get from that?

Nothing.

He could fly a plane. Why hadn't I thought to ask her how it happened he could fly? Of course, lots of people could nowadays; maybe I was the only one left who couldn't. But flying came in sizes. Even I could see that. Hopping a Piper Cub sixty miles from Booster's Junction to East Threadbare along two sets of railroad tracks and a six-lane highway was one thing; taking off across 500 miles of empty Gulf and God knows how many miles of green broadloom jungle was something else. You had to be a good dead-reckoning navigator, and you had to know you were good, to tackle it.

And if he knew exactly where that crashed plane was, he wasn't only a good navigator—he was a superb one. Of course, she had said it was within sight of the coast, but that didn't mean much. One part of a coast line can have a hellish knack of looking just like another part of a coast line, even when you're approaching it under sail at five knots, and I imagined it was a lot more so when it was flying back toward you at a hundred miles an hour. Of course, you were higher; but that probably didn't help a great deal. You could just see more things you were probably wrong about.

Then suddenly I thought of something else that was odd. The plane was in sixty feet of water, but still it was within sight of land, near enough to see some landmark to identify the spot. Off Yucatan? I'd never been down there, but I'd seen

it on the charts plenty of times, and it was my impression the ten-fathom curve was a lot farther out than that. I shrugged. Maybe she had meant something else was near enough to get a bearing on, an old wreck, or a shoal.

I went on soaking the hand and holding hot compresses on my face. At dawn I drove out to the nearest cafe and drank some coffee. I was beginning to feel people behind me now. It had been nearly twelve hours since he'd disappeared.

I drove downtown to the bus station. There'd be an eastbound bus at 10:35. I got in line with a few other people at the window. When my turn came I asked for a ticket to New York. After the man had filled in the blanks on a yard of paper and stamped it in half a dozen places I looked in my wallet and made the awful discovery I was seven dollars short of the price.

Actually I had it, of course, but I slapped all my pockets and turned them out and looked stupidly through my wallet three or four times while the line behind me grew longer and people began to mutter. I milked it until his patience began to wear thin, and then told him to set the ticket aside and I'd be back later with the rest of the money.

I went out in the street again. It was a hot, still morning, but the cold place between my shoulder blades was growing larger all the time. I watched in shop windows, and stopped suddenly, looking around as I lit a cigarette. Sure, there were people behind me. There were hundreds of them, going to work.

As soon as the used car lots began to open I drove around to one. A man with a cigar glanced at the Ford with complete indifference, told me tearfully how bad business was, and offered me half what it was worth. I knew I wouldn't get any more, but I screamed like a wounded rug merchant and drove away. Twenty minutes later I came back and turned the papers over to him and he gave me a check. He'd remember me, too. I'd cried louder than he had.

I took a taxi out to the pier, looking at my watch every few minutes now. This was the first place they'd come when they began to wonder what had happened to him, and I was cutting it too fine. There was no one around the gate, however, and the watchman shook his head when I asked if anybody'd been looking for me.

"But you got a telegram," he said.

It was from Carter. There'd been a delay in opening the bids for the salvage job and he wouldn't be back until tomorrow. We drove out to the end of the pier and I asked the driver to wait while I picked up the bag. We met no one coming out. I turned the keys over to the watchman, said something vague about sickness in the family, and told him I was leaving for New York.

Back at the bus station the ticket agent gave me a surly grunt and reached for the ticket before I'd opened my mouth. I checked the bag through, and looked at my watch again. It was 10:10. I walked over to the bank, cashed the car check, and drew out my account.

There was a telegraph office in the same block. I wrote out a wire to Carter so he'd have a chance to pick up a new diver around New Orleans. It was the least I could do.

The last ten minutes were rough. I kept looking around for them, knowing at the same time it was stupid because I'd never seen any of them except Barclay. After a long time they called the bus over the P.A. system and I went out and climbed aboard. I got a seat on the aisle, away from the window, and just sat there, enduring it. At last the driver swung the door shut and we rolled out of the station into traffic.

The little man in the seat next to the window wanted to know where I was going and when I told him he said, no offense, but he just couldn't stand the place. All them foreigners, he said.

While he was telling me what was wrong with it the driver cut in the air-conditioning unit and we began to roll faster through the outskirts.

I unwound all at once. It was something like melting.

I straightened suddenly and looked around. It must have been some time afterward, for we were out in open country. People in near-by seats were staring at me, and the man who didn't like New York was shaking my arm.

He grinned apologetically. "Thought I ought to wake you up," he said. "You was having a nightmare."

"Oh," I said. "Thanks." I was clammy with sweat.

“Must have been a fire in it,” he said. “You kept moaning and saying something about smoke.”

Seven

We came into New Orleans at ten-fifteen p.m. Through passengers going east were scheduled to change busses, with a layover of forty minutes. I hunted up the baggage room, caught the eye of a colored boy, and gave him my claim check and a dollar.

“See if you can find this bag for me,” I said. “I want to clean up a little between busses.”

He located it. I went around the corner toward the washroom, ducked out a side door, and caught a cab. At a little hotel just off Canal Street I signed the register *James R. Madigan* and when I was up in the room I looked at the marks on my face. They were better, and in another few hours they’d be hardly noticeable. I drew a basin of hot water and went to work on them again, soaking the hand at the same time. The swelling was going down.

They might find out I’d left the bus, and they might even trail me to this hotel and eventually start looking for somebody named Madigan, but there the whole thing would end. Harold E. Burton was only a check for \$15,000, and the last place they’d ever expect me to go would be back to Sanport.

I studied the rest of it. There’d be the station wagon I had to buy to get back to Sanport with all the gear. Abandon it when we sailed? No. Storing it in a garage was a better idea.

After a year or so they'd probably sell it for the storage charges, and if anybody ever bothered to look into it all he'd find would be that it had been left there by a man named Burton who'd sailed for Boston in a small boat and never been heard of again. People had been lost at sea before, especially sailing alone.

What about after I'd landed them on the Central American coast? Florida was my best bet now. I could lose myself among the thousands who made a living along the edge of the sea in one way or another, and gradually build up a whole new identity. I tore all my identification into tiny shreds and flushed it down the plumbing along with the remainder of the bus ticket. As soon as I turned out the light and lay down I was thinking of her again.

It was a little after eight when I awoke. I shaved hurriedly, noting my face was almost back to normal now, and dressed in a clean white linen suit. Brassy sunlight spilled into Canal Street, shattering on the chrome and glass of traffic as the sticky New Orleans heat began. I pushed through the crowds, looking at my watch. The banks wouldn't be open for over an hour.

I got some change in a cigar store and went back to the battery of phone booths. Putting in a long-distance call to Sanport, I caught the yacht broker just as he came in his office.

"Hello," I said, sweltering in the airless little cubicle. "My name's Burton. I understand from a friend of mine you've got a New-England-built sloop over there, 36 footer by the name of *Dancer*, or something like that—"

"Yes," he said. "That's right. The *Ballerina*. Good boat, in first-class condition—"

"How much are you asking?"

"Eleven thousand."

"That sounds high to me," I said. "But I'm looking for one of her class and I'd go to ten if it's in top shape. Suppose I come over and take a look at it? I'm in New Orleans now, but I could be there sometime tomorrow morning if you could make arrangements for the boat yard to haul her out."

"Fine," he replied. "She's at Michaelson's Yard. We'll be looking for you."

"Around nine a.m.," I said.

So far, so good. She hadn't been sold yet.

When the banks opened I went into the first one I came to, endorsed the check for deposit, and opened an account, asking them to clear it with the Sanport bank by wire. They said they should have an answer a little after noon.

The used car lots were next. I didn't find a station wagon in the first one and was just about to leave when the idea began to come to me. Part of my mind had been occupied with the problem of getting Macaulay out of that house, and now I was starting to see at least part of the answer. I didn't want a station wagon; I wanted a panel truck, a black one. I found one in the next lot. After trying it out, I told the salesman I'd come back later and let him know. I couldn't buy it until the check cleared.

The wire came back from the Sanport bank a little after one. I cashed a check for three thousand, picked up the truck, and drove over to a nautical supply store. It took nearly two hours to get everything I needed here, chronometer, sextant, azimuth tables, nautical almanacs, charts, and so on, right down to a pair of 7 by 50 glasses and a marine radio receiver. That left diving gear. Of course, there was still the aqualung in the back of her car, but the coast of Yucatan was too far to come back for spare equipment if anything went wrong. I bought another, and some extra cylinders which I had filled. At five o'clock the truck was full of gear, and nothing remained but to check out of the hotel and start back.

No, there was one thing more. I went into a dime store and bought an anniversary greeting card.

* * *

I drove all night.

Just at dawn I was approaching the outskirts of Sanport, and stopped at an all-night service station to shave and clean up a little while the attendant filled the tank. I was a little nervous as I approached the downtown area, but I shrugged it off. There was nothing to worry about yet. In the panel truck I looked like any laundry route-man or cigarette salesman.

Michaelson's Boat Yard lay some three miles from town, in the opposite direction from the Parker Mill. It was on a sandspit running out toward the ship channel beyond the eastern end of the water-front, with only some mud flats between it and the long jetties going toward the open Gulf.

About a block away from the yard gate there was a small cluster of buildings among the otherwise empty lots, a beer joint or two and a cafe and an abandoned store building with a *For Rent* sign on it. I parked the truck in front of the cafe, locked it, and went inside. It was still early, and a girl was making coffee in a big urn. I drank two cups and ate an order of hot cakes. The morning paper was on the counter. I looked through it, but there was nothing about his body's being found. It was too soon yet. There would be.

The yard workmen began to drift in. I walked down to the gate and went inside. The *Ballerina* was hauled out on the marine railway. I stood for a moment, just looking at her. She was long-ended and slimly arrogant, cut away at the forefoot and tapering in sharply under the stern, and she drew nearly six feet when she was afloat, with some 5000 pounds of iron in her keel. I'd never been aboard her, but I'd seen her several times over at the yacht basin, and I was familiar with the design. I'd sailed one of her sisters in a race shortly after the war.

Opening my pocketknife, I walked under her, white linen suit and all, and started probing. It must have been six months or more since she'd been hauled, because she was foul with grass and barnacles, but in half an hour I knew that under all the marine growth she was as sound as the day she was built. I kept on, hardly even aware when calking hammers began sounding on the ways.

Finding a ladder, I went aboard and went on with the inspection. She'd been well kept up. I remembered Carling had bought new sails for her a few months ago when she was over at the yacht basin, so I didn't have to look at them. The cabin seemed to be all right, with no indication of leaks in the decking overhead. The layout was perfect for the three of us who were going to be aboard. There were two bunks forward, then a head on the port side and a locker on the starboard that formed almost a partition, leaving only a narrow passage. That could be curtained to make two cabins of it. Aft

of the head and the locker there were two settees, one on each side, and either of these could be made up as a bunk. A folding chart table came down over one of them, and aft of them were the icebox and locker space of the galley and the primus stove hanging in gimbals.

I inspected the bilges, and took a look at the Gray marine engine, though I couldn't tell much about the latter until she was back in the water and I could try it out. Just as I was coming down the ladder the man from the yacht broker's showed up. The yard foreman was with him. I introduced myself.

"Well, what do you think of her?" he asked.

"She's in good shape," I said. "I'll give you ten thousand."

"He's still asking eleven."

"Who owns her?" I asked.

"Man named Carling. Automobile dealer."

"Well, how about getting him on the phone? Tell him I'll write you a check for ten in the next five minutes."

He went off toward the office. I gave the yard foreman a cigarette. He was a big, heavy-bodied Finn or Norwegian. He nodded toward the sloop.

"That one's built," he said.

"She's that," I said. "But her bottom's in awful shape. How soon can you get a crew of men on her? I'll give you the paint specification, and the rest of the work list—"

He grinned. "Hadn't you better wait till you've bought her?"

"I've already bought her," I said. "We're just arguing about how much I have to pay."

The yacht broker's man came back. "Says he'll take ten five. That's the bottom."

I pulled out the checkbook, and nodded to the foreman. "Tell your men to start scraping."

We went up to the office and the foreman introduced me to the superintendent. We started writing out the work list, and all the time that anniversary card was burning a hole in my pocket. She couldn't possibly get it before tomorrow, I told myself. But I kept thinking of what she must be going through with nothing to do but wait. That wasn't all, either. I was wild to talk to her.

I happened to glance out the front door of the office and saw a phone booth just inside the gate on the other side of the driveway. Why not wire an anniversary telegram? It would be faster, and safe enough. No, I thought; they'd see it delivered and just the fact she'd received one would make them watch her that much more closely.

". . . install new starting and lighting batteries," I went on to the super. "Put up a twenty-by-fifteen-inch shelf above that starboard settee for a radio receiver, and run a cable to the lighting battery for power for it. As soon as she's back in the water, run a check on that engine, and make what repairs are necessary. As far as I can see she doesn't need anything done topside, and as soon as I get to Boston she'll have a general overhaul, anyway. The main thing is that pasture on her bottom. Do you think we can work out a paint schedule so we can get her back in the water tomorrow afternoon?" And then I added, "With the paint dry."

He nodded. "Sure. You check it yourself before she goes in."

I stood up. "Fine. I'll be around here all the time, so if anything comes up, just yell."

Just then the telephone rang. The girl at the desk near the door answered it, and said, "Just a minute, please." She looked inquiringly at the super. "A Mr. Burton—"

"Here," I said. I could feel the tingling of excitement all over me as I reached for it. "Thank you."

"Burton speaking," I said.

"Can you talk all right from there?" she asked softly.

"Oh, hello," I said. "George told me he was going to wire you I was coming over. How are you?"

She understood. "Everything is the same here. Is there another phone you can call me back?"

"Yes," I said. "Did George tell you about the boat? I've just bought it. And by the way, he wanted me to give you an address. I wrote it down, but it's out in the truck. Suppose I get it and call you back?"

She gave me the number.

I walked out to the truck and stalled for a minute, and then came back and ducked into the booth just inside the gate. I

closed the door and dialed, fumbling in my eagerness. She answered immediately.

"Bill! I'm so glad to hear you—"

It struck me suddenly she didn't have to act now, as she had the other night, because there was no chance anybody could be listening. Then I shrugged it off. Of course she was glad. She was in a bad jam, and she'd had two days of just waiting, biting her nails.

"I didn't do wrong, did I?" she went on hurriedly. "But I just couldn't stand it any longer. The suspense was driving me crazy—"

"No," I said. "I'm glad you didn't wait for the card. I was worried about you, too. Has anything happened?"

"No. They're still watching me, but I've been home nearly all the time. But tell me about you. And when can we start?"

"Here's the story," I said. "I got back around seven this morning, and wrote out a check for the *Ballerina* about twenty minutes ago. She's on the marine ways now, and will be off sometime tomorrow afternoon. Let's see, this is Thursday, isn't it?"

"That's right," she said. "Then what?"

"As soon as she's in the water we have to try out the auxiliary. Then later in the afternoon I'm going to take her outside for a shakedown for three or four hours. I hate to use up the time, but you can't go to sea in an untried boat. I've got everything we need out here in the truck except the actual ship's stores, and I'm going to make a list this morning and have the ship chandler deliver them here Saturday morning."

"Is there any way I could go on that trip outside with you?" she asked. "I'm dying to see her, and we could plan how we're going to get away from here."

I was tempted. I thought of three or four hours out there, just the two of us alone. She could charter a water taxi, meet me down the channel somewhere. No. It wouldn't work.

"It's too risky," I said. "If you're going to be safe after you get away from here, there just can't be anything they can remember afterward that would connect you with a boat. Any boat."

"Yes. You're right," she agreed. "But it's going to be a long time. I keep getting afraid when I can't talk to you. We sail Saturday night? Is that it?"

"Yes. Everything will be stowed and ready for sea some time in the afternoon."

"Have you thought of anything yet? I mean, for getting Francis aboard?"

"Yes," I said. "I've got an idea. But something else has occurred to me."

"What's that, Bill?"

"Sneaking him aboard isn't the big job. Getting you here is going to be the tough one."

"Why?"

"They're not sure where he is. But they're covering you every minute."

It was stifling in the booth, even with the little fan whirring. I looked out the glass part of the doors and could see them scraping away at the *Ballerina*.

I went on, talking fast. "But Macaulay first. You can help me a little. I think they're covering you from both ends of that alley in back of your house, as well as from Barclay's place in front of it, so we can't just sneak him out the back way. Now your house, as I recall, is the second one from the corner, so Barclay's, right across the street, must be also, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said.

"What's the name of that intersecting street?"

"Brandon Way."

"All right. Now from Barclay's house they shouldn't be able to see down Brandon Way very far, should they? I mean, the angle would be too flat to see much more than the corner itself, and the place where your alley comes out into Brandon would be hidden behind the house next to you. That right?"

"Let me see," she said. She thought for a moment. "Yes, I'm sure it would."

"Good. And there are lights only at the intersections of the streets themselves? None around the alley?"

"That's right."

"All right. That's about all I needed to know. I think we can pull it off, but I want to work on it a little more. And I've still got to figure out a way to get you."

"And your diving equipment," she said. "It's still in the back of the car."

"I know," I said. "I was just coming to that. There won't be time to fool with it, either, when I come to get you, no matter what kind of plan we work out. So we'll have to get it aboard first. You'll also want to bring a few clothes with you. So here's the way you work it. Put that aqualung in a cardboard carton and tie it. Pack what clothes and toilet articles you can get into another carton, and put both of them in the trunk of your car. Around noon tomorrow call Broussard & Sons, the ship chandlers, and ask if they'll deliver a couple of packages to the *Ballerina*, along with the stores. They will, of course. But don't take them to Broussard's yourself."

"Take the car to the Cadillac agency. It's got a squeak in it, or the motor goes purtle-purtle when it should go whirtle-whirtle, or something. As soon as you get inside on the service floor and they're trying to find what's wrong with it, you remember those packages you were supposed to deliver. Call a parcel delivery service to come after them. The point of all this hocus-pocus is that whoever's following you will be outside and won't see the things come out of your car. If he did they'd be hot on the trail in nothing flat to see where they went. All straight?"

"Yes. Now, when do I call you again?"

"Saturday afternoon about five, unless something happens and you have to get in touch with me sooner."

It took the rest of the morning to check the gear on the sloop and make out a stores list. Broussard's runner came down in the afternoon and picked it up. The yard closed at five. I drove the truck inside and parked it. The night watchman was a friendly, talkative old man who reminded me a little of Christiansen. He wanted to know if I was going to sail that boat clear up to Boston all by myself. What happened when I had to go to sleep? The whole thing fascinated him. Here was another problem; as fast as I solved one I had two more to take its place. I had to get them aboard without his seeing them.

I studied the layout of the yard. The driveway came in through the gate where the office and the shops were located, and went straight back to the pier running out at the end of the spit. There were some ways on the right, where they were building a couple of shrimp boats, and on the left was the marine railway itself. The *Ballerina*, of course, would be out on the pier after I brought her back in from the shakedown. It could be done, I thought; if I backed the truck up to the pier and left the lights on he wouldn't be able to see them come out the rear doors.

The foreman had given me an extension light and some cleaning gear. By midnight I had the cabin immaculately clean. I switched off the light and lay down on one of the settees.

We put her back in the water a little after one the next afternoon. I kept watch on the bilges for about an hour, and she was all right. With one of the yardmen aboard to give me a hand I took her down the channel against the tide with the engine, after the dock trial, hoisted sail, and went on out. There was a good breeze blowing, kicking up a moderate chop on the bar. I took her back and forth across it and let her pitch to see if she opened up anywhere. When we came back and tied up I pumped the bilges again. In a few minutes she was dry. *Baby*, I thought, standing on the pier looking at her.

There was still nothing in the morning or afternoon papers about his body being found. When the yard closed I backed the truck down to the pier and stowed all the gear aboard the sloop. The yard work was completed now, and I'd asked them to have the bill ready for me in the morning.

I worked on the charts for a while, stowing away the ones we wouldn't need in the Gulf. Turning on the radio, I picked up a time tick from WWV and started a rate book on the chronometer. After a while I heard a weather report for the West Gulf: moderate east and northeast winds.

I switched off the light and lay down. It was hot in the cabin. I could hear water lapping against the hull. It was a lovely sound until I started thinking of his body down there somewhere. How much longer did we have? I got off him at last, and tried again to see Macaulay, running into the same

old blank wall. He didn't even exist. Then I was thinking of her again.

I sat up and savagely lit a cigarette. I was being paid, I reminded myself, to get Macaulay out of that house alive, and not to lie there thinking about his wife.

All right. So I'd get him out. I had an idea for it, and it might work, too, if I didn't get myself killed doing it. But what about her? I still hadn't solved that.

Suppose I arranged a rendezvous out there on the beach and transferred her to the truck? That was all right, provided she could get far enough ahead of them so I could get her aboard without their seeing it. But if they did see it, we didn't have a chance. That truck was too slow. And I was pretty sure by now they were trailing her with two cars. They'd murder us.

They were pros; we were amateurs. It was going to have to be good. I dug up and discarded plan after plan, but after a long time I began to see a way I could do it. When I had it all straight in my mind, I looked at the watch. It was a little after four. Sleep was impossible now, so I got up and walked out on the end of the pier. Taking off the watch and the shorts, I dived in and went for a long swim out toward the channel. When I came back I sat naked in the *Ballerina's* cockpit, smoking and watching the sky redden in the east. This was the last day. If everything went right, this time tomorrow we'd be at sea.

Eight

The stores came down in a truck at a little after nine. I looked quickly for the two cartons. They were there. I took them aboard and started checking stores with the driver. When he had it all on the end of the pier I wrote out a check and started carrying it aboard.

I was still at it at eleven o'clock when I looked up and saw the two strange men come into the yard. They were dressed in seersucker suits and Panama hats, and were smoking cigars. I saw the foreman go over, as if asking what they wanted. They started around the yard, talking to each of the workmen for a minute or two.

Then they were coming toward me. I was just picking up a coil of line; I straightened, watching them. I'd never seen them before as far as I could tell.

"Mr. Burton here's from out of town," the foreman was saying. "I doubt if he'd know him."

"What is it?" I asked, trying to keep my face blank. I was beginning to be afraid. The larger one, the blond, was carrying something in his hand. It was a photograph.

He held it out. "Ever see this man, that you know of?" he asked. He didn't glance toward my hand as I took it; he watched my face. They both did. They didn't have an expression between them.

I held it up to take a good look. Then I handed it back. "I don't think so," I said. "What did he do?"

"Just a routine police matter," he said. "We're trying to find somebody that might know him."

I shook my head. "Sorry. He's a new one on me."

"Thanks anyway," he said.

They left.

I went on aboard the boat with the coil of line under my arm, but instead of stowing it away I walked down into the cabin and dropped, weak-kneed, onto the settee. I wiped the sweat from my face. The way they worked was frightening; it couldn't possibly have been more than a few hours since they'd found him, and already they had a picture. Not a picture, I thought. Probably dozens of them, being carried all over the water-front. And it was a photograph of him as he was alive, not swollen and unrecognizable in death.

Anybody but a fool would have known it, I thought. The pug would have a criminal record, and when they have records they have pictures. Maybe they had identified him from his fingerprints. But that made no difference now. The thing was that Christiansen would recognize him instantly.

I shook it off. They'd still be looking for Manning, who had gone to New York. And we'd be gone from here in another twelve hours. I was still tense and uneasy, though, as I finished loading stores and went up to the office to write a check for the yard bill. I topped off the boat's fuel tank and fresh water tank. The ringing clatter of the calking hammers died away at twelve as the men knocked off and went home. It was Saturday afternoon.

I filled the running lights, and drove the truck out and bought some ice. She was ready for sea. There was nothing to do now but wait.

It was bad. And it grew worse.

It was exactly five o'clock when the telephone rang inside the booth at the gate. I went in and closed the door.

"Bill," she said softly, "I'm getting really scared now. Are we all ready?"

"We're all ready," I said. "Listen—I've got to get Macaulay first. They're not sure where he is, and if it works right they

won't even know he's gone. They won't suspect anything's happening. But when you disappear, everything's going to hit the fan."

"I understand," she said.

I went on, sweating inside the booth. I could see the watchman down in the other end of the yard. "Tell him to dress in dark clothes and wear soft-soled shoes. He's to come out the back door at around nine-ten. That'll give him plenty of time to get his eyes accustomed to the darkness and make sure there's nobody in the alley itself. I don't think there will be, because they're too smart to be loitering where somebody might see them and call the police. They're watching the ends of it, sitting in cars. I'll come down Brandon Way and stop at the mouth of the alley at exactly nine-twenty—"

"But, Bill—You can't stop there. He'll know what you're doing. He'll kill you."

"He'll be busy," I said. "I've got a diversion for him, and I think it'll work. Now the truck will be between him and the mouth of the alley. Tell Macaulay to come fast the minute the truck stops. And if anything goes wrong he's to *keep coming toward the truck*. If he breaks and goes back he hasn't got a chance. But I don't think there'll be a hitch. Tell him when he reaches it to stand a little behind the door and just put his hand up on the frame of the window, near the corner. And he's not to try to get in, or even open the door, until the truck starts moving. If he even puts his weight on the running board while it's stopped, that guy may hear it. Got all that?"

"Yes," she said. "Then what?"

"You're next. Have you ever been to a drive-in movie?"

"Yes. Several times."

"All right. As soon as he leaves the house at nine-ten you lock all the doors. Be standing right by the phone at nine-twenty. If you hear any commotion or gunshots, call the cops and hide, fast. A prowler car will get there before they can get in and clobber you for having him hidden in the house. But if you don't hear anything, you'll know he got away. So leave the house at nine-thirty. Just go out front to your car and drive off. Some of them will follow you, of course. Go to the Starlite drive-in, out near the beach on Centennial Avenue. Centennial runs north and south. Approach from the north,

and try to time it so you get there at ten minutes before ten. If you look you'll see a black panel truck parked somewhere in the last block before you get to the entrance. That'll be me. Drive on in.

"Now, all this is important. Be sure you get it right. This is Saturday night, so it'll be pretty full. But you know how they're laid out, fan-wise, spreading out from the screen, and there are always a few parking places along the edge because the angle's poor out there. Enter one of the rows and drive across to the exit, slowly, looking for a good spot. But there aren't any. So you wind up clear over at the end. Sit there twenty minutes, and then back out. You've decided you don't like that, and there must be something better farther back. So drop back a row and go back to the entrance side again. Park there for five or ten minutes, and then get out and walk down to the ladies room in the building where the projector is. Kill about five minutes and then come back to the car. The minute you get in, back out and drive toward the exit. Before you get to it, pull into one of the parking places along the edge, and step out, on the right hand side. Don't scream when a hand grabs your arm. It'll be mine."

"Won't they still be following me?"

"Not any more," I said. "By the time you come back from the ladies' room I'll know who he is."

"You think he'll get out of his car, too?"

"Yes. It's like this. There'll probably be two cars tailing you. When they see you go into a drive-in theater one man will follow you in to be sure it's not a dodge for you to transfer to some other car. And the other bunch will stay outside near the exit to pick you up coming out, because there's a hellish jam of cars fighting for the exit when the movie breaks up and they could lose you if they both went inside. There's just one thing more. If an intermission comes along, sit tight where you are. You've got to make those two moves and that trip to the powder room while the picture's running and not many people are wandering around. It's darker then, too; nobody has his lights on."

"Yes, but how are you going to stop him from following me the second time? Bill, they're dangerous. They use guns."

"It's all right," I said. "He won't even see me. When he gets out to follow you on foot I'll just get in his car and pull all the

ignition wires loose from the switch, under the dash. By the time he tumbles to the fact his car's not going to start, you'll already be down at the other end of the row and in my truck. When the picture's over, we just drive out, along with everybody else."

"All right. But you'll be careful, won't you?"

"Yes, if you say so."

"I do say so," she said softly.

"Why?" I asked. I couldn't help it.

"Couldn't we put it this way—if anything happens to you we wouldn't get away."

"We'll call it that."

"Yes," she said. Then she added, "That, at the very least."

She hung up.

* * *

I sweated it out. Somehow, after a long time, it was dark. I was growing increasingly nervous after eight o'clock and kept looking at my watch every few minutes. At eight-fifty I picked up the big flashlight I'd bought with the stores, and got in the truck. The watchman let me out the gate.

I skirted the edge of the downtown area and went on west. Crossing Brandon Way, I looked at the numbers and saw I was about ten blocks north of Fontaine Drive. I turned left at the next corner, went nine blocks, and turned left again. Just short of the corner I pulled to the curb under some big trees and stopped. This was a block and a half above him. I flipped the lighter and looked at my watch. It was 9:10. I waited, feeling dry in the mouth. A lot depended on just a flashlight and a panel truck.

The thing was to give him just a little time to look it over, so I wouldn't spring it on him too suddenly, on the same principle that you never surprise a snake if you can help it. He'd be able to see what I was doing, and as I passed under the street light at the intersection of Fontaine Drive he'd see the black sides of the truck. My headlights would cover the Louisiana license plate. I took another look at the watch. It was 9:18. I stepped on the starter and eased away from the curb.

Switching on the flashlight, I held it in my left hand and shot the beam into dark places under the trees and back among the hedges as I came slowly down the street. After crossing Fontaine I could see him. He was in the same place, facing this way. I flashed the light into another hedge.

I had to calculate the angles fast now. I was well out in the center of the street, watching the mouth of the alley on his side. He was parked just beyond it. I stopped with my window opposite his, and at the same time I threw the light against the side of his car but not quite in his face.

"You seen anything of a stray kid?" I asked, as casually as I could with that dryness in my mouth. "Boy, about four, supposed to have a dog with him—"

It worked.

I could feel the breath ooze out of me as a tough voice growled from just above the light. "Nah. I haven't seen any kid."

"Okay. Thanks," I said. I felt along the edge of the window frame in the opposite door. *Hurry. For the love of Christ, hurry.*

My finger tips brushed across a hand. I inhaled again.

I let the truck roll slowly ahead three or four feet, and said, "If you see a kid like that, call the station, will you? We'd appreciate it."

I moved the light away from him. He wouldn't be able to see anything for twenty or thirty seconds, and Macaulay was on the far side of the truck, walking along with me. But he had to be in before we hit the street below Fontaine, under the light. I slipped the clutch and hit the accelerator a couple of times, shooting the flashlight beam along the sidewalk. The door opened soundlessly, and he was sitting beside me. He closed it gently.

There was no outcry behind us. I wanted to step on the gas and flee. *Not yet*, I thought. Easy. I still hadn't seen him at all. He was only a dark shadow beside me as we rolled on toward the intersection. Then a cigarette lighter flared.

I jerked my face around, whispering fiercely. "*Put that—*"

"It's all right," a smooth voice said. "Just turn at the corner and go around the block, like a good fellow."

I saw a lean face, and tweed, and the gun held carelessly in his lap. It was Barclay.

We turned. I was numb all over and there was nothing else to do. We went slowly up the street behind Fontaine and turned again.

"Rather theatrical," he said, almost deprecatingly. "But it was the only way to enlist you without a brawl which might arouse the neighborhood. Please go on around and park at the mouth of the alley, where you were."

"Mrs. Macaulay?" I asked mechanically.

"She's in the house."

"Is she all right?"

"Yes. A little shock, perhaps."

I swung around the next corner, and we were on Fontaine, under the big, peaceful trees. "Then you finally killed him?"

"Oh. Yes," he replied, almost as if talking to himself. "Quite unfortunate."

I didn't know what he meant, but there was no point in asking. I was too far behind now to catch up in a week. We parked at the mouth of the alley. Across the street I could see the red tip of a cigarette in the other car. Bitterness welled up in me. I'd fooled them, hadn't I? It was wonderful the way I'd fooled them.

Barclay opened the door on his side. "Go inside, shall we? Ready to leave shortly."

"Leave?"

"Embark. *Ballerina* does sleep four, doesn't she? Hope we haven't been misled as to the accommodations."

He stepped aside in the darkness and followed closely behind me. My mind turned the parts of it over and over with no more comprehension than a washing-machine tumbling clothes. Embark? Four of us? Macaulay was already dead; that was what they'd wanted, wasn't it?

It was—unless she had been lying all the time. I tried to shove the thought out of my mind. It came back. How would they have known I was coming by in the truck unless she had told them?

Maybe I could have got away from him in the alley, but I didn't even try. The whole thing had fallen in on me, and I

didn't have anywhere to go. I wanted to see her, anyway. She had lied about it, or she hadn't lied about it. I had to know.

We went in through a rear garden full of dark shrubs and the cloying sweetness of honeysuckle. The kitchen door was unlocked. There was no light inside, nor in the hall beyond, but at the end, through a Spanish archway, I could see the living-room and hear music.

It was a large room dimly lighted by the one bridge lamp that was turned on. I had a confused impression of beige broadloom, modern furniture, and drapes with bright splashes of color. The music was issuing from a phonograph console at the right end of it.

There were two men in it besides the one lying on the rug under the edge of the coffee table, but they registered merely as blurs as I swung my face and looked at her. She was on the right, near the phonograph, sitting straight upright on the front edge of a chair. She was wearing a sea-green dress and sandals, and the light gleamed softly on her hair. Nothing moved, and she might have been a well-bred girl listening to some old bore at a party until you looked at her eyes and saw the shock wearing off and could sense the scream running around inside her like a motorcycle riding the rim of a motordrome. I came over in front of her just as her mouth opened and she pressed the knuckles of her right hand against her teeth. Barclay stepped from behind me and hit her across the right side of the face with an open hand. The scream choked off before it could get started, and she whimpered and fell back in the chair.

I hit Barclay. The two men who had been blurs hit me, one of them with the flat side of a gun.

I was on my hands and knees, trying to get up with a big ocean of pain sloshing around in my head. The lights went out and then came back on and I tried to focus my eyes. I could see nothing but feet and the rug. Her nylons and gilt sandals were before me, and to one side I could see a pair of huge brogues under gabardine legs. I lunged weakly at them. One brogue kicked my arm from under me, and shoved. I rolled onto my back.

He looked down at me with a bleak grin, a big cottony blond with a flat slab of a face and gray eyes set wide apart. The other one had backed away and was on the other side of

the table, holding the gun in his hand as if it were an extension of his arm. He was a mean-looking slat about six feet tall, wearing a white linen suit and a Panama hat. His face had the human softness of a hatchet blade.

He pointed with the gun. "Sit down in that chair."

I looked at him and at the other one and slowly got to my feet with the two of them watching me. My legs buckled and I slid into the chair. Barclay got up, felt his jaw, and brushed casually at his clothes.

The telephone was on a stand at my left. Barclay saw my glance and shook his head. "I shouldn't try it," he said. "They're looking for you, anyway."

"You've killed Macaulay," I said. "What do you want now?"

"Mrs. Macaulay, obviously."

"Why?"

He gestured impatiently. "Later, Manning." He walked over to the other end of the room and stood looking around like a director inspecting a set for a scene he was going to shoot.

I could see the man lying under the edge of the coffee table. He was wearing slacks of charcoal gray and a dark-blue sport shirt, and his shoes had crepe soles. He had been ready to go when they killed him. My mind was still numb, but it could encompass that much. He was lying on his stomach with his face turned to one side, and a little blood had run from under his chest. It looked black against the rug. The face, what I could see of it, was slender, and his hair was very dark and needed cutting. I was conscious of the crazy thought that I'd been wondering for days what Macaulay would be like when I met him, and this was what he was like. He was a dead man who needed a haircut.

I turned my face and I could see her. She was slumped forward with a handkerchief pressed to her mouth. What if she had told them I was coming by in the truck? They had ways of making you talk. But what did they want with her? And with me, and the boat? The whole thing was one big blank. I sat there, feeling sick.

"You cleaned your prints from everything you touched?" Barclay asked.

The thin one nodded.

"Very well," Barclay said. "Who has the keys to her car?"

"Here." The big blond fished them from his pocket.

"Give them to Carl," Barclay directed crisply. "You'll go with us in the truck."

He shifted his gaze to the thin man. "Take the Cadillac downtown and park it. Meet us on the southeast corner of Second and Lindsay. We shall be going east, in a black panel truck, Manning driving. Get in the front seat with him. When we go in the gate at the boat yard Manning will tell the watchman you've come along to drive the truck back to a garage. If Manning tries a trick of any kind, don't shoot him; kill the watchman. As soon as we're all aboard the boat, take the truck to some all-night storage garage and leave it, under the name of Harold E. Burton, and pay six months' storage charges in advance. Then pick up the Cadillac, drive it to the airport, and abandon it. Take a plane to New York, and tell them we should be in Tampa in three weeks to a month. Tell them how it was with Macaulay, but that we have her and it's well under control. You have all that?"

"Check," Carl said. He took the keys and went out.

I could see a little of it now. They were hanging it on her quite neatly. The police already wanted me, and now they'd be after her, too, for killing Macaulay. I didn't know what Barclay wanted with her, but he had her from every angle. There was nowhere we could run.

Nine

"Here, George."

Barclay took the handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and tossed it, waddled into a ball, to the big towhead. "Put that in her mouth, so she doesn't cry out in the alley."

George tilted her face up and rammed the handkerchief into her mouth. Then he tied his own across it and around her neck to hold it in. She was crying softly and offered no resistance.

"Go, shall we?" Barclay said.

I saw him through dancing flickers of rage. My head was splitting and I was helpless and weak as a cat, nothing seemed to matter. "Suppose I don't"? I asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," he answered crisply. "Would you like to have her knocked about a bit to convince you?"

There was nothing else to do. I stood up. George gave me a bright, hard grin, and led her past. As they started out through the archway she pulled suddenly away and tried to fall to her knees beside Macaulay. George cursed and yanked her back. Barclay watched me with his hand in the pocket of his jacket. He shook his head warningly.

"Your boy's good," I said.

"He's efficient."

"Don't overmatch him and get him hurt," I said. "He might lose his confidence."

George glanced back over his shoulder at me. Barclay said, "Let's not be heroic, Manning. Suppose you follow them."

I followed them. Barclay followed me. As we went through the kitchen I could hear the phonograph softly playing Victor Herbert for a dead man, and then we were outside in the darkness and Barclay eased the door shut. I could see nothing but the pale gleam of her head, and that very faintly. Barclay had taken the gun from his pocket and was holding it against my back as we walked slowly through the garden and out the gate. At the end of the alley George stopped and I bumped gently against her. He stepped ahead to peer up and down the sidewalk. I put my hand on her arm and let it slide down until I had her hand in mine. I squeezed it, but there was no answering pressure. All her lines were down.

"All right," George whispered.

We moved ahead across the walk. There was no one in sight. It was just another peaceful evening in an upper-middle-class suburb where the only violence was on 21-inch screens. George opened the door of the truck and tipped the seat up. He helped Shannon Macaulay into the back and got in himself.

"Get in," Barclay whispered to me. I slid under the wheel and he sat beside me. "You know where to pick up Carl. Don't attempt anything foolish."

They couldn't get away with it, but they did. We rolled downtown through increasing streams of traffic. I counted three police cars, and once one stopped beside us at a traffic light almost near enough to touch. It was like a nightmare. Every turn of the wheels was taking her farther beyond the reach of help by anyone. There was nothing in the house to indicate the others had ever been there, and when the police found her car abandoned at the airport they would be sure she had done it and fled.

Just before we reached the corner of Lindsay and Second, Barclay climbed over the seat and sat on the floor in back with the others. I stopped. Carl got in. We went on, going out of town now. Nobody said anything. I thought of their three guns. It was like driving a nitro-glycerin truck over a rough road.

Traffic thinned out. We were driving through dimly lighted streets. I made the last turn and stopped before the gates of the boat yard. I beeped the horn. The old watchman swung them open. I pulled inside and he stood by my elbow.

"I'm going to get under way in a few minutes," I said. "This man will drive the truck back to a garage for me."

He glanced at Carl. There was dead silence from the rear of the truck. I could hear my own breathing. Carl nodded.

"Okay, Mr. Manning," the watchman said. "You need any help down there at the dock?"

I shook my head. "No. Thanks."

We rolled ahead.

At the lower end of the yard I swung the truck in a circle and backed it up against the end of the pier. The watchman was settling down with his magazine again, in the pool of light at the gate. Everything was black behind us.

"Get out and open the rear door, Manning," Barclay said softly.

I stepped out. Carl slid behind the wheel. I went around in back and pulled the door open. They stepped out. "Give us two minutes," Barclay whispered to Carl. "Then drive on out."

I led the way down the pier with Barclay close behind me and then George and Shannon Macaulay. It was intensely dark and I had to keep my eyes averted from the glow of lights over the city off to the left in order to make out the form of the pier and the clots of shadow which were the craft moored to it. Beyond in the channel the buoy winked on and off and the bell clanged restlessly in the night. Then the tall stick of the *Ballerina* was above us, shadowy against the stars. I felt my way aboard and stepped down into the cockpit.

"Stand clear," Barclay whispered. "Move to the aft end of the cockpit and sit down."

He was taking no chances of our being scrambled too closely together in close quarters in the dark. I stepped back. I could have jumped over the side and possibly escaped, but he knew I wouldn't. I had nowhere to go, with the police looking for me, and I couldn't leave her. They helped her down into the cockpit.

"Take her below and stay there with her," Barclay said quietly. "I'll watch Manning."

I could hear the soft scraping of shoes on the companionway and two shadows disappeared. "Start your auxiliary, Manning, and cast off," Barclay said. "Let's go to sea."

"Where?" I asked.

"I'll give you a course when we're outside. Now, step to it."

"I'll have to light the running lights first. Is that all right with you?"

"Certainly."

"I just wanted to be sure I had your permission."

He sighed in the darkness. "I assure you this is no game, Manning. It should have penetrated before now, but in case it hasn't I'd like to call your attention to the fact that your position is very poor, and Mrs. Macaulay's is even more dangerous. What happens to her depends on the way the two of you co-operate. Now suppose you take this sloop away from the dock before the watchman hears us and comes down here to investigate."

Getting the watchman killed would accomplish nothing. "All right," I said. As soon as the running lights were burning I started the engine and cast off the lines. We moved slowly away from the pier. I took her straight out toward the channel and swung hard over as we cleared the buoy. The twin rows of the channel markers stretched ahead of us, going seaward between the long dark lines of the jetties. There was no other traffic.

Barclay sat down across from me in the cockpit and lit a cigarette. The tip glowed. "Neat, wasn't it?" he asked, above the noise of the engine.

"I suppose so," I said. "If killing people is your idea of neatness."

"Macaulay? It was unavoidable. We were afraid of it."

"Of course," I said coldly. "It was an accident."

"No. Not an accident. Call it calculated risk." He paused for a moment, the cigarette glowed redly, and then he went on. "And speaking of that, perhaps I'd best brief you now as to your part in this expedition. You're also a calculated risk, for

the reason that—quite frankly—I’m not a navigator and neither is Barfield. I can handle small sailing craft well enough to take this sloop across the Gulf, but I couldn’t find the place we’re looking for. Therefore we need you, and while we both have guns and are quite expert in their use we won’t kill you except as a last resort. Score yourself one point.

“But before you start plotting a mutiny, try to imagine a bullet-shattered knee, complicated by gangrene, with a medicine chest which probably consists of aspirin tablets and Mercurochrome. Not an enchanting picture, is it? And while you’re about it, you might consider how unpleasant life could be made for Mrs. Macaulay if you don’t co-operate with us.

“One of us will be watching you every minute. Do as you’re told and there’ll be no trouble. Try to get out of hand, and both you and Mrs. Macaulay will be badly hurt; we’re not amateurs at this sort of thing. Is it all clear, Manning?”

“Yes,” I said. “Except you keep telling me this is no game, so there must be some point to it. Would you mind telling me where you think you’re going, and what you’re after?”

“Not at all. We’re looking for an airplane.”

I stared at the end of his cigarette. “You mean the one Macaulay crashed in? You’re going to try to find it after you’ve killed the one person on earth who knew where it is?”

“There’s one more who knows,” he said calmly. “Why do you think we brought her?”

“Look,” I said. “Don’t be stupid. He was alone in it when it crashed. How could she possibly know?”

“He told her.”

“You’ll never find it in a million years.”

“I think we shall. He knew where it was, obviously, and was certain he could go back to it, or he wouldn’t have tried to hire a diver and a boat. Therefore it has to be near some definite location, such as a reef or promontory. And if he knew, he could tell her. All she has to do is tell us. In fact, she has already given me the general location. It’s to the westward of Scorpion Reef. You know where that is, I presume?”

“It’s on the chart,” I said curtly. I swung the tiller a little to line up the channel buoys again. “Listen, Barclay. You’re stupid as hell. Even if you found the plane, that money’s not

recoverable. I didn't tell her, because the main thing they wanted was to get away from you and your damned thugs, but that currency's pulp by now. It's been submerged in sea water for weeks—"

"Money?" he asked. There was faint surprise in his voice.

"Don't be cute, for Christ's sake. You're not looking for that plane just to recover the ham sandwich he probably had with him."

"She told you there was money on the plane? Is that it?"

"Of course that's it. What else? They were trying to get to some place in Central America so they could quit running from you and your gorillas—"

"I wondered what sort of story she gave you."

"What do you mean?"

"You're rather naive, Manning. We're not looking for some trifling sum of money Macaulay might have had with him. We're after something he stole from us. He was a thief."

"I don't believe it."

"What you believe or don't believe is of no importance whatever. But what makes you so sure, when you'd never met him and knew nothing about him at all?"

"I know her. She wouldn't lie about it."

He chuckled. "I rather thought that was it. And, by the way, that puts me in a somewhat awkward spot."

"Why?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? One of us, it would appear, is lying. I think I can prove it was the lady; but should I, as a matter of policy? It's a delicate point. We're depending to some extent on your regard for the toothsome Mrs. Macaulay to ensure your co-operation in this venture, and it would seem we'd be doing ourselves a disservice in proving to you she's been having you on. You might become indifferent as to what happened to her—"

"You got out of that all right," I said.

"—but, on the other hand," he went on as if he hadn't even heard me, "if you were thoroughly disenchanted with the enchantress, you might be more inclined to help us in recovering what her husband stole from us. Interesting psychological point, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said contemptuously. "Very interesting. We'll be down to the bar in a few minutes. Could I interest you in taking the tiller when we're outside so I can get sail on her?"

"Certainly, old boy."

The *Ballerina* began lifting slowly on the long ground swell running in through the mouth of the jetties. I searched the darkness ahead and could see the sea buoy winking on and off. There was a moderate breeze, a little north of east. I wondered why Barclay had tried to get off a cock-and-bull story like that. He was in control; why bother to lie?

"I found their bag, the one she sent aboard."

I looked around. It was the voice of George Barfield, issuing from the companionway.

"Any chart in it?" Barclay asked.

"No." Barfield came out and sat down beside Barclay. In the faint starlight I could see he was carrying something in one hand. "The satchel was in it, all right. About eighty thousand, at a rough count. But no chart."

"What?" It exploded from me before I could stop it.

"What's the matter with Don Quixote?" Barfield asked. "Somebody goose him?"

"I'm afraid you've spoiled Manning's illusions," Barclay murmured. "Mrs. Macaulay told him that money was in the plane."

"Oh," Barfield said. "Well, I wanted to see everything before I died, and now I have. A man over thirty who still believes women."

I could only keep my hand on the tiller and stare straight ahead. I felt sick. "Shut up, you son of a bitch," I said. "Put that bag down and throw a flashlight on it. There's one on the starboard bunk."

"I've got it here." Barfield put the bag down at my feet.

The light flipped on and he pressed the catch on top of the bag. I looked at bundle after bundle of twenties, fifties, and hundreds.

I sold my jewelry and borrowed what I could on the car. It's the last chance we'll ever have. I don't know why they're trying to kill him; it was something that happened at a party

"All right," I said. "Turn it off."

"Didn't you forget my rank?" Barfield asked.

"What?"

"You're supposed to say, 'Turn it off, you son of a bitch.' "

"Shut up," I said.

"How long would it take you to learn enough navigation, Joey?"

"Too long," Barclay answered. "Leave him alone."

"I was pretty good at math," Barfield said; "Want me to try it? I could get sick of this guy."

"Stop it," Barclay ordered curtly. "Even if we could find the place alone, we still need a diver."

"Anybody can dive with an aqualung."

"George, old boy—" Barclay said softly.

"All right. All right."

"What's in the plane?" I asked.

"Diamonds," Barclay answered. "You might say a considerable amount of diamonds."

"Whose?"

"Ours, obviously."

"And she knows about it?"

"Yes."

I wondered if I had a latent tendency toward masochism. I wanted to hear it all. "And they weren't trying to get to Central America?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, they were. Or at least originally. But Macaulay couldn't take her in the plane because he had to take a diver. These particular diamonds appear to have an affinity for water. This will be the third time they've been recovered by a diver."

"Why don't you write him a book about it?" Barfield asked.

"Are you worrying over matters of policy again, George?"

"No," Barfield said hastily. "But I don't see any sense telling this jerk the time of day—"

"Well, I assure you he isn't likely to tell anybody out here."

Or ever come back. The implication was obvious.

I didn't even hear them any more. They faded away as if I were alone in the cockpit. She had lied about the whole thing. Why try to find a way out now? It was perfectly clear; anybody but a fool would have seen it long ago. I wasn't interested in their airplane or their stupid diamonds, or where they had come from, or what it was all about. The fact that she'd been lying all the time seemed to be the only thing that mattered.

I was a chump. A sucker. I'd believed her. Even when I'd had intelligence enough to realize the story sounded fishy I'd still believed it. She wouldn't lie. Oh, no, of course not. Why, you could look at those big innocent, come-on-in-and-drown-yourself gray eyes and just know she couldn't tell a lie. Jesus, how stupid could you get? She couldn't go in the plane because he'd had to add a fuel tank to stretch out its cruising radius. I was their last chance to escape; she had trusted me with all the money they had left. She must have been laughing herself sick all the time. I had no desire to spare myself any of it. I even imagined her telling her husband about it. *Dear, this poor sap will believe anything.*

So I'd gone for it like a high-school sophomore. And because I'd believed it I had killed that poor vicious little bastard in a fight and now the police would be looking for me as long as I lived. Only I wasn't going to be living very long. That was as obvious as the fact that I'd been a fool. I was scheduled for extinction just as soon as I located Macaulay's plane and brought up what they wanted.

So was she. And wasn't that too bad? I wondered if she realized just what her chances were of selling Barclay and that big thug a sob story of some kind. As soon as she told them where to look for that plane they'd kill her with no more compunction than a monkey cracking the life out of a louse. And if she didn't tell them they'd enjoy beating it out of her. Well, let her turn up the rheostats in those big beautiful eyes and see what it bought her on this moonlight cruise. There should have been some satisfaction in knowing her double-crossing had got her killed as well as me, but when I looked for it, it wasn't there. I just felt sick.

So I was going back to feeling sorry for her? I was like hell. The dirty, lying, double crossing—I stopped. A puzzling thought had occurred to me. If she knew what was in the

plane and where it was, why hadn't they grabbed her off long ago? Why had they kept trying to sweat Macaulay out of hiding so they could take him alive and make him tell, when they could have picked her up any time they pleased?

I cursed myself. What the hell, was I still trying to find a way out for her? Of course they hadn't wanted her as long as there was a chance she would lead them to Macaulay. Her information about the plane would be secondhand, and they'd only taken her as second choice after Macaulay was dead. She was all they had left.

Well, I thought, they didn't have much.

We were on the bar now. The breeze was kicking up a moderate sea that was choppy and confused as it fought with the ebbing tide. We shipped a little water on deck now and then as I held her on course toward the sea buoy.

"Here, take the helm," I said to Barclay. He slid over and I went forward and got the mainsail and jib on her. Barfield sat where he was, smoking. When I had the sails set we were passing the sea buoy. I cut the auxiliary.

"All right, what course?" I asked Barclay.

"Make it a little west of Scorpion Reef," he replied in the darkness. "That will do until in the morning and we can have a little quiz session with Mrs. M."

"Right."

I went below, pulled down the chart table over the port bunk, and clicked on the small light above it. 155 degrees true would do it. I was just guessing at the leeway we'd make, having never sailed her before, but that was close enough since we didn't even know where we were going anyway. And since nothing made any difference and I didn't care whether we ever got there or not. Unless the wind changed we'd be able to run down on that course all night without tacking.

Before I went back I looked swiftly around the cabin. I didn't even know what I was looking for, but since it was the first time I'd been alone, there must have been some idea in my mind of trying to find a weapon. I was just kidding myself. They had brought nothing aboard with them, so there was no hope they'd have another gun down here. I didn't have a chance. There were two of them; I'd never be where one wouldn't be watching me or at least aware of where I was. If I

got behind one of them and tried to get his gun, the other would kill me. They were professionals; even a man armed with another gun would have no chance against them.

The sloop heeled down a little, the cabin deck tilting. Barclay had cleared the sea buoy and was letting her pay off a little before the wind, guessing at the course as approximately southeast. She lifted on a sea, and eased across and down, the only sound the hissing of water past the hull and the creaking of cordage. It was like home again until I remembered I was laying down a course which went in only one direction—outbound.

They wouldn't need me going back. Anybody could find the coast of Florida.

On some impulse I couldn't explain, I stepped to the curtain and looked into the forward part of the cabin. There was just enough illumination from the chart lamp behind me to make her out, lying on the starboard bunk with her face in the pillow. The big lovely body looked defenseless and utterly beaten.

I didn't know why I did it. I stepped inside and stood near the bunk, as if I had no control over my own movements. She must have heard me, for she stirred and turned on her side and her eyes opened. They were wet.

"Bill," she whispered, "I'm sorry—"

I snapped out of whatever it was. I grinned coldly at her. "Have a nice trip," I said.

Turning, I went back through the after part of the cabin and on deck. Barfield had his legs stretched out in the cockpit. I kicked at them savagely.

"Keep your goddamned feet out of the way," I said.

It had all the potentialities of lighting a cigarette in a tanker's pump room. Barclay's cold professionalism was all that saved it.

He was going to have his hands full. You could see that.

Ten

The moment for explosion had passed and he sat in the breeze-swept darkness. She heeled down a little and water hissed along the hull. I gave Barclay the corrected course, and he let her fall off another point.

"Now," he said, off to my left, the faint glow of the binnacle light on his slender, handsome face, "watches. Have you ever handled a sailboat, George?"

"No," Barfield replied, across from me. "But if your nipple-headed friend can do it, anybody can."

"Well, it won't be necessary, actually," Barclay said. "Manning and I can take it watch-and-watch, but you'll have to be on deck when he has it and I'm asleep. Mrs. Macaulay can have the forward part of the cabin; you, I, and Manning can get a little sleep in the two bunks in the after part from time to time, except that obviously he can't go down there when one of us is asleep."

He was utterly calm and matter-of-fact, as if he were discussing the seating arrangement at a dinner party rather than trying to work out a deathwatch over a condemned man they had to live with and keep prisoner until the hour came to kill him.

"It's a little after twelve now," he went on. "You'd best go below, George, and catch up on your sleep. Manning can stretch out here in the cockpit and I'll take the first watch,

until six. When Manning relieves me, you'll have to come on deck."

Barfield grunted something and went below, carrying the satchel.

When he had gone, Barclay said, "I'd advise you to be chary of provoking him, Manning. He's quite dangerous."

I sat down, as near him as I dared, and lit a cigarette. "It would be tragic, wouldn't it?" I said. "I mean, if he blew his stack and killed me before I found your lousy plane for you and the two of you could take turns at it."

"Why should we kill you?"

"Save it," I said. "I knew all along you wouldn't. But aren't you going to give me a letter of recommendation? You know, something like: 'This will introduce Mr. Manning, the only living witness to the fact that we killed Macaulay and that his widow is innocent—'"

"Not necessarily," he said. "You won't go to the police. You can't. You're wanted for murder yourself."

I wondered if he thought I would believe that. Certainly the chances were I wouldn't go to them. I'd have everything to lose and nothing to gain. But if I were dead and lying on the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico somewhere in two hundred fathoms of water, there was no chance at all. And .45 cartridges were cheap.

I moved a little nearer. Just a slight shift of the buttocks along the seat, almost imperceptible. I glanced at his face. It was calm and imperturbable in the faint glow from the binnacle. I stretched and slid another inch. I could almost reach him.

The eyes were suddenly full of a mocking humor. "Here," he said. He took the .45 automatic out of the pocket of his jacket and held it out to me butt first. "Save scuffling for it. Undignified, what?"

My mouth dropped open. For a fraction of a second I was too startled to do anything. Then I recovered myself and grabbed it out of his hand.

"That was what you wanted, wasn't it?" he asked solicitously.

"Come about," I said. "Take her back to the sea buoy."

"I say, you are a theatrical devil, aren't you?" His voice was amused.

"You don't think I'd kill you?"

"Frankly, no."

"So it's not loaded?" Completely deflated, I took the gun in my left hand and pulled the slide back. I stared. It was loaded.

"You won't pull the trigger," he said, "for several reasons. You don't want to go back to Sanport, because the police are searching for you. And in the second place I doubt very seriously that you are capable of shooting a man in cold blood. Requires a certain detachment you don't have—"

"Go on," I said.

"But, naturally, the principal reason is that Barfield is down there in the cabin with another gun, and he's between here and Mrs. Macaulay. If you attempted anything, he has her. And he can be quite unpleasant if necessary. Has a knack for it."

"I don't give a damn what happens to Mrs. Macaulay," I said.

He smiled. "You think you don't, but that would change with the first scream. You don't have the stomach for that, either."

"I'm the original gutless wonder. Is that it?"

"No. You're just vulnerable in a number of areas in which you can't be in a business like this. I've made quite a study of you since that afternoon up there at the lake."

"Then you knew what she was up to? That's the reason you shoved off and left us?"

"Naturally. Also the reason we were a little rough with you, without actually hurting you, that night on the beach. We wanted you to hurry a bit and get this boat for them so we could find where Macaulay was hiding. Worked out quite well, too, except that he was in such a funk he forced us to kill him. However, that's all in the past. Right now, would you mind giving my gun back if you're finished examining it?"

Sweat broke out on my face. I lifted the gun, lined it up squarely between the mocking brown eyes, and flicked the safety off. My hand shook so badly it wobbled. I had only to

squeeze the trigger, ever so gently, and there would be only one of them. He watched me coolly. I wondered if there was any fear in him at all. He couldn't be human.

My finger tightened. I was taut as guitar strings all over and the muscles hurt in my arms. I didn't care what happened to her, did I? I cursed her silently, bitterly, hating her for being alive, and hating her for being here.

"George," Barclay said quietly.

I went limp. I handed the gun to him, feeling sick and weak all over.

"What is it?" Barfield's voice asked from the companionway.

"Nothing," Barclay said. "Sleep tight, old boy."

I lit a cigarette. My hands shook.

"Charge it to clarification," Barclay murmured.

He had wanted me to know it, wanted me to realize the futility of jumping one of them to get his gun as long as she was there where the other could get her. This way it hadn't cost anything. I wondered what kind of mind I was dealing with. He knew things about me I didn't know myself. I detested her. Maybe I even actively hated her. She and her lying had ruined everything for me, I was sick with contempt when I thought of her, and yet he'd known he could tie my hands completely by threatening her with violence.

Clarification, he called it. It was about as clear as the bottom of the Mississippi.

"I shouldn't feel too badly about it," Barclay said. "Exploitation of weakness is purely routine in war, chess, or tennis, and older than any of them. And she is admirably constituted to be a carrier. Rather delectable wench."

"Carrier?"

"Typhoid Mary of vulnerability, to use a medical analogy, assuming any extension of the areas of potential hurt to be a pathological condition. Regard for another human being is an exposed nerve end, if you follow me. Imagine a surrealist football player trailing his solar plexus or testes after him like an eleven-foot bridal train. Unwieldy, what? And damned convenient for the opposition in case the score is close."

"The hell with Mrs. Macaulay," I said.

"Forgive me if I talk too much. Grow philosophical at sea, particularly under sail. Unpleasant habit."

"What are you going to do with her after you find the plane?"

"Frankly, I haven't given it any thought, old boy. And since neither of us gives a damn what happens to her, as you say, why waste time in speculation? Lovely night, isn't it? Are you fond of Swinburne?"

"We were like that," I said. "What did Macaulay do?"

"He tried to steal, or did steal, some three quarters of a million dollars worth of diamonds from us."

The sum meant nothing to me. He could have said twenty dollars or a billion and it would have been the same as far as I was concerned. It was something they were after, and Macaulay had been after. I was just a pedestrian who had been shoved into the line of march and run over.

The breeze was almost directly abeam. We shipped some water amidships and a little spray blew into the cockpit. Barclay handled her well; he was a good helmsman. A clumsy one might have had the cockpit full by this time. I leaned down and cupped my hands to light another cigarette and looked around at him. The brown eyes gazed thoughtfully at the compass card. He was the most completely baffling human being I had ever run into, and I knew somehow that if we were to sail this boat around the world for the rest of our lives, just the two of us, I wouldn't be any nearer to understanding him on the last day than the first. He was cold-blooded, entirely without conscience, and still you almost liked him. Why, I didn't know.

"Since you were in the salvage business," he went on, "you must be familiar with the *Shetland Queen*."

I looked up suddenly. "Sure. I remember her."

She had lost her rudder in a tropical disturbance last fall and hit a reef somewhere along the northern edge of the Campeche Bank. As I recalled the story she had gone on across it as the sea piled up, but there had been too much damage below water line and she had gone down a few hours later. The crew had got away all right. She was in about ten fathoms, and the underwriters had let a contract to salvage as much of the cargo as wasn't ruined. They had saved some

machinery and several thousand cases of whisky that somehow hadn't been smashed.

"So that's the first time your diamonds were dunked," I said. "But where did Macaulay get into the act?"

As soon as I asked, I began to get the connection. Salvage—underwriters; so she had been telling the truth about part of it, anyway. The part about his being in the marine insurance business.

"That is correct," he said. "They were aboard the *Shetland Queen*. But—" He looked up and smiled in the faint glow from the binnacle. "Through some oversight they didn't appear on the cargo manifest or any of the customs lists. To be exact, they were in some cases of tinned cocoa which had been loaded in Holland and were consigned to a small importing firm in New Orleans. Quite an economical way to ship diamonds, if you follow me, except that it can be damned embarrassing if something happens to the ship, as in this case. The cocoa was insured, as I recall, for some two or three hundred dollars. And naturally we should have looked a little silly trying to explain to the underwriters at that stage of the game that we hadn't really meant chocolate at all, but diamonds, and that they should pay us three quarters of a million when we'd paid a premium on a valuation of three hundred dollars. Hardly sporting, what? And one might anticipate a certain element of skepticism on their part. To say nothing of the embarrassment of attempting to explain a harmless prank like that to the customs chaps. Lacking in true appreciation of these little matters, the customs people.

"It was something of an impasse, as you may well imagine. Benson and Teen had paid off all claims, including ours, and were engaged in salvaging what they could, but naturally this didn't mean they were going to waste any time and effort in bringing up insignificant items of general cargo such as a few dollars' worth of tinned cocoa. They paid, and wrote it off. We made a few tentative feelers. Inasmuch as they were working inside the ship anyway, and inasmuch as the sea pressure at that depth probably hadn't been sufficient to crush the tins, why didn't they merely bring up our cocoa and let us withdraw our claim? They brushed this aside as ridiculous. They were working in the open sea, salvage operations are deucedly expensive, and they had no intention at all of trifling

with such picayune items. We let the matter drop, knowing that any insistence would excite suspicion. We'd be forced to wait until they were finished with the wreck and then undertake a salvage operation of our own.

"But, unfortunately, some—ah—competitors of ours began to suspect what was in the wind and also tried to purchase the cocoa from Benson and Teen. This proved to be a little too much for the gentleman who was in charge of the operation for them—the late Francis L. Macaulay. This obviously valuable chocolate began to intrigue him, so he sent a confidential emissary down to Mexico to go out to the scene of operations and look into it on the quiet. This chap asked to have the cocoa brought up, and since he was ostensibly acting for Benson and Teen through the person of Macaulay, they brought it up. It took him only a few minutes, of course, to determine what made it so valuable. He devalued it forthwith, saying nothing to anyone. As soon as he was back in the little Mexican port where the salvaged cargo was being landed, he called Macaulay by long-distance telephone.

"They had two problems. The first was, of course, our original one—getting the stones into the United States without paying duty or having to answer any embarrassing questions as to where they had come from. The second was to keep us from recovering them. We had two men in the Mexican port keeping an eye on the cargo that was brought in. Macaulay solved both problems at once. He had been a bomber pilot in the Second World War, and held a pilot's license. He came down to the Gulf Coast, chartered a big amphibian, and came after his colleague and the stones. They were to rendezvous in a *laguna* some ten or fifteen miles to the east of the Mexican port. They did, but our men were there, too, having become suspicious of Macaulay's man and followed him in another motorboat. They lost him in the jungle, but saw the plane coming in and arrived at the spot just as the man was climbing aboard. Macaulay was helping him, and our chaps recognized him. They opened fire, killing the other man, but Macaulay got the plane off the water and escaped."

"With your stupid diamonds," I said.

He nodded. "So we thought. Macaulay never did go back to New York, suspecting that inasmuch as our men had

recognized him as the pilot of the plane engaged in stealing three quarters of a million dollars from us we might feel ill-disposed toward him. His wife disappeared also. The firm said he had suffered a heart attack and resigned. He'd told them, originally, that he had to go to the Coast because of illness in the family, or some such story. We tried to trail him. He escaped us rather narrowly two or three times. But the strange part of it was that he apparently had never made any attempt to sell any of his loot. We began to understand then, just about the time we ran him down in Sanport. He hadn't sold it, or tried to, because he didn't have it.

"He escaped us in Sanport, taking off in another plane. We learned that another man had been with him, a man carrying an aqualung diving outfit. Macaulay, incidentally, couldn't swim a stroke. As soon as we learned of the diver, of course, we knew what had happened. The metal box containing the diamonds had fallen into the laguna during those few hectic moments when Macaulay's friend was killed.

"Our only hope lay in staying so close to Mrs. M. she'd have to lead us to him eventually. But just about that time we began to have a strong suspicion he was back in Sanport. Perhaps you missed the little item in the paper, but just about five days after Macaulay took off, a fishing boat docked with a castaway it had picked up in a rubber life raft on the Campeche Bank. This man, the captain said, gave them some vague story about being a pilot for some Mexican company and having crashed while en route from Tampico to Progreso alone in a seaplane. But he had, strangely, just vanished the minute the fishing boat docked."

"I get it now," I said. "As soon as she got in touch with me you knew the castaway was Macaulay. He'd gone back to the *laguna* with a diver to hunt for the box. But how do you know he found it, or even got there? Maybe he crashed on the way down."

"No. He crashed on the way back. So the box is in the plane."

"I see. And from the fact that he was trying to hire me to do some more diving for him, you realized he knew where the plane was and could go back to it?"

Barclay nodded. "Correct. We also suspected he was right there in the house, but that taking him alive wasn't going to be easy. He was armed, and very scared."

"The thing that puzzles me," I said, "is that you and your meat-headed thugs never did put the arm on her to find out where the plane was. You're convinced now she knows where it is, but you let her come and go there for a week or more right under your noses."

"We weren't certain she knew *then*."

"But you are now. Why?"

He hooked a leg over the tiller and used both hands to light a cigarette. The glow of Sanport's lights was fading on the horizon.

"It's really quite simple," he explained, filling his lungs with smoke. "As a matter of fact, I'm a little ashamed I didn't think of it before. I merely wrote Macaulay a letter two days ago and pointed out the advisability of telling her where it was."

I shook my head. "Maybe you'd better run through that again. You wrote him a letter—where?"

"Addressed to his house, naturally. Even if he weren't there she would get it to him."

"And he'd be sure to tell her, just because you suggested it? Don't be stupid. There's no reason at all he'd do it."

He smiled again. "I disagree, old boy. There was a very good reason he would tell her. Remember, Macaulay was in the insurance business. He didn't sell life insurance, but he was familiar with the necessity for it as well as any married man and probably more so than most. I simply pointed out that inasmuch as there was always a chance something might happen to him, it behooved him to protect her."

"By telling her where the plane was?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes," he said.

"And wouldn't that be wonderful?" I said. "That way he could guarantee she'd be kidnapped and beat up and put through the wringer by you and the rest of your sadistic bastards—"

He shook his head gently. "I'm afraid you still don't see it, at least not from Macaulay's point of view, old chap. There

was no doubt as to her being interrogated; he knew that. But suppose she *didn't* know where the plane was?"

I turned and looked at him, and it took perhaps a full second for the slow horror of it to catch up with me. "Good God—"

"Precisely, old boy. Life insurance, you see. He was leaving her the only thing that could stop the questions."

I saw then what Macaulay must have gone through in those last few hours. He couldn't turn to the police because he had already left the protection of the law. There was a good chance he would be killed, and he was going to leave her right in their hands. He had to tell her.

"Hostage to fortune, you see," Barclay murmured. "The exposed nerve end again."

I leaned my elbows on my knees and looked at him. "*You dirty son—*"

I stopped. I'd forgotten him. A number of things were beginning to click in my mind, all at the same time. She'd told the truth about his job. She'd told the truth about their trying to get away to Central America. Barclay had sent that letter to Macaulay only two days ago. Macaulay had told one lie, to his company, about where he'd been going when he left New York. Maybe—

No. He'd been on his way *back* when he crashed. She'd still been lying when she said he'd been trying to get to Central America. But I had to talk to her. I stood up.

"I'm going below," I said.

"No." Barclay shook his head. "George is asleep."

I was tight with rage. "I said I was going below. Wake him up. Tell him to hold his goddamned gun with both hands. Tell him to sit on it. Tell him to come up here and jump overboard. I'm going down there."

"Why?" he asked.

"I want to talk to Shannon Macaulay."

I could see it in his face in the glow from the binnacle. He was smart. He had more pure intelligence than anybody I had ever known. He saw the possibilities of it and knew what I wanted to ask her. And not only that. He was already adding it up on his side of the ledger. He hadn't wanted to prove she

was lying, in the first place. Always increase the areas of vulnerability; don't decrease them.

"George," he called. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," came the weary answer from inside the cabin. "What's biting our stupid friend now?"

I went below and switched on the chart lamp. He was lying in the starboard bunk smoking a cigarette with his jacket and tie off and his collar unbuttoned. The gun was in a shoulder holster under his left arm. He was big and tough, and his eyes blinked sourly at the light.

"Look, Snerd," he said. "Why don't you flake out somewhere and get off my back?"

I walked over and stood staring down at him. "Get out," I said.

He started to rise to his elbows. "Why, you dimwit—"

"George, come here a moment," Barclay called from the cockpit.

"Better run along, baby," I said. "Your boss is whistling for you."

He swung his legs over the side of the bunk and slowly sat up. The gray eyes looked hungrily at me for a moment, and then Barclay called out again.

"Just keep on asking for it, Snerd," he said. He turned his back and went out.

I parted the curtains and went into the forward part of the cabin. She was lying on the starboard bunk with her face in her arms.

Eleven

Shannon," I said.

"What, Bill?" Her voice was muffled.

"How long have you known what these gorillas are after?"

She turned slowly on her back and looked up at me. The gray eyes were dry now, but they were washed out and dead.

"Since three o'clock this afternoon," she said.

I sighed, and felt suddenly weak with relief or joy, or both. I'd been right. All the cancerous growth of bitterness was gone and I wanted to kneel beside the bunk and take her in my arms. Instead I lit a cigarette and put it between her fingers. "I want to apologize," I said.

Her head moved almost imperceptibly. "Don't. I sold you out, Bill."

"No," I whispered. "You didn't know. I thought you had lied, but you hadn't. It doesn't matter that he was lying to you."

"Don't make it any worse, Bill. Don't you see? I still betrayed you. I had six hours to call you, and you could have got away. I tried to, but I couldn't. I thought I owed him that, in spite of what he did. Maybe I was wrong, but I think I'd still do it the same way. I don't know how to explain—"

"You don't have to," I said. "You were telling the truth all the time. That's the only thing that matters."

She stared up at me. "Why does it?"

"I don't know," I said.

I did know. It was the only thing I knew, or even had room for in my mind. I wanted to shout it out to her, or sing it, but I kept my face blank and lit a cigarette for myself.

"I'm sorry about it," I said gently.

She didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, "It's all right. He didn't have a chance, anyway. I think they knew he was in the house, and anything we tried would have failed."

The ash was growing long on her cigarette. She glanced at it dully and cast her eyes about for a tray. There was one made of half a milk can in the rack on the bulkhead above the bunk. I reached it down and held it for her. She tried to smile. Just looking at her made my breath catch in my throat. I squatted on my heels with my back braced against the other bunk and my face on a level with hers.

"Why hadn't he ever told you?" I asked.

"Ashamed, I think. He wasn't a criminal, Bill. He wasn't even dishonest. There was just too much of it, and it was too easy, and no one would ever know."

"It's too bad," I said. "It's a dirty shame."

She turned her face a little, and her eyes met mine squarely. "You know I must have suspected it, don't you? Nobody could be stupid enough not to guess there must be more to it than he told me. I did suspect it. I can't deny it. I was cheating when I told you what he told me, because I was afraid it wasn't the truth, or not all the truth. But what could I do? Tell you I thought my husband was lying? Did I owe you more than I did him? Doesn't eight years of time mean anything, or the fact he had never lied to me before, or that he'd always been wonderful to me? I'd do it again. You'll just have to think what you will."

"If you're selecting a jury," I said, "I've already formed an opinion. I'll tell you about it, some day."

What some day? We had about five left, if we were lucky.

"Wait, Bill," she whispered. "You don't know all of it yet. When you do you'll think I'm a fool. You see, he wasn't on his way down there when he crashed. He was coming back."

I realized I'd forgotten that. "I know. To Sanport."

"Not to Sanport. To somewhere on the Florida coast, where he was going to destroy the plane and disappear. Don't you see? He was leaving me."

I got it then. "And you'd have gone on to Honduras, thinking he would be there? And when he wasn't, you'd have been certain he was dead? Down somewhere in the Gulf, or in the jungle?"

"Yes," she said. Then she smiled a little bitterly. "But I wasn't the one he wanted to convince. He was just trading me, you see—"

"Oh." I really saw it at last. "So if Barclay and his men had managed to follow you down there, they'd give him up as dead, too. That was what he was after."

She nodded.

"Maybe it gets easier as you go along," I said.

"He was scared. He'd been hunted too long, and I guess it does things to you."

"But running out on you? Deserting you, leaving you stranded in a foreign country?"

"Not quite stranded, if you mean money," she said. "You see, it wasn't in the plane. I thought it was, but it was in a bag of his I was supposed to bring down with me. None of it's clear-cut, Bill. He was leaving me, and he had to double-cross his friend who bought the plane, but he wanted me to have the money. Maybe he thought it was just sort of a ball game. I was being sacrificed to advance the runner to second."

And maybe the money was a way of buying off his conscience, I thought, but I said nothing. Macaulay was a little mixed up for me.

Suddenly her eyes were full of tears and she was crying silently. "Does it make much sense to you that I still didn't call and tell you, after that?"

"Does it have to?" I asked.

She put both hands alongside her face and said slowly, around the tightness in her throat, "I would like to explain it, but I don't know how. When he told me that, I knew I would leave him, but I couldn't run out on him until he was safe."

I tried to see Macaulay, and failed again. How could he inspire that kind of loyalty on one hand and be capable of the

things he had done on the other? I said nothing about it because it might not have occurred to her and it would only hurt her, but he had killed that diver, or intended to until the airplane crash saved him the trouble. The way he had it planned, there couldn't be any second person who knew he was still alive. He'd probably have killed him as soon as the poor devil brought up the box in that Mexican *laguna*. And he would have killed me, in some way.

That was the only way it would add up. He didn't want his wife to know what he was mixed up in. So when I went down into that plane he had to tell me what he was really after, and when he'd done that the chances were I'd have fallen overboard the next night. He was a great Macaulay, I thought. He'd started out with an itching palm and wound up itching all over.

"How much chance do you think we have?" she asked.

I tried to think of something to say. But what? They were going to kill us. Everything said they had to. Escape? At sea in a small boat with two of them watching us? And if we did get rid of them some way, what then? I was wanted by the police. In a very short time she would be, too. We had nowhere to go. The trap had double walls.

Then I thought of something else, even worse. "Do you really know where that plane is?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. He told me very carefully. And I memorized everything he said."

I wondered. She thought she did. Barclay was convinced she did. But apparently I was the only one aboard who had any idea of the immensity of the Gulf of Mexico and the smallness of an airplane. If you didn't know within a few hundred yards you could drag for a thousand years and never find it.

Not that I cared if they found their damned diamonds or not. It was something else. If they didn't, Barclay would think she was stalling, "—suppose she *didn't* know," he'd said softly. The implication was sickening.

"He didn't show you on a chart?" I asked. "Or make a drawing?"

"No," she said. "But it's near a shoal. The shoal is about fifty miles north-northeast of Scorpion Reef, and is around a

half mile long, running north and south. The plane sank two miles due east of it."

"Was there white water, or did he just see the shoal from the air before he crashed?"

"He didn't say."

It was silent in the cabin except for the swish of water across the deck above us. I didn't say anything for a moment. It was pretty bad. You had to assume too many things. You had to assume, to begin with, that Macaulay had known where he was himself. Then you had to believe the water was shallow enough at that spot to cause surf, so we could find it. If he'd merely seen a difference in the coloration of the water from above, we didn't have a chance. Then you had to have faith in his ability to estimate his bearing and distance from the shoal in the wild scramble to get out of the plane and launch the rubber raft before he went down.

I tried to reassure myself. He could navigate, or he wouldn't have tried to fly the Gulf in the first place. He gave the location in reference to Scorpion Reef, so he must have sighted Scorpion. Fifty miles was only a few minutes in a plane, so he couldn't have gone far wrong in that distance. And there had to be visible white water. He'd been intending to go back to it in a boat, hadn't he? He must have known what he was doing.

Then something else struck me. "Wait," I said. "Barclay told me to set a course to the *west* of Scorpion Reef. Are you sure you told him east?"

"Yes. He must have misunderstood. I said north-northeast."

"Just a minute," I said. I went out into the after part of the cabin and leaned over the chart. Barfield was still on deck. With the parallel rulers I laid down a line 22 degrees from Scorpion Reef, picked fifty miles off the edge of the chart with the dividers, and set them on the line. I stared. There was no shoal there. The only sounding in the vicinity was 45 fathoms. I grew more uneasy.

Beyond, another 20 or 25 miles, lay the Northern Shelves, a wide area of shoaling water and one notation that three fathoms had been reported in 1907. Could he have meant that? But if he had, we didn't have a chance. Not a chance in the world.

In the first place, if he couldn't fix his estimated position within 25 miles that short a time after having sighted Scorpion Reef, his navigation was so sloppy you had to throw it all out. There went your first assumption, the one you *had* to have even to start: that Macaulay had known where he was himself. And in the second place, that whole area was shoal. God knew how many places you might find white water at dead low tide with a heavy sea running. Trying to find an airplane with no more than that to go on was so absurd it was fantastic.

Fumbling a little with nervousness, I swung the rulers around and ran out a line NNW from Scorpion Reef. Barclay had said she'd told him that direction. I looked at it and shook my head. That was out over the hundred-fathom curve. Nothing there at all. And if he'd been headed for the Florida coast he wouldn't have been over there in the first place.

I thought swiftly. We'd never find that plane. To anybody even remotely acquainted with salvage work the whole thing was farcical, except there was nothing funny about it here, under the circumstances. They were going to think she was stalling. She'd already contradicted herself once, or Barclay had misunderstood her.

Three quarters of a million dollars was the prize. Brutality was their profession. I thought of it and felt chill along the back.

I was still looking at the chart when the idea began to come to me. I hurriedly slid the parallel rulers over on our course and looked at my watch. It was just a little less than two hours since we'd cleared the sea buoy. Guessing our speed at five knots would put us ten miles down that line. Growing excited now, I marked the estimated position and spanned the distance to the beach westward of us with the dividers. I measured it off against the edge of the chart. It was a little less than nine miles.

Hope surged up in me. We could do it. There was still enough glow in the sky over Sanport to guide us, and if there wasn't, all we had to do was keep the sea behind us and go downwind. The water was warm. You could stay in it all day without losing too much body heat.

Sure, the police would get me, and her, too. We wouldn't have a chance, half clothed and with no money. But that was

nothing compared to what lay ahead for us here. She might go free. If we could sell them the story soon enough, the Coast Guard might pick up the sloop and take them. There was a chance it would clear her. I'd go to prison, but that was better than going crazy out there when they started getting rough with her.

But we had to have a life belt. She probably couldn't swim anything like that distance, and it was just a tossup whether I could or not. But how to get one out there on deck without their seeing it? They were big and bulky, and even down here in the cabin Barfield would notice it as she went by. I looked swiftly around the cabin and had an idea that might work. Taking one of the big, cork-slab belts from under the starboard settee, I put it on top of the icebox, which was right beside the companionway.

I hurried back through the curtain and knelt beside her again. Leaning close, I whispered, "Can you swim?"

Her eyes widened in surprise, but when she replied her voice was low. "Just a little," she said.

"Good," I whispered. "Listen. We've got to get off here. Now. There's not a chance in the world of finding that plane with the information you've got, and when they begin to find it out it's going to be murder. And even if we could locate it, they'd probably kill us anyway. So we've got to swim for it. Maybe we make it, maybe we drown; but it's better than this. How about it?"

"How far?" she asked quietly.

"About nine miles."

"I can swim about a hundred yards, in calm water."

"That's all right. I'm pretty good at it, and we'll have a life belt. It's our only chance."

The big eyes looked at me gravely, without fear. "All right," she whispered.

"Fine," I said. "Now, I'm going back on deck. As soon as I'm up there, Barfield will probably come back down here and turn in. Wait about five minutes, and then come on deck yourself. If he tries to stop you, make a gagging sound and pretend to be seasick. Say you've got to have fresh air. Now look—" I pulled the curtain back a little so she could see straight through to the companionway. "There's the life belt,

on top of the icebox. He won't see it, because I'll turn the light out before I go back up. When you're on the step, grab it fast and hug it to you and come on up in a hurry. Don't try to put it on. Just hold it. The minute you step out onto the bridge deck, head for the rail, and go right over the side. By the time Barclay sees you've got a life belt it'll be too late. Got it?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good," I whispered. "See you in the water. Better take your shoes off before you start up. And go for the lee rail."

"Which one is that?"

I grinned. "The one downhill."

She nodded. "Thank you for everything," she said softly. She thought we were going to drown.

I put my hand against her cheek. "We'll make it," I said. Just touching her brought back that intense longing to take her in my arms. I stood up abruptly and turned away.

I went back on deck after turning out the lamp over the chart table. It was very dark at first. Barfield growled something and I heard him going below. I sat down in the cockpit, on Barclay's right and as near him as I dared.

"Have a nice conference?" he asked with urbane humor.

"Very nice," I answered.

"She really didn't know what he was doing, did she?"

"No."

"Curiously enough, I rather believe her. The possibility didn't occur to me, however, until I was telling you about it. Macaulay was an odd one, and there was a good chance he didn't want her to know about it. Or anyone else. Came from a rather prominent family."

"She did?"

"No. Macaulay. She was a show girl. Danced in a cabaret."

My eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness now. I looked astern and could still see the faint glow over the city. Involuntarily, I shuddered. There was a lot of dark water between here and the shore.

But we could make it. One life belt will support two people if they don't try to stand on it or fight the water. We'd each hold an end of it and I could tow her, resting when I was

tired. The sky was clear; even if we couldn't see the glow of the city from down there in the water, we'd have Polaris to orient us until dawn and after that the sun. All we had to do, anyway, was go with the sea and wind and we'd hit the beach eventually.

"You'd best stretch out and get some sleep," Barclay said. "I should like to be relieved at six."

I had to be careful not to arouse suspicion. "All right," I said. "In a minute." If he got an inkling of what we were up to they wouldn't let her on deck until we were a hundred miles at sea.

I thought of the hours we'd be in the water and wished longingly for one last cigarette, but did not light it because it would momentarily destroy night vision. Things were going to happen fast, and I had to find her there in the water before she could become frightened and cry out. I waited, trying not to tense up. She should be coming up any moment now. Suppose Barfield stopped her?

"Did she tell you where the plane was?" Barclay asked.

"Yes," I said. I repeated what she had said, and asked, "Where did you get the impression it was west of Scorpion Reef?"

"From her, naturally," Barclay answered. "I hope we aren't going to have any of that. She distinctly said north-northwest."

"She was suffering from shock," I said coldly. "I believe she had just seen her husband butchered in cold blood. And, anyway, it's a cinch he wouldn't have been to the westward of Scorpion Reef if he'd been heading for the Florida coast."

"True enough," he said. "But we'll take the matter up after breakfast. And I would advise you both not to attempt any evasiveness or lying. Unfortunately, we are quite in earnest about this."

I started to say something, but at that moment I heard voices in the cabin. She had started up.

"Where do you think you're going?" Barfield's voice growled.

"I—I feel nauseated," she said. I could barely hear her. "—fresh air—"

"Hey, Joey," Barfield called. "All right to let her up?"

I waited, holding my breath.

"No," Barclay said. "Find her a pail and tell her to stay down there—"

If she was beyond him we had no chance at all, but it was now or never. I swung. My fist crashed into the blurred whiteness of Barclay's face, and at the same time I yelled, "*Run!*"

Barclay fell back, clawing in his pocket for the gun. She came up through the hatch, moving fast, with Barfield shouting behind her. I could see her for a brief second, standing erect on the deck at the forward end of the cockpit with the bulky life preserver clutched to her breast. Then she was lunging and falling outward. I grabbed Barclay's jacket and hauled, rolling him into the bottom of the cockpit. Barfield came lunging up out of the hatch. I heard her splash.

Barclay grabbed my left leg and was trying to pull me down. Barfield jumped into the cockpit. The *Ballerina* rolled, and he lost his balance and came slamming into me. I lashed out at his jaw and felt the jolt as I connected. He was trying to get his arms around me. I kicked loose from Barclay and knew he was going for the gun again. I lunged backward, onto the seat, put a foot in Barfield's chest, and shoved. He peeled off. I kicked backward once more, slid over the rail, and water closed over me.

Even as I was going down I tried to keep myself oriented. I had to find her back there in the darkness with nothing to guide me except the spot I'd gone in and the direction I was facing. In a moment the *Ballerina* would come up into the wind, the continuity of its course shattered and all the angles gone. My head came out. I looked at her lights. She was swinging now.

I started swimming back. I was hampered by my shoes and clothing, but there wasn't time to shed them until I'd found her. A sea lifted me and broke over my head. I angled up against the next one, afraid of drifting below her.

The sloop was 50 or 75 yards away now, broadside, as she came about. I could see only the port running light, glowing like a ruby in the darkness, swinging up and back as she rolled. I swung my head and looked about me. I should see

the white of the life belt or the blond gleam of her head, but the whitecaps all around were too confusing.

I lifted my head and called out, not too loudly, "Shannon. Shannon!" There was no answer. I wondered if I had gone beyond her. I began to be afraid, and called out again.

This time I heard her. "Here," she said. "Over this—" The voice cut off as if she had strangled, and I knew she had gone under. She was off to the left, downwind. I turned.

Another sea broke over me. Then I was floundering in the trough. The blond head broke surface right beside me. "Thank God," I said silently, and grabbed her dress. She clasped her arms tightly about my neck and tried to pull herself up. We went under. I felt suddenly cold in water that was warm as tea. She had *both* arms about me.

Our heads came out. I shook water from my face. "Shannon! Where's the life belt?"

She sputtered and fought for breath. "It—I—" she said, and gasped again. "I lost it."

Twelve

Another sea broke over us. She clung to me, choking. "When I went under—" she said, "the water pulled it out of my hands. When I came up—I saw it once—a wave knocked it away."

I fought the sudden whisperings of panic and tried to think. It had to be near, probably within twenty feet. Downwind. Go downwind. It floated high and would drift faster than she had. We were pushed upward by a sea. I shook water from my face and looked wildly about. I saw nothing but whitecaps and foam, gleaming faintly in the darkness. She pulled us under again. I kicked upward.

She was fighting the water, trying to climb out of it, the inevitable way to drown. I broke her grip around my neck and snapped, "Relax! Take hold of my belt and lie down in the water."

It worked. She got hold of herself and did as I told her. As soon as she was stretched out low in the water and buoyant I no longer had to support her. I turned on my side and kicked ahead, lifting my face every few seconds to peer desperately around in the darkness for the life belt.

Minutes dragged by. We must have passed it. We had to go back. But back where? Direction had no meaning because we had no idea where we had been or which way the current was setting us. There was no point of reference. Even the sloop's position meant nothing; it was drifting in the same trackless

void. In another five minutes I knew it was all over, as far as the life belt was concerned. It could be a hundred yards in any direction. We'd never find it now.

I heard the growl of the starter on the sloop, and the engine took hold. They had the sail off her now and were coming back under power to look for us. The running lights swung, and then I could see them both, lined up. They were bearing down directly on us. A flashlight was probing the darkness on each side. I swam away, towing her.

They went slowly past. Light swept the water ten feet away. The engine stopped in a minute and she slowed, rolling heavily in the trough.

"Manning!" It was Barclay's voice. "Can you hear me? You'll never make it ashore. You're ten miles off the beach. Call out and we'll pick you up."

We were treading water with just our faces out. My arms were around her and I could feel her shaking.

"Can we make it—without the life belt?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. I couldn't lie to her here.

"Could you, alone? If I went back?"

"No," I said.

A sea lifted us and broke over our heads. When we came clear she gasped, "Maybe you could, without me. I owe you that."

She didn't know what I meant. I told her. "If they have you, they can make me come back."

She understood then.

"Let's try it, Bill," she said.

"We'll probably drown," I said. "I've got to tell you that."

She was frightened by water and she could panic like anybody else, but when the bets were down she was calm. There was a wonderful quiet courage about her now. She knew what would happen if we went back, and she knew we'd probably be dead by sunrise if we didn't. She made the decision coolly.

"Let's go," she said. "Help me take these clothes off."

I helped her. I fumbled a little, unsnapping the back of the dress, but we got it free and I held her with an arm about her

waist while she stripped it and the slip off over her head. We sank through the water, tight in each other's arms, and I could feel the wonderful smoothness of her against me. When we came up the *Ballerina* was drifting away to leeward and to the north of us, and I could hear Barclay still calling out, making promises. I cursed them, monotonously and helplessly, and with an infinite bitterness.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's all right," she said. "I know the same words. I'd use them but I haven't got the breath."

She wore no girdle. She unfastened the garter belt and I helped her strip off the nylons. "Will that do?" she asked, gasping a little with water in her throat.

"Yes," I said. I stripped to my shorts and told her to hook the fingers of her left hand in the waistband. "Kick with your feet," I said. "Very slowly. Don't struggle. And when you're tired, just float and rest."

I couldn't see the glow over the city at all, but I swung my face and oriented us with Polaris, heading a little north of west. I swam slowly. The seas rolled up behind us, raising us, and then broke in white water about our heads and passed on downwind in the darkness. There was no sound except the roll and swish of water. I could scarcely feel the drag of her weight, and knew she was kicking with her feet.

"Don't work too hard," I said. "Slowly. Very slowly. And don't think about it."

And shut up and don't waste breath talking, I added silently for my own benefit.

I tried to remember which way the current set along here, but I couldn't. The tide should be flooding now, which would help, but it would reach high water and start to ebb long before we were anywhere near shore. That was when it would get us. We might go on for hours, but inevitably our arms and legs would grow heavier and heavier until it took everything we had merely to stay afloat. After that it would come fast.

I wondered if we could make it, by some miracle. I had swum that far once or twice, I was sure. You lost body heat very slowly in this Gulf water. The sea and wind were behind us. No, I was just kidding myself. I'd done it before, but never after having been nearly 48 hours without sleep, and never

towing somebody else. She would become exhausted, even if I didn't, and begin to struggle in panic, and when she dragged us under we were finished. I tried not to think about it.

I saw the lights of the *Ballerina*. She was coming back now, and passed several hundred yards to seaward. When she returned the next time she was half a mile downwind. They thought we had the life belt, and would keep right on searching.

Time passed somehow. The reach, pull, reach became monotonous, and then mechanical, and at last eternal. I had never done anything else; I'd been born swimming through warm water toward a shore that receded nine miles ahead as fast as I advanced. Ursa Major wheeled over and down in the northwest and Cassiopeia swung up like the other arm of a giant counterbalance turning around Polaris. It would soon be dawn.

My arms began to grow heavy long before I would admit I was tiring. My breathing was ragged now, and sometimes I inhaled water and choked. I looked around once and the sky was pink in the east. Then, suddenly, it was full daylight. I looked ahead. There was nothing but water, and the sea running, and far off to our left the bare mast of the *Ballerina*. Land didn't even exist any more.

We couldn't have covered much more than a third of the distance, and I knew I was almost done. I let my feet down, treading water, and she came up against me with only her head above the surface. Her face was drawn with weariness, and there were blue circles under her eyes. She put a hand on my arm under water and tried to smile. A sea picked us up and threw us together. Her face was only inches from mine.

"I'm sorry about the life preserver," she said, her voice thin with exhaustion.

"It's all right," I said. There was a bad pain in my side and my breathing was labored. I knew it was stupid to waste breath talking, but suddenly I wanted to tell her.

I put a hand on each side of her face. "I couldn't tell you before," I said. "Even—if he had run out on you. But it doesn't matter now. Have to tell you. I love you. More than anything—in the world. You've never been out of my mind since you walked out on edge of that pier—"

She didn't say anything. She brought her arms up very slowly and put them about my neck. We went under, our lips together, arms tight about each other. It was like falling endlessly through a warm, rosy cloud. I seemed to realize, very dimly, that it was water we were sinking through and that if we didn't stop it and swim up we'd drown right there, but apparently there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't want to turn her loose long enough to swim up. We went on falling, through warmth and ecstasy and colors.

White water crashed about our heads. We were right on the surface and hadn't fallen anywhere. We gasped for breath and I held my face against hers. "Shannon—Shannon—" I said.

"Don't talk," she whispered.

I held her, and kissed the closed eyes, and we went under again with that sensation of falling through infinite rose-tinted space. We came up. I saw the sun rising out of the sea. I didn't want to die. They couldn't take it all away now.

I started to swim again, but the stroke was ragged and uneven and she seemed to be a heavier weight pulling at me. Suddenly the drag was gone. Panic seized me. I thought she had gone under and was drowning. I turned. Her head was still above surface. She had let go deliberately.

"Go on—" Her face went under and she choked.

I caught her arm and pulled her up and toward me, and held her with her face above water. I saw the *Ballerina* going by again to seaward. They were too far away. They wouldn't see us. I wondered if I wanted them to. I couldn't think; it was all mixed up. Being willing to die in the future, even in a future measured in hours, was one thing; dying now was something else. But it didn't matter what I thought. They'd never see us. They were nearly a mile off.

"Go on—" she gasped. "Maybe you can make it. Leave me. I've ruined everything for you—"

"Hush," I said. "Don't waste breath."

We went under.

I pulled her back to the surface. It seemed to take a long time. *Once more*, I thought. *Maybe twice*. But the panic hadn't started yet. I hoped we wouldn't fight each other when it did. Maybe there wouldn't be any panic. No, there always

was, when you took that first mouthful and your throat shut off automatically to keep it out.

My eyes opened. We were on the surface again, and I saw that the sloop had turned and was bearing down directly toward us. But they couldn't have seen us. Then some detached part of my mind figured it out as calmly and analytically as if I were working out something with a slide rule in a classroom. It was those glasses. It was those 7 by 50 binoculars I had bought in New Orleans. They were the reason they'd kept on searching. Barclay had known he could locate us as soon as it was light.

Somehow we were still afloat. I could see Barclay standing on the boom with an arm around the mast, directing Barfield at the helm. They cut the engine and drifted down on us.

I watched them helplessly, unable even to struggle any more. We had failed. But we were still alive. Barclay climbed down into the cockpit and tossed a line. I caught it and he pulled us over. When the sloop rolled down, he and Barfield caught her arms and lifted her over the side. I heard Barfield whistle, and then laugh. I stared up at him through the mists of utter exhaustion, tried to curse him, and couldn't.

They hauled me in. She was on her knees in the cockpit, unable to rise, her head bowed and water running out of her hair. The red rays of the sun coming over the horizon splashed against her body and the two wisps of underclothing were stuck to her like wet tissue. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and the most completely beaten. I took a step toward her, stumbled, and fell myself.

"Some dish, Manning," Barfield said. "A wet dish, but a dish."

I tried to get to my feet. He put a hand on my head and pushed gently, and I collapsed like a column of building blocks.

Barclay's voice lashed out, the first time I had heard anger in it. "Help her below, Barfield," he said.

They helped her down the companionway. I lay for another minute in the cockpit, fighting for breath, and then managed to get to my feet. I went below, staggering weakly and holding onto anything I could reach. They had put her in the starboard bunk in the forward part of the cabin, the one she'd

been in before. I pulled the curtain aside and leaned against the door of the head. Barfield stared at me with amusement and went out.

Barclay was pulling the sheet up over her nearly nude body with the impersonal efficiency of a nurse.

I looked at him. "Thanks," I said.

"Not at all," he replied. "Best fall into the other bunk yourself. You both look a bit done in."

I indicated the sheet. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Why not? Gratuitous brutality is for fools." He went out.

That was it, I thought, lost in a sea of fatigue. That was as near as I'd ever come to figuring him out and he'd said it himself. Gratuitous brutality was for fools. He was a pro, and was brutal only for pay. Why give away something you could sell? To Barfield this half-clad girl was a peep-show and a snicker; to Barclay she was an investment.

I stood beside her bunk, swaying a little, staring down at the lovely, wide-cheekboned, Scandinavian face and the long lashes on her cheek. Her hair was a sopping ruin.

I knelt a little and started taking out the pins, and when it was loosed I spread it across the pillow. Maybe it would dry a little.

Her eyes opened. They looked up at me and her lips moved. "You could have made it alone."

"I can't think of any place I want to go alone," I said.

"Neither can I," she whispered.

I bent and kissed her, and everything caved in on me. I fell into the other bunk and was asleep before I could straighten out.

* * *

I awoke. Barfield was shaking my arm. "Rise and shine, Manning," he said. "Barclay wants to see you."

It all came back and I could taste the bitterness of failure. I sat up. I was stiff and sore all over, and the shorts were still wet with sea water. "What time is it?"

"Four o'clock. You've been sacked out for ten hours."

"All right, all right. You can dock my pay." I reached up on the shelf above the bunk and found a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches. I fired one up and inhaled gratefully. She was still asleep in the other bunk with the sheet pulled up over her breast. She didn't stir.

Barfield stepped backward and leaned against the locker. He had taken off his shirt and was pink with sunburn where he wasn't covered with hair. I wondered where the other gun was and decided Barclay probably had both of them. They'd have better sense than to try to hide it somewhere. He had a magnificent build, with shoulders like a lumberjack, and I thought he'd outweigh me fifteen or twenty pounds. He moved with good co-ordination and was light on his feet for a man that much over 200, and I had an idea he'd take me in a fight. Either way, somebody would get hurt. He'd been hurt before. The nose was flat because it had been broken and he had white scar tissue running down into his left eyebrow. The gray eyes were sure of themselves and a little hard. His hair was crew cut and almost as white as cotton, or at least it looked that way against the tanned slab of a face.

I took another drag on the cigarette and studied the beat-up face. "Fighter?" I asked.

"Amateur. In college."

"Football?"

He shook his head indifferently. "They hired their football players."

She was lying on her back with her face turned to one side. Her hair streamed across the blue pillow slip in a cascade of silver, and you could see the outlines of her breasts under the sheet. Barfield stared. "What a build," he said.

"Why don't you go ahead and take the sheet off?" I asked. "She's asleep."

He shrugged. "You're easy to get sick of. Work at it, don't you?"

"This cruise wasn't my idea," I said. "I didn't know I was supposed to be a ray of sunshine."

"Well, you'd better roll off your fat and get on deck. Barclay wants you."

"All right," I said. "I signed for the message. You can scram."

His face and the gray eyes were ugly, but he didn't move toward me. Barclay had probably read him off about picking fights with the gilt-edged investments or letting himself be provoked. A fight could get out of hand, and Barclay needed his passengers alive for a while yet. He turned and went out.

I went into the after part of the cabin, got some dungarees out of a sea bag, and put on a pair of slippers. I looked in the small mirror on the bulkhead. My eyes were puffy with sleep and I needed a shave. I looked as rugged as I felt. Sticking a pack of cigarettes and some matches in my pocket, I went on deck.

It was a clear afternoon. There wasn't much sea, and the breeze had moderated a little. She was still on the port tack under unreefed mainsail and jib. There was no land in sight.

"Good afternoon, Manning," Barclay said. "Do you feel better?"

"Rested," I said. "You want me to relieve you now?"

He shook his head. The only concession he had made to the informality of an ocean cruise was to take off his tie. He still had on the tweed jacket, and I could see the bulge of an automatic in each of the patch pockets. His face was pink from the sun, and his jaw was covered with a stubble of brown whiskers.

"No," he said. "Barfield relieved me for a while this morning. You can take over at six. What I called you about was the matter of food. You can cook, I presume?"

"A little," I said.

"Well, suppose you prepare something, sandwiches at least, and make some coffee. And call Mrs. Macaulay. Tell her we shall have a meal of sorts and a briefing session here at around five o'clock."

"Briefing?"

His eyebrows raised sardonically. "Yes. We intend to take up, at long last, the trifling matter that brought us out here. I refer to the location of that plane. Provided, of course, that we don't have any more distracting swimming parties. We should be some fifty miles offshore now, so perhaps she'll leave her life belt below when she comes up."

I took a last puff on the cigarette and tossed it overboard. "I have some news for you," I said. "She lost the life belt when

she went overboard and didn't expect to reach shore. She was merely committing suicide rather than come back."

"Very touching," he said. "But you've come to the wrong department. I'm not the custodian of Mrs. Macaulay's happiness."

Barfield spread his hands and shrugged with burlesque sympathy. "You see, Mortimer? It's a cruel world."

"And I have more news for you," I went on, ignoring Barfield. They'd know, sooner or later, so why not start preparing them? "You're never going to find that plane. She told me what Macaulay told her, and you couldn't find the Pacific fleet with the information."

He shrugged. "Really, we don't expect to find it that easily. It may be the second or third location before she begins to get near the truth."

I kept my face expressionless, but it scared me. It was what I had been afraid of all the time. They had no conception at all of the immense waste of water out here and of the firsthand, pinpointed accuracy of information you had to have in order to locate something lost in it. The only thing they'd ever be able to see was that she wanted the stupid diamonds herself and was holding out on them.

"If you had lost your watch overboard between here and the sea buoy," I said, "could you go back and find it?"

"An airplane is considerably larger, old boy. And Macaulay knew exactly where it went in, or he wouldn't have tried to hire a diver. But enough for now. We shall take that up when Mrs. Macaulay is present. Right?"

I said nothing as I turned and went below. Arguing with him was futile.

I pulled the curtain aside and stood by her bunk. She slept peacefully, a little flushed with the heat. "Shannon," I said softly. She didn't stir. I touched her arm.

Her eyes opened and looked at me without comprehension at first. Then she stared around the cabin and just for a second her defenses were down as the whole ugly mess came back the way it does in that instant of waking. She absorbed it and took command without a sound.

"Hello, Bill," she said. "I'm glad it was you."

"How do you feel?"

She stirred a little, experimentally. "I'm not sure yet. Wobbly, I think."

"You look wonderful."

She made a wry face. "I'll bet I do."

"Really, you do. You're beautiful."

Self-consciousness seized us both. Too much had been compressed into too short a time. By any normal standards what we had done could have been called ugly and callous and an absolute travesty on any kind of good taste, but normal standards didn't exist any more. Time was telescoped and flattened like the front end of a car in a head-on crash. We had been through a lifetime in less than a week, and we probably had less than another week to live.

Sure, he was dead, and he'd died violently less than 24 hours ago, but it meant nothing any more. He had deliberately erased himself long before that. He had run out on her to save himself. She had left him when she knew it—not physically, because out of some sense of obligation she had to stick with him and try until the end to save him in spite of his treachery, but she was gone nevertheless. She didn't owe him anything; she'd paid it all and canceled the account.

I hoped she would see all that, too, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything about it now. A girl had a right to be fully awake, I thought, before being assaulted with a speech like that.

"I'm going to make some sandwiches and coffee," I said. "Feel up to it?"

"Yes," she said.

"Fine. Stay right where you are for a minute." I went into the after part of the cabin and drew a basin of fresh water. Setting it on the little stand between the forward ends of the bunks, I went back and picked up the cardboard carton of clothes and personal effects she had sent aboard. It was on one of the settees where Barfield had been pawing through it as we were coming down the channel.

"You'll feel better," I said.

She sat up on the bunk, clutching the sheet, with her hair falling about her shoulders.

"Big, beautiful Swede with an Irish name," I said.

She smiled wanly. "I am half Irish," she said. "But my mother was a Russian Finn nearly six feet tall."

"And beautiful."

"Very beautiful."

I grinned at her. "Don't ask me how I knew. I might tell you."

I went out and drew the curtain.

Thirteen

While I was firing up the primus stove and starting coffee I could hear her moving around beyond the curtain. It was wonderful, just knowing she was there. Then I thought of those two in the cockpit and the wonder of it became torment. I damned Macaulay. He had done this to her.

He must have been a little mad there at the end. He should have known there was no hope of finding that plane. It must have become an obsession.

What he had done was pass her the baton in a rat race that could never end any way other than in her death. His stupid belief that he could find the plane again had convinced them, and now after Barclay's off-beat piece of genius she was assumed to have all the facts and was supposed to run and hide until they hauled her down and killed her. I cursed them all for a bunch of fools. It was a game. It was "button, button." The rules were simple. You dropped a cuff link in two hundred thousand square miles of empty ocean and then went back and found it. If you didn't find it, you killed somebody. You didn't know much about the odds on finding cuff links dropped in oceans, but you were hell on wheels at killing people.

What chance did we have of getting away from them? And if we got away, where did we go? With not only the police after us but the rest of the "button, button" crowd as well. The two we had on our backs now were only part of them. The game

never really ended. It just took them a while to find you, and then it started all over again. Macaulay had never been able to shake them, had he?

I was measuring coffee into the percolator when the idea began to take form. I stopped dead still, so abruptly I spilled the coffee from the spoon, enthralled with the beauty of it. Half of our problem didn't even exist. Go back?

Who wanted to go back?

Here was the *Ballerina*, the answer to any blue-water sailor's dream. There she was, beyond that curtain, the girl I'd never had out of my mind since the moment I met her. And behind me, in a black satchel, was eighty thousand dollars. I stood there holding the coffee can in my hand, feeling the deck heel down and hearing the sound of water along the hull while I rolled the names around on my tongue: Grand Cayman, Martinique, Barbados, Guadeloupe, Granada—Not the big places, not San Juan or Port-au-Prince or Havana, where we'd be caught, but the little ones, the small tropical islands with long golden beaches and native villages in sheltered bays where the water was blue and still.

They'll never find us. That much money would last us a lifetime. I thought of it and could feel the intense longing take hold of me. *Just the two of us.* It was like looking at paradise. And on the other side of the world—Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Tongareva, the Marquesas—all those names out of Conrad and Jack London that made your mouth water. Go back? With all that tropic, coral-reefed, blue-watered world there waiting for us, and the boat and a fortune right here in our hands? Why in the name of God hadn't I thought of it before? We'd change the name of the sloop, and her port of registry. Change our own names, and be married by a priest in some out-of-the-way native village.

* * *

Aboard the American tanker *Joseph H. Hallock*, the master looked up from the thick journal and frowned. It was past midnight. He sat in a leather-upholstered easy chair in the dim and well-ordered seclusion of his office with the book in his lap in the glow from the single reading lamp. There was only the faint vibration from the big diesels aft to indicate he was at sea.

His eyes were thoughtful, as if something puzzled him. Slipping a finger between the pages to mark his place, he flipped back, looking for something. When he found it he reread the passage. With the thumb and forefinger of his left hand he pinched his lower lip in a gesture that was characteristic of him when he was thinking, and sat for another minute staring at the page. Then he shook his head and went on reading, a little faster now, forgetting he was up long past his bedtime.

* * *

I came abruptly back to earth, and the dream faded. All that was waiting for us, but knowing it and yearning for it only made reality worse. You couldn't dream Barclay away, nor escape from Barfield by imagining he wasn't there.

But there must be a way. There had to be.

I put the coffee away and began slicing bread for sandwiches. I took salami and cheese from the icebox. What were the chances at any given moment? Last night Barclay had mockingly handed me his gun, knowing I wouldn't use it because Barfield could kill her. But now she was behind me, and they were both in the cockpit, Barfield unarmed. Suppose

Suppose I went out there, came close to Barclay on the pretext of handing him a sandwich, and slugged him. He was slender, fine-boned, and probably easy to hurt, and he had two guns in his pockets. I might get one. But what would happen? For a fraction of a second I was off guard as far as Barfield was concerned, and he didn't have to be armed if you didn't have your hands up. He'd belt me from behind and I'd be lying in the cockpit having my face kicked in. He was built for it, and he knew his business.

But they had to sleep sometime. So what if they did? They slept one at a time, and the other was watching me. And there was always the threat of what they could do to her. If I got hold of a gun they could make me give it up if they had her. Anything I tried had to work the first time, and all at once, or it was no good at all.

But five days! Maybe a week. They had to slip up sometime. If I kept watching them, and waiting—

I was stacking sandwiches on a plate when the curtains parted and she came out. She was wearing a summery blue cotton dress and sandals, and her legs were bare. She had put her hair back up, but it was still faintly damp and a little of its fine, soft sheen was lacking. Salt water was poor for a shampoo. She wore no make-up.

She came over beside me. Self-consciousness was still like a wall between us. "Feel better?" I asked.

She nodded. "I'm hungry, too."

She glanced beyond me, toward the companionway. They couldn't see down here unless they were in the forward end of the cockpit. Sunlight streamed in the open hatch and slid along the deck as we rolled slightly in the sea.

The big eyes were grave, and her lips scarcely moved. "You're pretty wonderful," she said. "Thanks for understanding."

Then she went on, in a louder tone: "Shall I help you carry something up to the animals?"

"Sure," I said. I handed her the sandwiches. "Take these, and I'll bring the coffee and some cups."

We went up. Barclay was at the tiller, and Barfield lounged on the port side, his legs outstretched. He drew them in, and grinned. "Going for a swim, honey?" he asked.

She glanced briefly at him as if he were something that had crawled out of a ditch after a rain, and sat down on the starboard side holding the plate of sandwiches in her lap.

Barclay smiled coolly. "I trust you've recovered."

She nodded. "I have. Thank you."

He signed to me. "Take the helm for a while Manning."

I set the coffeepot on the cockpit deck and moved back. He slipped past and I took the tiller. The sun was low in the west and the breeze had subsided to a light air scarcely filling the sails. Barclay sat down on the weather side beyond Barfield and took one of the sandwiches from the plate. A lock of brown hair was breeze-blown across his forehead and he looked more like a young poet or student than ever, if you forgot the heavy sag of the jacket and didn't look too closely at the cool deadliness of the eyes.

He glanced at me and then at Shannon. "If you'll be kind enough to give me your attention I shan't have to say this more than once. We are now at least fifty miles from the nearest land. Obviously, any further attempt to swim ashore is futile. I have thrown overboard the oars to the dinghy, so you can't get away in that. Any attempt at upsetting the status quo will be met with a pistol-whipping."

He stopped. Barfield had leaned forward to take a sandwich from the plate on her lap, and while he was about it he patted her on the knee. She stared at him with icy contempt.

"Listen to the nice man, baby," he said.

"You are listening, aren't you, Mrs. Macaulay?" Barclay asked coldly. "I was speaking primarily to you, since you will be the recipient of the pistol-whipping if Manning tries to get out of hand."

She was superb. She turned and regarded him calmly. "I hear you. But you don't have to impress me; you forget, I've already seen you at work."

He shrugged. "That being the case, shall we get down to business? Your husband told you where his plane crashed. I should like you to tell us exactly what he said."

"Of course I'll tell you," she said. "Why shouldn't I? But I fail to see why you had to bring me out here to ask a simple question like that."

"Obvious, isn't it?" he said. "But go ahead."

"All right. It was late in the afternoon, he said, near sunset, when he picked up Scorpion Reef. He changed course slightly so as to hit the Florida coast somewhere above Fort Myers. A few minutes later he began to have trouble with his starboard engine. Then it caught fire. He couldn't put it out, and he knew he was going to crash. He had noticed a reef or shoal below him just a minute or two before, and tried to get back so he could land on the downwind side of it, where the sea wouldn't be so rough, but he couldn't make it. He crashed on the east side of it, about two miles off, and the plane sank almost immediately. He just had time to climb out on a wing, and throw the raft in the water. As you probably know, he couldn't swim at all."

"Why didn't he try to get the diamonds off with him?"

"He had stowed the box in a locker so it wouldn't go flying around if the weather got rough. And the locker was aft, already under water."

"What about the other man? The diver?"

This was the only part of it that hurt her. She hesitated for a moment, and I could see the sickness in her eyes. "He said the man didn't have his belt fastened, and was killed in the crash."

You could take your choice, I thought. He might have been alone, already a murderer, or he could have left an injured man to drown. Or possibly there was just a slim chance he was telling the truth. She could hold onto that, anyway.

"Very well," Barclay said. Then he lashed at her suddenly: "Now. Why was he so sure of his exact bearing from that reef? He didn't have time to take a compass reading before the plane went down, and he didn't have a compass on the raft."

She was quite calm. "It was late afternoon, I said. The sun was setting. The plane, the very northern end of the surf on the shoal, and the sun were all in one straight line."

She looked around suddenly at me. "I remember now, you asked me that, didn't you, Bill? Whether he could see surf from the raft. And I'd forgotten."

I nodded. It would make a difference, all right; but you still had to find the reef. It was hopeless.

Barclay dropped the rest of the sandwich over the side and cupped his hands to light a cigarette. "Very well. Now, what was the position?"

"Fifty miles north-northeast of Scorpion Reef."

He stared coldly. "And why did you say it was to the westward when I asked you last night?"

"I'm sure I didn't," she replied.

"The fact remains, you did. Make up our minds, shall we?"

"It's north-northeast."

"Very well," he said crisply. "George, run down and bring up that chart. And the parallel rulers and dividers."

Barfield brought them up and the two of them crouched over the chart in the bottom of the cockpit. She drew her knees to one side and continued to regard them as if they

were some kind of vermin. Barclay's face was thoughtful. "North-northeast—"

"Make it twenty-two degrees," I said. "Get it off the compass rose and slide the rulers over." I knew what he would find, and waited, a little tensely.

He had the line, and picked up the dividers. He looked over at me, his eyes questioning. "Edge of the chart, isn't it? Mean latitude, or something?"

"Yes," I said. "Sixty nautical miles to the degree."

He picked the distance off and set the dividers along the line. Then he turned his head and stared bleakly at Shannon Macaulay. "Perhaps you would like to try again."

"You asked me what he told me," she said indifferently. "I have just repeated it, word for word. What else would you like me to do?"

"Tell the truth, for one thing."

"I am telling the truth."

He sighed. "I see. Then we are to assume the chart-maker was lying. The nearest sounding shown here is forty-five fathoms. A practical joke, no doubt."

"And why do you think I would lie about it?"

"Really? For a paltry three quarters of a million?"

There was Irish in her, all right, and it flared now, the second time I had seen it. "Why, you idiotic vermin! I wouldn't stoop to pick up your damned, filthy diamonds if I stumbled over them in the dark. I don't want them. I wouldn't have them. I have no interest in them whatever. If I had them here in my lap, I'd give them to you, and be glad to get rid of them. But there's no way you can understand that, is there? I'd be wasting my breath trying to explain it to you."

"Excellent scene," he said. "More effective, as a rule, however, if you throw something. Now, shall we start over?" He paused, and nodded to Barfield. "George."

Barfield turned, still on his knees, and caught her left wrist. He started to twist it, slowly at first.

I pulled my feet under me, and crouched, still holding the tiller. "Call him off," I said.

Barclay slipped the gun out of his right-hand jacket pocket and pointed it carelessly in my direction. "As you were, Manning."

"Call him off!"

Barfield had stopped to watch us, but he continued to hold her arm. Her lips were tightly compressed, and I knew it was already hurting.

I was too wild to be scared. "Listen, Barclay. This whole thing is going to come unzipped. If he hurts her, it's you I'm coming for, and you're going to have to use that gun to stop me. If you think you can find that reef without my help, go ahead."

It hung poised, ready to go either way. I tried to take a breath through the tightness in my throat. "Don't be a damned fool," I went on. "If she were going to lie, would she give you a stupid position like that? Maybe there is a shoal there, or somewhere within fifteen miles or so. All that area hasn't been sounded. Macaulay could have been off in his reckoning. The only thing to do is go there and see, and you'll never get there unless I take you. You name it. Now."

He saw I was right. He motioned for Barfield to turn her loose. The tension drained away, and I was limp. I'd bought a little time, but I knew that when the next time came I'd be tied up before they started.

She stood up, turned deliberately to smile at me, and went below, ignoring them.

Barfield lounged on the seat with a cup of coffee in his hand. "The hero," he said. "We've got a real, live hero aboard, Joey."

* * *

Barclay took over again while I ate a sandwich and drank some coffee. I relieved him at six. He and Barfield went below and sat in the cabin, talking. After a while I heard them turn on the radio. It had short wave in addition to the marine bands, and they got an Argentine station playing Latin American dance music. Sunset was a great splash of salmon and orange and pink, fading slowly while the sea stretched out like a rolling, dark prairie.

I was about to call Barclay to take the tiller so I could light the running lights when Shannon came up through the hatch. After I'd shown her briefly how to handle it, she took over while I attended to them.

When I came back she slid forward and sat there near enough to touch, but not touching, saying nothing. Sunset was a bad time of day if you had trouble, but I could sense she didn't want any help with it, at least not yet. There was an odd awkwardness between us. It would go away after a while, but until it did there was nothing we could do about it. I tried imagining that this was the Java Sea and we were alone aboard, two people who had forgotten the rest of the world and had been forgotten by it. For a moment it was very real, and the longing was almost unbearable.

There was just enough light in the afterglow to see her face, and when I looked around again she was crying. She was doing it quite silently with her head tilted back a little and not trying to put her hands up to her face or wipe away the tears or anything. The crying just welled up in her and overflowed.

"I'm sorry, Bill," she said after a while. "This will be the last time. I got to thinking of him all alone there in that big house, with it getting d-dark outside. He was afraid of the dark. For months he was terrified of it. B-But always before I was there with him—"

He was leaning on her. She held him up and kept the sawdust from leaking out while he planned to double-cross her and leave her. And when it blew up in his face he went back and leaned on her some more. I didn't feel anything for him, nor care a damn if it did get dark outside, but it was a gruesome picture if you couldn't keep your mind off it—a dead man lying there alone in all that Swedish modern with one bridge lamp burning day in and day out and a phonograph still going if it hadn't shut itself off. He probably wouldn't be found for over 24 hours yet. She'd said Tuesday and Friday were the days the maid came. When they did, they'd pick up her car out at the airport almost immediately and know they had it made, all except finding her.

There was nothing I could do. I let her cry. It was a helpless feeling.

After a while she got it under control, and she said quietly, "I wonder why nothing is ever simple and clear-cut. Why can't things be completely black or completely white, instead of all mixed up? What he did amounted to deliberate betrayal; so that should make it easy, shouldn't it? There's your nice, pat answer. It's routine. It's a cliché. She was in love with him, but he wasn't in love with her. That's fine, except it was the other way around. He was a heel. That's simple and easy, except it wasn't true."

I waited, saying nothing. She was trying to tell me about it, or maybe trying to straighten it out in her own mind, and she didn't want me mixed up in it. Not yet, anyway. She was talking to a psychiatrist, or a priest, or to herself.

"He was driven to it. It's easy to say it was his own fault, that he was old enough to know it was wrong, and that he began it deliberately. But people have been tempted by easy money before, and it'll go on happening as long as you have people and have money. What I'm trying to say is that in the beginning there was no question of running out on me. Maybe he even thought he was doing it partly for me. He liked to give me things. Expensive things.

"You don't dive or fall into something like that all at once. It's gradual. It was simple at first, and then it failed and it was more difficult, and in the end it was an obsession. And he was afraid. There's no way I can make you understand fear like that, probably, because it's something the human race has forgotten. Being hunted, I mean. It's been too long. It's an individual experience now, and you have to go through it yourself to know what it's like.

"So that brings us to another easy answer. All he had to do was forget the stupid diamonds and get word to Barclay where they were so they'd go recover them and quit trailing him. And all a heroin addict has to do is make a New Year's resolution and quit. And how did he know they'd stop trying to kill him even if they got them back? He'd stolen from them, hadn't he?

"So in the end he was driven into a corner and he knew the only way he would ever be free of them was to make them think he was dead. And to make it convincing he had to leave me and let me think he was dead, too. Send me out as a decoy. Sacrifice me, or something. So condemn him. But

before you do, try to remember that he was already beginning to break. The carrousel was whirling like a centrifuge now, and he was no longer the same man who'd got on back there when it was a children's ride.

"I wasn't in love with him—not the way I know it can be. I liked him, and I admired lots of things about him, and he was wonderful to me and I owed him everything. But that's not love, is it? So when I learned what he'd done, or tried to do, all I had to do was walk out. Wasn't it? You see? Simple again.

"Listen, Bill. My father was a vaudeville-skit Irishman, with all the props. He was little and pugnacious and he got into fights and he was lovable. He worked on the docks when he wasn't in trouble with the union bosses or drunk or in jail for disturbing the peace. We never had anything. I didn't finish high school. I was a big, awkward, slangy, sexy-looking blonde who didn't have anywhere to go except bad. I couldn't speak English, and I didn't know how to walk or wear clothes or have the taste to buy them if I'd had the money to do it with. When I met him I was twenty and working in a night-club chorus. I couldn't dance and I couldn't sing, but there was a lot of me to look at in the costumes we wore, so nobody complained. He asked me to marry him, and I did, realizing it probably wouldn't happen twice in one lifetime. I mean that anybody that nice, with taste and discrimination, would fall in love with what amounted to just a lot of bare skin, even if it was smooth.

"He came from a very nice family; his grandfather had been a United States Senator. He wasn't particularly rich, but he had a good job. He was fifteen years older than I was, but it didn't matter. It wasn't that sort of thing at all. He was wonderful to me. I'm still a big, sexy-looking blonde, and I'll never know anything startling, but if I'm not as awkward and slangy and brassy as I was at twenty I owe it all to him. He had a knack for teaching me things without hurting my feelings or making me feel he was ashamed of me.

"In a lot of ways he was a very gentle person, Bill. He was nice, until that fear started eating him up. He'd never told me a lie before. I thought he was entitled to one. So I stayed."

She stopped and sat with her head tilted back a little, looking at the sky. Then she said quietly, "So I ruined everything for you."

"No," I said. "I would have come, anyway, even if you'd telephoned me. And nothing's ruined. We'll get away."

She shook her head, still not looking at me. "I've been doing this a little longer than you have. There's no escape."

Fourteen

The breeze held steady out of the northeast, day after day, and the miles ran behind us. I'd bought time for us, but I hadn't bought much, and every day's run was bringing us nearer the showdown. I knew what would happen when we got down there and couldn't find any shoal. Something had to happen before then; we had to get a break. But days passed and we didn't. I watched them. I studied the pattern of their movements, looking for the flaw in their complete mastery of the situation, but there was none. When one was asleep the other was watching me, never letting me get too near. And there was always Shannon Macaulay. They had me tied, and they knew it. It was unique, a masterpiece in its own way; we were at sea in a 36-foot sloop, so all four of us had to be sitting right on top of the explosion if it came. I couldn't hide her or get her out of the way.

Shannon was silent for long periods when she sat in the cockpit with me on the night watches. The wall of reserve was still there between us. Perhaps it was because of the others there, never more than twenty feet away, or perhaps it was Macaulay, or both, but I could sense she wanted to be left alone.

When Barclay had the helm, from midnight to six, I slept in the cockpit—when I slept at all. Most of the time I lay awake looking up at the swing of the masthead against the sky while

my thoughts went around in the same hopeless circle. There had to be a way to beat them. But how?

It was noon the fourth day out of Sanport. I had taken a sight and was working out our position at the chart table in the cabin. Barclay was at the helm, and Barfield lounged shirtless and whiskery on the other settee, eating an apple. Shannon stood near the curtain, watching me silently to see where I put us at noon. She realized what those little crosses meant, marching across the chart. They were steps, going to nowhere.

I was nearly finished with my figures when Barfield tossed the apple core out through the hatch and leaned forward. "How about it, Admiral Drake?" he asked. "When do we get there?"

I glanced at the chart, about to mark the position on it, and then paused. An idea was beginning to nudge me. We wouldn't pass near enough to Scorpion Reef to sight it, so they had to take my word as to where we were. Barclay knew approximately, of course, because he checked the compass headings against each day's position, but he had to accept my figures for the distance run.

I was thinking swiftly. It might work.

Twenty or twenty-five miles beyond the point where Macaulay was supposed to have crashed lay the beginnings of the Northern Shelves. If there was a shoal or reef in a hundred miles it would be out there. The chances were a thousand to one that it was somewhere in that vast shallow area that he had actually gone into the drink, even though they were about a hundred billion to one against our ever finding where. So if I put us out there when they thought we were on the location she had given me—We might find a shoal. And any shoal would do. "Oh," I said to Barfield, as if I had just remembered his question. "Have it in a minute."

I set the little cross down 15 miles to the westward and a little north of our actual position and tore up my work sheet. Subtract ten miles tomorrow noon and I'd have it made without exciting Barclay's suspicions. We'd be twenty-five miles ahead of where Barclay thought we were, right in that shoal area of the Northern Shelves when he thought we were 50 miles north-northeast of Scorpion Reef, the position Macaulay had given her. We would also run through

Macaulay's position in getting there, so we'd have two chances instead of one of finding something. Taking up the dividers, I stepped off the distance. "Let's see, this is Wednesday. Sometime Friday afternoon, if this breeze holds."

He nodded and went on deck to tell Barclay. Shannon was watching me. "That means," she said quietly, "that by Saturday night or Sunday, if we don't find anything, the animals will be growing ugly."

I started to tell her what I was doing. The words were almost out of my mouth when I stopped. I couldn't. The object of the whole thing was to get her off the boat, and if she knew why I wanted her off she wouldn't go. She'd have some foolish idea about not letting me face it alone, and I'd never convince her that alone was the only way I had a chance.

I looked down at the chart. "Maybe we'll find the shoal," I said.

"If we don't, I'm going to jump. Don't come after me."

I had to say something. "No," I said. "When they start it, climb on Barfield. Just hang on. Bite him. Anything. I'll try to get to Barclay. He'll have the guns."

It was a stall, and I knew it. They'd slug me and tie me up before they started to work on her. But maybe she hadn't figured that out and it might give her something to live with.

* * *

I worked star sights at dusk, and again just at dawn Thursday, checking our leeward drift and course made, trying to pinpoint our position as closely as possible. At noon I dropped our ostensible position back the other ten miles.

Barclay apparently suspected nothing. He merely nodded, seemingly satisfied with all the effort I was making to put us over the right spot.

Friday morning was clear again, and the breeze was dropping a little. I took a series of star sights just at dawn and worked them out while Barclay took the helm. Barfield smoked a cigarette and watched me, surly at having been awakened so I could come down into the cabin.

My sights checked out within a mile of each other. We were right on the nose, 45 miles northeast of Scorpion Reef. I

marked the position on the chart as being 20 miles northeast, and went on deck.

"We're far enough south," I said, "but still setting too far to the westward. Have to come a little north of east."

"I don't think she'll sail that close to it," Barclay said. "Have to tack."

I took the helm, relieving him, and we came about on the starboard tack. It was lucky, I thought; we'd cover that whole area pretty thoroughly beating up against the wind. The sun was coming up now. Barclay went below, and I heard him telling Barfield to start making some coffee.

It was a beautiful morning. A very light sea was running, not breaking now in the gentle breeze. The deck was wet with dew. I lit a cigarette and kept watching the horizon, looking for white water. It was the same unbroken blue as far as the eye could see, with not even a tinge of shoal-water green. But it was all right. We had two chances this way, instead of one, and I didn't really expect to find anything around here. Macaulay had been completely haywire in his reckoning. By late afternoon, when they thought we were arriving on Macaulay's position, we'd be on the edge of the Northern Shelves and in much shallower water. The chances should be reasonably good for seeing surf somewhere. And when we did, the odds might swing, ever so slightly, in our favor.

Shannon came up from the cabin and brought me a cup of coffee, carrying another for herself. Her face was pale, and she was very quiet. It would be even worse for her, I thought, if she realized that this empty blue expanse of water we were tacking across right now was the position Macaulay had given her.

We beat slowly to the eastward. At noon I worked out another sight. We were already beyond the area Macaulay had thought he'd gone down in. I put our position on the chart twenty miles to the westward.

"Sometime this afternoon," I told Barclay. "Or early tonight. Depends on the wind."

He merely nodded. He was growing quieter now, colder than ever, and unapproachable. You could feel the tenseness in the air. We had to sight something, and soon.

The breeze kept threatening to die altogether, but held on, dead ahead. We tacked, and kept on tacking. When I wasn't being watched I experimented to see how close to the wind I could sail her, and she was a dream, but I didn't hold her there. I wanted to cover as much water on each side of our course as possible.

The afternoon wore on and sunset flamed, and we saw nothing. Barfield's face was ugly as he watched her now, and several times I saw him glance questioningly at Barclay. We were all in the cockpit. I had the tiller.

"Listen," I said harshly. "Both of you. Try to get it through your heads. We're not looking for the corner of Third and Main. There are no street signs out here. We're in the general area. But Macaulay could have been out ten miles in his reckoning. My figures could be from two to five miles out in any direction. Error adds up."

He was listening, his face expressionless.

I went on. I had to make them see. "When Macaulay crashed, there was a heavy sea running. There's not much now but a light ground swell. There could have been surf piled up that day high enough to see it five miles away, and now you might think it was just a tide rip. We've got to crisscross the whole area, back and forth. It may take two days, or even longer."

Barclay studied me thoughtfully. "Don't take too long."

It was dusk. We came about and headed due north. Three hours later we came up into the wind and beat our way eastward again for an hour, and then ran south. Nobody said anything. We listened constantly for surf and strained our eyes into the darkness. The hours went by.

I was growing desperate. Our only chance lay in making them think we had found the place. Their vigilance would slacken a little. If we actually found a reef, any reef, and started dragging and diving I could ask for help. We had two aqualungs. If Barfield went over with me I could come back on some pretext and I'd have only Barclay to contend with. If she went over, I'd have her out of the way, so I could make a bid for one of those guns. Anything to get the four of us split up.

We ran south until after midnight, beat our way east a few miles, and swung back to the northward again. It went on all night. There was no sound of surf, no white relieving the darkness of the horizon. Dawn came. The sea was empty and blue as far as the eye could see.

The breeze died completely and we lay becalmed, the sails slatting. We lowered them.

"Start the auxiliary," Barclay said.

"We'll need the gasoline to drag with," I protested, "when we find the reef."

"Might I point out that we don't appear to have found any reef," he said icily. "Start the engine."

I started it. The sun came up. We went on. The strain was bad now. You could feel it there in the cockpit.

Barclay took the glasses and stood up, scanning the horizon all the way around. Then he said, "Perhaps you'd better make some coffee, George."

Barfield grunted and went below. In a few minutes Barclay followed him. I could hear the low sound of their voices in the cabin. She sat across from me in the cockpit, her face stamped with weariness. When she saw me looking at her, she tried to smile.

The voices in the cabin stopped. I slipped a lashing on the tiller and stood up, easing my way softly to the forward end of the cockpit. I could see them below me, inside the cabin. Time had run out on us at last.

Barfield had taken a coil of line from under one of the settees and was cutting a section from it with his pocket-knife. He cut off another, shorter piece. I saw Barclay hand him one of the guns.

Oddly, it wasn't fear I felt now that it was actually here. It was rage—a strange, hopeless, terrible sort of anger I'd never felt before. I turned and looked at her, thinking how it could have been if they had just left us alone. She was all I'd wanted since the first time I'd seen her. I hadn't asked for anything else, and she hadn't asked for anything except a chance to live, and now they were going to take it all away from us. I was shaking.

I turned and hurried back to her. "Go forward," I said. "Lie down on deck, against the forward side of the cabin. Stay

there. If anything happens to me, you can raise the jib alone. Just the jib. Keep running before the wind in a straight line and you'll hit the coast of Mexico or Texas—"

"No," she whispered fiercely. "No—"

I peeled her arms loose and pushed her. "*Hurry!*" She started to say something more, looked at my face, and turned, running forward. She stepped up from the cockpit and went along the starboard side of the cabin, stumbling once and almost falling.

It was like a black wind blowing. I knew I didn't have a chance, but all I wanted now was to get my hands on one of those guns for just two seconds. Maybe she could make it to land alone. They'd kill me, anyway, so I had nothing to lose. I was tired of being run over in traffic.

I had to hurry. They'd be coming up any minute. I slipped forward and stood on the deck, looking down the hatch.

"*Surf!*" I yelled. "Surf, ho!"

When they were both on the steps I'd dive down on top of them. All three of us would go down in one tangle in that narrow space between the settees, three of us with two guns in an area not quite as wide and a little longer than a casket. Then, in all the foaming craziness some detached part of my mind wondered quite calmly how a girl alone would ever get us out of there. She'd be a week reaching land, maybe ten days. She'd go mad. They were starting up. Barclay was coming first. I didn't dive.

"*Surf!*" I yelled again. I pointed.

He came up on deck, his head starting to turn in the direction I was pointing. I swung. It kept on turning, and I felt his jaw break, and then his whole body pivoted and went off balance and the sloop rolled to starboard and he went over the side. I was falling, too, across the open hatch, across the head and shoulders of Barfield emerging from the hatch, like dropping across the arms of a rising grease rack or the top of an ascending freight elevator that didn't stop or even slow down at the impact but just kept on coming up.

He was a bull. He came erect on the top step before he toppled at last and fell. We crashed to the deck and when the sloop rolled down to port we hung poised over the rail with blue water slipping by just under my face. For some reason

we didn't go overboard, but rolled in one straining tangle onto the cockpit seat and then down onto the grating. A big fist beat at my face. I tried to get my hands around his throat. He heaved upward and we rolled over in the space between the seats. The gun was in his hip pocket. He had it out and was swinging it at my face. I caught his wrist. The gun went off as I got my other hand on his wrist and twisted. It slid out of his hand and kicked along the grating.

He hit me on the temple and my head slammed back against the planks. He was coming to his knees, groping behind him for the gun. I tried to push myself up, and then beyond him I saw her. She ran along the deck and dropped into the cockpit. I opened my mouth to yell at her, but nothing came out. Or maybe I did yell and my eardrums were still paralyzed by the crashing of the gun. Everything was happening in an immense silence and slow motion, as if we were three bits of something caught and held suspended in cooling gelatin. She picked up the gun and was swinging it at his head. He should have fallen, but it had no more effect on him than a dropped chocolate Eclair. He heaved upward, lashing out behind him with one big arm. She fell, and her head struck the coaming at the forward end of the cockpit. I came to my feet and lunged at him and we fell over and beyond her onto the edge of the deck just as the sloop rolled again and we slid over the side into the water.

We went down through warm greenness, still struggling and almost completely oblivious to the fact of having moved our hatred from one element to another. The propeller rumbled past, scattering white bubbles like dust. One of his arms was still locked around my neck and he was trying to swing with the other, the blows softened and slowed down by the water. Neither of us made any attempt to break and swim to the surface. I could see the flat slab of a face inches from mine, and tried to get my hands back at his throat. We went on down, turning slowly like a big pinwheel. Then he jerked with sudden spasm and the arm around my neck clamped tighter, with something wild and frantic about it now. I brought my feet up and put them against him and pushed. It felt as if my head were being pulled off. My lungs hurt. I knew I was going to inhale in a minute, and that he already had. I kicked at him once more and my head came free and I shot toward the surface.

I came out into sunlight and sparkling blue, and sobbed for air. I shook water from my face and breathed in again, shuddering, feeling my lungs swell with it. He hadn't come up yet. I turned, searching the water for him. A gentle ground swell lifted me and I came down into the trough as it passed. Seconds went by, and I knew he wasn't coming up. He'd had the breath knocked out of him when we hit the deck, just before we slid overboard, and he'd drowned down there.

I could hear the boat's engine behind me, fainter now, and I turned to see which way it was circling. I stared. It wasn't turning. It was two hundred yards away, going straight ahead for Yucatan with nobody at the helm. I didn't see her anywhere. She'd been knocked out when she fell. And I had lashed the tiller.

I started to cry out, but stopped. Even if she were conscious she couldn't hear me above the noise of the engine. The boat was already too far away. I was utterly helpless; there was nothing I could do at all. If she didn't regain consciousness and start back before she'd gone too far she'd never find me.

I reached down mechanically and started taking off my dungarees and slippers.

I was calm now, after the crazy, foaming rage had gone away, and I looked at it with complete objectivity. It just wasn't intended to be. We'd been doomed from the start. There was something inexorable about it; it was what mathematicians called an infinite series with a limiting factor. Add .1 and .01 and .001 and .0001 and so on and on forever until you'd worn out all the adding machines on earth and you'd never reach 1.

My head jerked suddenly erect and I looked around, wondering if I had lost my mind. What I had heard was a gunshot, and ten feet off to my left something had gone *chu-wuuug!* into the side of a ground swell. It was insane. The stern of the *Ballerina* was receding in the distance and I was alone in a blue immensity of gently heaving, sunlit water and calm, empty sky, and somebody had spliced the sound track of a western movie onto it. I had forgotten all about Barclay.

He came to the surface of the sea forty yards away. He was drowning—drowning in a waterlogged tweed jacket with a gun in his hand as if he would no more have parted with either of them than he would have condescended to notice

the existence of the Gulf of Mexico when he was busy trying to kill me. I forgot even to be afraid, watching him. It was fantastic.

He would go under. The gun would reappear first, held above his head, and then his face, the broken jaw agape and water running out of his mouth. He would calmly tilt the gun barrel down to let the water run out so it wouldn't explode when he fired, and then he'd shoot. His aim was wild because of his exertions to keep himself afloat long enough to fire. The bullet would ricochet off a swell and go screaming into the blue emptiness behind me, and the ejected shell would whistle into the water on his right. He would go under. And then fight his way back to the surface to do it all over again. There was something utterly magnificent about it, and I didn't even hate him any more. I forgot I was the one he was shooting at.

He shot three more times. The fourth time he didn't quite make it. The gun came up out of the water and then sank back and there was an explosion just under the surface as he pulled the trigger while it was submerged. He never came up again.

I was alone now. I looked around. The *Ballerina* was far out on the horizon, still going away.

Fifteen

Even when you don't have anywhere to go, you keep swimming. I swam toward the boat, disappearing now, and toward the coast of Yucatan a hundred and twenty miles away. The sun was on my left. It climbed higher.

I didn't panic, but I had to be careful about letting the loneliness and immensity of it get hold of me or thinking too much about how near we had been to winning at last. I wondered if she had been killed, or badly hurt, and saw in a moment that wasn't safe, either. I concentrated on swimming. Don't think about anything.

It could have been an hour, or two hours, when I looked off to the right and saw the mast. It was at least a mile away and she wouldn't see me, but even so a great surge of hope and thanksgiving went through me and I broke the rhythm of my stroke and went under and almost strangled. She was all right! She'd only been knocked out. I reminded myself realistically of the odds against her ever finding me in this immense waste of water, but just knowing she was alive and could reach land helped me to keep going.

I waved frantically each time I was lifted on a swell. She went on past, far to the westward, and was soon hull down to the north. I kept watching her, looking over my shoulder. Now she was swinging, heading east. I began to hope. I saw what she was doing. I loved her. God, she was wonderful. Oh, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, she was wonderful. When she'd regained

consciousness she didn't have any way of knowing how long she'd been out or where we'd gone overboard, so she couldn't go back and swing in a big circle. But she knew the sloop was on a 180 degree heading. So she was running offset north-and-south courses, cutting the whole area into a big grid. A girl who didn't know anything about boats or compasses or the sea. I turned and started swimming toward the sun.

Far out, she turned, heading south again. I tried to estimate how far to the eastward she'd pass me. I couldn't tell yet, but I swam faster. She steadied up, began to grow larger. She was passing three or four hundred yards ahead of me. I could see her. She'd lashed the tiller and was standing on the boom with an arm about the mast. I remembered the glasses again. Each time the ground swell lifted me I kicked myself as high as I could in the water and waved an arm. She was going on by.

Then I saw her jump down from the boom and run aft. The bow began to swing. I closed my eyes for an instant, and the breath ran slowly out of me.

The sound of engine died and she drifted down toward me and came to rest, rolling gently in the trough. Shannon was in the cockpit with a coiled line in her hand. She started to throw it. I shook my head. She watched me swim over. Her face was utterly still. She didn't say anything. I didn't say anything. I caught the rail when the boat rolled, and pulled myself up. She knelt on the cockpit seat to help me. She put a hand on my wrist and an arm about my shoulders and I came up on the seat beside her in the warm sunlight. She let go then. Everything went. They blew the dam.

Maybe you live your whole life for one moment. If you do, that was the moment.

She was all over me. She was crying. I started to cry. I couldn't help it. Tears ran down my face and I was holding her so tightly she couldn't breathe and I was kissing her. I kissed her on the mouth and the boat rolled and it was the way it had been that other time with that sensation of falling through light-years of rose-colored space and the way it had been the first time with that feeling of drowning in her, of being overrun, submerged, lost, of never being able to come up again, nor ever wanting to. I kissed the tears on her face and kissed the closed eyelids, and at last I just held her in my

arms with my face pressed to her throat, feeling her heart beat. Neither of us had said a word.

After a long time I raised my head so I could see her. Water had dripped out of my hair onto her face, mingling with the tears. I had got her dress all wet, holding her against me. There was a puffy and discolored bruise on her forehead, just at the hairline. The morning sun slanted across the closed eyes and the broad-cheekboned planes of her face, and with all of it she was so beautiful my breath caught in my throat.

Her eyes opened. They were wet and they were radiant, and the lashes looked darker, matted together with tears. She was somewhere between crying and laughing, and then the smile came and it trembled about the corners of her

"I—I didn't think I was going to find you," she whispered. "Oh, Bill! Bill—"

I leaned down and brushed the bruise on her forehead very gently with my lips. "You Swede," I said. "You big, lovely, magnificent Swede. Hold still. I've got to look at you. I've got to touch you—"

It occurred to me I was both looking at her and touching her already and that I must be a little wild and not making much sense, but I didn't really expect to. I was overloaded. I couldn't handle any more right then. They were gone. We'd won. We were free. We were alone. The whole world was ahead of us. I loved her so much I choked up just looking at her. I tried to tell her all this, but I floundered and went dumb. I suppose you can take only so much of any emotion—even happiness—and then your circuit-breakers start to trip.

"I love you," I finished lamely. "Maybe some day I'll be able to make you understand how much—"

She nodded, and whispered, "I know. It's the same with me. I have all the time, even before I knew what he'd done. I couldn't help it. Don't you see now why I couldn't go off and leave him? The rest of my life I'd have felt I was the one who deserted *him*. And I couldn't let it show in front of those two—pigs. I'd have died. I'd have felt naked."

"They're gone. Forget them."

Her eyes grew suddenly grave. "There isn't anywhere left in the world we can go, is there? But right now I don't care.

We're alone. They'll never take this away from us. We're more alone than any two people have ever been in the world."

I sprang up and caught her hand and pulled her erect. "What do you mean, there's nowhere left we can go? Come here; I want to show you something."

She looked at me as if I'd gone crazy, but let me hurry her down the companionway. I suddenly remembered I had nothing on but my shorts, but there was no time to worry about that now. I had to show her.

"Here," I said. "Look." I snatched away the top chart, the one of the Gulf of Mexico. The one below it was a chart of the whole Caribbean from Cuba down to the Windward Islands. "Look, Shannon. Honey. Look at it! That's where we're going. Nobody will ever catch us. We've got the boat. It can go anywhere. I could sail it around the world. All that money in that bag is yours—"

I put an arm about her and pointed at the chart, talking faster now, carried away with it, wanting her to see it. "Barbados—Antigua—Guadeloupe—Martinique. The small islands. Fishing villages. Just the two of us. Going places and doing things even millionaires just dream about. Think of it, honey: mountains and jungles rising straight out of the sea, water so blue you won't believe it when you're looking at it, beaches you never saw before, the trade winds blowing, and nights that almost make you drunk. *And just us*. They'll never find us. Not the police, or anybody. They'll forget us. We'll change the name of the boat. Change her port of registry to—to—" I stabbed at the chart with a forefinger. "To San Juan. When we get tired of the Caribbean we'll cross the Atlantic on the southern track and go through the Mediterranean and Suez to the Indian Ocean and down to the East Indies and the South Pacific. Java. Borneo. Tahiti—"

I stopped. She was watching me with the expression of someone listening to the babbling of a child.

"What is it, honey?" I asked. "Don't you want to try it?"

"Oh," she said. "Why—yes. *Want to?* Bill, I'd give anything on earth. Do you really think we can do it?"

"Do it?" I put my hands on each side of her face. "You big, beautiful Swede, of course we can do it! We'll forget the whole world. You're going to learn to sail a boat, and

navigate, and swim, and fish off the reefs, and dive for lobsters, and you're going to be tanned by every tropic sun there is, and made love to by moonlight off Trinidad and in the Malacca Strait and the Solomons and in tropical lagoons —"

"Bill—" She stopped. She couldn't talk.



At noon a little whisper of breeze blew up. We hoisted sail and I laid a course southeast toward the Yucatan Strait. We logged a scant two knots, but we were on our way. Toward sunset it dropped to dead calm again. I put the dinghy in the water and went around under the stern with a pot of white paint. I put a coat over the name and port of registry. When it dried I'd add a second, and a third, and then letter in the new name with black.

While I was working she came on deck in a rubber cap and a bathing suit that was just a brief pair of trunks and a bra. She dived over the side and swam around to hang onto the stern of the dinghy and watch me. When I had finished she helped me put the dinghy back on the cabin, and we sat in the cockpit and smoked, watching the afterglow fade.

"We'll have to think of a name," she said.

"It's forgone," I said. "Inevitable. It'll be Freya."

"Who was Freya?"

I grinned. "Another Swede. A goddess. The Norse goddess of love, to be exact."

Her eyes were soft. "Bill, you're sweet. And I hope you never change. But I'm just a big blonde."

"So was Freya," I said. "And Juno. And the Milan cathedral is a pile of rocks."

She stopped me in quite the nicest way there is to stop anybody.

The last of the flame died in the west and there was a half portion of moon just past the meridian in the sky. The masthead swung in a lazy arc against the stars and we lay in the cockpit on a mattress from one of the bunks and looked up at it and made love and slept, and waked to whisper again.

I awoke late at night and the moon was gone and the deck was wet with dew. She lay very quietly beside me in the

darkness, but in a moment I began to feel somehow she was awake. I put a hand on her bare thigh, and all the muscles were taut, and she was shaking. She was making no sound, but she was tight as violin strings.

"Shannon, honey," I said. "What is it?"

It was a moment before she answered. "It's all right, Bill," she said. "I'm just a poor sleeper."

I wondered if she had been thinking of Macaulay again, but I couldn't ask her. I could feel the tenseness and rigidity flow out of her after a while and she lay quietly beside me. The stars began to fade.

"Let's go swimming," she said. "Last one in's a landlubber."

I sat up, and she was pulling the rubber bathing cap over her hair. We stepped onto the seat and dived, hand in hand, over the side. When we came up I caught her in my arms and she laughed. The shadowy form of the *Ballerina* rocked on the swell beside us and there was a splash of pink across the eastern sky. It was so beautiful it hurt, and so wonderful you wanted to tear it out of the context of time and put it in an album.

I kissed her, and stopped treading water with my feet, and we sank down through the water with our arms tight about each other and our lips together with that beautiful sensation of falling through space.

We came out. "I love you," I said. "I love you. I love you."

"Let's don't ever go to land again," she said. "Let's stay out here forever."

I had reached that overloaded condition again, where I could no longer express myself. "You'd miss television," I said.

We swam in a circle around the sloop. "We'd better get out," she whispered. "It's growing light."

I grinned at her. "That wouldn't bother the other goddesses. Where's your union card?"

She laughed. "Freya was probably never paid for parading half-naked in a night club. She'd have got self-conscious, too."

I climbed out and helped her up. She was a tall blond gleam in the pre-dawn darkness as she hurried past me and down

the companionway. She clicked on the light and I heard her draw the curtain. I went below and dressed in dungarees and put on some coffee. I lit a cigarette and sat listening to her moving around beyond the curtain.

It had been a thousand years since yesterday. It seemed impossible the two of them had been here in this cabin just one dawn ago, with their guns and their cold-blooded deadliness, and that we had been so near to dying. I tried to figure out what I felt about being responsible for their deaths, but I couldn't run down any feeling about it at all. They lived by violence. They had died the same way. It was just an industrial accident.

I thought of the police looking for me. And for her. But if our luck held they would never know we had left there in a boat. Nobody would know except Barclay's gang. They knew we had all gone to sea together and the boat had never been heard of again, and they'd be looking for us, thinking we had killed the two of them and tried to run with their lousy diamonds. But how could they ever find us? Nobody could find us.

She came out. She had put on a short-sleeved white summer dress. She smiled. "The last of my traveling wardrobe. If I don't get to wash something pretty soon I'll be down to a swimsuit."

"Maybe we'll get a rain squall and catch some fresh water," I said. We had plenty yet, but you never used it for washing or bathing at sea.

We took cups of coffee and sat down in the cockpit. It was light now, and the sea was empty and blue to the horizon.

"Do you think anybody could ever find that plane?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I don't think there's a chance. What he saw may have been a tide rip instead of a shoal. And even if he was right and he crashed in shallow water near surf, on the weather side of a reef or shoal the plane would break up in a matter of weeks and be covered with sand."

"You wouldn't have looked for it any more, anyway, would you?"

"No," I said. "I haven't lost any diamonds. Have you?"

She shook her head.

"I've already got what I wanted," I said.

"Thank you, Bill."

She was gazing off to seaward. I'd never get tired of just looking at her, I thought. There was variety in her, and contradiction. The generally smooth humor was balanced by that flash-burn of a temper I'd seen twice, when she was provoked or pushed too far, and the definite hint of sexiness in her face by the straightforward honesty of the eyes.

She turned and saw me looking at her. I grinned at her. "You don't mind my calling you Swede, do you?"

She smiled. "Of course not. But my mother was a Russian Finn, not a Swede."

"Hush. All squareheads are Swedes. And you're all the big, beautiful Nordics in the world rolled into one. If they ever consolidate into one Scandinavian country, I suggest they put you on their money.

"It's not that I don't love the Irish half of you, too," I went on. "But the Irish are supposed to be very dark, when they're beautiful. Every time I look at you I half expect Thor to come running up and hit me over the head with a short-handled hammer and say, 'Hold up thar, you polecat, where you a-goin' with my gal?' "

She laughed. "Who's going to miss television?"

We went below and cooked breakfast. We had bacon and eggs and set up the table between the settees and had paper napkins and were very proper.

A light southeasterly breeze came up at midmorning. We hoisted sail and tacked up against it all day. It died again in the late afternoon. I put another coat of paint over the sloop's name. It was the same the next day, and the third. We'd beat up against a whisper of air all day and lose what we'd gained when it died and the current set us to the westward. We began to joke about it. We'd never get into the Yucatan Strait. And we didn't care.

We swam. She sun-bathed—in the two-piece swimsuit at first and later in just the bottom part of it. We rigged a hand line and caught fresh red snapper for dinner. I lettered the new name and port of registry on the stern of the sloop: *Freya of San Juan, P.R.*

I began to teach her seamanship and navigation. She protested she couldn't learn the latter because she'd never been any good at mathematics, but I assured her the math involved was predigested when you used the tables and that the thing that took skill was the sight itself. We practiced each day at noon, shooting the sun, and took star sights at dusk and dawn. We were still over the Northern Shelves, not more than twenty miles to the eastward of the point where Barclay and Barfield had drowned. The current was setting us back when we weren't under way.

She loved it all. That was the thing that made it finally complete. I had thought at first she might merely tolerate it because I liked the sea and boats and sailing and because it was our only escape, but she took to it as naturally as the Vikings she was descended from.

She was watching me take a sight one noon. "I'm so happy," she said. "We'll remember this always, as long as we live, won't we?"

I glanced at her. "Sure. But don't forget, this is only the beginning."

"Oh," she said. "Yes. Of course."

We were lying becalmed again the next afternoon when the rain squall hit us. She was sun-bathing on the forward deck in the half bathing suit and I was reading aloud to her from a paper-bound edition of *The Heart of Darkness* I'd had in my gear when we saw it darkening to the eastward. We both ran below. I left the book and took off my dungarees and shoes. It burst over us without too much wind but with a tropical deluge of rain. As soon as it had washed the salt from the deck I blocked the scuppers and opened the filler cap to the fresh water tank and let it run full. When I had topped it off and put the cap back on, I turned, and she was coming forward again with a small bottle of shampoo in her hand, grinning at me through the deluge.

"Here, let me help, too," I said.

We gravely sat down in opposite directions on deck, as if in a love seat, and unpinned the roll of ash-blond hair. Rain fell over us in sheets. I poured some of the shampoo into my hands and we rubbed it on her head, trying to work up the foam against the beating of the rain. She was naked from the waist up, and well tanned now, and she looked like an Indian

in a white turban. Our eyes met and she started to laugh. Soap ran down her face. I kissed her and got soap in my mouth. We held onto each other and strangled with laughter while the rain rinsed her hair clean. We could never pin down afterward what had been so funny about it.

When the sun came out we sat in the cockpit with towels, drying it. It gleamed like freshly burnished silver against the smooth, tanned skin of her face and shoulders. If I live until I'm ninety and never see anything beautiful again, they don't owe me a thing.

That night when we prepared dinner she changed into the white dress again, and when she came out of the forward end of the cabin she had a small bottle of perfume in her hand and was touching the glass stopper to the lobe of an ear.

She smiled, a little shyly. "I know it's ridiculous," she said. "But it was there in the things I sent aboard—"

"No," I said. "It's not ridiculous. On this ship the mate comes to dinner every night with just a suspicion of Tabu behind her starboard ear or she's logged a day's pay. Put it in the night order book."

"Night order book?" she asked, and it was the first time I had ever seen that particular roguishness in her eyes. "Things *are* simplified on ships, aren't they?"

We were ecstatically happy, and we didn't care how long it took us to get into the Yucatan Strait. But twice more I awoke at night with that strange feeling she was going through some hell of her own there beside me. She would be lying perfectly still, staring up at the sky, as rigid and tense as someone petrified with fear.

I couldn't get to it. Whatever it was, she never let me come near it.

Sixteen

She liked to swim, and had no exaggerated fear of sharks. I coached her to get her out of the dog-paddle class, and she improved tremendously. She was a natural. She was in no sense an athlete, but then neither are most really hot girl swimmers. You don't have to be lumpy-muscled and bony to get around in water.

We spent hours at it, lots of times even when there was enough wind to have been under way. This was paradise and we were so wonderfully alone it was impossible to be concerned with headway or making a schedule or taking advantage of every capful of wind. The world between the Tropics of Capricorn and Cancer was our oyster, and we had the rest of our lives to savor it. We swam, and we lay side by side at night looking up at the stars, and we fished and read, and we dived with the aqualungs.

Diving fascinated her, and she was never afraid of it from the first. We were over the Northern Shelves in the beginning, and in three days she was going to the bottom with me in a shoal spot we found where the water was only ten fathoms deep. She loved confronting startled schools of fish—any kind of fish. They were all the same to her, and actually were nearly all red snapper.

"They look so absurd." She laughed. "Not really scared, but just offended, as if you'd done something in very bad taste by coming down there bothering them."

"Fish expressions are deceptive as hell," I said. "They're probably whistling at you. You do have nice legs."

She made a face at me. "I wouldn't know about that. It seems to me you haven't mentioned them recently. Not in the past hour or so."

"You know why I joke, honey?"

Laughter faded, and the eyes were soft. "Yes. We have to, I guess, Bill. You get too filled with wonder and you'd just bog down and go dumb if you couldn't relieve the pressure with a little lightness."

"Maybe we should have been Latins," I said. "Then we could be intense and articulate at the same time." I thought about that. Then I said, "No. The hell with it. I'd have to change the name of the boat again, to some brunette goddess. I'll struggle along with you the way you are."

We had a day of good breeze, and worked up into it for 16 hours, running for the Strait. Then it fell again and the current set us west and north for two days and nights. On the eighth day after Barclay and Barfield had drowned we were far out on the northern edge of the Shelves where the Campeche Bank drops off into the depths.

We took a sight at noon and worked it out. We were at 23.50 North and 88.45 West. When I put it on the chart I saw we were right on the hundred-fathom curve.

It was hot in the sun and very still, and the immense pastures of the Gulf heaved gently all around us. A gull sat on a piece of driftwood off to starboard and stared at us, and a school of flying fish burst out of the side of a ground swell to go ricocheting off the next like skipping stones.

She was quieter than usual, and last night late I had roused once to find her lying awake beside me again.

"What is it, angel?" I'd asked. "Is something bothering you?"

Her voice had sounded all right, however, when she replied. "Oh, I was just thinking about us, Bill. I didn't bring you much of a dowry, did I?"

"What kind of talk is that?" I asked, puzzled.

"Silly talk," she said. "Go back to sleep, darling."

I put my head on her breast. There was almost a full moon now, and it was low in the sky. The boat rocked gently and she hugged my head to her with sudden, impulsive fierceness.

"Oh, Bill, Bill, *Bill*—"

She stowed the sextant in its case now and we went on deck. A school of porpoises was playing around to port. She looked at them with quick interest.

"Let's dive," she said, "and see if we can watch them from below."

I dropped a line over the side to make the aqualungs fast to when we were ready to come out. I watched her slip her arms through the straps of one of them. She had torn the bathing cap the other day and had to throw it away. Her hair was free, down on her shoulders. She was nude except for that single wisp of swimsuit and beautifully tanned all over now, more like some magnificent pagan than ever. Just before we put on the masks she came close to me and kissed me, hard, on the mouth with her arms fierce and tight about my neck.

I caught her. "Not many things could make me lose interest in porpoises," I said, "but—"

She slipped away from me, adjusted the mask, and slid into the water. I followed her.

The porpoises were gone, of course, by the time we got out there. We came back and swam just below the surface in the shadow of the *Freya*, looking the hull over again to see if we'd begun to collect any marine growth. It was cool and pleasant, and I loved watching the silvery flow of hair about her head as she swam. A few minutes later I saw a small shovel-nosed shark off to one side and below, and swam down to watch him. He retreated, going deeper. I looked back over my shoulder, and she was still under the boat.

I sounded again, and the shark kept his distance. He was quite small, and utterly harmless. I swam down a little more, and I could still see him circling below me in the clear blue water, which grew darker as it fell away into the depths. I was down about a hundred feet.

A school of some kind of small fish I had never seen before swam by me in a big circle and I watched them idly, enjoying the relaxation of lying suspended in the water. It must have

been several minutes later that I turned and looked above and behind me to be sure she was still under the boat. I saw the boat, all right, but she wasn't there.

I looked straight above, toward the ground-glass screen of the surface. She was nowhere in sight. I began to be uneasy. But maybe she had gone back aboard for some reason. I was turning to look behind me again when a flash of silver caught the corners of my eyes at the edge of the mask. I froze with horror. She was at least a hundred feet below me, going straight down.

I pushed my feet up and sounded vertically, pulling myself down so fast I could feel the pressure clamp on my head like a vise. I tore at the water. I gained on her, but the depths were gaining on us both. It was terrible, not being able to call out to her. She was swimming straight down. I could see her legs kicking, and the silvery undulation of her hair. The squeeze was beginning. I was growing drunk and the water was darker all about me. She was down past 300 feet, not swimming now, turning a little, falling into the infinite and darkening blue below me. I could never reach her because she was going into that terrible wall of pressure faster than I could gain on her. Maybe I imagined it, or it was a trick of the waning light, but I thought I saw her lift one arm and beckon just as she faded into the depths. I closed my eyes to shut it out. I clamped them shut, and it was on the backs of my eyelids like a motion picture screen. It's there yet.

* * *

It must have been pressure that drove me out—pressure and training, because I remembered nothing of it at all. After a while I was conscious of being on my knees in the cockpit of the boat with my forehead on my arms on one of the seats, praying. I hadn't had an identifiable religion for years and had never believed in immortality, but I was asking Somebody to be good to her.

“—be gentle with her. Take care of her. Please, please, please, be gentle with her—”

The sun beat down on my back and water dripped off me. After a while I stopped, and for the first time I realized I had been praying aloud because when my voice ceased I began hearing the silence. The whole boat was drenched with

silence. There was an emptiness about it you could actually feel. It pressed in on me. I went down in the cabin and it drove me back on deck. I sat on one of the cockpit seats with my face in my hands, still numb with shock and only half aware of what I was doing. Less than an hour ago she had been right here, here in the cockpit, alive, warm, lovely, brilliant, thrilling to touch and look at.

That was it, I thought. She was here all about it; not a million miles away, but right here, offset only by a thin, transparent sheet of time one hour thick. Why couldn't you reach through an hour's time the way you could through a foot's space? What was time but a ball of mud spinning on its axis? Time? Her watch down there in the cabin was set on 90th meridian, Central Standard Time. The chronometer within three feet of it in space was six hours away on Greenwich, zero meridian time. The local apparent time where we were ourselves was 88th meridian. *Time?* I wanted to cry out. Offset slices of time lay side by side here like laminations of plywood and she was forever unreachable because she was on the other side of one thin, unshatterable pane of it.

I realized I wasn't completely rational, and tried to get a grip on myself.

What had happened? How had it happened? I'd told her, warned her over and over about depth and the awful things pressure could do. She'd been above me, right there under the boat. Maybe that was it. She must have been too near the surface, under the stern maybe, and had been hit on the head by the rudder or propeller as it slid off a passing swell. I stopped. No. She hadn't been falling, except at the very end. She'd been swimming down. I could swear it. I saw the long legs kicking, the way I had taught her.

But maybe she had been dazed by the blow and didn't know which way she was swimming. Or she could have been knocked out momentarily and settled beyond any distance she'd ever been before and had been seized by drunkenness, the rapture of the depths, brought on by breathing air at too great pressure. When I saw her she'd been at least 200 feet down, and she'd never been below sixty before.

Then I stopped and raised my head and stared unseeingly out across the water. No. She wouldn't have. It was

unthinkable. Why would she? She was happy, wasn't she? Wildly, deliriously happy, as I had been. Of course she was. It was apparent in every smile, every laugh, every word she said, every gesture of love.

But I was remembering now. I was thinking of those times I awoke to find her rigid and tense, staring into the darkness beside me. Those times I'd had that feeling she was being tormented in some recess of her mind she'd never let me near. What about the way she had kissed me, suddenly and fiercely, just before we'd gone over the side?

Was it "Macaulay? Of course it wasn't. She wasn't in love with him. And he'd betrayed her. He'd lied to her, and double-crossed her. The very fact of her trying to find excuses for him only showed him up for what he was. She didn't owe him anything. She'd paid it all. She'd even stayed and tried to save him after she knew what he had done, stayed at her own danger.

I didn't bring you much of a dowry, did I?

I sat up straight, feeling sick. There it was. That was it. I had failed her. I could see all the clues, now that it was forever too late.

"I've been doing this a little longer than you have," she'd said. "There is no escape."

She'd already had too much of being hunted, with Macaulay, and I'd failed in trying to show her we could get away. I remembered the way she had looked at me when I was showing her on the chart, the places we'd go, the things we'd do. She'd been like someone listening to the babbling of a child. She didn't believe it. She wanted to, and she tried, and she pretended to, but in the bottom of her heart she couldn't. There were too many of them after us now. She and Macaulay had never been able to get clear away from Barclay's crowd, and now we had not only them but the police.

We were doomed, she thought, and she blamed herself for it. She'd tried to keep it from me, to give us what time there was, but in the end it was too much for her. And I'd been too blind and stupid to realize she was being tortured by it. Oh, God, if I'd only been able to show her, to make her understand we *could* escape! Just one more chance, now that I knew what it was. Please. *Please*. The whole world was

before her, and I let her kill herself. It was agony. I couldn't sit still. I stared down into the water where she had gone. The sloop rolled. I forced myself away from the rail.

"No," I cried aloud. She hadn't done it deliberately. It was an accident. Nobody could have been outwardly as happy as she had been and be tortured by something like that at the same time. She *had* been happy. It was an accident.

"It was an accident," I cried out wildly. "An accident."

But she'd been *swimming* down.

The sloop rolled. The silence screamed.

I went below. She came at me from everywhere at once. I was drowned in her. Everything was saturated with her. She'd touched this, she'd stood there. She came from behind the curtain in a white dress dabbing at the lobe of an ear with the glass stopper of a perfume bottle. "I know it's ridiculous—" she said. The ghost of the perfume was still there. It was all over the cabin. The mattress and pillow were back on the bunk where they were stowed during the day, and the perfume was on the pillow where her head had lain and there was one long, shimmering, ash-blond hair. I knelt beside the bunk and pressed my face into the pillow, holding it with my arms.

"Swede," I said. "Swede—Swede—Swede—"

I knew the danger of it. It was morbid. I stopped.

The sloop rolled. The silence rose and screamed.

The sun went down. It was night. I couldn't sleep. When I closed my eyes the picture was there on the backs of my eyelids, the infinite blue and that last flash of silver, beckoning as it faded.

I've got to quit seeing it, I thought. *I've got to. I've got to.*

The boat rocked. There was no wind.

At dawn I took star sights and worked them out because I had to have something to do. The current had set me 18 miles to the northwest. I started the engine and ran back. I wasn't sure why, except that 23.50 North, 88.45 West was a place. It had existence. It was fixed. Nothing else had reality. I shot the sun at noon and plotted my position. I was at 23.46 North, 88.44 West. I had missed it four miles. I was too far south.

"Well," I said reasonably, "it's all right. I knew that wasn't the place, anyway."

I stopped. I'd said it aloud. I looked out across the heaving, trackless miles of water. *I knew that wasn't the place.* I went below and looked at myself in the mirror.

It was night. It was day. It was night again. In the day there was sun and at night on the back of my eyelids she was a flash of silver, falling through blue.

Once I went to sleep. She fell like poured quicksilver through a cloud, but I flew down and caught her. I took her by the arm and turned her around and kissed her and we went on falling through the cloud, but now the color was changing from blue to rose. We clung together.

"You didn't let me explain," I said. "You've got to listen. I can't live without you, Swede. I didn't make you understand the first time. Give me another chance—"

"Come with me," she said. "We'll live in raptures."

I awoke and somebody was screaming. I shut my mouth and it stopped.

The current set me to the north and west. I ran back. I drifted. I ran back. I used up all the fuel and could beat my way back only when there was wind. I took star sights at dawn. I shot the sun at noon. I took star sights at dusk. None of them ever worked out exactly on 23.50 North, 88.45 West. I was always off a mile one way or three miles another.

I ran out on deck and looked across the miles of water glittering under the sun. Then the whole thing came to me at once. It was Macaulay. He'd been right all the time. He was the only one of us who was sane. And I'd been stupid enough to think he was mad. I, with my smug superiority and my cheap little bag of tricks like spherical trigonometry and azimuths and sun lines and hour angles and bearings from fixed points, having the effrontery to say a man was crazy because he thought he could go back and find something he'd lost in an ocean. Of course he could go back and find it. The whole thing was absurdly simple. It didn't even take third-grade arithmetic.

When you got to the spot, you'd know. It was as simple as that.

I looked off to starboard. A seagull was sitting on a piece of driftwood.

That was it. That was the place.

I remembered. There had been a seagull sitting on a piece of driftwood just before we dived.

"Nice seagull," I said, moving softly. "Pretty seagull. Don't go away. I'll bring you some bread crumbs. Don't fly away."

When I came back on deck he was still sitting on the piece of wood. "Nice seagull," I said. I threw the bread crumbs. He flew away. I began to cry.

I threw some more. Maybe he would come back and mark the place again. He had to come back because the other piece of driftwood had a seagull on it. I could see her. She was beckoning, a flash of silver falling into blue.

"Swede, angel," I said. "I didn't make you understand. We can escape."

I began to feel weak. I hadn't eaten anything for a long time. I ran a hand across my face, and felt shaky all over, waiting for the seagull to come back.

Something heavy was on my shoulders. I felt the straps across my chest. I was wearing the aqualung. That was what I'd gone after.

I screamed.

I tore it off and ran below. I fell into a bunk and lay there, shaking. My mind was clear again. I covered my face with my hands.

Seventeen

It's all past. I'm rational again, but it scares me to think how near the edge I was a week ago. The whole thing was morbid and neurotic, and it almost cost me my life. I'm ashamed, and she would have been ashamed of me.

The sense of loss is no less terrible than it was, but I can accept it now and go on, the way you're supposed to. Instead of lacerating myself with all that morbid what-might-have-been I try to remind myself that we did have eight days and that there are millions of people who've lived out their entire lives without one hour of what we knew.

Writing it down has helped. What I wanted to do was see it all in one piece, and I did, and I think I see now that she couldn't have done it deliberately. She was happy. Right to the end. The end was an accident. It had to be.

I'm going on to the Caribbean, the way we had planned. There is a little wind now. I've been steadily under way for two days. After I regained my senses there was no wind for a long time and I continued drifting to the westward, but I've regained nearly all that on my way into the Yucatan Strait. My sight at noon today put me eight miles northwest of the spot she died. It's now one p.m., and if the wind holds steady I should pass somewhere over 23.50 North, 88.45 West just at four p.m.

I don't know any of the service for burial at sea, and there's no Bible aboard so I can't do much, but I do intend to drop something of hers just to mark her grave. That white dress I liked so well, I think. I'll weight it.

* * *

I've just lashed the tiller again and come back below. It's 3:30 now, and the breeze is holding on, what there is of it. I don't think I'm logging more than two knots, but at least I'm on my way and all the sickness has ended. It's good to be clearheaded and well again. I still don't understand why they had to take her away from me, but maybe you're not supposed to understand it. Maybe you're only supposed to learn to live with it.

I went to get the white dress ready, but while I was in her things I found the little flask of perfume. It would be much more appropriate; I don't know why I didn't think of it in the first place. There's something personal about it. It's so completely hers. It has a French name I'm not familiar with, and I never knew anyone else who used it.

It's here on the chart table where I'm writing. I removed the glass stopper and held it under my nose for an instant, and in replacing it I spilled a drop on the chart under this book. It's amazing how one drop of something so delicate could invade a whole compartment. It must be very expensive.

Of course, when I drop it the chances are I won't be within a mile of the place she died, but she'll understand. Navigation is never that exact. In the final analysis it's only a human being measuring something with an instrument designed by another human being, and as such is subject to human error, however small. That's one thing that scares me about the way I was—thinking, like Macaulay, that you could go back to a place on the ocean where you'd lost something. He was mad, of course, and I was very near to madness myself.

She had a habit of sometimes coming up behind me when I was working over the chart table like this and drawing her finger tips very softly up the back of my neck. It was a delicious, shivery sensation that made my whole back tingle, and then I would smell the good, clean, salt-water-and-sun smell of her and that faint suggestion of perfume, and I'd turn

and the gray eyes would be laughing at me very near to mine because she was so tall, and silvery hair would be brushing shoulders as smooth as satin and beautifully tanned, and then we would look squarely into each other's eyes and the teasing and that always precarious veneer of lightness would blow up in our faces.

"That's not fair," she would whisper shakily just under my lips. "You're cheating."

That's just the way it always began, with that same sensation of finger tips being drawn ever so gently up the back of the neck, and before I turned I would be conscious of the fragrance of you. Remember?

Who am I to say Macaulay wasn't right, after all? But, no. The whole thing is absurd. Science is one thing and madness is another, and Macaulay was mad. But, still—

You never understood. We can escape, darling. Give me another chance to show you. Let me tell you. We'll go to all those places. They'll never catch us. Antigua—Barbados—Martinique— The trades blow in the afternoons and the nights will almost make you drunk. We'll look up at the stars.

Swede. You're everywhere— That wasn't the place the other time. I know it now, because the seagull flew away. But I'll find it. I'll tell you.

I can close my eyes and see the whole thing—the blue, and that last, haunting flash of silver, gesturing as it died.

It was beckoning. Toward the rapture. The rapture . . .

Fowey Rocks Abeam

The master of the *Joseph H. Hallock* closed the journal. *The poor devil*, he thought. *The poor, tortured devil. Four o'clock—and we raised the sloop a little after five.*

He sat for a moment, thinking with that vaguely puzzled frown on his face again. It was late, after 2 a.m. and very quiet in the dim seclusion of his office.

It was odd, he thought, still trying to come to grips with the disturbing factor, that it should have been the girl who realized there was no escape for them in that boat. Or any boat. It should have been Manning. It was something not likely to be known except by shipmasters and persons who had cruised on their own craft—and Manning had said he had cruised the Caribbean once for eight months.

Changing the name of the sloop was farcical. Painting out what was lettered on the stern didn't alter the identity of any kind of seagoing craft. There were papers. And more papers. It was as futile as writing your own name on a borrowed passport. Manning should have known that, as he should have known it took about ten pounds of paperwork and red tape to enter any foreign port in the world with a boat, and that included fishing villages. They all had port authorities, and they all demanded consular clearances from the last port of call, bills of health from the last port, registry certificate, customs lists, crew lists, and so on, ad infinitum, and in the case of pleasure craft they probably required passports and

visas for everybody aboard. They didn't have a prayer of a chance of getting away with something like that, and Manning should have been the first to know it. Not the girl.

But from the evidence of the journal, Manning was certainly no utter fool, and not particularly given to wishful thinking. He appeared to be quite intelligent, in fact. Then was it sheer desperation, knowing there was no escape for them in the States with the police and a gang of criminals looking for them? Of course, the question was academic, since they had both died before they'd had a chance to flee anywhere, but the whole thing persisted in bothering him. And there was something else that nibbled at the edge of his mind.

He changed into pajamas and climbed into his bunk. He turned out the reading lamp on the bulkhead above his pillow, still puzzling over it. Then he sat upright. "I'll be damned," he said softly. "I'll just be damned. It would be perfect."

Just Manning? he wondered. *Or both of them?* He hoped it was both of them.

* * *

It was sunset again, two days after they had taken the *Freya* in tow. *The Joseph H. Hallock*. was waddling, full-bellied, up the coast of Florida just south of Fowey Rocks. She was well inshore from the main axis of the Stream, since they had made arrangements by radio to have a Coast Guard boat meet them off Miami and take the *Freya* off their hands. Or, at least, that was the master's excuse to Mr. Davidson, the mate. He felt, actually, a little like Conrad's master in *The Secret Sharer*, a story he was sure Manning had enjoyed.

He was on the bridge now with Mr. Davidson, who was waiting to catch Fowey Rocks light in the pelorus as it came abeam, to complete his four-point bearing. The master himself was staring astern in the afterglow where the *Freya* rode easily at the end of her long towline. He had been watching her as they passed each of the keys during the day, but this was the closest they would come inshore until they were off Miami itself and the Coast Guard came out to get her.

When you resolved the contradiction and acknowledged that Manning couldn't possibly have believed any of that

moonlit dream about escape to the tropics in a boat, he mused, what did you have left? You had left the twin facts that Manning was a writer, and that he was trying to save himself and that girl he was so much in love with.

They had nowhere to go, the girl had said. Nowhere to go, that is, as long as they were being sought by a gang of criminals and also by the police. But if they weren't being actively sought by anyone, they could come back to their own country, where they would attract less attention than anywhere else on earth. And they would no longer be sought if everyone believed them dead.

There could be little doubt they'd be given up as dead. Not many people would have the specialized knowledge to cause them to wonder at that contradiction in Manning's story. And certainly the facts were convincing enough. The boat was only 36 feet long, was on the open sea, and had been searched by three men. The entire area had been searched by the ship itself, and there had been no survivors and no other boat. The sloop had been under way, and its dinghy was still there on the cabin. The last person aboard had disappeared less than an hour before, because the coffee was still warm, and the sloop was nearly 150 miles from the nearest land.

And the clinching argument, the master thought, was that eighty-three thousand dollars lying there on the settee in its satchel. In a world where money mattered above everything, who would believe two people would deliberately and unhesitatingly give away an amount like that just to have each other for the rest of their lives? It was unanswerable, he thought, and he loved them both.

He wondered if they had found the plane. It was rather unlikely, he thought. The whole story was probably true except the ending. It almost had to be, for the benefit of the rest of that gang, who knew everything prior to the actual departure of the boat from Sanport. And if the circumstances of the plane crash were as Manning had set forth, finding it was obviously impossible.

But I don't know any of this, he thought. I'm only theorizing. I don't really want to know, absolutely and finally, because I'd be obligated to report it. They hadn't committed any real crime, unless it was a crime to defend oneself, and he hoped they got away with it.

Mr. Davidson came out of the chartroom. "Fowey Rocks abeam at seven-oh-three, Cap," he said. "Seven miles off. Pretty close in, for northbound."

"Just keep a good lookout for fishermen and southbound tankers," the master replied. "We'll haul out as soon as we drop our tow."

Then he saw what he had been watching for, astern and slightly inshore from the *Freya*. It could be driftwood, or it could be a head, or two heads. He peered aft in the gathering twilight, and almost raised the glasses.

No, he thought reluctantly; if I know, I have to report it. But nobody is interested in the unverified vaporings of a sentimental old man.

He wondered what Mr. Davidson would think of all this moonshine. The mate was a good man, who knew his job, and he had searched the sloop thoroughly. But being a sound and practical seafaring man not given to foolishness, he had, understandably, not bothered to look under it. It would have been easy for them to ditch the diving gear and climb back aboard on the offboard side just before the towline tightened.

They would make it ashore without any trouble, with the life belts. And they probably had enough money to buy some clothes to replace their bathing suits. Not that they would be likely to attract any attention in Florida, however, if they went around in their bathing attire for years.

But they were drifting back rapidly. Would he have to lift the glasses to satisfy himself? Then the objects separated momentarily for an instant before they merged again as one. And one of them had been definitely lighter in color than the other. The master sighed.

"*Bon voyage,*" he said softly. He turned and went into the chartroom with the glasses still swinging from his neck.