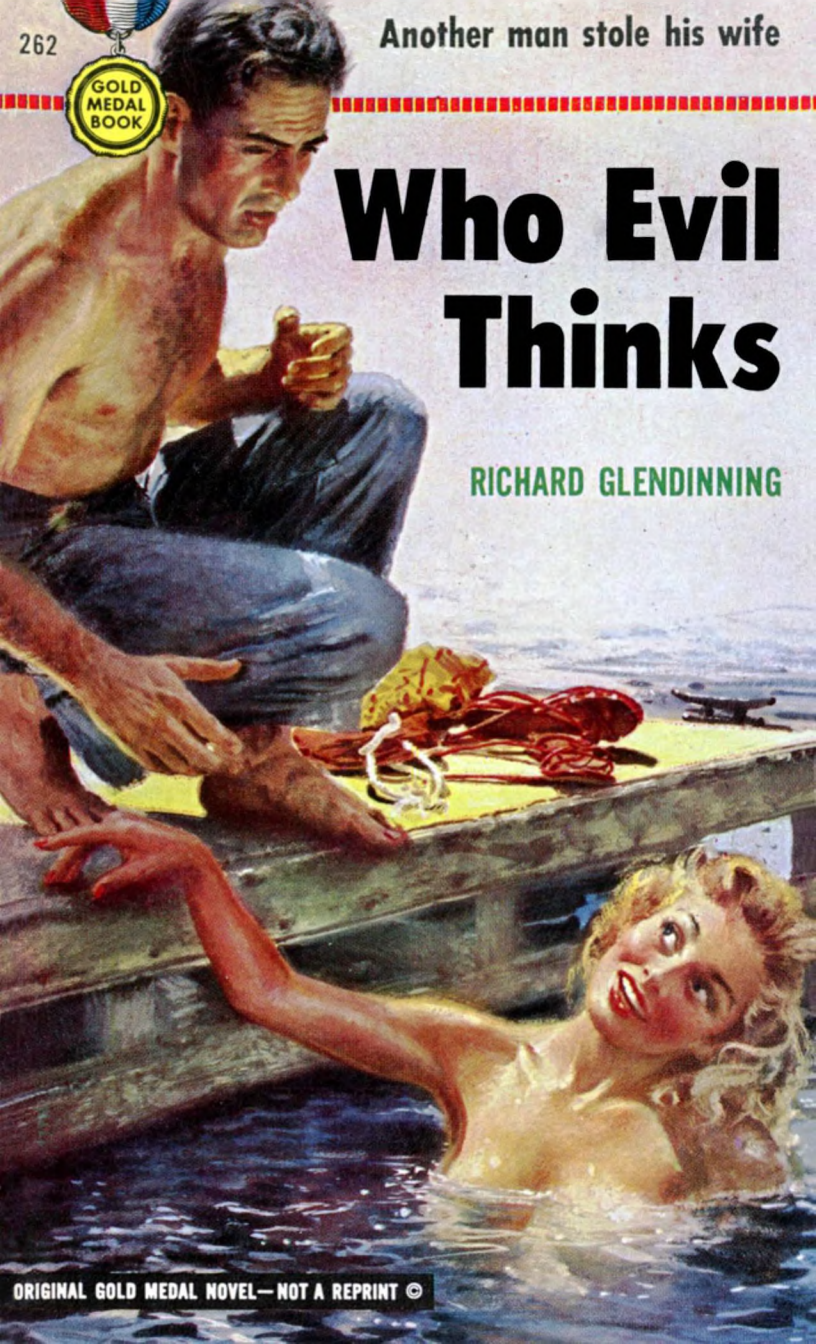




Another man stole his wife

Who Evil Thinks

RICHARD GLENDINNING



ORIGINAL GOLD MEDAL NOVEL—NOT A REPRINT ©

Angry Voyage

"Where have you been?" a voice whispered from the blackness of the boat's cabin. It was Nina. "It's after two in the morning."

"I didn't ask you to wait," he said sullenly. "You have a husband and I'm allergic to bullet holes."

"You're in one hell of a mood," she called. "Maybe for seventy-five dollars—"

He stepped quickly into the cabin, caught her wrists, and sharply twisted them up behind her back. "If you ever say anything like that to me again, your husband won't recognize you when he comes home."

He shoved her from him roughly. "Now let's get on our way."

She started slowly toward him, then stopped and laughed exultantly at what she saw in his eyes.

"O.K., Dan," she said softly. "Let's see how good a sailor you are."

**Another book by Richard Glendinning
that you will enjoy:**

TERROR IN THE SUN

WHO EVIL THINKS

A Gold Medal Original

by

Richard Glendinning



GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

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WHO EVIL THINKS

Chapter One

HE WAS nursing a hang-over with a mug of steaming black coffee when he heard the hollow click of high heels on the dock planking. The tiny cabin, smelling as it did of kerosene and gasoline fumes and the rancid odor of a hundred burned and greasy breakfasts, was a poor place for anyone who felt as horrible as he, but it was better than going up on deck into the sunshine. The sun had a way of stabbing through his eyeballs and knifing deep into the reservoir of his mind where he kept all last night's rye and stale smoke, painful memories and even more painful lapses of memory.

The clicking footsteps stopped alongside the Ginny T. The tide was out, the port was at eye level with the dock, and Dan could see no more of the woman than her red shoes and long, shapely legs. That was all it took to iden-

tify Mrs. Lewis. The hairy, dead-white piano legs next to hers would be her husband's. Dan shuddered and wished to God they'd go away. He felt wretched and wanted only to rest here in the dimness. The last place he wanted to be on a day like this was out on the Gulf in a small, bobbing charter boat, the sun blazing down on his aching head and the Lewises expecting him to be full of fishing lore and salty yarns.

"Captain Taylor," Mr. Lewis called eagerly. "We're here, Captain Taylor." Lewis was consistent, if nothing else. He was always eager, always on time, and always scrupulously careful to give Dan a title. If Lewis could screw up the courage for it, it would be Skipper next, said with a certain nautical jauntiness and a hand snapping a salute from the duck-billed visor of his red fishing cap. He was already calling his wife Matey.

Dan sipped his coffee, then carefully set the cup down. It made a little noise, a faint clink, but not loud enough to carry to the Lewises on the dock.

"Are you there, Captain?" Mrs. Lewis called.

Physically, lady. That's all. The body got home all right last night but the mind is still face down on the bar in front of the last stool hard by the door to the men's room. Joe's Bar, if you want to know.

She probably did want to know. There was a difference in the way she called him Captain. He could almost trace the steps his name would take before she murmured in his ear while her husband wasn't looking. And the name she would call him immediately afterward, when he laughed in her face and told her to grow up, would not be lady-like. That was a damned odd thing. Let a man operate a boat and take fishing parties out for hire, let him be reasonably young, husky, and deeply tanned from days upon days in the Florida sun, and *wham!* he became a kind of feral creature to most women, a glamorous adventurer who supposedly romped from bed to bed and bar to bar. It was the Hemingway influence. Hemingway with an assist from Bogart.

Another set of legs came into view. The new ones were not so long as Mrs. Lewis', perhaps not quite so shapely, but they sported a nice tan and were attractive. They were shod in sensible deck-grippers, not red shoes with French heels. Anne Knowles had a working knowledge of boats and docks.

"I'm sure Dan is aboard, Mrs. Lewis," Ann said.

"He doesn't answer."

"I'll raise him," said Anne, and Dan winced at the determination in her voice. She braced her legs and roared in the strident tone of a bosun's mate, "Don't play possum with me, Dan Taylor."

He knew she'd stay there until Sarasota Bay froze over if he didn't put in an appearance. She was a good kid, just nineteen, but there was a streak of Carry Nation in her and she had made it her personal crusade to keep him on the straight and narrow. She hadn't done too badly, except for an occasional night when he drank himself into sublime forgetfulness. He filled the mug and stumbled up the two steps to the cockpit. The bright sun did everything to him that he had thought it would do and even threw in a few new tortures for good measure.

"Good morning, Captain Taylor," cried Lewis. He was in his middle fifties, full of false bounce and juvenile mannerisms. Herbert Lewis' main fault was that he tried desperately to seem as young as his wife actually was. "I hated to wake you up."

"You didn't."

"Then I guess you didn't hear us calling," Lewis said with a bright smile. His face was lobster red from too much sun and his button nose was peeling. "We called you a coup—"

"I heard you. I was having breakfast."

Herbert Lewis was taken slightly aback. Disappointment came into his face. "Aw, you forgot we wanted to go out today."

Now was his chance, Dan thought. He could say he had forgotten and had made other plans for the day. It was the perfect opportunity to escape Herbert Lewis' exuberance and constant chatter. More important, it would be an escape from Nina Lewis' boldly amused gaze. She was too attractive and reminded him physically of Constance, his ex-wife and the cause of his life's upheaval, though Nina Lewis was honey-haired and Constance a golden blonde. The Lewis woman filled him with an uneasiness that increased each time he saw her. He couldn't afford to get mixed up with her, for he was on probation of good conduct now.

"Perhaps," she said, looking at him directly with her sparkling blue eyes, "he's chartered to someone else."

Before Dan could get in a word, Anne said, "No, he's always grouchy in the morning."

"Really?" said Nina Lewis. A little smile fretted the corners of her generous mouth.

"And he isn't chartered to anyone else."

"Brat," Dan muttered. She grinned at him with her hands on her hips. She was a cocky little thing with short, curly, glossy-black hair and a saucily elfin face. He had known her since she was thirteen, and though she was no taller now than she had been then—she came only to his shoulder—she had filled out beautifully, and her athletic figure always put him in mind of the clean-limbed girls in the sun-lotion ads. He turned away from her and laked a smile at the Lewises. "Anne's right."

"Then let's go!" Herbert Lewis said happily. A kid with a new bike couldn't have been more elated. It was a source of wonder to Dan that this short, plump man with the eager manner should have made more than a million dollars in Connecticut real estate, kept most of it, and put that to work to make still more. Lewis jumped down into the boat and began to stow the picnic hamper under the seat.

"Would you mind giving me a hand, Captain?" Nina Lewis asked.

He reached up. There was more pressure behind her grip than was necessary. He swung her down lightly and she fell against him when her feet touched the deck. She stayed there a moment, as if weak from laughter at her own clumsiness, but when he let go of her hands and stepped back, her laughter broke off sharply and her eyes took on a shrewdly appraising look. She went to join her husband, and Dan climbed up on the dock.

"Why were you trying to duck taking them?" Anne asked.

"I feel like hell. My head is a cotton-stuffed basketball."

"No other reason?"

"What other reason could there be?"

"Don't you think she looks a little like Constance?"

"Superficially. But Constance is a lady and much prettier."

"I'll grant you that."

"Keep an eye out for the telegram, youngster?"

"Stop calling me a youngster. I'm nineteen."

"Is that so?" he said with mock gravity, his brown eyes twinkling. "An old bag."

"Honestly, Dan—"

He rumbled her hair. "Just watch out for the telegram. It will be delivered down here."

"Stop pretending you're so calm. I'll bet you're pins and needles inside."

"I never bet against a sure thing."

"You've earned it, Dan."

"Not alone. If it hadn't been for you, I'd still be the biggest bum on the east coast. You'd make a whale of a broncobuster. When you start to ride, the devil himself couldn't throw you."

"Are you broken?" she asked worriedly. "I wouldn't want you to be—"

"I'm a hell of a lot better man than I was a year, or even six months ago."

"What happened last night?"

"A few drinks. A few more. I wanted to get it out of my system. But if you're worried I'll—"

"I've stopped worrying about you, Dan. You'll do fine. You came back a long way and you won't go down again. A man's entitled to a binge once in a while, and when Ginny gets down here, you'll be in for a long dry spell." She rested her hand on his arm. "If I haven't mentioned it before, I'm proud of you. It's been hard work."

"You're the one who took the beating." There had been the night when she had tried to coax him out of a Main Street bar and he had slapped her, humiliating her in front of a lot of grinning bar flies. But that had been the turning point. Bitterly ashamed of himself, he had finally gone with her, and from then on it had been the tough climb back to self-respect, back to the point where fishing parties would go out with him again, no longer afraid of a drunken skipper in a small boat on the open Gulf. "Thanks, Anne."

He left her then, started the engine, and waited for Herbert Lewis, who got a big kick out of making like a sailor, to cast off the lines. He backed, came about, and headed the Ginny T. down the bayou and into the broad, peacock's-plume bay. He felt immediately better. He thought he would live. The water always revived him, no matter how miserable he felt, no matter how much he dreaded going out. The bay stretched out beautifully

to the emerald necklace of low-lying keys, and the bay and Gulf met in froth-capped waves at the mouths of the passes. The sky stretched out forever overhead and a man had the world to roam in.

Nina Lewis got up on the engine box to catch the breeze above the windshield. Her lips were half parted and her blue eyes narrowed against the rush and song of wind. Glancing at her from the corner of his eye, Dan caught the ecstatic smile and knew that it was not the breeze alone that had put it there. Her honey hair was wind-streamed, and, as she stood on her toes, she thrust her body forward, the full breasts coming taut against the tight red-and-white-striped sweater. She was getting a sensuous pleasure from the wind that washed over her caressingly. The uneasiness grew in Dan. He had to stay clear of Nina Lewis. He was fully aware that a strong physical attraction had arisen between them, but if he became involved with a married woman, it would be a certain way to wreck all the months of hard comeback.

"Who was that girl?" she asked, smiling at her husband's antics as he made a production of coiling a line on the forward hatch.

"Anne Knowles."

"I know that, but *who* is she?"

"Just a kid who loves boats. Her father owns a clothing store on Main Street."

"You should take a closer look at her. She's well developed for *just* a kid. But I'm sure you've noticed that."

"She was thirteen when I pulled her out of the bay. She had a little sailboat and it capsized."

"You're dodging the question. You have noticed Anne, haven't you?"

"I notice very little, Mrs. Lewis," Dan said quietly.

She laughed throatily. "You aren't the kind of man who would miss something like that." She was using Anne's name, but it was Nina Lewis she was talking about. "Can't you call me Nina?"

"Does your chauffeur in Connecticut call you Nina?"

She flushed and looked away. "She must be popular with the boys."

"Anne? If they don't like boats, she thinks they're silly. If they do, she scares them away by making them work like dogs on hers. She keeps it there where I keep mine."

Herbert Lewis, grinning as the salt spray soaked him, was starting back. Nina Lewis watched him poutily, then turned to Dan. "Who did you name the Ginny T. for?"

"My girl."

"Your fiancée?"

Dan's knuckles whitened on the wheel. "My daughter."

"I didn't know you were married."

"I'm not. She divorced me."

"Why?"

Dan's tightening mouth drew white lines through his deep tan. He threw the wheel over hard as if to make for Big Pass. Nina Lewis lost her balance and jumped awkwardly from the box to the deck. She must have turned her ankle because she let out a cry and sat down hard.

"You shouldn't have worn high heels on a boat," Dan said.

She rubbed her right ankle. "Quick-tempered, aren't you?"

"What gives you that idea?" he asked guilelessly.

"Just because I asked a few questions—"

"I thought we were after fish. If it's information you want, you could have found out about me in town."

"Ask any bartender on Main Street," she said with heavy sarcasm.

Dan shrugged his shoulders.

Herbert Lewis hurried to his wife and bent over her solicitously. "What's the trouble, Matey?"

"I turned my ankle a little. I'll be all right. Don't worry, darling."

He patted her hand. "It's those shoes. I asked you not to—"

"I like them and I'll wear them. I won't trip again."

"Well, all right, Matey."

Dan turned from the wheel and looked down at her. "Take off the shoes, Mrs. Lewis," he said curtly. "I'm responsible for your safety."

Her eyes clashed with his, fought a silent duel, and surrendered. She kicked off the shoes.

"I don't know how you do it, Captain Taylor," Herbert Lewis said in bewilderment. "Well, where do you take us today?"

"We'll troll in Big Pass—the mackerel schools should be moving in about now. If we don't have any luck, we'll go out to the grouper banks."

"I sure would like to hook into a tarpon," Lewis said wistfully.

"Just what we need for the wall," said his wife.

He missed the bite in her voice. "In my den!" he cried. "Boy, wouldn't the gang sit up and take notice!"

Dan felt a little sorry for Lewis. The man was so damned sincere in his exuberance that it was impossible to dislike him. But he was a lousy fisherman. If a fish had leaped into the boat of its own free will, Lewis wouldn't have known what to do about it, and by the time he got over his paralysis of joy, the fish would have jumped back into the water.

"Get a jack or a ladyfish on the hook," Dan solemnly told him, "and you'll think you have a tarpon for a couple of minutes."

He came into Big Pass and cut the engine speed. Herbert Lewis was already paying out line as the boat moved in a wide circle, but his wife was staring at her steel rod and white nylon dude with an expression of utter helplessness. The expression was a fake. Dan had shown her how to handle the gear three times before and she had understood him perfectly the first time, for she was quick to learn and was a better fisherman than her husband. Her wide-eyed helplessness and look of despair sent Herbert Lewis into a convulsion of good-natured laughter.

"I guess you'll have to show her again, Captain Taylor."

"I'm all thumbs," she said with an embarrassed smile. "Do you mind, Captain?"

She did everything but bat her eyes at him. It was Dan's inclination to tell her to go to hell, that she was wasting her time and his; but he strongly suspected that Herbert Lewis, blind though he was to his wife's obvious play, would take quick exception to Dan's rudeness. The tension mounting almost to the breaking point within him, he stood behind Nina Lewis, put his arms around her and his hands on hers, and showed her how to handle the reel for the fourth time. She leaned against him, her warm shoulders moving along his bare arms. There was a clean, scented loveliness about her hair and a subtle invitation in the perfume she had touched to the lobes of her ears.

"Understand now?" he asked.

"I think so." She quickly turned her head and looked up at him, her blue eyes only inches from his, and she pressed her back and buttocks hard against him in a way that couldn't have been accidental in a million years.

"Don't be a fool, Mrs. Lewis," he muttered. He stepped away from her and glanced quickly at her husband as he returned to the wheel. Herbert Lewis had seen nothing. He was smiling contentedly, his rod cradled in the crook of his arm, and he was humming off key while he stared at the tip of the rod as if his life depended upon it.

Chapter Two

ANNE WAS WAITING on the dock to receive the lines, and at Dan's questioning look she shook her head. "No, Dan," she said. His shoulders slumped dejectedly and she added with a hopeful smile, "I'm sure the telegram will come tomorrow."

"What's all this telegram business?" Nina Lewis asked, stepping from the boat.

Dan saw the chilliness in her face. It had been like a punch between the eyes when he had called her a fool, but it would not be the name she would resent as much as that he had seen through her so quickly. There had been no trick to that. A schoolboy could have done it without any trouble.

"Now, Matey," Herbert Lewis said, "that's Captain Taylor's own business."

"I'll tell them," Anne said proudly. "I think it's wonderful news. Dan got word that his daughter is coming to spend the month of October with him. He's waiting to hear which plane she's coming in on."

Nina Lewis received the news indifferently but Herbert seemed to melt. "Your daughter! Well, say, that *is* wonderful, all right. Where's she been—away at school?"

"She lives with her mother in New York," Dan said.

"How old is she?" Lewis asked.

"Going on six."

"Six is a good age, but any age in a child is a good age." Lewis looked with envy at Dan. "You're a lucky man, Captain Taylor. We—we don't have any children. My wife, she—" He seemed close to tears, but then he brightened suddenly and put his arm around Nina Lewis' shoulders, squeezing her affectionately. "Nina would love to have a dozen kids. Right, Matey?"

"Yes, Herbert." The smile she gave him was one of gratitude for his gentle understanding. She was the yearn-

ing Madonna with empty arms, an attitude that was so phony in her that Dan looked away in disgust.

"Now," said Herbert Lewis, "what about tomorrow?" He had had a ladyfish on the line. A tarpon in miniature, it had taken to the air in wild leaps to throw the hook, and the fight of fish against light tackle had delighted Lewis. He couldn't wait to get back for more.

"I don't know," Dan said evasively. "If the telegram should come tonight—"

"What makes you so sure your daughter is coming at all?" Nina Lewis asked.

"Constance said so."

"Constance?"

"My former wife."

"Has she remarried?"

"Now, Matey—"

"Mrs. Lewis won't rest until she knows," Dan said acidly. He glared at Nina Lewis. "Yes, she remarried. She married a man named Anthony Maile. He made a couple of million bucks in textiles."

Nina Lewis laughed. "She divorced you to marry a bank vault. What makes you so sure you can believe her? And why all the surprise that your daughter should be coming at all? Isn't it custom—"

"Because Dan got a dirty deal," Anne Knowles broke in. "The court wouldn't even let him—"

"That's enough, Anne," Dan said sharply. A year ago he might have agreed with her, but now he realized that the court had done the only thing possible. In the period between Constance' leaving him and the divorce itself, he had gone to hell. Emotionally shattered, he had been drunk most of the time, and the women he had slept with— Well, the less said about them, the better. "I didn't get a dirty deal. I got a lucky break. The court at least made the proviso that I could have the child for a month if and when I straightened myself out."

"And have you?" Nina Lewis asked sarcastically.

He nodded, looking at her intently. "It was hard work, but it was worth it. Nothing is going to cancel it now." He kept his eyes fixed upon hers until she looked away.

"Well, let's set it up tentatively for tomorrow," Herbert Lewis said eagerly, having caught none of the meanings in the interchange between his wife and Dan. "We'll come down, and if you haven't heard anything—"

"I'm going to shop tomorrow," his wife said.

"Listen to her, will you! *Shop!* She shopped for three weeks, getting ready to come down here. Now she's been in Sarasota a week and she's set to shop again. I swear I don't see what women— Now, Matey, you can shop all you want in New York, where you've got a million stores to choose from and"—he winked at Dan—"a charge account in almost every one. But you're on a vacation now."

"We'll see," she said. She slipped her feet into the red shoes and walked down the dock.

"I must have said something to upset her," Herbert Lewis said in bafflement. He ran after his wife.

"She's a witch," Anne said. "You handled her neatly."

"I feel sorry for Lewis." Dan hosed down the Ginny T. and secured the ports and hatches. When he jumped across to the dock again, Anne was still there. "Don't you ever go home?"

"I'm going now." She fell into step at his side. They walked down the dock and across the vacant lot to the dead-end street where her chartreuse Ford convertible was parked. "Hop in," she said. "I'll give you a lift."

"I feel more like walking, youngster."

"Dan!"

"I can't help it. It just pops out. Anyway, if I start thinking of you as anything but a youngster, your folks won't let you come down here. I've got a hell of a reputation."

"They like you." She looked away. "They liked Constance, too."

"Everyone liked her. Some even loved her."

"And still do. Your torch is showing."

"Love isn't a case of measles. You don't get over it very quickly, and even when you look cured, there's still a carry-over inside you. A pocket of sickness and misery that stays with you forever—if you loved hard enough in the first place."

"As you did."

"That's right." And still do, he thought. A divorce was just some words on paper. It ended the act of love but it was no end to love itself. Not even in his most bitter despondency, when he had blamed and hated almost everyone else, had he ever blamed or hated Constance. Anthony Maile, dapper, fifty-six, and as hard as

steel under his shy manner, was something else again. "Don't ever fall in love, Anne."

She flushed and started to say something, then changed her mind. After a moment she asked, "What are you going to do tonight?"

"Stay out of bars and turn in early. I don't want Ginny to see me looking like a red-eyed monster. Do you think she'll remember me?"

"Of course."

"Do you suppose she'll like me?"

"You know she will."

"I don't know anything. I'm so damned mixed up. I've made an awful botch of things."

"Stop kicking yourself around."

"I'm getting frightened. The nearer the time comes, the shakier I get. That's probably why I took on a load last night."

"Listen to me," Anne said with a firmness and maturity far beyond her years. "She'll remember you, love you, and cry when she has to leave you. That's all you have to remember. Stop worrying yourself into ulcers. And if you feel shaky tonight, take a sleeping pill, not a couple of drinks."

He grinned at her. "Don't worry. I'm staying out of trouble."

"Is that crawly detective still in town?"

"Kurtz? I don't know. I haven't seen him for several days. I hope he's gone for good." Dan passed his hand over his eyes. "There were a couple of times when I wanted to kill him."

"It was a rotten trick. I'm surprised that Constance—"

"She didn't have anything to do with it," Dan said harshly. "You should know her better than that. Anthony Maile was the one who hired Kurtz. Kurtz admitted it. He told me all his reports went directly to Maile. You'd better run along now."

"Good night, Dan." She turned the convertible around in a driveway and sped down the street.

He watched until the car turned a corner and then he walked slowly toward the small house between Orange and Osprey that he had rented for the month of October. He had sold the little place where he had lived with Constance and Ginny; that house had been too full of memories and remembered laughter. The rented house

was impersonal, full of other people's belongings and alive with the ghosts and habits of the owners. The boat was the only home he had. He knew it better than other men knew their concrete-rooted homes, knew it more intimately than most men knew their wives. In that debauched period, the boat was the house to which his stumbling feet had always led him; but he had never taken any of the women to it.

She was a good boat. She had provided a living for seven years, ever since he had come back from a German prisoner-of-war camp obsessed with the desire for an unlimited sky, an unlimited world, and water stretching off in all directions without a barbed fence to block the way. Yet he could understand that the boat could not possibly mean to Constance what it meant to him. At twenty, it had been exciting and romantic to her, but at twenty-six she had wanted something better than a sea-going chauffeur for a husband. She had wanted more security for Ginny. Well, you couldn't blame her for that. The basic drive that kept most people plodding through their daily routines was the endless search for security of one sort or another.

He unlocked the door of the rented house and went inside. He felt like a prowler, but that would soon change, he thought. Fill its strange corners with Ginny's ringing laughter and it would become his home while she was there. And a little bit of Constance would be watching from the shadows, perhaps smiling with him, for Ginny was from the loins of each, and in her was their love.

The thought made the house seem less empty now, and the hope for tomorrow made his loneliness almost bearable.

Chapter Three

HIS BIG MISTAKE was going to the boat at all the next morning. He was threading a wire leader through a yellow dude when he saw Nina Lewis coming down the dock. She was carrying the big picnic hamper she and her husband always brought along.

"Good morning, Captain." She put down the hamper and came aboard. "Do we go or don't we?"

"We don't," he said bluntly, bending on the hook.

"Oh? I take it you got your telegram."

"Not yet, but I'm sure it will come today and I don't want to miss it." He looked up at her curiously. "I thought you were going to shop."

"I changed my mind."

"Well," he said, pointing to another boat down the bayou, "Tex Renow needs the business."

"We like your boat. It's smaller."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lewis, but—"

"Naturally," she said stiffly, "it would be a sacrifice for you to go out today. You could expect to be paid more than usual."

He stood up with a short laugh and tossed the dude into the tackle box. "No, Mrs. Lewis."

"Seventy-five dollars could do a lot for a child."

He turned slowly toward her and studied her cool expression for a moment. "You've just hired yourself a boat, Mrs. Lewis."

"Do you have to keep saying my name as if it were something to rub in?" She was angry and her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides.

"Not at all, Mrs. Lewis." He took the hamper from the dock and set it in the stern. "Would you like a cup of coffee while we're waiting for your husband?"

"He can't go today. He's expecting a call from Connecticut."

Cold fingers played up and down Dan's spine. "In that case, Mrs. Lewis—" He checked himself and thought of the many things seventy-five dollars would buy for Ginny. The child came first. If Mrs. Lewis was bored with her husband, that was her tough luck. Her money would rent her the services of the boat but nothing else. "Let's get going."

He cast off, and when the Ginny T. was into the bay, Nina Lewis got up on the engine box just as she had done yesterday. She was wearing a pair of white shorts with blue piping and a halter that matched the touch of blue on her shorts. The wind whipped back her honey hair and brought to her face that ecstatic smile.

"I hope you see I'm not wearing those high-heeled shoes," she said.

He had noticed the canvas sneakers immediately and had been secretly amused. "I hadn't noticed," he said.

"Well, look at them." She put her long, slim leg straight out and pointed the toes downward. It was a good leg and she was fully aware of it. She smiled at him. "You see?"

He nodded and looked away.

"You're as cold as leftover hash, aren't you?"

"Running a fishing boat is a business like anything else. I don't see any point to making it a palsy-walsy clam-bake."

"And you're quick-tempered, too. Not that I mind," she said with a laugh. "I didn't really mind it much yesterday. It was a nice change. Herbert never loses his temper. He just keeps grinning."

"Why did you come out today?"

"To get more tan. And Herbert insisted. The telephone thing stopped him at the last minute, but Herbert didn't want to disappoint you, so he told me to go out alone with you."

"At seventy-five bucks?"

"You don't think it was my idea to— Oh, now, *really!*"

Dan came into the pass and cut the engine. "Just for a change, Mrs. Lewis, see if you can handle the gear without another lesson."

"Certainly, Captain." She smiled at him and ran out her line expertly. "Nothing to it."

"When we're trolling, try not to get your line fouled up with mine."

"No, sir, Captain, sir. Will I catch a tarpon, Mr. Captain, sir?"

"I doubt it." Holding the boat on a circular course with his left hand, Dan made the rod easy under his right arm and kept his back to the woman.

"Dan—"

He thought she might have got a strike already, exciting her into using his first name. He turned toward her. "Yes?"

"Why don't you call me Nina?"

"I told you I—"

"Damn the business manner, and damn you, too! Call me Nina!"

"Anyway you say," he replied indifferently. He wasn't going to argue with her. He felt too good. He fell into a busy daydream of the month to come.

"Dan!" Nina Lewis cried, snapping him out of his reverie. "I've got something. It feels like a whale."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the bend in her rod. He planted his own in the socket and went to stand behind her. She was jerking the rod as if she were snatch-hooking a mullet.

"Let him run but keep a taut line." The line sang out. He thought she had probably hooked into a redfish, a hard-mouth fish that could easily shake a hook unless given time to swallow it. The fact that she still had the fish, despite her premature jerks, indicated that the red, which had stripped most of the line from the reel, was making a meal out of the steel hook. "Play it. You want to exhaust the fish, not yourself." It was bad business to cheat the paying customer of any fun, so he made no offer to help her.

She finally brought the fish to the boat and he gaffed it. As he had guessed, it was a redfish, and it ran better than twenty pounds. "Good work, Nina," he said sincerely.

Her face was flushed with excitement and her blue eyes danced. "I did it, Dan! I did it by myself!" Putting down the rod, she gripped his arms and leaned against his chest as if to rest after her battle with the fish. She was trembling and he suspected that it was not from weariness but from the strong emotion the duel had aroused within her. Triumphant, she now sought another outlet for her elation. She was looking upon Dan as a more exciting catch to hook and play. She turned

up her face, lips parted expectantly, and thrust herself forward from the hips. "Dan," she whispered, kissing him at the base of the throat. "Dan . . ."

She was warm and vibrant. She was physically exciting. Under almost any other circumstances he would not have hesitated a moment to make love to her. But that was out of the question now. What an unholy mess Constance and Anthony Maile would make of it if they should ever find out that he had played around with another man's wife! It would make no difference to them that they themselves had met while Constance was still Dan's wife. Time blurred and marriage sanctified. But in all fairness to them, he was forced to admit that they had never let themselves become involved in a situation like this. Maile had come to the Ginny T. as a customer, a neophyte at fishing, and had met Constance then. He had been on a vacation, the first in his life, only because his doctor had ordered him to do so, for he had a weak heart. The vacation had stretched out from three weeks to two months and Maile had been with Constance and Ginny almost every day; but it had never occurred to Dan to be jealous or suspicious of a middle-aged man. In fact, he had been grateful to Maile for doing so many nice things for Ginny and Constance. Thus it had come to him as the greatest shock of his life when Constance had asked for a divorce in order to marry Maile.

But he knew that she had never given herself to Maile. She hadn't had to tell him that. In seven years of marriage, he had come to know that Constance, who had a fiercely possessive streak, could not give anything away.

He put Nina aside. "Wait until your husband sees that fish," he said lightly. "He'll be so proud he'll—"

"Who cares?" she whispered. "Dan . . ."

"Why did you marry him?"

"Some people like to keep dogs. I just like to keep a grin. And I like the feel of his money."

"That's what I thought."

"You should know something about that," she said cuttingly. "Your ex-wife married for—"

"Shut up. You wouldn't understand her reason in a million years."

"I understand money and women. I should think you'd hate her guts."

"Why? She didn't want to go on living in a little

house and smelling fish on me, but she would have put up with it if it weren't for the youngster. What kind of life is that for a child? A high-class beachcomber with a—"

"Dan, can't we go out on the Gulf?" She was rubbing herself against him and covering his chest with kisses. "I want to leave the land behind and forget there's any such thing as—"

"We're heading in."

"I brought a wonderful lunch. A thermos of Martinis, fried chicken—"

"Feed it to your husband."

"I've chartered the boat and you'll take me where I want to go."

"I won't charge you. The fish is on me."

She stepped back and glared at him furiously. "You heel!"

"Another thing—Constance is a lady." He turned the Ginny T. toward home at full power. White birds swooped and wheeled overhead and spray-bright boats with bellied sails dotted the turquoise bay. The houses on St. Armands and Siesta Key were pastel touches in the strong sunlight. Nina saw none of it. She sat in sulky silence and stared blindly outward. "Hey, snap out of it," Dan said affably. "Life is too short."

She said nothing. Her sullen silence continued all the way back to the dock.

Anne Knowles was waiting there for him. She bent a line about the bow cleat. "You weren't out very long."

He sensed a suppressed excitement about her. "Did it come?"

She cocked her head and grinned elfishly at him. "Coax me a little."

"You're a devil." He jumped from the boat and, laughing, chased her down the dock to the shore. He overtook her and threw his arms around her to hold her still. "Come on, hand it over."

"All right, all right." She was laughing so hard that she had trouble getting the telegram out of the hip pocket of her denim shorts. "It came about ten minutes ago."

His hands were shaking as he ripped open the yellow envelope, and when he fumbled the wire out of it, the film over his eyes made reading impossible for a moment. Rubbing his eyes, he looked away, and when the world

had stopped its crazy rocking, he looked back at the telegram. He read it quickly. He read it through again.

"What time?" Anne asked eagerly. "Don't keep me in susp—"

"She isn't coming." Bitterness etched his face. "Anthony doesn't believe I've changed a bit."

Tears sprang to Anne's eyes. "Oh, Dan!"

"You could at least lift the picnic basket for me," Nina Lewis shouted from the boat.

Dan wheeled and started angrily toward her, meaning to tell her off in a few hot words. But when he reached the side of the boat, he changed his mind. He looked at her with a stiff smile. "Do you still want to go out on the Gulf?"

She jumped to her feet and caught his hand. "Do you mean it?"

"It would be a crime to waste a good Martini." He got aboard and started the engine.

"Don't do it, Dan." Anne cried. "There must be a mistake."

"There's no mistake. You haven't heard the worst of it. They're all coming down to spend the season. Anthony hopes their schedule will permit them to have me for dinner some night. Lovely, isn't it? He wasn't satisfied to torture me from New York. He wants to shoot from closer range. This town is too small. He knows damn well that I'll have to keep slinking through back alleys to avoid the sight of them, that I'll be afraid to read the paper for fear I'll come across their name, that I won't be able to go anywhere without having someone tell me how well Constance and Ginny are looking."

"Prove to them they're wrong."

"I'm afraid of proving things." He crumpled the telegram into a tight ball and threw it into the water. It floated down the bayou on the tide. "We've wasted a year, youngster."

When he was a hundred yards away from the dock, he thought he heard Anne shout to him. But he was on the engine box next to Nina and their thighs were touching. He didn't look back.

Chapter Four

THE HOUSE the Lewises had rented for the season faced the bay on the south side of town. As Nina turned into the gravel drive with a howl of wheels, the headlights raced along the house and Dan got an impression of wings, terraces, and lush planting. "It's a big place," Nina said, "but I've got to have room to get away from him once in a while."

"He isn't that bad," Dan said uncomfortably. Under the circumstances, he wasn't looking forward to facing Herbert Lewis.

"He's terrible." She braked to an angry stop in front of the house. "He's always wanting to hug me. I can't even walk near him without having him—"

"What are you going to tell him? He'll wonder why you're so late."

"I don't tell him a damn thing, and he won't dare ask me anything, either."

"I can't go in there with you."

"Why not?"

"That should be obvious."

She got out of the car and slammed the door. "I'm not going to touch that stinking fish and I want Herbert to see it. You've got to carry it in for me. Come on." She walked across the terracc and tried the door. It was locked. "That's odd." She kicked up the door mat and found the key. She unlocked the door and stood waiting for Dan. "Are you coming or aren't you?"

"I'd better take the fish around to the back door. The newspaper is soaked through."

"Who cares if it drips on the rug? This isn't our house."

"You don't care about anything, do you?"

"If it's *mine*, I care plenty," she said with surprising vehemence. "I learned about that a long time ago. My old man worked for the railroad. There were eight of us

kids and we never had enough to— Oh, the hell with all that." She stepped into the living room and turned on a light. "Herbert, come see what Matey caught!" In an aside to Dan, she muttered, "*Matey*, for the love of God!"

"He isn't here," Dan said.

"How do you know?"

"It's got that empty-house feeling. He's probably out beating the bushes for you. What should I do with the fish?"

She was leaning over the coffee table to read a note that was weighted down by a heavy green ash tray. "You can throw it away." She turned in a kind of pirouette and laughed at the note, which she now held in her hand. "His phone call came through. Listen to this, will you? 'Matey, I could kick myself for running out on you like this, but Carson says the Stamford deal will fold if I don't handle it personally. Flying up. I may be gone at least a week. Don't be too lonely, and don't worry, I'll make it up to you. I'll call you tonight for sure.'"

Dan looked down at the fish in his hands. "Where do I throw it?"

"I wish you could throw it at Herbert." She put her right hand on her stomach and danced a slow, throbbing step toward him, shifting her torso in a stylized seesaw motion. "He doesn't want me to be too lonely, Captain," she said huskily. "That's an order. A week of not being lonely. Any suggestions?"

He turned away from her. "It's no good."

"Look, this is a week for you to do some forgetting in, too. You got a rough deal today. You've got things to work out of your system."

"A week wouldn't do it."

"But you could get off to a flying start."

He turned and looked thoughtfully at her. He had taken her on the boat as an outlet for his shock and disappointment. He had taken her harshly, bitterly, and with no intention of its ever happening again. But he had found no release in it. The thought of the wasted months, the pain of the blow that had sent him crashing from elation to despondency, and the prospect of the loneliness ahead had been too deeply scoured into him to be erased in a few tempestuous minutes in the tiny cabin. There was too much to forget. His only hope was to build up a hard layer of indifference. Staring at Nina Lewis, he

thought that he would never find a better instructress in the art of indifference than she.

She put her hands on his arms, her body still moving in time to the secret rumba rhythm. Her fingers tiptoed with tormenting languor across his shoulders, met, and interlocked at the back of his neck. She drew herself against him, rising high on her toes; but when he tried to put his free arm around her, she danced away and laughed throatily from the doorway to the bedroom wing. She called softly to him.

"Why don't you do something with that silly fish? And make some more Martinis while you're in the kitchen. I'll meet you in the patio."

Turning on lights as he passed from room to room, he took the fish to the kitchen and crammed it in the garbage pail under the sink. Then he got a tray of ice cubes from the refrigerator. The kitchen was a huge, bright room with cupboards built into every possible inch of it. After a long search through them, he finally found a Martini pitcher. He cracked the ice in the palm of his hand, dumped it into the pitcher, and made the Martinis with no more than a token splash of vermouth. Juggling the pitcher and two glasses, he went back through the house, turning off lights with his elbow, and stepped out to the broad patio that overlooked the bay. There was no moon. His eyes, having adapted themselves to the lights in the house, were of little use to him for the moment. Nina had not yet come out, he thought, and he stumbled across the patio, bumping into some kind of potted plant, in a blind effort to find a table to put the pitcher and the glasses on.

"Why so far away?" Nina asked unexpectedly. "There's a table over here."

He walked cautiously toward the direction of her voice and bumped into the foot of a chaise longue. He finally found the table and set down the pitcher. "How am I going to pour? I can't see the damned glasses."

She struck a match. He poured the drinks by the flickering light. He turned toward her to hand her hers, and in the instant before the flame touched her fingers and she hastily shook out the match, he saw that she was nude. She laughed. "Aren't I presentable?"

"Eminently." He tossed off a drink and, able to see now, poured another. He looked down at Nina. Her

flesh glowed white against the dark covering of the chaise longue. She moved and he thought she was making room for him next to her, but then she swung easily to her feet and walked toward the steps that led to the sea wall and dock. "Where are you going?"

"For a swim. Is the bay clean enough?"

He laughed, wondering why it struck him as funny. "Oh, sure, it's clean enough."

"Come on, then."

"I'll stay here."

"Suit yourself," she said indifferently.

He watched her walk down the dock, a graceful, alive figure moving across the lights on the bridge to St. Armands, a mile away, blacking out the lights one by one and flickering them on again after her passing, like an animated sign that spilled its advertisement across the clean sweep of water. He finished the Martini and poured himself another. They were beginning to get to him and he thought he was cockeyed drunk when he saw green lights bubbling up from the bottom of the bay. He realized then that the water was unusually phosphorescent tonight and that Nina was leaving a churning wake of greenish-white bubbles. She swam back to the ladder and climbed up. When she walked along the dock, she dripped sparklers.

"There's a towel on the chaise," she said from the step. "Bring it to me." He started to hand it to her. "No. You dry me."

"Stop ordering me around," he said irritably. He was feeling the cocktails more than ever. That was natural. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. The fried chicken had gone into the water to feed the gulls, but the gulls hadn't wanted any.

"I'm not ordering you. But that stupid Herbert would break his neck for the chance."

"Oh, hell." He dried her back roughly, rubbing almost hard enough to take the skin off. He hoped to make her cry out, but she gave a shrill, triumphant laugh and squirmed around to throw her arms around his neck and press her body against him. She was a moving, murmuring pillar of flame that licked at him and tried to bring him down in its hungry destructiveness. He resisted but a moment and then gave himself up willingly to the fire. . . .

"What's the matter?" she asked him later.

They were on the chaise. By moving his eyes only a little he could see the town's lights reflected against the clouds to the north. "Not a thing," he said. "Why? Wasn't it good?"

"Yes," she admitted, "it was all right, but it could have been better. You're strong, lusty, fairly good-looking. When Herbert and I first went out with you, I looked at your back and legs and thought how wonderful it would be."

"Nothing is ever as good as you think it will be." He rolled over and put his back to her. "It's only good in the dreaming."

She snuggled against him. "I'm not really worried about it. When you stop fighting it and let yourself go—"

"I'm getting out of here," he said abruptly. He swung his long legs over the side of the chaise and stood up.

"What is she like?"

"Who?"

"Your wife, of course." Nina laughed teasingly. "The woman who spoiled you for every other woman."

"Constance is—well. Constance is wonderful."

"Is she as pretty as I am?"

"That's a stupid question."

"No. I really want to know. Is she?"

"All right," he said solemnly, "but you won't like it. She's beautiful. I've never seen the woman yet who could match her looks."

"You don't have to be so damned truthful," she said sharply.

"I told you you wouldn't like it."

"I can't figure you out at all. She divorced you to marry another man. Now she's coming back to show off her wealth to her old friends and—"

"Constance doesn't have to show off. People have always loved her for herself and wealth never meant anything to her. She never had much extra cash when we were married, but she got along all right. Oh, she wanted nice things and spent a lot of time window-shopping, but I never heard her complain because she couldn't buy everything in sight. The only reason she married Anthony Maile was to make a better life for Ginny. Maile understood that. If you're trying to make Constance out to be greedy, you're off the track."

"What size halo does she wear?" Nina stood up and got a cigarette from the box on the table. Tapping it on her thumbnail, she said, "She's going to deliberately flaunt your daughter in your face. You should want to kill her."

"I can't hate her. I wish I could—it would make everything simpler—but I can't."

"There's a lot of hate in you."

He was buttoning his shirt. "For Anthony Maile," he said with cold rage. "This coming to Sarasota for the season is his idea. He'd think it was a great joke. If I ever get my hands on him—" His thumb and forefinger tightened on the button and snapped it in half.

"I'd like to meet her sometime. It takes a lot of woman to have two husbands." Nina walked with him through the house to the front door. "Technically you're a bachelor with only yourself to answer to, but you act like a husband sick with guilt after a night on the town. You're as thoroughly married to her as you ever were."

"The court put the collar around my neck. Well, I'm through wearing it."

"You mean you don't want to see Ginny?"

"As much as ever," he said grimly. "Oh, the hell with all that. We've got ourselves a week. Let's make the most of it."

She purred and rubbed sleekly against him. "Tomorrow?"

"Why not?"

He left the house and walked quickly to Osprey Avenue. Striding north, he went past the neat homes and manicured lawns. He liked to walk as a change from the boat, and the old battered coupé he had picked up secondhand a couple of years ago spent most of its time parked at the curb. The only trouble with walking was that one saw too much, and he tried to keep his eyes away from the picture windows and the family scenes behind them in the houses along the street. He had no heart for spending another night in the lonely rented house, but he had no choice until he could move his clothes back to the boat.

He was unlocking the front door when he heard the scrape of a shoe at the far end of the porch.

"Who's there?"

"Just me Skipper. Just Ben Kurtz." Kurtz slid from the

deeper shadows as if he rolled on well-oiled bearings. He stood waiting while Dan opened the door and turned on the light inside. "Care to invite me in, Skipper?"

"Why should I? And cut out that Skipper stuff."

"No harm intended," Kurtz said with an unctuous smile. He shoved his greasy brown fedora toward the back of his head and wiped his brow with the flat of his hand. "It's mighty warm. I guess it takes quite some time for a man to get his blood just right for Florida. You got any cold beer in the house?"

"Say what you have to say, then beat it."

"A man can talk better when his throat's cool, now can't he?" The private detective sidled past Dan and went into the house. He wandered around the living room with an air of aimlessness but his glittering black eyes were missing nothing. He went over to the new toys piled at the end of the sofa and, clucking his tongue, he squeezed the stomach of a curly-haired doll to make it cry. "Sad the way things turned out."

"It didn't take you long to get the news."

Kurtz looked around in quick surprise. "Well, that's my job, ain't it?" He let out a wheezing sigh and looked mournfully at the ceiling. "Did you say whether you had any cold beer, Mr. Taylor?"

"Get it yourself."

Kurtz nodded thoughtfully and went back to the kitchen. Waiting for him to return, Dan lighted a cigarette and nervously paced the floor. Each time he made his turn at the end of the room, the doll was staring at him. He put two of the sofa cushions on top of the toys, and when he straightened up, Kurtz was watching him from the doorway.

"Out of sight, out of mind, eh?" Kurtz came into the room with two cans of beer and gave one to Dan. He was no taller than five-seven and suggested a gluttonous raccoon with sharp little ears projecting stiffly from a moon-shaped head and sooty rings under his alert eyes. He wore a wrinkled gray seersucker suit that was stained down the front with food droppings and sloshed beers. Sweat had turned the light-colored suit black at the armpits and across the back. "The kid would of loved that stuff."

"I thought you left town."

"Oh, Lord, no. Well, to tell the truth, I was thinking

about going back to New York the job being over you understand. One way I was kind of glad to be going—I get homesick for Broadway—but in another way I wasn't looking forward to it much. I ain't never had a job as nice as this one. Mr. Maile, now he's been paying twenty-five a day and expenses. I guess you can see how expenses would run up in a town like Saras—"

"I get the picture."

"So you can see how I wouldn't of looked forward to going back. A man in my business don't often run into a case that'll keep him going a year." Kurtz turned the can in his hands and slowly read the label, his thick lips shaping the words. He glanced obliquely at Dan and smiled. "But I'm still here. I was here a couple of nights ago when you tried to drink up all the liquor Joe had in the place."

"And how long did it take you to get off the telegram to Maile?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't send him a telegram. A thing like that seemed important enough to call him long-distance about."

Dan's brown eyes burned into Kurtz. "Your report queered me. You've been watching me for months and you know I've tried to—"

"Why, Mr. Taylor, you've got to understand it's my job to report facts. That's what I get paid for. But as for judging you," Kurtz said in a humble voice, "well, who's Ben Kurtz to judge anybody? A man's entitled to some fun, I always say, and it sure never occurred to me Mr. Maile would take exception to a little bender."

"You knew very well he would if you twisted the facts and made one night in a respectable bar sound like a two-week binge. You'd be perfectly willing to twist them if you thought it would keep you on the job."

"I'll admit it couldn't of happened at a better time for me from a money point of view, but now *you've* got to admit every man's got a right to make a living according to his own lights. And don't start saying I've been hounding you, 'cause I haven't. You might say I'm just a kind of spectator at a fight—and it was a pretty good scrap you put up for a time."

"I lost custody of Ginny to help you keep your filthy job."

"That's a little rough, Mr. Taylor. You got to keep in

mind—now don't you—that it wasn't me drinking at Joe's the other night and having anything to lose by it."

"Get out."

"Before I even finish my beer?" Kurtz asked obsequiously.

"Get out," Dan repeated.

"That's a nasty little temper you got there, Mr. Taylor." Kurtz took a long drink. Beer dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He hooked it with a bent forefinger and snapped it at the floor. "I just stopped by to let you know Mr. and Mrs. Maile'll be getting in tomorrow."

"That soon? They haven't even had time to rent a house."

Kurtz giggled. "Mr. Maile rented the Roebler place over a month ago. I know that for a definite fact, 'cause I'm the gent who found the house for him."

"A month ago?"

"Closer to two months," said Kurtz.

The significance of Maile's act hit Dan with the impact of a heavy blow at the pit of his stomach. He couldn't speak for a moment, and when he finally got out words, he hardly recognized the voice as his own. "He never intended to let Ginny visit me. God, what a laugh he must have had! There I was, working and hoping like a damned fool, while all the time he sat up there in New York and—"

"No sense to get bitter or give up hope." Kurtz snickered behind his hand.

"I could have had testimonials from all the apostles and it wouldn't have made any difference to Maile. His mind was made up long ago."

"Kind of appears that way, don't it?" Kurtz sadly shook his head. "He's a real hard man, that Mr. Maile."

"You're as bad as he is," Dan said angrily. "You made sure his mind stayed made up by feeding him a lot of malicious—"

"Facts, Mr. Taylor, just plain facts is all I gave him, the thing I was being paid to do." He finished his beer and ambled toward the door. "I'll see you around."

Dan went after him and grabbed his shoulder. He whirled Kurtz around roughly. "No, you won't. You're getting out of town. If I see you again, I'll slam your teeth down your throat."

"I guess you're big enough to do just that," Kurtz said

with a little sigh, "but it's a chance I'll have to take. An occupational hazard, you might even say." He lifted Dan's hand from his shoulder and opened the door. "I'm a mild sort of a fella, and if there's ever been anybody less willing to get into a fight, I sure would like to see him. But if you'll take my advice, Mr. Taylor, you'll think twice about what you'll do the next time you see me. Good night."

He went out, quietly closing the door behind him. He was whistling tunelessly as he walked down the street.

Dan stood stiffly by the door and spasmodically clenched and unclenched his big, tanned hands. Only his great contempt for Kurtz had kept him from battering that oily face to a bloody blob. And in the long run, it would have been Kurtz who got the most satisfaction from the beating, for it would have been one more thing to report to Anthony Maile; not that that made any difference now, but it was crucifying to have one's efforts wrecked by the distorted reports of a slimy bum. What made it an even more bitter blow was that Maile must have gloated over every one of Kurtz's reports, good and bad alike, because he alone knew that Dan was working for nothing. Maile had built a wall around him that was even more soul-crushing than the barbed wire of a prison camp.

He went into the kitchen and opened another can of beer. He drank it without enjoyment. Beer was too mild and he was in need of something with an immediate effect. He went to the cupboard and got down the bottle of bourbon. He tossed down a jigger, knowing that the bourbon on top of beer and Nina Lewis' Martinis might well make him violently ill before he could get drunk. He was pouring himself a second when the phone rang. He couldn't imagine who would be calling him; very few people knew he was living here.

He stumbled to the phone. The room was snapping the whip and he leaned against the wall to keep from falling off. "Hello?" he said.

"Dan, I—"

"Oh, it's you," he said, recognizing Anne Knowles's voice. "Go to bed. It's time little girls should be in bed."

"I want to talk to you. Are you drunk?"

"Not enough."

"You're a fool."

"For God's sake, leave me alone. Stop wasting your time and my own."

"Don't worry," she said curtly. "I stopped wasting my time the minute you went out on the boat with that Mrs. Lew—"

"She's of age. So am I."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"Is that what you called to tell me?"

"No." She laughed hollowly. "The Mailes will be here tomorrow."

"I've already heard the happy news."

"They're flying. Constance just called me from New York. She sounded pretty broken up, Dan. She asked me to tell you how sorry she is that you couldn't have had Ginny for the month, but Anthony—"

"That rat. The dirty, sadistic bastard. He wants to rub salt in the wounds. All right, he can try, but it won't do him any good. I'm past caring."

"Constance wants you to have a chance to see the child. She thinks that if you'll try to—"

"Maile will always be able to find an excuse. And I'm damned if I'll spend the rest of my life pointlessly living his way while he pulls the puppet's strings."

"You're a quitter."

"How right you are." He slammed down the phone. It began to ring again almost immediately, but he went to the kitchen to get the bourbon, and when he came back to the living room the phone was silent.

As the liquor took hold of him, he became belligerently angry. Bellowing out his frustration, he stormed through the house to gather together his few belongings and cram them into a battered suitcase. Somehow his foot became entangled in the cord of a floor lamp. He kicked furiously and the lamp toppled over. It crashed, broke against an end table, and knocked the table over, spilling a litter of books, bookends, and ash trays across the floor. He peered around the room, looking for Kurtz and Maile. Sarasota, the whole world was too small to hold him and them, too. Maile was the kind of character who was socially shy among strangers, and his efforts to ingratiate himself were pathetic; but once he knew people, he got what amounted to a sexual pleasure out of dominating them completely.

Dan went back to what was left in the bottle and tried

to find oblivion in it before nausea could find him first. It came at last and he stumbled to his knees. In an attitude of prayer, he stared stupidly at the pattern in the rug, and then he leaned slowly forward until his elbows jarred against the floor. He tried to get up, couldn't make it, and sprawled flat on his stomach. The room turned in tight, soaring circles, rising and dipping, sweeping him into a crazy nightmare in which he was a baby crawling across a patch of slick ice. But his hands and feet, elbows and knees kept sliding out from under him. He finally stopped trying and lay still with his cheek pressed against the dusty rug. The room gave a last sickening swoop, then rested too.

Chapter Five

THE SUN tortured his eyes but the pain at least made him forget the miserable ache he had had in the pit of his stomach upon awakening. He parked the coupé at the edge of the vacant lot and got out. He dragged himself wearily across the lot, the suitcase banging against his knees, and every step was a major effort. Anne was working on her boat, the Seaborne, but when he waved to her she turned from him with a flounce of short, glossy-black curls. That was all right, he thought. She'd be better off if she kept right on ignoring him. She was a good kid.

He clumped down the dock and dropped the suitcase aboard the Ginny T. with a heavy thud.

"Cut out the racket," a voice whispered from the cabin. Nina peeked out. "Where have you been? It's after two and I've been waiting since nine."

"With everyone on the bayou knowing about it," he said sullenly.

"No one was around when I came. I've been in this stinking cabin ever since."

"I didn't ask you to wait."

She looked at him speculatively for a moment. "What do you care if anyone sees me?"

"Your husband may be a guy who goes shooting your boy friends. I'm allergic to bullet holes."

"Well, I've got a better reason than your skin for not wanting to be seen. I'd hate to lose a steady bank roll like Herbert for a fisherman with a lousy temper and big muscles."

"Did he call you last night?"

She nodded. "He hoped I wasn't too lonely. I told him we had a good day of fishing and he said that was just daisy. His words exactly, or maybe he said *super-daisy*. Herbert's a neat man with the apt phrase." She reached

out and took his hand. "How soon are we going out?"

"We aren't going at all." He jerked his hand free. "Go on home, will you?"

"You're in one hell of a mood." Her blue eyes frosted over and her compressed lips drew an ugly line across her face. "Maybe for that seventy-five dollars—"

"Shut up." He looked toward the bridge over the bayou. A blue sedan rumbled across. The woman at the wheel, a blonde, looked something like Constance. Another car, a gray coupé this time, crossed over in the opposite direction, and again he thought the woman in it bore a resemblance to Constance, though it was obvious that this woman was on the plump side and had black hair. He knew now that he would be seeing her in the face of every passing stranger and that his knees would shake and his palms turn clammy each time it happened. He couldn't go through that; not yet. He turned back to Nina. "All right, let's get going."

"Seventy-five dollars buys you in a hurry," she said tartly.

He stepped quickly into the cabin, caught her wrists, and sharply twisted them up behind her back. "If you ever say anything like that to me again, your husband won't recognize you when he comes home." His face white with rage, he applied a bit more pressure to her wrists, then smiled coldly when she winced and tried to squirm free. "I've done plenty of lousy things but I've never hired out at stud."

"You're hurting me."

"I'll hurt you a lot worse than this if you don't take back that crack."

"I do, Dan. I swear I do, darling."

He shoved her from him roughly. "Then let's get on our way."

She looked at him breathlessly, needing no wind in her face to put that now familiar ecstatic smile there. She started slowly toward him, then stopped and laughed with her head cocked to one side. "Hurry, Dan."

He left her and went on deck to cast off the lines and get the Ginny T. under way. As he passed astern of the Seaborne, he saw Anne watching him from a port. He was close enough to see the scorn in her brown eyes. He looked ahead quickly, but when he was a hundred feet beyond the bridge, he looked back once more. A cream-

colored Cadillac went across at that moment and his heart rose in his throat. There was no doubt about it this time. The woman in the passenger's seat was Constance. Her soft golden hair was hidden under a pale blue scarf, but there was no mistaking that fine bone structure. She was looking directly at him and he could almost see the dark pupils in her startlingly violet eyes. She recognized him and opened her mouth instinctively to call out to him, her hand coming up in a half salute. Then the hand dropped wearily and her mouth closed and she turned her head to look toward the front. She was even more beautiful than he had remembered. Anthony Maile, who was at the wheel, had not seen Dan. His mouth was working beneath the gray military mustache, as if he were talking to someone Dan could not see. Then suddenly the top of a pigtailed, straw-colored head came into view as Ginny, sitting between Constance and Maile, leaned forward to look at something. The car disappeared behind a tall hedge of Brazilian peppers.

"Are we in the bay yet?" Nina called.

"Not yet. Make me some coffee."

"A drink would do you more good. I brought along a bottle of bour—"

"I'll have a drink later. Make a pot of coffee, if you know how to do anything as domestic as that."

"I told you my old man worked for the railroad."

"Watch out for the stove. It's tricky."

"If it works, I can work it."

"Just don't turn it up too high." He entered the bay and steered south, making for the bridge that crossed over from the mainland to Bay Island and Siesta Key. He changed his mind and came about to head for Big Pass. He thought about the convertible. It was a relief to know the kind and color of the car they'd rented. Or maybe Maile had bought it since his arrival. Cream. He'd have to duck only when he saw a big glob of cream coming down the street. The thought of having to duck at all filled him with an angry, frustrated despair. It would make him feel like a hunted criminal.

A shrill scream of panic from the cabin jerked him out of his reverie. The scream went up and up, then broke harshly. Dan cut the engine, locked the wheel, and jumped into the cabin.

"Dan!" Nina cried, pointing. "The stove!"

Yellow-blue flames a foot high were leaping up from the front burner. In the small cabin, the flames looked gigantic, large enough to devour the boat. Dan pushed Nina aside and twisted the feed knob to cut off the supply of fuel. The flames dropped and vanished. He turned toward Nina again. She was staring in terror at the stove, her body rigid and her fingertips between her teeth.

"It's all right now," he said gently. "I warned you it was tricky."

The tension went out of her slowly and she gave him a wan smile. "I thought it would set fire to the boat."

"It hasn't happened yet."

"You mean the stove has gone crazy like that before?"

"It feeds too much fuel. When you want to set the flames high, you can only give the knob about a quarter turn. If you just want medium heat, you look at the stove sternly."

"You ought to get it fixed. It's dangerous."

"Not once you get the hang of it. Constance was always at me to get a new one, but when she found out how to work this—" He broke off abruptly, not wanting to talk or think about Constance. He lighted the stove properly. "Now how about that coffee?"

Nina nodded dubiously. She was still shaking from fright and Dan couldn't blame her. There was something especially terrifying about a fire aboard a boat out on open water. Most people shared the fear of it, for almost everyone knew of an incident that made a shipboard fire a very personal thing. Dan's had started one day in his youth when he had gone to see the charred hulk of the Morro Castle lying close to the beach at Asbury Park. The hawkers had been selling postcards and souvenirs of the great disaster. Telescopes that only the night before had given intimate views of the valleys of the moon had been set up along the boardwalk to give sensation-seekers a closeup of the carnage. But Dan had not been able to look. He had had a mental picture of flesh stripped from arms like elbow-length gloves and people screaming to their deaths in the hot water below. He had turned away sick.

He went back to the wheel, and in a few minutes Nina brought him a mug of black coffee laced generously with bourbon. It picked him up wonderfully and made him

feel almost like a human being once more. The sun warm on his bare back, he steered a leisurely course along the shoreline of Siesta Key and then across the mouth of Midnight Pass to follow the white edging of Casey's Key. He found a sense of contentment. This, after all, was where he belonged.

"Can't we anchor here, Dan?"

They were about a hundred yards from the beach, on the offshore side of the sandbar, and the only people in sight were four figures a good three hundred yards down the beach. He nodded and went forward to drop anchor. When he came back, Nina was taking off her bra.

"Wait a minute," Dan said, pointing to the people on the beach.

"Don't be so conventional. They can't see us, anyway."

"How do you know they don't have binoculars?"

"I'm not ashamed of what I've got. Let them take a good look." She stepped out of her shorts and kicked them across the deck. "Come on." She dove into the water and swam a few strokes. Then she rolled over on her back and floated with her hands behind her head.

Dan dove in and swam under the water until he was beneath her. He pinched her, then popped up beside her. She threw her arms around him, trying to drag him under, and they wrestled in the deep water. The buoyancy of the water was an aphrodisiac in itself and their good-natured playing soon took on a breathless urgency.

"Come on, Dan," she cried.

They swam quickly back to the boat and Dan helped her aboard. He glanced over his shoulder, saw that the people were straggling toward the house, and then he turned swiftly to Nina and grabbed her roughly around the waist. He pulled her to the plastic-covered seat across the stern and they lay down with their hungry mouths hot on one another. There was no gentleness in him. It was as if he found her in a receptacle for his frustration and grim-lipped rage. But she was fury, too, and they were fury together, until they finally lay still and utterly weary.

It was getting dark. The lights were going on in the houses scattered along the beach. Nina sat up, hugged her knees, and stared toward shore. "I'm a bitch," she said with unexpected vehemence. "Don't say I'm not, because I am."

"I'm not saying you're not. I agree with you."

She laughed. "You can't make me mad. I know what I am. I've been one all my life." She twisted around and looked at him, her face a pale oval in the gathering darkness. "We were so damned poor that six of us slept in one room, three in one bed and three in the other. The two youngest slept in with the old man and his second wife. . . . You know, Herbert thinks I can't have children. I saw your face. You knew that was so much bunk. Having kids killed my mother and I made up my mind I'd never have one. Another thing I decided—someday I'd have the biggest damn bed in the world and wouldn't share it with anybody." Her face brightened. "Dan, you ought to see my bed back in Connecticut! It's round and I've got it smack in the middle of the room. I can sleep anywhere in it, face any wall I want."

"Is it the biggest bed in the world?"

She nodded and the brightness left her face. "But what good does it do me? A bed like that needs youth in it, but a young man couldn't afford to buy it for me. Oh, well," she said with a resigned shrug of her shoulders, "I made my choice. It was either a young coal miner with a strong back or Herbert. I'd seen enough poverty and overcrowding; enough doing without and skimping to get along. And I could picture the coal miner in a couple of years. His back would be bent and the pores of his face would be black with coal dust. I could hear the kids squawling. Herbert seemed a damned sight better."

"And he isn't?"

"He is. That's why I'm a bitch. He thinks I'm a helpless, cuddly thing to be sheltered and waited on hand and foot. I play along and he gets a big kick out of it. You get to hate yourself after a time. You can live just so long as someone you really aren't, and then you can't stand the sight of yourself in the mirror."

"Who are you really?"

"A tough kid by a railroader out of a washwoman. I cheated, lied, double-crossed, clawed, and kicked to get to the top. The only legitimate thing I ever did was to take a secretarial course. Herbert was my first and last boss."

"I don't understand why you're telling me all this," Dan said uneasily. "We don't have to exchange little secrets just because we—"

"I'm trying to figure out who we were both beating and

pushing a little while ago." She sighed and fell back against him. "And if I could dope out the answer, I'd remember it for the next time we're together. Because this time, my pet, was a very fine time, no?"

He nodded solemnly. She had drained away much of his anger and had been good for him. "We ought to be getting back."

"I suppose so." She stood up. Suddenly she beat his chest. "Oh, God, why can't the young—people like us, people who know how to live and have the zing for living—have the money? It isn't fair."

Dan went into the cabin, got a clean gray shirt and gray wash trousers from the suitcase, and put them on. When he came on deck again, Nina was dressed in her shorts and bra and was pouring bourbon into paper cups. He took his. She raised hers. "Here's to now while we have it." They tossed off the drinks, had another, and then Dan brought Ginny T. about and headed for home.

Back at the dock, Nina said, "Are you coming back with me?"

"Not tonight."

"It's just as well. You're exhausting and I need sleep."

"You can give me a lift to Five Points." They crossed the lot and walked to where she had parked her car a couple of blocks away. They drove in silence to the center of town.

"When again, angry man?" she asked, letting him out.

"I don't know."

"Did we lose something?"

"I don't know the answer to that, either."

"I hope not." She shifted gears smoothly and turned the corner into South Pineapple.

Dan stood indecisively for a moment, then crossed the street with the light and went to Joe's place for a roast beef on rye and a glass of beer. It was a good enough place but tonight it seemed shabby and full of shabbier memories. He had made a drunken ass of himself in here more times than he wanted to remember. And it was in here that he had slapped Anne. A lot of people had seen that little performance and the account of it had inevitably got back to Anne's father. But Jim Knowles was an understanding man. He had never said a word about it to Dan. The beer tasted flat. Dan paid his money and went out to the sidewalk again. This was his town and he knew most

of the people, but tonight he felt like a vagrant who had just drifted in and would soon be asked to leave. He started aimlessly up the street, a lonely man without destination, and his mind was as empty of conscious thought as the minds of all men who stand on the bridge between noplac and nowhere.

"Dan." His name came softly, gently, almost a whisper.

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared fixedly ahead, afraid to look for fear it might only be an echo in his mind, yet just as afraid that the voice might be real.

"Dan," Constance called again.

He turned stiffly from the hips and saw her sitting in the cream-colored Cadillac at the curb. Ginny was not with her and the driver's seat was empty. His first instinct was to run, but Constance held him with her steady violet eyes. He went toward her leadenly and stopped when he was five feet from the car.

"Hello, Constance."

"How are you, Dan?"

"Fine, fine."

"You're looking well."

That was a lie and they both knew it. He had lost weight since she had seen him last, and his eyes were still red-rimmed from last night's drinking. He was acutely conscious of the stubble of black whiskers on his face. But what else could she have said? Small talk. Lightness. The correct thing to say. Two people who had met casually a few times before, seeing each other again at a cocktail party and saying all the proper things because they had no backlog of memories to share.

"Oh, sure, I'm feeling great," he said. "Never better. You're looking well, too." At least that much was the truth, for he had never seen her looking better. She wore no scarf to hide her hair now and it had the soft sheen of old gold. It was parted at the middle and pulled back severely to the back of her neck where it was caught with a navy-blue ribbon that matched her expensively simple dress. His pet name for her had been Golden Girl, and it still suited her. There was gold in her eyebrows, even a golden cast to her beautiful complexion, but the long lashes over the violet eyes were startlingly dark.

"Thank you, Dan."

He wanted to ask her about Ginny, but he somehow found it impossible. He couldn't do it without letting

some of his bitterness find its way into his voice. He was grateful to her then when she said:

"Ginny is fine. She had a bad cold a couple of weeks ago, though."

"I'm sorry," he said worriedly. "Is she—"

"Oh, she's fine now. It didn't last long." She looked away for a moment, then looked back at him. "We're putting her in school down here for the season."

"She's smart. She'll do fine." He hated this sham. The effort to appear casual, when she must have known how deep his disappointment in not having Ginny went, was taking too much out of him. He scuffed his feet. "Well, I guess I'll be getting along."

She nodded. "It was nice seeing— Oh, here comes Anthony."

Dan turned quickly and saw Maile coming out of the news store with a copy of *Fortune* under his arm. Maile walked like a soldier, his chin out, his back straight, his shoulders stiff. His gray eyes flicked over Dan, moved to Constance, came back to Dan. He smiled briefly. He was a well-knit, gray-haired man of medium height and weight. His eyes, set deeply under shaggy gray eyebrows, were a strangely deceptive gray, as changeable as curling smoke, shifting quickly with each shift of emotion from a shade almost as pale as eggshells to the tone of cold slate.

"Well, well, Dan." He made no move to hold out his hand, which suited Dan just as well. There was nothing shy about Maile at this meeting. He was on top of the situation. "You've lost some weight."

"Have I?"

"Don't you think so, Constance?"

"I think he looks quite well, Anthony."

"Perhaps so." Maile's left hand lifted in a gesture of a man who wanted no further argument. He smiled at Dan as if he knew some secret joke. "You'll have to visit us some evening."

Dan laughed hollowly to hide his rising anger. "I don't think—"

"You really must, Dan," Constance said. "We've taken the Roebler house. Do you know the one?"

"Quite well." It was one of the biggest houses on the bay in the Indian Beach section.

"Then why not come to dinner tomorrow night?" she

asked, and he couldn't tell if this again were one of those casual remarks, the informal invitation extended at a cocktail party. "We eat at seven."

"I don't think Dan does much eating these days," Maile said, still smiling at that secret joke. "Maybe a drink would be more attractive to him." The words were biting but Maile tossed them off blandly.

Dan jammed his fists in his pockets and looked coldly at Maile. "I'll be there at seven—for dinner." He had an idea what would be in store for him, but he was willing to take all Maile dished out if it would give him a chance to see Ginny.

"Umm," Maile said. He nodded curtly and got in the car.

"I understand you flew down," said Dan.

"That's right," Maile replied.

"Did you buy the car in town?"

"Yes."

"It's a lot of car to pick up on such short notice." Dan made a great show of admiring the convertible's color and styling. His eyes came back suddenly to Maile's. "You must have ordered it over a month ago, about the time you rented the Roebler place."

Maile said nothing, but darkness gathered in his eyes. He held Dan's icy stare for a moment. Then, muttering something unintelligible, he started the motor and drove down the street.

Striding back to the boat, Dan wondered how it was possible to hate a man as much as he hated Anthony Maile, and to love a woman as much as he now knew he still loved Constance. He sensed that there had been sympathy for him in her eyes; not that he wanted anyone's sympathy, but at least she understood how difficult the unexpected meeting had been for him.

He was making up the bunk for the night when he heard footsteps shuffling uncertainly along the dock. He went on deck and waited for the visitor to step within the circle of yellowish light that shone through the open port.

"It's just Ben Kurtz, Mr. Taylor." He walked as cautiously on the dock as if he were teetering along a steel girder on a high bridge. He stopped, wiped sweat from his face with the sleeve of his gray seersucker coat, and looked sheepishly at Dan. "Docks and boats make me

nervous. When a man's afraid of water, he watches his step."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Dan said irritably.

"Maybe for you there ain't. But when I was a kid, around nine, another kid pushed me off an East River dock. I came near drowning—couldn't swim a stroke—and I guess I would of drowned if a tugboat skipper hadn't of hauled me out. I ain't tried to swim since and never intend to learn how to. That's one reason I do all my fishing off bridges down here."

"All right, now I know. Beat it. Last night I told you—"

"To get out of town? Funny thing, that's just about what I have in mind to do. Care to invite me aboard for a little talk?" He didn't wait for Dan's answer. Giggling nervously at the three feet of water between dock and boat, he leaped desperately for the deck and settled himself comfortably on the stern seat, his chubby legs crossed at the knees.

Chapter Six

"WELL, NOW, Mr. Taylor, first off I want you to know I feel sorry for you. I mean that. I'm a bachelor myself, always have been, but I'm an emotional man."

"Never mind the hearts and flowers. What do you want?"

"I've been searching my mind to find any excuse for Mr. Maile's coming here with your daughter and wife—"

"Ex-wife."

"Well, yes, if you want to be that exact about it. But I just can't figure out why he'd want to flaunt them up to you." Kurtz leaned forward confidentially. "A man's got a right to see his child under normal circumstances, I always say. That's the *natural* way of doing things."

"Kurtz," Dan said, standing grimly over the sloppy private detective, "I told you last night that if my child isn't with me, I can blame most of that on you."

Kurtz looked deeply offended. "Oh, I can understand your meaning well enough, but you've got to remember that I just report what I see to Mr. Maile."

"Twisted to suit your purposes."

"Ah," Kurtz sighed, slapping his fat thigh, "now we're coming right to what I was getting at. It just might—I'm not saying it is, now—but it just *might* be that I phrased my report wrong and that Mr. Maile got the wrong meaning out of it. If that's so, a thing like that would sit on my conscience. I'm an honest man, Mr. Taylor, and a man who always listens to what his conscience has to say. As my daddy used to say—"

"What's that lily-pure conscience telling you now?"

"That I'd better do what I can to straighten out any damage I maybe did—always provided," he added, rolling his wet, black eyes, "that Mr. Maile got the wrong impression out of my report."

"So?"

"So I suppose I could tell him that he got me all wrong and that that bender you went on the other night wasn't much of a one when all's said and done, and that you've completely reformed."

"That would mean the end of your job down here if he believed your story."

"Well," said Kurtz, peering off into the darkness, "I think I mentioned last night that I'm getting kind of homesick for Broadway. But naturally I wouldn't want to give up a good thing like this here job without getting something to make it right for me."

"How much?"

Kurtz turned his head quickly and looked with sharp inquisitiveness at Dan. "I don't believe three hundred would be too much or too little, do you?"

"You greasy bastard. I ought to—"

"Oh, now wait a *min*-ute, now. You can see how I'd stand to lose a whole lot more than three hundred out of this. That's less than two weeks' pay, to say nothing of the expenses, and the fact of the matter is, I'm only making this offer to you because of a kind of a feeling I got in my heart. I think a man ought to see his own kid." Kurtz gave a small sigh of disappointment. "Oh, well, if you ain't interested, just forget the—"

"I didn't say that."

"What *did* you say, Mr. Taylor?" Kurtz asked quickly.

"Give me a minute to think it over."

"Why, sure," Kurtz said magnanimously. "Take all the time you want." Humming tunelessly, he examined his dirty nails.

Dan knew that this was the crudest kind of blackmail. Blackmail with an ironic twist. He would be giving Kurtz money not to cover up for something he had done, but for something he hadn't done. He would be paying Kurtz to retract a lie and, in its stead, give Maile a straightforward report; it could mention that Dan drank—hardly a sin—but that he was certainly not an irresponsible drunkard by any means. At least, he amended to himself, he had not been irresponsible for more than six months up to the moment when the telegram had come saying that Ginny would not be visiting him. But he hadn't sunk too far this time. Given fresh hope of seeing his child, he would have no difficulty straightening himself out.

"All right, Kurtz. I'll buy it."

"The three hundred, Mr. Taylor?"

"I'll have it for you in the morning."

"Good." Beaming, Kurtz stood up with a little bounce, and after a timid pause to judge the distance, jumped to the dock. He took a few steps into the darkness, then came back into the pale light, a silky smile on his oily face. "And for just a few dollars more, Mr. Taylor, I could forget—Aw, but we can talk about all that some other time."

Dan stared hard at him. "No, Kurtz," he said coldly. "Let's talk about it now. Forget what?" He stepped easily to the dock and stood rigidly at the end of it, his eyes fixed upon Kurtz's sweating face.

"Oh, it ain't nothing to go into now. One thing at a time, I always say."

Dan stepped forward quickly and put his hands on Kurtz's arms. "Now, Kurtz, now."

"Let go of me," Kurtz whined. He struggled futilely to free himself from Dan's firm grip.

"Forget what?"

"Let go of my arms and I'll tell you," Kurtz gasped. Dan let go of him. Kurtz jerked down the hem of his gray coat and backed away uneasily. "Nina Lewis."

"What about her?"

"Well, now, Mr. Taylor," Kurtz said with a pathetic attempt to strike a note of cocky camaraderie, "we're both men—lonely men, you might say—and we understand how a man can need a woman. But I wonder if Mr. Maile, getting along in years like he is, understands a young man's needs. Eh?"

"Keep talking," Dan said. He was having trouble keeping the shakiness out of his voice.

"Well, I could cover up easy enough on the drinking business, but that Mrs. Lewis—" Kurtz threw up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "She's something else again. You take that scene there on the patio, for instance, with the two of you sprawling all out like you were on the chaise—"

"You watched that?"

"Why, Mr. Taylor, sure I did," Kurtz said guilelessly. "That's my job, ain't it? Her husband out of town and the two of you scrounging around on the patio, and then again going out on the boat and coming in after dark

without any fish, and— Well, I just can't help asking myself how Mr. Maile would take to all of that. On the other hand, I ain't the kind of a man to spoil another man's fun—the good Lord knows I don't mind grabbing some myself every now and then—and I don't suppose Mr. Maile would have to know a single thing about all that." Kurtz made another critical examination of his nails. "The way I figure it, seven hundred more—that would make it an even thousand dollars, right?—would get me back to old Broadway and tide me over pretty well until something breaks."

And when nothing broke, Dan thought, or even if it did, Kurtz would be back for more. There was no end to blackmail.

"Now, it's possible you ain't got that much ready money," Kurtz went on, "but I expect Mrs. Lewis would be mighty willing to give you enough to meet an emergency. She'd take a real personal interest in a thing like this."

"Have you said anything to Maile about Mrs. Lewis and me?"

Kurtz drew himself up in righteous indignation. "I told you before I'm an honest man. Do you think I'd come to you with this proposition if I already talked to Mr. Maile about it? No, sir—not Ben Kurtz!"

When Kurtz tired of peanuts from Dan, he would turn to Nina directly for bigger money. It would do no good to pay Kurtz for his silence. When Nina had given him all she could spare without making her husband suspicious, the little toad could then go to both Herbert Lewis and Anthony Maile and offer to sell them valuable information at a fat price. Looking intently at Kurtz and his oily grin, Dan saw the wall that would always stand in his way. When the only passage through a wall was by way of a gate with a prohibitively high toll, a man had no choice but to smash the barrier down.

"I've been wanting to beat the hell out of you for months," Dan said. "I didn't dare because you would have reported it to Maile. But I don't care now. I'm damned if I'll spend the rest of my life under your thumb."

He started toward Kurtz.

"Stay away from me!" Kurtz cried, backing along the dock. "Lay a hand on me and I'll—" His foot knocked against a boat hook. He stopped quickly to snatch it up.

He cocked it at his shoulder like a baseball bat. "Come any closer and I swear you'll be sorry."

The threat meant little to Dan. Kurtz might be able to get in one hard blow with the long pole, but before he could get into position for another swing, Dan would be all over him. Dan kept moving it. Kurtz swung and Dan, turning his head, took the blow on his raised shoulder. Kurtz retreated hastily, trying to bring the pole up again before Dan could reach him. He swung in the same haste. Dan ducked. The grappling end whistled harmlessly over his head. The momentum of the wild swing spun Kurtz halfway around and threw him off balance. He took a stumbling step backward, caught his foot in a coiled line, swayed drunkenly, then teetered backward and fell off the dock. His strangled cry of terror broke off sharply as he sank under the water.

It came to Dan then that Kurtz could not swim. He knew he could not let Kurtz die now. It would be almost impossible to make anyone believe that the death had been accidental.

Kurtz's head bobbed up. His fedora had come off, and in the strange ability of the mind to register a photographic impression in a split second when under emotional tension, Dan saw Kurtz's bald head fringed with feathers of oily black hair. It was the first time he had ever noticed that Kurtz was bald.

He snatched for the detective. Kurtz went under just as Dan touched his coat collar.

He kicked off his shoes and dove in after Kurtz. The water wasn't much more than seven feet deep here and he thought he would have little trouble, but though he searched thoroughly in the area where Kurtz had disappeared, he could find no trace of him. The only other place he could be was under the dock, carried there by his frantic efforts to save himself. Dan swam under the wooden crossbeams and went to the bottom. He found Kurtz immediately. Grabbing him under the arms, he hauled him to the surface. Somehow he managed to push and pull Kurtz's weight up on the dock.

He stretched him flat on his belly, extended his right arm overhead, and rested his check on the elbow of his bent left arm. Straddling Kurtz's right thigh, he went to work on him with artificial respiration, pressing down with the heels of his hands for the count of two, then

releasing, then applying the pressure again. He lost track of time. He was conscious only of the need to maintain the steady, unhurried, rhythmic pressure. His arms ached with weariness as he pumped oxygen into Kurtz's flabby chest.

After a long while, Kurtz stirred. He struggled to get up. But Dan held him down to make him rest. Kurtz was going to be all right, he thought with a sob of relief. The desperate need to save Kurtz's life and the horrible realization of what it might well mean to him if he failed had taken a great deal out of him. There was a hard lump in the pit of his stomach and he was trembling violently from head to toe.

"Let me up," Kurtz mumbled.

"I'm going to get you a doctor."

"The hell you are. I don't want nothing off you."

"You'd be dead right now if—"

"My God," Kurtz said, "are you expecting me to thank you for pulling me out? I wouldn't of even gone in in the first place if it wasn't for you."

"I'm not expecting any thanks," Dan said grimly. "If you'd chosen some other place for it, I would just as soon you'd drowned." He got up slowly, his legs still. His hands and fingers felt like knotted boards. He clenched and unclenched them time and again to loosen them up. "All right, Kurtz, whether or not you go to a doctor isn't any of my worry. Beat it."

Kurtz stumbled to his feet. His soggy suit was plastered to him. He reached instinctively toward his bald head. "Where's my hat?"

"Down the bayou. Go swim after it."

"You ought to be in burlesque, you're so damn funny." Kurtz's little black eyes glittered with bitter rage as he stood on the dock, the water dripping from him and puddling at his feet. But Dan saw something else in the eyes, too. Kurtz had come very close to death. It had touched his shoulder, embraced him, and the awareness of it lay exposed in his widened pupils. Far from being grateful to the man who had snatched him back, there was in him a burning hatred for Dan, for he would always consider Dan responsible for his having come so close.

Kurtz would now be a greater menace than ever. Perhaps it would be wiser to go along with the blackmail scheme. Scrape up the money, even if it meant mortgaging

the boat, to pay him off. Dan couldn't afford Kurtz's enmity.

Kurtz laughed suddenly. "Forget it," he said. "You'd be wasting your breath."

"I don't get you."

"I can read you like a book. You're thinking you can keep me happy by coming through with the money." He shook his head. "Not on your life. I used to think I'd do anything for dough, but I'm finding out something new about myself. If you should offer me a million bucks right now, tax clear, cash on the line, I'd tell you where you could tuck it. I'm going to make you sweat."

Kurtz turned and stared with a shudder at the dark water around the dock. "I told you about when I was a kid and how this other guy shoved me in." He looked back at Dan. "You're one of those big brave guys, ain't you?"

"Not so very. I've been afraid lots of times."

Kurtz snorted. "I hate rugged characters like you." His mean mouth hardened. "But you can be cut down to size. The guy who shoved me into the river that day was one of those show-off brave birds, too. He knew I was afraid of the water but it didn't mean nothing to him. He shoved me in just the same." Kurtz chuckled. "He wasn't too big to be cut down. It took a long time, but I wasn't in any hurry."

"Where is he now?"

"He's dead," Kurtz said flatly, "and I didn't have to lay a hand on him. He was sixteen by that time and stealing stuff around the docks. I told the cops and they were waiting for him one night and they shot him."

"You told them where he would be?"

"What do you think?" Kurtz asked disdainfully. "You're going to wish somebody'd shoot you, and maybe somebody will. I was going to leave town tomorrow, but now I think maybe I'll stick around. You'll keep wondering when I'm going to talk to Maile about you or when I'm going to drop a word in Herbert Lewis' ear. You'll keep wondering, and then *boom!* when you're least expecting it."

"Lewis is out of town."

"Don't you think I know that? I can wait. I waited seven years that other time." Kurtz stared fixedly at Dan, as if to memorize every plane and line in his face, and

then he plodded down the dock until he was swallowed by the darkness. "You'll be seeing me," he called back, "and even when you don't see me, you can bet your boots I'll be someplace around."

His voice grated on Dan's nerves like fingernails dragged across a blackboard.

Chapter Seven

THE DINNER at the Mailes' was the most miserable one Dan had ever sat through. The pompano *en papillotte* tasted like sawdust in his mouth and he could do no more than poke at it with his fork. Constance sat at the end of the long table with her eyes fixed upon the centerpiece of flowers most of the time. She had made a few attempts to strike up a light conversation but they had fallen flat; Dan had made no offer to help her, and Maile was the sort who would supply little to any conversation that he himself had not started. Yet only Anthony Maile seemed at ease and unaware of the tension. He kept up a line of his own chatter, himself giving the replies to his questions and comments when he could get no response from Dan. The chair opposite Dan's was empty. He thought it was Ginny's, but though he had heard her laughter somewhere at the back of the house, he had not yet caught so much as a glimpse of her.

Maile finally pushed back his plate, patted his stomach, and, smiling at Dan, said, "I never knew you to be so quiet. Aren't you feeling well?"

Dan looked at him grimly. "I don't shine at this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" Maile asked innocently.

"Second-act curtains by Noel Coward."

"I thought you were a modern."

"You thought wrong," Dan replied tersely. He looked at Constance and saw that she was frowning slightly. She seemed to sense that the conversation was steering into dangerous waters without her being able to do anything to alter the course. Dan looked back at Maile. "This is the time for bright chitchat and light remarks. But I'm not the man for it."

"You had some college, didn't you, Dan?"

"Two years."

"Then quote Shakespeare when conversation lags." Maile laughed and leaned toward Constance. "Are we to have no dessert tonight, my dear?"

"Certainly, Anthony," she replied quietly. She rang for the servant, and while she waited for the girl to clear the dinner plates, she smiled at Dan. He knew she meant to set him at ease. "How is the boat?"

"In great shape."

"Have you had a good year?"

"No complaints."

"After a reluctant start, eh?" Maile said. "Have you seen our good friend Kurtz lately?"

Dan's fingers tightened about the delicate stem of the wineglass. The glass was still full, though Maile had been urging him all through dinner to drink up and have some more. It had been the same thing with the cocktails before dinner. Maile had done everything but force the glass to Dan's lips in a vain effort to make him drink the Martini.

"I saw him last night," he said carefully. Afraid he'd snap the stem, he dropped his hands to his lap and clenched them. "I don't appreciate your putting him on my tail."

"It seems to me," Constance put in quickly, trying to change the subject, "the tourists are coming down earlier than ever this year."

Maile looked at her sharply and turned to Dan. "He's quite a fellow, that Kurtz."

"He's a louse."

The Bavarian cream was brought in. Maile tasted his immediately and smacked his lips over it. "Excellent, Constance. . . . A louse, you say? Oh, I suppose so, but he does his work to my satisfaction. Really, Constance, I don't know when I've tasted a better—"

"Oh, my God," Dan muttered.

"Something wrong, Dan?" Maile asked solicitously. He looked sadly at Constance. "My dear, I don't believe Dan likes Bavar—"

"Have you been taking many parties out, Dan?" she broke in.

"Enough to make a living."

"I've developed into quite a fisherman," Maile said affably, "thanks to you, Dan. We went to the Rockies last year and I got my first crack at trout. It's great sport."

"That so?" Dan said indifferently.

"But I'll still take the Gulf. I've been telling everyone about the Gulf and the fun we had on the Ginny T."

"It was a swell time all around," Dan said.

Maile either missed the bitterness in his voice or chose to ignore it. "She's a great boat. I wouldn't mind going out on her again sometime."

"Anthony," Constance said, "under the circumstances, perhaps Dan wouldn't want to take—"

"Nonsense," Maile declared. "A dollar is a dollar. Right, Dan? Certainly it is. You know, I'm a little surprised you haven't changed the name of the boat."

"Why should I?"

Maile smiled vaguely.

"Ginny is still my daughter," Dan said coldly. It was his first chance to bring her name into the conversation. Perhaps, if he talked about her enough, they would take the hint and let him see her. "Did she like the Rockies?"

Maile guffawed. "Since when do you take a child along on a honeymoon?"

Constance stood up quickly. "I believe we'll have our coffee on the terrace."

"No coffee for me," Maile said. "It keeps me awake. Not only that, but . . ." He tapped over his heart. "I have to be careful. Doctor's orders. Which reminds me, I've got to take that awful medicine."

He went to his bedroom and Dan followed Constance out on the terrace. She sat down on the white wrought-iron settee behind the coffee table and silver service. Two candles in glass hurricane shades flanked the service, and as Constance leaned forward to pour the coffee, the candles cast a soft upward light on her face, emphasizing the high cheekbones and lovely chin. She had that rare beauty which could look right in any setting. She seemed as born to this atmosphere of candles, silver, and quiet dignity as she had belonged aboard the Ginny T. with her fine long legs braced against the roll and pitch of the deck. She acted now with the poise and confidence of one who had always known great wealth, of one who could boast that she had never set foot in her own kitchen or performed a menial task.

One of the secrets of her charm, he supposed, was her ability to throw herself into a role and live it to the hilt. She had been an orphan at sixteen, she had told him, and her parents had never had much money, and yet he had

once heard her tell a group of women that her father was one of the important men in the steel industry. She was a third-generation American, and yet, interested in the prestige of the D.A.R., she had fabricated and authenticated a family tree that would have made Washington's descendants green with envy; she had even come to believe it herself, so completely had she played the part. But when he had mildly chided her for living under false colors, she had smiled at him.

"It's only wrong when you do it for gain," she'd said.

"What about this D.A.R. business?"

"Wait and see."

He had had a big laugh out of it when, a few weeks later, she had graciously declined a bid to join the organization, and her reason for refusing had given her a new stature around town. "I'm sorry," she'd said with a straight face, "but I don't believe in living on the past. I think the future is so much more important, don't you?"

Watching her as she performed the little ceremony over the silver service, remembering that the best she had ever had before was an aluminum percolator—but probably the same brand of coffee—he was hard put to define the golden beauty of this girl whom he had met in a U. S. O. canteen in New York. He knew only that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He would always think so. There wasn't enough liquor in the world to make him forget the perfection of face and form or to make him forget what they had once been to each other.

"Cream and sugar, Dan?"

"Black."

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten."

She might have forgotten many things, but not that. He had been too insistent upon strong, black coffee. He thought she was letting him know in an indirect way that she was Mrs. Anthony Maile, a woman he was meeting for the first time, and that there was no past for them.

She handed him the demitasse. "You look fine, Dan."

"We went through that last evening."

Her violet eyes met his steadily. "I'm sorry for the way everything turned out for you."

"Are you?"

"I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"I believe you well enough."

"Hiring Kurtz to spy on you wasn't my idea. I would rather have given you the benefit of the doubt and let you have a fair chance to see Ginny."

"Let's get one thing straight," he said bluntly, "and it took me a long time to see this. I was a first-class bum when the divorce went through. I wasn't fit to have Ginny then, and there was no assurance that I ever would be fit. All right, I've got over the feeling I had then. But this latest— Well, I think it was damn rough. I didn't have that coming to me. Oh, hell, I shouldn't have come here tonight. It's nothing but another way to stick pins in myself."

"You're right, Dan. You shouldn't have come. Oh, let's talk about something else. How is the boat? Have you done any work on her?"

"Nothing unusual."

"And the stove?" she asked with a faint smile. "I'll bet you never got around to fixing it."

"No." He walked across the terrace and stared out at the bay, his back to her. "We can't even talk. There's nothing safe we can talk about. To all intents and purposes, we're strangers, and I'm damned if I'll sit around and discuss books and movies. Everything else has a loot in the past." He wheeled and looked down at her. "You must see that, too."

"I do, Dan, but there isn't—" She looked toward the door. "Did you take it, Anthony?"

"Terrible stuff." Grimacing and wiping his mustache with his knuckle, Maile walked to the coffee table. "Three times a day, once after each meal, I have to get that foul medicine down. But there's no reason why our guest can't have a decent drink. I'll make you a highball, Dan."

"Don't bother."

"It's no trouble."

"I don't want a drink."

"You're on your good behavior tonight, aren't you? But according to Kurtz, you— Oh, speaking of him. I wonder where he is. I don't need him any more. He was supposed to drop around today to pick up his money and a train ticket back to New York. You saw him last night?"

"That's right."

"Ummm." Maile stepped quickly to the bar table, poured a good three ounces of liquor over two lumps of ice, added a splash of soda, and brought the drink back

to Dan. "There you are, my boy. Bourbon's your drink, isn't it?" He smiled ruefully when Dan refused the highball. Setting it down on the coffee table, he said, "Well, it's there for when you want it later." He bent down and kissed Constance on the forehead. "I'll be back directly, my dear."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the post office to see if any mail has been sent to our box."

In a voice that trembled slightly, Constance said, "There's no reason for you to— Couldn't it wait until morning?"

"Mail is business. Business goes on twenty-four hours a day." He walked briskly to the door, his hands jammed deep in the pockets of his blue flannel jacket. He stopped abruptly and looked back over his shoulder. "Is Ginny in her room?"

"Yes, Anthony," Constance said.

"Well, perhaps Dan would like to see her." The secretive smile stole quickly across his face. "I have no objection." He was whistling when he left the terrace.

Dan stared after him, then turned back to Constance with a scowl. "*He* has no objection! I'm the child's father but Anthony has no objection. This is the goddamndest—"

"It's the way it has to be."

"Maile is quite trusting, isn't he?" Dan said gruffly.

"What do you mean?"

"Either trusting or a sadist, leaving the two of us alone here."

"There's no reason why he can't. I'm married to him."

"You were married to me, too."

She flinched as if he had slapped her. "Dan, I'll admit it was dirty pool. I know how hurt you must have been and I'll always be sorry for that. I never gave you any warning. But for whatever consolation it is to you, Anthony and I never so much as kissed before I divor—"

"Thanks," he said bitterly. "That's a lot of comfort to me on a cold night."

"The situation is awkward enough without your making it worse. I think you'd better go."

"Not until I see Ginny," he said determinedly. "That's the only thing that brought me here tonight."

"I don't think it would be wise."

"The great man put his stamp of approval on it."

"Just the same—"

"Are you going to let me see her or not?"

"All right." Constance stood up with a troubled sigh. "I'll see if she wants to come out."

"Wants?"

"Yes." Anguish lay deep in the violet eyes. "This has been very awkward for you, Dan. I think it's too soon—"

"Let me be the judge of that."

"Very well." She left the terrace and Dan began to pace the waxed and polished bricks. After a few minutes, he heard the rustle of Constance's taffeta dress and he turned eagerly to her. She stood alone in the doorway. "She's—she's playing records."

He grinned. "I'll go there, then. I'd rather meet her on her own ground."

He brushed past Constance's outstretched hand and went to the bedroom wing. A phonograph was playing one of the adventures of Bozo the Clown and he went down the hall toward the sound, stopping when he came to the open door to Ginny's room. She was sitting on a bench with her back to him and was looking at the picture book that accompanied the record. Bozo was apparently at the circus and a lion was roaring in the background. Dan waited patiently, smiling when Ginny laughed aloud at something the elephant said. Her pig-tails, tied by plaid bows, came down to the small of her straight, strong back. It was obvious that she had grown at least three inches in the year and that she had put on several pounds.

The record ended and he stepped into the room. "Ginny," he said.

Her shoulders stiffened. She turned her head a little, saw him, and snapped her eyes to the front again. He took a few more steps and put his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Ginny," he repeated.

She twisted out from under his hand and darted across the room to stand with her back to the wall. Either she did not recognize him, he thought, or the surge of emotion at seeing him again was too much for her. She had never been a crying child and she seemed now to be fighting back a flood of tears. He'd have to be as gentle as possible. He smiled at her and reached in his pocket for the yo-yo he had brought for her.

"Hi, Ginny. Don't you remember me?"

She flattened her hands against the wall behind her. "Go away. We don't want you here!"

He stared at her speechlessly for a moment. He had caught a piece of shrapnel in the arm in Africa just before his capture. The impact and pain had been nothing compared with this. He turned and walked blindly out of the room.

Constance was waiting for him on the terrace. She didn't have to question him. The answer was ugly on his face. "I'm sorry, Dan."

"Sorry! You spend most of your time being sorry for things, don't you?"

She nodded and looked away.

"What have you done to her?" he demanded. He crossed the terrace and grasped her roughly by the shoulders, twisting her around to force her to look at him. "What have you done?"

"I tried to warn you."

He shook her fiercely. "*Answer me!*"

"You've got to look at it from her point of view. She doesn't understand what's happened. As far as she's concerned, you left us."

"She wouldn't have to think that unless you encouraged her to think it. You could have found a way to explain—"

"I didn't encourage it." She winced as his fingers dug into her shoulders. "I've wanted her to remember you the way you were when—"

"Maile, then. Maile did it." He let go of her suddenly, vaguely aware that he had ripped the left shoulder of her powder-blue dress. He ground his fist into his palm. "He turned my own child against me, poisoned her mind."

"You'd better leave before he gets home. When you're in this mood, you might— His heart is bad, really bad, Dan. He can't stand any excitement."

"I don't care about his heart. I doubt if he even has one. Ginny hates me. Why?"

"Maybe Anthony has been trying too hard to become a father."

"And lied to her about me." He took a long pull on the warm, flat highball. "The rat. The dirty, rotten rat." He took another drink, then looked at Constance over the

top of the glass. "If he's done that to her, what has he done to you?"

"Please leave, Dan." She tried to start him toward the door. "I know your temper and his nature. He'll deliberately provoke you and you'll go off half-cocked. If you upset him . . . well, you'd be responsible."

"Do you love him?"

"I never have. He understands that. But I didn't marry him for love, so forget me in this."

He waved toward Ginny's room. "A lot of good that sacrifice did anybody."

"She's happy."

"Has he really been so good to her?"

She looked away. "Yes."

"You're lying."

"You have to remember he's been lonely all his life. He's never been around children and she makes him nervous at times. Of course, he doesn't know how to unbend enough to play with her the way you used to, but he tries." She looked back and smiled a little. "His efforts are pretty awkward."

"Is he strict?"

"Discipline is his middle name. There's a right time for everything, he says. If she cuts loose before breakfast, he— But that doesn't mean anything," she said quickly, seeing the sudden stiffening of his face. "You were always a bear before you had your morning coffee."

"And as I remember it, you weren't exactly sweetness and light your—" He broke off abruptly. The past couldn't be put down. "I'd better go. If I'm here when he gets back, I'll—"

"Don't say it."

He strode to the front door, Constance hurrying to keep up with him. "Thanks for a lovely evening," he said bitterly.

"Be patient. Give it time. It will all work out."

"Do you know what I've been through for the past year?" he snapped. "Don't tell me to be patient! Maile's boy Kurtz hounded me continually. I took it because I—" He held out his hands in a helpless gesture. "And then to have it snatched away from me! I can't stand any more of it, Constance."

She reached out and touched the back of his hand as if to placate him. The effect of the contact was like the

spark between two bare wires. He looked at her intently in the dimly lighted hall and saw that she was feeling it too. There was fear in her eyes.

"Dan. I—" She withdrew her hand. "You'd better not come again."

"I'm coming to see Maile tomorrow, when I cool off a little."

"Be careful, Dan," she said earnestly. "For your sake and Ginny's."

"I won't take a poke at him, if that's what's worrying you."

"I won't be here when you come," she said.

"That's up to you." He studied her face. "No, you'd better not be. You felt it, too."

"It's over, Dan."

"Not for me. Not for you, either."

"It is. It has to be. Don't try to stir up dead fires."

"Take my hand and tell me the fire is dead."

She put her hands behind her back. "Let's not torture ourselves. We aren't the kind of people who can play this game without being hurt." She opened the door. "Good-by, Dan."

"It isn't that simple."

He left her and heard the door snick closed when he was halfway down the walk. Then he thought he heard a sound like that of a sob muffled through the door. He knew they each remembered keenly the ways of the other and felt the demand stirring deep within. The passage of time had not dimmed the memories, but had sharpened them. Yet it was true that they could not see each other again, for Constance was not Nina Lewis and there could be no release for them.

Chapter Eight

DAN WAS fashioning a gaff from a broom handle and a Sobey No. 7 hook the next morning when he saw the green-and-white patrol car stop at the edge of the lot. A plump, open-faced policeman got out of it. The officer, Brad Majoley, stood by the car for a moment and looked about him aimlessly, as if he had nothing more on his mind than to stretch his legs and catch a cigarette.

Dan thought nothing about it for the time being. He went back to the gaff and wound copper wire tightly around the handle and the shank of the hook. A moment later he heard the hollow thud of heels on the dock plank-ing. He looked up quickly and saw Majoley coming toward him.

"How's it going, Dan?"

"Pretty good."

"I've been meaning to go out with you sometime, but by the time I get the lawn cut on my day off, I don't have strength to do more than lift a can of beer." He slipped his cigarette into the water. "You know a character named Kurtz—Ben Kurtz?"

Dan carefully set the gaff down on the dock. "I know him."

"I thought you did." Majoley smiled encouragingly. "What do you know about him?"

"He's a private detective from New York," Dan said, puzzled.

"I know about that part of it. He checked in at headquarters when he first hit town. What else do you know about him?"

"Well, I guess you've heard about the trouble I've been having with—"

"Yeah. I hope it's working out all right."

"So-so. But why the questions about Kurtz? What's he been up to?"

Majoley laughed. "One of the boys picked him up on Main last night. Drunk and disorderly."

"That happens," Dan said warily, wondering what this had to do with him. "I guess I could have been picked up on the same charge any number of times this past year."

Majoley nodded. "We give a guy a break if we think he has it coming to him. Anyway, about this Kurtz. He didn't have a cent in his pockets, so we held him overnight and were going to book him on a vag, but then he gave you for a reference. Said you'd speak for him."

It would be simple, Dan thought. Tell Majoley that Kurtz was a first-class bastard and Kurtz would be escorted out of the country whether he wanted to leave or not. The police would be happy to do it. They had no liking for Kurtz's breed. It was an efficient force and it had no need for cheap private investigators from New York to give it advice.

But Kurtz would know that. He must have had some scheme in mind when he gave Dan's name instead of Anthony Maile's. The answer came to Dan then and his loathing for Kurtz increased. All Kurtz had to do was tell the police that Maile was holding a substantial pay check for him—the money he had not picked up last night because he had been too drunk to make it—and the vagrancy charge would be dropped. No matter what Dan told Majoley now, it would make no difference. Meanwhile, it would strike the warped, filthy-minded Kurtz as a great joke to force Dan into a position where he would have to vouch for him or stand the chance of immediate exposure.

"He's got some money coming to him," Dan said. "Maile owes him quite a bit. Maile told me that last night."

"Maile?" Brad Majoley asked in surprise. "That's the bird who married Constance, right?"

Dan nodded.

"And you'll speak up for Kurtz?"

Again Dan nodded.

"I'll be damned." Majoley sighed disappointedly. "Well, you've just lost me five bucks."

"How come?"

"When I heard that he'd given your name, I laughed myself sick. He'd been sticking to you like a back plaster

so I figured you'd be anxious to get him off you. I bet one of the guys that you wouldn't give Kurtz the right time. I had the money spent already."

Dan forced a laugh. "Sorry, Brad. Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

"I'll get something out of it, anyway."

They went aboard the Ginny T. and Dan led the way to the cabin. He poured bottled water into a saucepan and set it on the stove.

"This is sure a crazy, mixed-up world," Majoley said.

"How do you mean?" Turning the feed knob, Dan looked back at Majoley over his shoulder.

"Like you and Constance, for instance. She divorces you and marries a got-rocks, and you turn into the biggest bum on the Gulf Coast. Then you get better, she comes back to town, and I'll be darned if you don't get chummy with this Maile. Listen, if *my* old lady up and married some guy, you wouldn't catch me—"

"Skip it, Brad." He struck a wooden match.

"It isn't just you. It's the whole nutty world. People act like— Hey, for God's sake!" Majoley cried in sudden fright. "Watch what you're doing!"

Dan looked from Majoley to the stove. In listening to the policeman, he had taken his mind from the burner and had given the erratic feed knob a full turn. High flames were leaping up around the pan and closing above it to form a cone of fire.

"It's all right," he said. He cut the knob to low and the flames subsided after a few moments.

Brad Majoley's face was pale and damp with sweat. "You want to burn up the boat?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Look, I was in the Navy during the war. I saw a couple of ships burn, and once I was on S.P. duty when a fire broke out on a liberty boat that was coming into the landing. There were fifty guys aboard and they were trapped because the damn boat was covered from stem to stern with a canvas tarp." Majoley shivered at the memory. "Don't tell me not to worry."

"The flames die as soon as you cut the feed." Dan took two mugs from the shelf and dumped a heaping teaspoonful of powdered coffee into each.

"Sometime something'll go haywire with it, or somebody who doesn't know about the stove will—"

"Don't be such a nanny," said Dan, pouring water over the coffee.

"You ought to get it fixed." Majoley brought his attention from the stove to Dan with great effort and accepted his cup of coffee. "Thanks." He took a sip and smacked his lips. "As I was saying about this cockeyed world—"

"It may be every bit as bad as you say, but talking about it isn't going to make it any better." He had to keep Majoley from swinging the subject around to Constance and Anthony again. "Say," he said affably, "when are we going to shake loose from the coroner system?"

Majoley's reaction was immediate. He forgot all about Constance and, his face taking on a grim expression, he cursed roundly, then launched into a tirade against the antiquated system that frequently shackled the law. He talked for ten minutes at a furious pace, citing chapter and verse, recalling case after case in which the police doubted accidental death but had no way of proving murder without holding an autopsy; and autopsies were not permitted without strong evidence of foul play.

"Every time a body washes up on a beach or some guy keels over with what looks like a heart attack, I get the shudders," he went on. "How do we know the corpse isn't really stuffed with poison to the ears? I'm telling you, I—" He looked suddenly at his watch. "Oh, Lord! I've got to check in. So long, Dan. And thanks for the coffee." He dashed out of the cabin, leaped to the dock, and ran to the squad car.

Laughing, Dan watched him from the hatch until the car was out of sight. He started back into the cabin but then his gaze fell upon the Seaborne farther down the bayou. Anne Knowles was leaning against the housing. Her short black hair, stirring slightly in the breeze, was full of the sunlight that shone upon it. Behind her, far away, was a backdrop of blue, blue sky, fluffy clouds, and swaying palm fronds. It was a setting of gaiety and cleanliness, and Anne was the cleanest thing in the picture, as much a part of it as if she had been planted there by a landscape architect with his eye on perfection. Clean-limbed and vital, she was the sparkle, the decency, the earnestness, the hopes, the dreams of youth.

He wanted her friendship, even if he could never hope to regain her respect, and he walked slowly toward her, hoping somehow to make amends.

She watched him coldly as he approached.

"Anne—" he began.

"Don't waste your breath."

"I just wanted to tell you—"

"There's nothing I want to hear from you."

"You're going to listen just the same," he said severely. He stood alongside her, towering over her. "I'm sorry if I let you down."

"Not just me. You kicked yourself right in the teeth."

"You expected too much of me. I'm no saint."

"That's for sure. What you need, mister, is some guts."

He had wanted to be friends and to make her understand his position, but suddenly he found it easy to blame her for his disappointment. If she had left him alone a year ago, he would never have worked so hard, giving up precious time, for nothing. "You're quite a girl scout."

"What now?" she asked wearily.

"You did your good deed like the little girl who helped the cripple to the island in the middle of the street, then left him stranded there to go the rest of the way alone."

"You blame what's happened on *me*?" she asked incredulously. "For the love of Pete, did I twist your arm to make you sleep with Nina Lewis? I think you've gone out of your head."

He put his face close to hers. "Don't ever mention her to anyone else," he muttered.

She gave him an inscrutable look. "You shouldn't care if I had it put in the paper. You've proven that."

"I'm still going to win Ginny over."

"Win her over? I don't get you."

"Anthony's turned her against me. Last night I— Last night was the worst thing I've ever been through. She looked at me as if I had two heads and fangs, and then she told me she didn't want to see me."

Anne's expression became sympathetic for a moment, but then she shrugged her shoulders. "It's just as well. You're no good. She'll be happier when she can completely forget you ever existed. We all will. I know I will, damn you." She turned quickly, ran into the cabin, and slid the door closed behind her.

He went to the door and threw it back with a force that shook the boat. She was lying face down on the bunk. "I guess you're right, Anne, but at least give me a chance to explain." He put his hand on the back of her head.

Her glossy curls were silk between his fingers. He dropped his hand to her shoulder and shook her gently.

"Take your hand off me."

"I'm strictly one hundred per cent skunk to blame you for anything." He massaged her shoulder while he spoke. "Oh, God, you're too young to get involved in this kind of mess. It's been a rough year for you."

"I knew it would be when it started," she snapped.

"This is the age when you should be worrying about what dress to wear to the dance. You ought to be writing lovesick letters to some freshman at the university or crouching around a vic with a gang of girls your own age."

"Youngsters," she said tartly, "no longer swoon over Sinatra."

"You know what I mean. This is the best age of your life. It's full of misery and blues, but the good kind."

"There isn't any good kind."

"Sure there is. There are pains now that are going to be fun to remember someday. When you get a little older, you'll under—"

"Will you stop beating it into me that I'm a kid? What are you trying to prove? Don't you have sense enough to know that nineteen isn't very young these days?" She wrenched around to look at him, her face flushed with anger. She propped herself up on her elbows. "Take a good look at me! Am I so young?"

She bore only a superficial resemblance to the thirteen-year-old he had pulled out of the bay. Her legs, tan against the white cover on the bunk, were beautifully formed. Her slim hips would have made any Hollywood beauty envious. Her breasts, under the short-sleeved white sweater, were perfectly proportioned, and as they rose and fell with her labored breathing, he knew that she was in that best of all times in a woman's physical development; she had reached maturity but still had the firmness and vigor of youth. Then he saw the light in her eyes and he was saddened by it. The magic of youth was gone. He had stolen it from her.

"I'm sorry, Anne." It was a stupidly inadequate thing to say when he had brought bitterness and disillusionment to one who had had high hopes and beautiful dreams. What good did his sorrow do her now?

She twisted and the sweater worked out of her shorts

to expose a strip of tanned flesh across her flat stomach. "Do you think I'm a natural-born reformer? My father and mother wanted me to go away to college. But I wouldn't go. Boys—and plenty of them, don't you worry—called me for dates. My answer was always the same: a big, fat no. After a time, they got the drift and stopped calling. And why did I act that way? Because I'm anti-social or a recluse? Did I turn down dates because I was dog-tired from messing around a drunken bum just to send him back to his ex-wife if he could get her? Go ahead. *Why?* You tell me."

"I don't know the answer."

"Well, I'll tell you, and you're going to stand there with your ugly face hanging out and listen. I'm full of confession. Confession is good for the soul, they say. And confession is easy when you're young, isn't it?" she said bitterly. "Nothing is important or very lasting to the young. Leave them alone and they'll get over it. That's one of the favorite sayings of you old, wise voices of experience. Maybe it's one of the few right things anyone ever said. I'm over it." She sat up abruptly on the edge of the bunk. "I loved you and I'm over it."

"No, Anne. You never loved me. You got a crush on me because I saved your life. When I didn't measure up to your picture of what a hero is supposed to be, you tried to change me into—"

"Oh, shut up!" she cried. "Don't pull that high-school psychology on me, and don't try to tell me how I felt. Call it a girlish crush if it soothes your conscience any, but I know better. I never stood a chance with you—I knew that from the start—but don't think I sacrificed anything this past year." She glowered at him. "I can tell this to you now because you've become a great big zero in my book of memories. Anything I ever felt for you is gone."

"I'm glad of that."

"Yes, it must be nice to wriggle off the hook so easily. Well, now you can go back to your precious Nina. Or have you thrown her over already? Maybe it's Constance you're playing footsie with." She waved him toward the door. "Go away. It makes me ill just to look at you."

"Promise me just one thing, Anne. Promise you won't say anything to anyone about Nina Lewis."

"Afraid her husband will come home and put a couple

of bullets into you?" she asked scornfully. "He strikes me as a placid, pleasant little guy who could be a holy terror when he's worked up. I've got an idea that her affair with you is just the sort of thing that would set him off. He might shoot the both of you and it would serve you right."

"I'm not afraid of that."

"You're trembling in your boots."

"Just promise me, Anne."

"If you've discovered anything at all about me this year, you should at least know I don't gossip."

"Thanks," he said gratefully.

"Don't thank me. Why should I talk to anyone about you? I've already told you that you no longer exist as far as I'm concerned."

"Thanks anyway. I'm in the middle of a messy situation."

"*You're* in the middle?" She laughed hollowly, her eyes raking him. "Guess again."

He stared at her numbly for a moment, then turned slowly and left the cabin.

Chapter Nine

HE SHAVED and washed himself in cold water and quickly put on a white sports shirt, tan trousers, and brown-and-white loafers. When he left the cabin, he glanced down the bayou and saw Anne securing the ports of the Seaborne. There was a note of finality in her movements. She carried everything portable into the cabin, even the bucket that she usually left hanging from a nail on the dock, and he realized that she was securing the boat as if she had no intention of coming back to it for a long time. That, along with everything else, was his fault. She loved to putter about her boat but he had spoiled the fun. The sight of him sickened her and the bayou wasn't big enough to hold both of them.

He left the Ginny T., crossed the lot, and got into the coupé to drive to Anthony Maile's house on Indian Beach.

The house Maile had rented was one of those boom-time constructions of stucco. It had weird battlements and towers, narrow leaded windows, and a red-tiled roof upon which a purple bougainvillea bloomed. Dan parked in the circular drive in front of the house and wandered around to the back, which faced the bay. He went up on the screened porch and found Maile stretched out on the sofa with his shoes off.

Anthony Maile had been dozing. He sat up with a start at the sound of Dan's steps. "You caught me napping," he said sternly. "I mean it. I'm not being funny about it. The man who takes a nap in the middle of the day is either lazy or ought to have his head examined, but that fool doctor and his stupid orders— Well, what do you want? Constance isn't here."

"I didn't come to see her."

"Neither is Ginny. Constance took her to the casino for a swimming lesson."

"I want to talk to you," Dan said quietly.

"You left in one hell of a hurry last night, didn't you?" Maile's gray eyes shone. "But not so much of a hurry that you didn't take time to drink the highball. I knew you would. Did you see Ginny?"

"You must know the answer to that, too."

"Yes." Maile drummed his fingers on his knees. "You drank it after you'd seen her. I know people. You wouldn't have gone in there with liquor fresh on your breath. But when you came back . . ." Maile chuckled. "Well, how do you think she is?"

"I wouldn't want to lie to you," Dan replied after a moment's hesitation.

"You're wise. I can spot a liar before he's opened his mouth. I've been crushing liars all my life. It doesn't pay to lie to—"

"But if I tell the truth, I'll have to jam my fist down your throat at the same time." Maile looked at him in alarm and Dan laughed. "Oh, don't worry, you're a sick old man."

"Not so old," Maile snapped. "Fifty-seven isn't old."

"And sick," Dan insisted. "If I raised my little finger, you'd die of fright. You're quite an operator, Maile. You've got people afraid to death of you because you've got them by the economic throat, but I'm one boy who doesn't scare so easily."

"I've got you where I want you, too."

"Not any more."

Maile grunted and went to the bar table to make two highballs. He gave one to Dan and took a long pull on the other. "That idiot doctor isn't completely out of his head. He allows me one drink a day." He set down his drink and surveyed Dan curiously. "Aren't you going to drink yours?"

"I don't think so."

"Ah, yes, you will." He crossed his legs, taking care to keep the crease just so. "You know, there's no such thing as sheer luck in business any more than there is in everyday life. There's a definite basis for every decision a man makes. I'm a successful man. I'm a success because I've always made successful decisions. And do you know the basis for every decision I've ever made? Oh, you wouldn't guess in a million years. I call it the predicted pattern."

"A fancy word for guesswork."

"Far from it. I take every available fact, and the sum total of those facts, if we're talking about a man, is what that man will do in any given situation. I have all the facts on you, for example. If I wanted to, I could tell you exactly when you'll drink that drink, just as I could have told you when you'd drink that one last night."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"No?" Maile asked sharply. "Well, perhaps not. You broke a little from the predicted pattern when you came pretty close to reforming yourself. I must say I hadn't anticipated Anne Knowles's fine hand in that. She—"

"I thought you didn't believe I'd changed?" Dan said quickly, his eyes narrowed.

"Not on the basis of Kurtz's reports, but you've got to understand that I'm not fool enough to accept as infallible the remarks of a man like that. Ah, well," he sighed, throwing up his hands, "it's too late to concern ourselves about that, isn't it? You saw Ginny and her reaction to you."

"That's what I want to talk to you about. You turned her against me. If you were a whole man instead of a weakling, I'd punch your—"

"Naturally I am anxious to be the man in her life—just," Maile added with a smug smile, "as I already am in her mother's." He raised his glass and surveyed Dan over the top of it. "I mentioned Kurtz. How much money did the rascal want out of you?"

Dan had trouble holding back a gasp of surprise. "Nothing."

"Come, come. His pattern is a clear and simple one of blackmail. If I know anything at all about people, I'd say that he approached you with a suggestion that he send me a revised, favorable report on you. His price would have been anything up to five hundred dollars. No more than that, because you'd have trouble scraping up even that much. You know he spent last night in jail, don't you?"

"I heard that."

"The police called me, wanted to know if I really owed him some back pay. I assured them I did. He'll be popping in here at any moment to get his money, and then he'll wave it around in front of his cheap friends. He'll feel important for a little while, but it won't last long. Importance never does; only as long as the money lasts."

"Why did you ever hire a man like that?"

"He intrigues me. Every once in a while I meet a man who was born to be murdered. Kurtz is one." He raised his glass in a toast. "To Kurtz, and good riddance, eh? . . . What, won't you even drink to that?"

"No."

"Born to be murdered." Smiling distantly, Maile savored the phrase. "Many people are, you know. Not the gentle, considerate souls with the little human frailties, but the strong ones who want something and don't care how they get it or whom they step on to get it. I'm one of them. I could count on one hand the people who don't wish me dead. That doesn't bother me any. It takes precious time to make friends. I only have time to make enemies."

"You took the time to marry Constance."

"That was something I wanted, and you were one of those I stepped on to get it," Maile said simply. "You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you?"

Dan's hands trembled. He gripped the arms of the wicker chair to still them. "I don't know."

"You'd know if you had the guts to face it." Maile cocked his gray head at the sound of gravel crunching in the driveway in front of the house. "That will be Constance and the child. If you came here to say anything, you'd better say it before they come in."

"Just this," said Dan. "It's true I hate you more than I ever thought it possible for one human being to hate another, but as for wanting you dead, you'll be dead soon enough without my lifting a finger to hurry you up. On the other hand, if you ever do anything to hurt Ginny—hurt her more than you already have with your rotten lies about me—I'll beat the hell out of you. If it kills you, well . . ."

Dan held out his hands in a gesture of indifference.

"You see!" Maile exclaimed, laughing delightedly. He slipped his feet into his shoes and popped to his feet. "It's the predicted pattern I was telling you about." He went quickly to the door as footsteps tapped across the tile floor inside the house. "Look who came to visit!" he said heartily.

From the position of his chair, Dan could not see into the house, but he knew Constance and Ginny would be coming out on the porch at any moment. He snatched for his glass and took a long drink to fortify himself. The

glass rattled against the table when he set it down with a shaking hand. Constance and Ginny appeared behind Anthony Maile in the doorway. Ginny stood rigidly, staring at him, then turned and ran to her bedroom.

"What do you suppose came over her?" Maile asked with a pleased smile. "I'll go see."

He went after Ginny, and Constance came out on the porch.

"I thought you'd be gone before I—"

"I was about to leave. I stood all I could take." He cursed Maile. "Does he give you a lot of this predicted-pattern stuff?"

"Some," she admitted. The sun streamed in behind her. It silhouetted her beautiful, willowy figure and sparkled in her golden hair. She had never looked more desirable. "I don't pay much attention to it. We get along all right."

"You'd say that anyway." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Marrying him hasn't changed anything. You still love me."

"It's over, Dan."

"It isn't. We both felt it last night."

"That didn't mean anything. I was nervous." She looked warily over her shoulder, then turned back. "Dan, don't make it any worse for yourself. You've got to go."

"As soon as I hear you say you don't love me."

She averted her eyes. "I don't love you."

"You always were a poor liar."

"There's only one thing I can tell you, Dan. If Anthony died tomorrow, and if you'd have me, I'd come back to you."

"That's answer enough, but I don't like that first *if*."

"It could happen any time," she said solemnly. "His heart is very bad."

"Sure, and he could also outlive us both. I've seen that happen before. No, Constance, that isn't good enough. Divorce him."

"I can't. I made a choice and I'll stick to it."

"Good-by, then. I'm not going to sit around like a vulture and wait for a man to die."

"You aren't being reasonable."

He laughed hollowly. "If I had an ounce of reason in me, I wouldn't have come here last night."

"But we can still be friends."

"That's the most foolish thing I've ever heard you say."

Do you think I could be around you without remembering how it used to be with us? There's no sense torturing myself that way. As it is now, there isn't a single thing we can say to each other without stirring memories unless we talk in consequentiality. I can do that with a dozen other women, and not have their husbands show me to the door at the end of the evening."

"Dan—"

"Never mind, Constance."

He turned away from her and was walking toward the door when Maile came out on the porch.

"Well," Maile boomed in a confident voice, "there wasn't much wrong with her. Children are too high-strung these days. It wasn't that way when I was young. I can distinctly recall—"

"I've got to be getting along," Dan said.

"Don't hurry. Drink your—" Maile looked at Dan's almost empty glass on the table. His gray eyes glinted slyly, and he said, "Oh, I see you finally got around to it. I could tell you when."

"Don't bother," Dan said grimly.

Maile put his arm around Constance's waist and smiled possessively at her. "Dan stopped by to talk to me about going out on the boat. He promised to take me fishing very soon."

Dan looked at him sharply. "I didn't—"

"Just name the date, boy," Maile went on. "And I'm quite sure that Constance would like to go out with us." He turned to her. "Wouldn't you, my dear? We'll make a real party of it."

"We'll see," she said.

"Certainly you'll go. The outing will do you good." Maile's expression was that of a man who brooked no arguments. He was enjoying the situation immensely. He seemed to be getting the same kick out of it that he would have found in backing a competitor into a corner and forcing him to react as if controlled by strings. "And Ginny would love it."

His face was now inscrutable.

Dan's fists clenched. He felt an overwhelming desire to punch a grimace of pain into that face, to make a cry of surrender bubble from those thin lips.

Constance spoke up just in time.

"Ginny will be in school. She starts in the morning."

"Then we'll go on a Saturday," Maile said blandly. "Certainly there is no school on Saturday, even in this enlightened age of progressive education."

"But I don't think—" Constance began.

"*This* Saturday," said Maile.

"I'm booked up," Dan said.

Maile cocked his head and looked at Dan admonishingly. "Dan, I just don't know why you want to lie to me. This is only Wednesday. You're never booked three days in advance. You know, I'm beginning to think you don't want to go."

"I don't."

"Oh, I see!" Maile cried, a tone of sudden understanding and sympathy in his voice, but the inflection was belied by the cold-slate quality in his eyes. "It's Ginny who worries you. Well, don't worry about that. You won't be embarrassed. I'll have her under control. It just takes a firm hand."

Dan glowered at him, then turned on his heels and started toward the screen door that led out to the back yard.

"Saturday, Dan."

Dan made no reply. He put his hand on the knob.

"Why go out that way?" Maile called. "You could go out the front door—just like one of the family."

Dan kept going.

When he got out to his car, he looked down at his palms. His fingernails, wrapped under his tightly clenched fists, had pressed deep, white half-moons into the flesh. He sat a moment behind the wheel and waited for the shaking spasm of rage to leave him, but it persisted; it rode with him when he sped down the street. It was still with him at dusk, and he knew then that it was no use, that sitting here alone in the darkening cabin with the pressure growing in and around him was the worst thing he could do.

He went out to the car again and drove around until he found a bar he had never been in before. He didn't want to see familiar faces, hear the ring of well-remembered voices, face the barrage of oft-repeated questions. He wanted only to be alone amidst strangers and lose himself in anonymity. Parking behind the building, he waited a moment in the darkness, then walked completely around the building to make sure that Kurtz had not

tailed him. From now on, more than at any time in the past year, he would not be able to make a move without first looking around for the greasy detective, feeling his presence even when he could not see him.

Assured, Dan went inside.

Chapter Ten

"YOU WANT ANOTHER, PAL?" the bartender asked. The sign on the mirror, courtesy of Schlitz beer, announced that his name was Leroy.

There was a swallow left in the glass. Dan had had one other bourbon on the rocks before this one. "I guess so." He pushed the glass toward Leroy, then quickly pulled it back again. "No. This should do me."

Scratching his head, Leroy stared at him in amazement. "That's one for the books," he said. "You stand on this side of the drinks long enough and you get so you can size a man up in a hurry. When you walked in the door, I said to myself, 'Oh-oh, Leroy, watch it. There's a guy with a chip on his shoulder.' I had the convincer all set." He picked up a sawed-off baseball bat from behind the bar and showed it to Dan.

"You won't need it."

Leroy put the bat down. "This is something I seen from actual experience behind the bar. A guy comes in mad, takes on a couple, and gets madder, and then I'm damned if he don't want to take on everybody in the house."

Dan nodded and hoped that Leroy would go away. He wanted to think. It was true that he had had a chip on his shoulder when he came into this dingy place with its blaring jukebox; and it was equally true that he had had every intention of getting roaring drunk. The chip was still there, but the urge to drink had left him.

". . . and that's the one time he couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag with a brick in each hand," Leroy was saying. "I don't know what comes over a fighting drunk."

"Yeah, that's the way it goes," Dan said.

"All right, pal," Leroy said understandingly. "I know when a guy's trying to think." He walked down the bar to talk politics with a couple of customers.

Liquor didn't do any good. A few months ago he would have found satisfaction in it. Perhaps even a few days ago it would have given him the illusion of having no troubles, but now it only postponed them. In his present mood, a few more drinks would have nurtured the seed of belligerence until he would have been prompted to smack down some perfectly innocent bystander for no reason whatsoever. What would he gain by that? The anger would still be in him and he would be no closer than ever to discovering the cause of it.

As far as liquor was concerned, he seemed to have lost his taste for it. He had consumed a lot of it this past year, but always as a prop, never as a way to achieve a pleasant glow of well-being. He was not alone in that, he thought. No one got mellow any more. No one got happy. No one got gay. No one wanted to sing or dance or listen to the in-between notes that soared from good piano. It was as if the distillers had hit upon a new formula. They now knew the way to distill Pandora's box. A few drops went into each bottle and people became nasty and bitter. There wasn't any fun in a drink. A drink became a vindication for a sickness without a name.

That was his trouble now. His anger had no name, no object toward which it was directed. If he only knew what lay behind it, he might be able to help himself, and if he didn't help himself, it was a cinch no one would do it for him. Turning down a drink was a step in the right direction; not too long ago he would have sat here tossing them down until Leroy ran him out with the bat or closed up the place.

Leroy came back and leaned on the bar. "Woman trouble? Five times out of six it's woman trouble—either too much of 'em or not enough of 'em. And the other time it's money."

"This isn't money."

"Women!" Leroy said triumphantly. "I figured it that way. I took one look at you and I said to myself—"

"I don't think it's women either."

Leroy's face fell into puzzled lines. His experience behind the bar had told him that women and money were the only troubles. "Then what's the—"

"I don't know the trouble."

"Nuts," Leroy said incredulously. "The man never lived who didn't know what was browning him off. I

know that for a definite fact. I see all kinds come in the place. Oh, well, maybe I've seen a couple of guys who didn't know, or claimed they didn't know. But after they took a good load on, they started cursing out some woman or other and it turned out they knew right from the start but didn't want to admit it."

Dan had nothing against Leroy. He was just a face behind the bar, a name on the Schlitz sign. But if Leroy didn't shut up pretty soon, he was going to have a mouthful of broken teeth, sawed-off bat or no.

Dan leaned forward, gripping the edge of the bar. "Drop it, will you?"

"Sure, pal. I'm a nice guy. Friendly. You can ask anybody. I let people run up tabs on me. I even buy a drink once in a while. It's been sixteen days since I had any trouble in the place, and I'm not fixing to spoil the record now. So sure, I'll drop it. Why not? Every man's got his troubles. With me"—he grinned broadly—"it's women *and* money."

It was hard to hate the man, and there was no sense trying to start trouble with him just to find a whipping boy for the festering anger.

Dan returned the grin stiffly. "Well, thanks for the conversation." He stood up and left the place. When he got out to the car, he sat in it quietly for a moment and wondered what to do next. The boat was out. He couldn't go back so early to that miserable loneliness. He suddenly remembered that Nina Lewis lived not so far away and an idea took shape in his mind.

He drove slowly to her house, parked on the drive, and walked across the terrace. There was a light burning in the living room and he peeped through the window to see Nina curled up in a deep chair with a book on her lap. She wasn't reading. Her eyes were fixed in a blank stare at the wall.

He rapped on the pane. She stood up with a frown stitched between her eyes. She turned on the terrace light and opened the inside door.

"What do you want?" she asked coldly.

"Did he come home?"

"No, not yet."

"Then let me in. I want to talk to you."

"It's late, and you're drunk."

"No, I'm not."

She peered closely at him through the screen. "Well, maybe you aren't, but just the same—"

"Please, Nina. I have to ask you something."

She reluctantly unlocked the screen door and stepped aside to let me in. "Before you say anything," she snapped, "let's get one thing straight: I'm not going to bed with you. The dance is over. Herbert will be popping up one of these days and I don't want—"

"I didn't come here for that."

She laughed loudly. "That's the only thing we had in common. Well, it won't do you any good." She sat down in the chair. "As long as you're here, make a couple of drinks, will you?"

He went to the kitchen and made one for her but none for himself. He brought her drink back to the living room. When he handed it to her, she stared at him in amazement. "Aren't you drinking?"

"I don't feel like it."

"You're full of surprises tonight, aren't you?" She sipped her drink and set the glass down on the table next to her. "What do you want to talk to me about?" Then she added sharply, "If this is some trick to soften me up and get me to bed—"

"No such thing."

She looked skeptical. "Hah!"

He began to pace the floor, beating his fist into his palm. "Remember the other day on the boat? You said we were both angry at something."

"And you still are," she said. "Your eyes are full of hell and hate."

"Yes," he admitted, looking around at her. "But why?"

"You know," she said. "You know the answer to that one, all right."

"I don't. I've been trying to find the answer."

"Well, I know, but I'm sure as hell not going to tell it to you."

He went quickly to the side of her chair and grabbed her shoulder. "You've got to." He began to shake her.

"Let go of me," she said coldly. She looked down at his hand. "That's one reason why I won't tell you. With that rotten temper of yours—"

"If I promise not to touch you?" He let go of her shoulders and stepped away. "Maile and Kurtz—I keep getting back to them. And yet—"

"You might take a good look at that damned ex-wife of yours, that paragon of virtue."

"You're way off," he scoffed.

"She's the one who's making you crazy mad. But you can't get at her, so you try to take it out on—"

"That's foolish. I'm not mad at Constance."

"You don't have the guts to admit it even to yourself," Nina said with a scornful laugh. "But you know good and well she could have seen to it that you got the child for a month. She's the mother."

"That was Maile's doing," he snapped. "Maile's and Kurtz's."

"And what about the way she came down here? You know that was deliberate. Under the circumstances, any other woman, unless she wanted to drive you out of your mind, would have—"

"That's enough!" he roared.

"You asked for this. You'll listen and like it. Maybe you can find some justification for her in those other things, but how do you explain the house they rented almost two months ago? Are you sappy enough to believe she didn't know what her husband was doing? She knew all along that—"

"Shut up!" He was shaking with rage and the blood pounded in his ears. "You're wrong. It's a lie. Every word of it."

"Are you sure? You were married to her long enough to know a little something about her. Ask yourself if it isn't exactly the kind of thing she'd do."

He shook his head stubbornly. "It's a lie." He leaned down and, glaring, put his face close to hers. "You're jealous of her because she—"

"The trouble with you," Nina broke in coldly, "is that you're so blindly in love with her you can't recognize a first-class bitch when you see one."

His open hand came up swiftly and slapped her face hard. When he dropped his hand, he saw the imprint of his fingers on her cheeks. He brought his hand up to slap her again but she sprang out of the chair and darted across the room. "Touch me again," she said through clenched teeth, "and I swear to God I'll kill you."

He stared at her stupidly for a moment, then turned and stumbled out of the house to the car. His hand burned from the slap. He wanted to cut it off. He

shouldn't have slapped her. She had only told him what he supposed he had known in his heart from the start. Of course Constance would have had to be in on Maile's plans.

Constance.

The ironic connotation of the name increased his fury. It was just the kind of trick she would pull. He knew very little about her family background except for the vague story she had once told him of having been snubbed by other children in a small town. It was her ambition to return there someday and lord it over those who had looked down their noses at her. That same drive had led her to modeling dresses in New York, where he had met her. She had liked to wear the expensive clothes and pretend they were her own, feeling a sense of smug superiority when she walked gracefully in front of prospective buyers who would never look as well in the stylish creations as she.

And now she was back in Sarasota to show herself off to those who had only known her as a charter-boat captain's wife. But the town had never snubbed her. It had accepted her for herself, and the yarns she had spun about a wealthy family and a finishing-school education—so much at variance with the story she had told Dan—had been unnecessary. Why would she be looking for revenge, then? There was only one conclusion he could reach: She wanted to strike at him by showing him the things another man could do for her and which he himself couldn't have afforded in a million years.

Curiously, he thought now of a pair of forty-dollar shoes she had wanted. When he'd told her that the boat was not yet paid for in full and that they couldn't afford the shoes, she hadn't become angry. It wasn't Constance's way to get angry. Cool logic and placidity were her weapons. Very quietly she had said, "You're quite right, darling. I'll take them back to the store."

But on the way to town—as she'd told it to him later—a rowdy boy had bumped her, knocking the box from her arm. In the fall to the sidewalk, one shoe had been scraped on the heel. Naturally she hadn't been able to take damaged goods back, so in the long run she had got her shoes; and though she'd said the scratch detracted from the value of the shoes, she had penalized herself by wearing them on dress-up occasions.

"I'll wear them no matter what. I'm so ashamed of myself."

The shoes had always looked fine to Dan. He wondered now what she would have replied if he had asked her to describe the rowdy boy.

Chapter Eleven

"CAPTAIN TAYLOR! Ahoy there, Captain Taylor!"

Dan, sitting on the edge of the bunk while he drank his morning coffee, stiffened at the sound of Herbert Lewis' exuberant voice. He got slowly to his feet and went to the hatch to look out at Lewis on the dock. The plump little man was wearing his duck-billed cap and a blazing sports shirt that featured green and black dragons rampant on a field of blood. His nose had stopped peeling on his trip north but the sunburn still glowed on his face.

"When did you get back?" Dan asked. Lewis was supposed to have been gone for at least a week.

"I popped in about midnight last night and gave Nina the surprise of her life."

"I'll bet." Dan wondered if the imprints of his fingers on her cheek had had a chance to fade.

"She was all for my sticking around the house today, but say! All the time I was gone I kept thinking about those big ones that were getting away. I couldn't put it off a minute longer. Well, how about it? Just say when. Can we go out today?"

"I'm already booked." That was true enough. He was waiting now for a party of three, old standbys.

"What about tomorrow, then?"

Dan pursed his lips thoughtfully. Anthony Maile had wanted to go out tomorrow, Saturday, but if the Ginny T. were chartered, that would be impossible; in the long run, Herbert Lewis would be the lesser of two evils, and Dan was fully aware that he couldn't keep stalling Lewis off without making him suspicious.

"Tomorrow sounds all right."

"But I don't think Nina will come along. She says she got her fill of fishing while I was gone. And speaking of that," Lewis said with a grateful smile, "I want to thank you for being so decent to her. I really appreciate that."

He took an envelope from his hip pocket and gave it to Dan. "There's a little something for you."

Dan opened it and took out two one-hundred-dollar bills. "I can't accept this."

"Sure you can. I turned a very tidy profit on my trip."

"Just the same—"

"See here, Captain Taylor," Lewis said sternly. "I wouldn't have gone at all if I hadn't known that Nina would be in good hands down here—someone she could trust. You might say you helped me clear a little better than seventy thousand. So you just tuck that money in your pocket."

Frowning, Dan put the bills in his wallet. "Thanks."

Lewis drew a deep sigh of relief. "It's a good thing you took it. Nina would have scalped me if I'd come home with it."

"Nina?"

Lewis nodded. "The money was as much her idea as it was mine."

"Thank her for me."

There was a nasty taste in Dan's mouth. Nina was paying him for services rendered, a perfect way for her to show her complete disdain. He couldn't blame her. After the way he'd treated her last night, he had this coming to him.

"That fish she caught must have been really something!" Lewis exclaimed. "I asked her what else she'd caught, but she couldn't remember the names of any of them."

"She's an all-right fisherman," Dan said uneasily. He looked toward the lot and was glad to see his party coming toward him with rods and tackle boxes. "I've got to get busy."

"See you in the morning," Herbert Lewis said cheerfully. He bounced down the dock and waved a cheery greeting to the new arrivals. "If there are any fish out there, you can bet your last dollar Captain Taylor will find them for you."

The fishermen grinned. Year-round residents of Sarasota, they'd been out with Dan many times before. They were wise enough to know that King Neptune himself couldn't prod fish into action when they'd decided not to bite. But today looked as if it would be a good day. It

was early morning and there was a moderate wind with a falling barometer.

"When did you hire the pitchman, Dan?" Corwin Rancy asked, motioning toward Lewis.

Dan laughed. "A satisfied customer, Mr. Rancy."

It was a relief to take out men who knew what they were doing. They went about the business of fishing without making a lot of unnecessary conversation and asking a string of foolish questions; and when the mackerel began to hit their Bullhead rigs, they contained their excitement. Herbert Lewis would have been jittering all over the boat. But these men, Rancy, Krestle, and Shane, reeled in, brought the fish to gaff, then paid out line again, letting the yellow feathers dart with a lifelike motion twenty or thirty feet behind the boat.

Dan spent most of the morning trolling slowly close to shore. With little else to do but pilot the boat, he thought stormily of the new picture Nina had given him of Constance. The open water was the best place for him in his present mood. He knew that if he were on shore, the temptation would be great to phone Constance or go to see her at her rented house to tell her off.

The wind was picking up a little but he didn't think it was enough to worry about. He looked at the watch over the compass, saw that it was eleven o'clock and time for the Coast Guard weather report. It listed squalls for the Sarasota area. He switched on the ship-to-shore and heard the usual jumble of conversation. He switched off for a moment, gave the channel a chance to clear, then called Tex Renow, who had gone out after king mackerel.

"How they doing, Tex?"

"Good enough," Tex came back in his hard-bitten, Western drawl. "Come on out."

"I'm acomin', baby. Move over. This is the Ginny T. Over and out." He released the switch and turned to his group. "When Tex says 'good enough,' he means it's something out of this world."

"What about the weather, Dan?" Rancy asked.

There was a leaden overcast, the wind was out of the southwest, and the barometer had dropped a bit more. "It will be all right."

He was anxious to give his party a crack at the king mackerel while they were still feeding. Fish were sensitive to changes in the barometer. A dropping barometer

meant a storm to fish as well as to men, and a storm meant a time without feeding. They gorged themselves, snapped at almost anything, and then, as suddenly as they had begun to feed voraciously, they stopped. The trick was to get them at their dinnertime.

Dan came about to steer a westward course. "We'd better eat now. There may not be time for it later."

The fishermen opened their lunches and Dan wolfed a ham sandwich.

"How about a beer to wash that down, Dan?" Raney called.

Dan grinned back. "If you twist my arm—"

Raney got a can of beer from the refrigerated box, opened it, and passed it to Dan at the wheel. "I wouldn't have even let you sniff the suds nine months ago," he said. "For that matter, I wouldn't have gone out with you on a bet. I can say that now."

"I wouldn't have gone out with myself."

"Especially on a day like this." Raney cocked an eye at the sky, then turned to look back at the retreating shoreline. The water tower on Lido was barely visible through the overcast. "It feels like hurricane weather."

"This is the season for them. But there isn't anything brewing within fifteen hundred miles."

"Thank God for that." Raney went back to join Shane and Krestle.

The men, on their own initiative, were switching from the yellow Bullheads to cut-bait rigs, securing strips of fresh mullet belly to the hooks. Herbert Lewis, Dan thought, would have been wringing his hands impotently and staring in supplication at the firmament for advice.

It was only about eight miles out to where Tex was, a run of twenty minutes at full power. Dan let out the Ginny T. and the plunging bow sent up a sheet of spray that leaped the windshield and soaked him. At the end of twenty minutes he knew he should be somewhere near Tex, but visibility had been cut down to much less than a mile, and he could see nothing of the other boat. He continued on at half speed for another few minutes.

"What's the trouble, Dan?" Shane asked.

"Tex is around here but I'm damned if I can find him." He flipped on the ship-to-shore. "Calling the Termite. This is the Ginny T. calling the Termite. Come in, Captain Renow."

Tex replied immediately. "This is the Termite answering the Ginny T. Over."

"Where are you, Tex? I can't find you."

"Well, hub, the way I'm receiving you, you must be sitting on my lap. I'm getting you loud and clear. But you can stop looking for me. I'm heading in. I don't like this weather."

Dan signed off and looked around at the fishermen. "Tex is heading for home. If you men want to do the same thing, just say the word."

Krestle grinned. "It would be a shame to leave all these fish out here without anything to eat."

Raney was the worrier in the party. "What do you think, Dan?"

"A squall won't hurt us any."

"I'm for trying our luck," Shane said. "I hate to come all the way out here and not even get the bait wet."

Dan nodded and turned back to the wheel. He began to troll in a wide circle. "There they are!" he said suddenly. The king mackerel were feeding close to the surface, their dorsal fins cutting water no more than two hundred feet off the starboard bow. He had no sooner spoken than Shane got a strike, then Raney, then Krestle, and the lines sang out. The kings were fast, unpredictable, fighting fish and could put up as fierce a struggle for a few minutes as almost anything that swam in the Gulf.

By the time Shane brought the first king to the boat, the fisherman was puffing and blowing like a swellfish. He fed the long steel leader through the Y bracket on the stern and Dan stood by with a club to hit the king before it came aboard. A king, fighting right up to the end, had powerful jaws that could take a healthy bite at a man's leg if given the chance. Dan had once seen one bite through a stout line.

The fish kept striking and running for home every time the baited hook was presented. They seemed bent on family suicide. Raney, Krestle, and Shane were working like happy madmen and Dan was growing weary of keeping ahead of them with mullet strips.

"Hey!" he finally shouted. "They'll bite at anything. The devil with cut bait. Spoons will be faster and better."

The exhausted fishermen switched to Reflecto No. 7's. The change made no difference to the kings. They kept right on striking ferociously while the men wrestled them

in and Dan held the boat to its broad circle around the edges of the school.

Then suddenly the fish no longer struck.

It was as if a huge hole had opened up in the bottom of the Gulf and had swallowed every swimming thing. In a sense, that was just about what had happened. The fish had taken to holes in deeper water where they could hibernate with full bellies until the storm ended.

It was just as well. Further fishing would have been practically impossible. The Gulf was kicking up, churned by the rising wind, which was still out of the southwest. The shoreline was completely hidden behind a screen of rain.

"Will we be all right, Dan?" Raney asked nervously.

"Fasten your seat belts," Dan replied with a grin. "It might be rough."

The boat rolled and pitched but she was seaworthy and had been through weather much worse than this. He recalled one time off Captiva—they had gone south for tarpon—when the twenty-eight-footer had kept her bow pointing doggedly into gusts that must have gone as high as fifty knots and had come out of it famously. Constance had been horribly seasick that day, but he and Ginny . . .

Mustn't think of that. Mustn't remember any of the times that had been fun or exciting.

"Sure, Mr. Raney. We'll do all right. This isn't anything." He sent the three men into the cabin to keep warm and to get themselves dry.

With his usual landmarks invisible, he steered by compass on a course of 050. That would bring him within sight of land and he could feel his way along the shore to one of the passes. New Pass was out. That channel could be treacherous in nasty weather. Big Pass was his best bet, but if he made his landfall to the north of it, he would have to turn directly into the wind, buck it until he was far enough south, and then come completely about, running the risk of capsizing, in order to get a straight shot at the mouth of the pass.

The cold rain rode the wind on a slant. Shane had found a bottle of bourbon in the bottom of his tackle box and passed it around to ward off the chill. Dan declined. Raney accepted ungraciously, mumbling that they would never have been in this fix if the others had only listened to him. He'd warned them about the weather. He had

been against their fishing when anyone with a brain in his head would have known that—

"Shut up," Shane said without rancor. He stood at the hatch and peered out at Dan, who was drenched to the skin. "That wind must be blowing a million miles an hour."

Dan laughed, straining to see through the sheet of rain and spray. "Twenty-five to thirty. No more than that."

He let out a sudden whoop. No more than two hundred yards ahead was the blurred but unmistakable outline of Siesta Key's Point o' Rocks, and to its left the beautiful sweep of Crescent Beach. He couldn't have asked for a better landfall. He was well to the south of Big Pass and would not have to come about in the wind. He now had a straight shot at the mouth with a following sea and wind.

It was easy from then on, and Raney's spirits began to perk up considerably. Not even the huge waves that pursued the Ginny T. and seemed to hover above the stern like mountains readying themselves to fall could faze him. By the time Dan entered the rough, wind-swept bay and started across it to the bayou, Raney was singing; and when Dan brought the boat alongside the dock, Raney grinned from ear to ear.

"What were you birds so worried about?" he said, guffawing at Shane and Krestle. "That wasn't anything. Why, I remember one time I was—"

"Yeah, yeah," Krestle said. He thrust the bottle into Raney's hand to keep him quiet.

The fishermen divided the catch, paid Dan, and ran through the rain to their car.

It looked to Dan as if this were a rain that intended to stick around for another day or so. Small-craft warnings would be up along the coast. He smiled stiffly. That solved one of his problems, at least. He wouldn't be able to take out either the Lewises or the Mailes tomorrow. It would be a long time before he could face Nina without embarrassment or Constance without losing his temper.

Cold and dampness had penetrated through to the narrow of his bones. Shivering, he went into the cabin, stripped, and rubbed himself briskly with a rough towel. While he was putting on clean, dry clothes, he glanced out a port and saw a light burning on the Seaborne. Anne was back. Thanks to him, she had not been down to the boat for several days. The fact that she had at last re-

turned was an indication that her anger toward him had cooled somewhat. Now was as good a time as any to tell her he was glad.

He put on his black raincoat and went out on deck. He had taken only a few steps down the dock when he saw Anne coming from the Seaborne. He walked toward her and they met halfway between the two boats.

"Can you come over a minute, Dan?"

"That's where I was headed." Beads of rain shone like diamonds in her glossy black hair. She was wearing a belted red raincoat that hugged her trim figure. He said, "I'm glad you didn't stay away for keeps."

She searched his face curiously. "Later, Dan. We can talk about that later. I've got an errand to do."

"In this rain?"

"It won't take me long. Why don't you go over and wait for me on the Seaborne?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll go along with you."

"Please, Dan." She put her hand on his wrist. She seemed strangely uneasy. "Wait for me on the boat. I'll be right back."

"Whatever you say."

"Dan, don't hate me."

She ran off into the rain and darkness.

He stared after her puzzledly for a moment, and then, shrugging his broad shoulders, turned and strode to the Seaborne. He slid back the door and stepped into the cabin. He stopped abruptly just across the threshold.

Ginny was sitting on the bunk, a picture book on her lap.

Chapter Twelve

THEY STARED AT EACH OTHER.

"Ginny . . . Ginny . . ." he managed to whisper.

She twisted around to face the wall. The book slid from her lap and thudded to the floor.

Rain was dripping from him. He unbuttoned the coat with stiff, fumbling fingers and took it off. Then he looked around helplessly for a place to put it. He was a man with a mind gone blank and he stood there stupidly with the wet coat in his hands. Finally he dropped it on the floor.

He took two hesitant steps towards his daughter. "Look at me, Ginny."

She shook her head.

He could have killed Anne for playing this trick. She had no right to intrude. It was frightening to the child, crucifying to him, and far from bringing them together, it would simply serve to drive them further apart.

He backed away from the bunk. He didn't want to frighten her still more. She was already trembling as if caught up in some horrible nightmare of goblins, nameless terrors, and black silhouettes against a flaming sky.

He rested his back against the bulkhead and began to talk in a gentle, low-pitched voice, hoping to make her relax a little, but he couldn't keep the quaver out of his speech. He talked to her about school and asked her how she liked it. He could get no response, not even a shake or bob of her head. She continued to stare at the wall, her back ramrod straight. He could not even break through her wall of silence and resistance when he talked to her about the boat. She had always loved the Ginny T., and her idea of high adventure had been to pack a picnic lunch and to sail off with him to a wondrous place where pirates lurked behind every mangrove thicket and buried treasure was there for the digging on every sandy spit:

but now it was as if she had never heard of the boat. She had pushed all those memories into a dark closet, locked the door, and thrown away the key.

Except for the occasional trembling of her lower lip and the flare of her nostrils, she had tightened up. Her body remained rigid.

"Shall I go now, Ginny?"

She nodded.

"All right." He picked up the raincoat and threw it loosely over his shoulders. "But before I do, I want you to know I love you."

He went to the door and opened it. Rain and wind rushed in and rummaged through the cabin.

"No, you don't."

She spoke in a small, almost inaudible voice. It seemed like a shout to him after her stony silence. He stood in the open doorway with his back to her, not daring to turn to look at her for a moment. She had given him an opening, however small, and if he jumped to it too quickly, there was the danger that he would alarm her into slamming it shut in his face. He waited, suppressing his eagerness, until he heard the bunk springs creak as she shifted position.

He turned then. Her hazel eyes were fixed directly upon him and her firm chin was cocked at a stubbornly defiant angle. She tried to look quickly away.

"No, Ginny," he said quietly. "It isn't that easy." He took a cautious step toward the bunk. "Mind if I sit down? I had a rough day. We went out after kings and ran into a first-rate storm. It wasn't anything like that one off *Captiva*, though. Do you remember?"

She didn't answer.

"Of course, if you don't want me to sit down—"

"I don't," she said distantly.

He stood awkwardly in the middle of the cabin, water dripping from the coat and puddling at his feet. He tried to keep a tremor out of his voice as he told her about the squall and about the fish they'd caught, carefully avoiding anything that would require a response from her. He kept talking, flitting from one impersonal subject to another, but always intently watching her face for a sign that his droning voice was lulling her into a more tractable mood. But he couldn't bring even the suggestion of a smile to her frozen face. He told her how worried Raney

had been, and then the way he had acted when he was safely ashore. The story got no response.

Finally he asked, "Have you been visiting Anne all day?"

She didn't answer.

He took another step toward the bunk.

She withdrew deeper into her shell. Biting her lower lip, she looked away.

"I wish you'd tell me," he said earnestly. "It would help me to do better."

Her eyes snapped around and she glowered at him. "You left us. You went away."

"I didn't leave you. You and your mother went to New York. I stayed right here."

"You shouldn't have let us go."

How could he explain to her that which he could not properly explain to himself? There were the usual clichés, but Ginny was a bright, inquisitive child who would never be satisfied with the vague, general answers that appeared in the lovelorn columns in the newspapers and the child-guidance articles in the women's magazines. She wanted to hear something specific and he had nothing to tell her.

"Maybe I let you go because I loved you so much," he said. That sounded ridiculous even to him, though God knew it was the truth. He tried another angle. "Do you have a pony?"

She nodded jerkily.

"A three-wheeler?"

Again she nodded.

"A pony and a trike," he said. "You're a lucky girl. I couldn't have given you nice things like that."

"I had a trike," she reminded him icily.

"Well," he said, squirming miserably, "I guess you did, but I couldn't have given you a pony."

"You had a boat. I like boats better."

He was getting nowhere fast. "When you grow up," he said lamely, trying again, "you'll want nice things, fancy party dresses and—"

"Why did you let us go?"

There they were again, right back at it. Her eyes locked with his. He was the first to look away. He had let them go and that was evidence enough to her that he no longer loved them.

"You must be very happy in New York."

"You don't like him, either," she said coldly, and then, with a child's innate ability to hurt through bluntness, she added, "Why did you make us live with him?"

That tore it. With tremendous effort he had managed to keep his emotions more or less under tight rein. But now her accusing tone showed him the futility of trying to convince her that he was not an ogre, that he really loved her and wanted her to love him as she had once done in brighter days. It was no use trying to make her understand the way that marriages ended and others began, and that sometimes little bridges, which could be crossed only by those who had faith, remained between the old and new.

The tears that had been buried deep within him rose to sting his eyes. She had never seen him cry. He didn't want her to see him cry now. Knuckling his eyes, he turned his back to hide the helplessness and despair that rode roughshod across his face. More tears came silently. Thank God he could cry without making a lot of noise about it. When he thought he once more had himself under control, he turned slowly and started toward the child.

She screamed in terror. "Go away!"

He nodded miserably and left the cabin.

He stood for a moment on the deck and stared through the drizzling rain at Anne, who was walking across the lot. Her eyes were on the muddy ground, but then she looked up and saw him. She came to a dead stop and waited for him to walk leadenly toward her.

"It didn't work," she said flatly.

He kept staring at her, unable to speak.

She looked down at the package in her hand. "I brought some ice cream. I thought we'd be able to make a party of it."

"Not too long ago," he said, "I slapped you because you wouldn't leave me alone. I didn't hit you hard enough."

"All right, Dan. I deserve that, I guess. But I only did what I thought was right."

"You didn't even stop to think," he said sharply. "If there was ever a chance for Ginny and me to get together, you've killed it by barging into something that isn't any of your damned business. The only way this could have worked out was through time, but this way—throwing

us together without any warning—only scared the socks off her and was a kick in the teeth to me.”

“There still may be a—”

“You’re an amateur do-gooder. When you grow up, you’ll be a professional, always sticking your nose into other people’s affairs. And like every do-gooder I’ve ever met, you’ll only cause more trouble than you’ll solve.”

The melting ice cream was leaking through box and paper. She shifted it to her right hand, then suddenly threw it into the bayou. “I was afraid it wouldn’t work: I thought you’d be too pigheaded to—”

“I did my best,” he snapped. “But she hates me. No wonder. It’s the only way she can make sense out of the situation. How can a child be expected to understand divided loyalties?” He looked down at his clenched fists. “The other day I told you I was in the middle of a messy deal. I was wrong. Ginny is the one in the middle. A child of divorce—confused, miserable, unhappy, pulled both ways at once.”

“If you’ve found that out, the meeting wasn’t a total failure.”

He laughed hollowly. “You’re a regular Pollyanna, aren’t you? Never the dark cloud without the silver lining.” He started to walk away from her.

She ran after him and plucked at the flapping sleeve of his raincoat. “I asked you not to hate me. Don’t, Dan. Please don’t.”

He kept walking. She ran to keep alongside him.

“I don’t care if you don’t love me,” she said, “But don’t hate me. I couldn’t stand that.”

He stopped and glared down at her. “It doesn’t make any difference how I feel about you. There’s only one thing important to me—Ginny. I’ve got to win her back.”

“Keep working at it. Maybe she can visit you next fall.”

“I’m not talking about a one-month visit,” he said grimly. “I mean for keeps.”

“That’s impossible. The court awarded her to Constance. The only way you can get her is by . . .” Her voice trailed off and she stared at him for a long time. “Oh, I see,” she said finally.

“Certainly you see. And now, for the love of God, stay away from me.” He pushed past her and stalked off into the cold rain.

Chapter Thirteen

SATURDAY MORNING was a nightmare.

Friday's rain had settled down to a light drizzle and the wind had abated somewhat, but the heavy sky pressed so low that it became a part of the earth. It threatened to split wide open and pour down a deluge that would make yesterday's seem as insignificant as dew.

Weather, however, meant nothing to a man like Anthony Maile once he had made up his mind. Burdened down with more useless and expensive fishing gear than Dan had seen in many a day, Maile appeared promptly at seven-thirty with Constance and Ginny in tow. He was sportily turned out in a pair of Abercrombie and Fitch fishing trousers, cork-soled shoes, a Basque shirt, and the kind of plaid cap made fashionable by the Key West vacationer from Washington. He nodded curtly to Dan.

"Here," he said, indicating his equipment. "Put this aboard."

Dan was watching Ginny. It seemed unlikely that she had mentioned their unexpected meeting to either Constance or Maile, for Maile wouldn't have missed the chance to gloat. Ginny was dressed in white shorts and white blouse, an outfit that matched Constance's. Dan normally viewed mother-daughter ensembles with a jaundiced eye, but on these two the twin clothes looked right. Ginny saw that he was looking at her. She turned her back to him. A year ago the prospect of an outing on the boat would have had her jittering happily up and down like a doll on a steel spring, but now she was indifferent.

"Dan," Constance said, "the boat looks grand. You've given her a fresh coat of paint recently, haven't you?"

He couldn't talk to her. Words gagged in his throat. If he had been able to say anything at all, he would have cursed her. He glared scornfully at her and felt a measure of satisfaction when she averted his eyes.

"Did you hear me?" Maile demanded, pointing again at his gear. "I told you to put these things—"

He didn't get a chance to finish.

Laughing and whooping, Herbert Lewis came bounding down to the dock like a plump and playful puppy. Nina trailed along behind him. Her eyes met Dan's in a look of pure vitriol. Bad enough, he thought miserably, that the Mailes and Lewises should meet with Ginny in the middle, but with Nina in a vindictive mood the situation was set on a hair trigger and might go off at any moment.

"All set, Captain Taylor?" Lewis asked cheerfully.

Anthony Maile looked him over coolly. "I've chartered the boat for the day."

"Well, now," said Lewis, "I'm pretty sure there must be some mistake. There's bound to be."

"Herbert," Nina said, "we can make it another day." Her blue eyes were hopeful. She was another who had no liking for a day's outing.

"Matey, I've had my mind set on fishing for almost a week now." He turned to look at Maile. They were a strange contrast. Maile's gray face was hard and square, as coldly imperious and as stiffly arrogant as a Roman emperor's; he held himself in the manner of one who would quickly crush anyone who dared question his power. Herbert Lewis, on the other hand, had much of the chubby, pink-checked, awkward boy in him, and he fidgeted nervously as his eyes met Maile's. "I'm sorry about this mix-up," he said apologetically, "but I talked to Captain Taylor yesterday and he—"

"Only yesterday?" Maile snapped. "Then this is easily settled. Tell him, Dan, so we can get out of this confounded drizzle."

"I'll settle it, all right," Dan said. "No one is going out. The small-craft warning is up."

"I don't give a hoot about the warning." Maile was becoming angry and his coloring was mottled, but his rage seemed directed as much at God, who was putting a crimp in his plans, as at Dan.

"I'm not leaving the dock," Dan said.

"In that case," Herbert Lewis put in quickly, "get me down for tomorrow."

Maile had been beaten to the draw, but he had a weapon in which he placed great faith. "I'll charter you

for a hundred dollars tomorrow, Dan." He glanced back in triumph at Lewis.

"Well, gee," Lewis said, "I don't like to get into arguments—"

"Is it a deal, Dan?" Maile said.

"—but on the other hand," Lewis continued without a break, "I guess a day's fishing is worth two hundred to me." He looked down modestly.

It was obvious from Maile's startled expression that he had sized Lewis up incorrectly. That was understandable. Herbert Lewis was dressed in dirty, baggy-seated dungarees, battered sneakers, and a faded khaki shirt. His duck-billed cap looked like a poor man's nose-thumbing gesture of defiance, and he gave every appearance of having had trouble scraping up just the standard rate for a day's charter.

To a man of Maile's temperament, a duel of this sort was for blood. His ability to judge people had been sharply challenged. "Five hundred," he rasped.

"What do you know about that?" Lewis exclaimed in awe. His eyes twinkled. "Well, Captain Taylor," he said, reaching for his wallet, "if you'd like a five-hundred dollar binder right now, and another five hundred in the morning—"

"Oh, for the love of God!" Nina said exasperatedly. "Put your damn wallet away."

"Let him bring it out if he wants to make a scrap of it." Maile reached toward his own hip pocket.

It would have been interesting to see how far they would have carried the absurdity under other circumstances, but now Dan was anxious only to get them all to leave.

"Why don't you two grow up?" he said irritably. "You're both acting about two years younger than Ginny here."

"Ginny?" Nina murmured thoughtfully, and she studied the youngster for a moment before turning to appraise Constance with one of those feminine head-to-toe looks that seem to sweep indifferently, dismiss casually, but miss nothing. It wasn't hard to read the critical light in her eyes. She was saying that Dan was as blind as a bat, that there wasn't anything so damn beautiful about Constance. The meaning was not lost upon Constance, either. She took Nina's measure and brushed her off with a sniff.

"Herbert," Nina said coolly, and Dan braced himself. "I think we've walked into a family reunion. This is Captain Taylor's daughter and his former wife. Stinky situation, isn't it? You remember I told you what happened?"

"Yes," said Lewis, and for the first time since Dan had known the man he saw him angry. Lewis glanced from Constance to Maile and started to say something to them, but he seemed unable to find the proper words. He turned to Nina. "Come on, Matey. Let's get away from here. I don't mind bucking a man, or even a stubborn mule, but I sure never fought with a skunk in my life."

Maile was apoplectic. "Explain that!" he demanded.

"I was here the day Captain Taylor was waiting to hear which plane the youngster would be coming in on. I saw his face then and I would have given a million dollars to be in his shoes. But I see the bitterness in his face now, and I know who did that to him. Does that answer your question?" Lewis went to crouch at Ginny's side. He smiled at her, and after studying her for a moment, he looked up at Dan. "She's got a lot of you in her. A lovely child."

"Thanks," Dan said uneasily.

Lewis put his hand on Ginny's shoulder. "I don't know what you've heard about him, but your dad is a fine man. He's made some mistakes, but so have we all."

Dan writhed in miserable embarrassment. He supposed Lewis meant well, but he was only making the situation worse with his kind words. "Never mind the—"

"I want her to hear it," Lewis said. "She could do worse than to grow up like you."

"She has a mother," Constance said icily.

Herbert Lewis stood up. "Ma'am, I never swear at a lady," he said with solemn dignity, "but I'll say this much to you: If my wife ever treated me as shabbily as you have treated Captain Taylor, I think I'd shoot her. Come on, Matey."

There was fright in Nina Lewis' eyes as she followed her husband down the dock.

Dan could share her feeling. Her husband would be a man who, prizing fidelity above all else, would place great trust and faith in another human being, be it a man or a woman. But if he should ever discover that his confidence had been misplaced, he would go off into a towering

rage. He had just revealed strength and passion under that boyish, almost foolishly exuberant manner. He was quite capable of taking drastic action.

"Who is that idiot?" Maile asked hotly, looking after the Lewises.

"Herbert Lewis."

"I didn't like him," Ginny said.

Maile snorted. "Of course not—not after the things he said about your mother."

"He doesn't tell true about things," said Ginny, glancing at Dan.

Maile got the point immediately and he chuckled. His predicted pattern was working out just right. The refusal of Ginny, who had obviously been brought along only to make Dan miserable, to accept the compliments Lewis had paid her father was music to Maile's ears.

"Can't we go home now?" Ginny asked.

Maile wanted to prolong the torture. "Let's see the boat first."

"I don't want to. I want to go home."

"We'll see the boat," Maile said sternly.

"You heard her," said Dan. "She wants to go home. Take her home."

"May I remind you," Maile said, "that you have absolutely no say in the matter?"

A muscle twitched over Dan's jaw. He took a step toward Maile.

"Dan!" Constance said warningly.

"He's not going to tell me what I can or can't say." He stared at her stonily. "And I won't take it from you, either."

Constance darted a glance at Maile, who was picking up his gear, then came close to Dan and whispered, "What's the trouble?"

"I'm just beginning to get some sense in my head. I've been blaming Maile and Kurtz instead of—"

"Instead of yourself?"

"Instead of you," he snapped.

Her violet eyes clouded. "Dan, I—"

"Go away," he said. "Go away before I really tell you what I think of you."

She continued to look at him puzzledly a moment longer. Shaking her head, she took Ginny's hand and said, "We're going home now."

The youngster looked up at her gratefully.

Maile came over then. "Too bad we couldn't make it today, Dan," he said as smoothly as if there had been neither tension nor harsh words between them. "Perhaps tomorrow."

"You're persistent, aren't you?"

"You should know by now that I always eventually get what I want."

"You won't this time. I'm not going out tomorrow."

"Monday, then."

Dan laughed curtly. "I'm not going to take you out Monday, Tuesday, or ever. You shouldn't be any more anxious to be with me than I am to be with you. Why you're so determined to—"

"You make me determined," Maile said with grim intensity. "I never accept any refusal as final except my own."

"You're in for a surprise."

Maile smiled blandly and walked down the dock in a cocky strut, Constance and Ginny following him. At the end of the dock, Constance stopped and looked back at Dan curiously. Then she looked down at Ginny, whose eyes were fixed rigidly ahead, and she whispered something to the child. Ginny nodded jerkily in reply. They continued on across the lot to the Cadillac.

Chapter Fourteen

A CHARTER-BOAT SKIPPER, when storm warnings were up, was like an amusement-park concessionaire on a rain-swept day. He had nothing but time on his hands.

Dan drove downtown, the coupé's erratic wiper creaking and thwacking, for want of anything better to do. He found a parking place on Main Street and walked a few doors to a sporting-goods store, where he got in his usual wrangle with the manager over the relative merits of the round line versus the flat. He wound up buying some Pflueger Sobey hooks and left the store.

When he got outside, he bumped into Brad Majoley, who was standing under the awning to keep his uniform dry.

"Don't let the Chief catch you," Dan said.

"I'm busy," Majoley replied with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm counting out-of-state cars. As far as I can see, there's nobody left in Ohio or Indiana. Say, have you seen anything of our boy Kurtz lately?"

Dan stiffened. He had been about to ask Majoley the same thing. Like an icy draft on the back of his neck, he had felt Kurtz's presence without having seen him. It worried him. Every time he moved, he sensed that Kurtz was with him—but waiting, waiting. Waiting for what?

"No," he said. "What about you?"

"Not since we released him a couple of mornings ago. I took him out to Maile's place to pick up his dough and the ticket. I brought him back and let him out at Five Points, and that's the last I've seen of him."

"Maybe he went back to New York."

Majoley shook his head. "Nope. He cashed in the ticket. I know that much."

It wasn't like Kurtz to vanish suddenly from the streets of Sarasota. The cold, foreboding sensation touched Dan again. He was the only reason for Kurtz's remaining in

town, and for his own protection he had to know what the detective was up to.

He chatted a minute or two longer with Majoley, then walked around the corner to the dark, narrow bar that Kurtz had made his unofficial headquarters in Sarasota. The place made no effort to cater to the tourist trade, and though Dan was the only customer, the air held the stale smell of last night's beer, smoke, and unwashed bodies. He ordered a beer and he and the bartender debated the strength of the Red Sox without Williams in the line-up. When they reached a deadlock, he asked if Kurtz had been in recently.

The barkeep's reaction was explosive. Smacking the bar with the flat of his hand, he growled, "Not since the night he got drunk in here and then went outside and got himself arrested."

"Gives the place a bad name."

"How bad can it get?" the bartender asked with a shrug of his shoulders. "The thing is, he was broke. He told me he'd have plenty of dough in the morning, so I let him load up on the cuff. That's the last I seen of him. If he don't show up by tomorrow, I'm going over to his place and take the dough out of his hide."

"Where's he living now?" Dan asked casually.

"Same place. A rooming house on Twelfth." He gave the address.

Dan finished his beer, bought one for the bartender, and left.

Ringling the bell at the Twelfth Street address, he realized he knew the lady who owned it. Mrs. Winmade didn't have much money but she was generous with her time for worthy causes. A few years back she had headed a committee to give the county's crippled children an outing and she had asked Dan for help. He had crammed as many youngsters aboard the Ginny F. as the boat could safely carry, and they'd had a wonderful trip around the bay.

She looked at him myopically through steel-rimmed glasses. "All filled up," she said, pushing back a strand of iron-gray hair.

"It's Dan Taylor, Mrs. Winmade."

She looked at him more closely. "Why, so it is. How are you, Danny?"

"No complaints. Is Mr. Kurtz in?"

"He left here—oh, it must have been two or three days ago."

"Did he leave a forwarding address?"

She shook her head. "He said he wasn't expecting any mail he couldn't get along without."

"Thanks, Mrs. Winmade." Worried and disappointed, he started away.

She called him back. "You know the Gunny Motel? Try there. I'm not saying he *is* there—he told me not to tell a soul—but if you should happen to be out that way . . ."

He grinned at her. "Thanks again."

The Gunny Motel had been built long before the word "motel" had become an important part of the English language. In the day when it had been known simply as Gunny's Cabins, such places had had a tawdry aura and were popularly believed to be roadside brothels. The supposition had been false in Gunny's case, but when a rash of modern, chrome-plated motels cut deeply into his profits, he had yielded to the inevitable, and now cars with local license plates could be seen in front of the cabins at almost any hour of the day or night. No one asked questions. Certainly not old Gunny. He had taken him a young, blondined wife named Mickey and she ran the establishment.

She was painting her nails when Dan went into the office. He knew her, too, but not under the same high-minded circumstances as he knew Mrs. Winmade. Mickey had once tried to pick him up in a bar, and when he had declined with polite thanks, they had parted friends, she promising to be immediately available whenever the whim seized him, he swearing to give the invitation serious thought and let her know.

Obviously with that occasion in mind, she gave her fingernails a critical examination and said, "I'll be with you as soon as they dry."

"Fate conspires to keep us apart," Dan said with a smile.

"You can give a lady the brush-off in seven languages and make her like it."

"How's Gunny?"

"Drunk," she said flatly. "How else has he ever been? . . . What's on your mind, now that I know what isn't?"

"Is Ben Kurtz staying here?"

Mickey made a grimace of disgust. "He blew in here a couple of days ago with a roll of dough, three bottles of rotgut, and that redheaded waitress Elsie from the Koro Café."

"Is he around now?"

"Cabin Four. Don't bother to knock. You know the Dr. Pepper ad? 'Ten, two and four.' That's Elsie. It's twelve o'clock now, so you're safe enough."

"How much money do you think he has left?"

"I don't know what he had to start with, but this Elsie isn't in it for love. It's pay as you go with that hooker. Let's see . . . I got a week in advance. Then there's more liquor, a little food, a lot of Elsie. I guess maybe two hundred bucks gone down the drain. Does that help you any?"

Dan nodded. Kurtz could have little more than fifty dollars left. He would soon be looking around for a fresh bank roll.

"When do I start counting the towels?" Mickey asked.

"At the rate he's going, I wouldn't put it off till morning."

He left the office and went down the muddy path to Cabin 4. Knowing where Kurtz was holed up was not enough. Time was running out and he could no longer lie with his head on the block and wait for the ax to fall. He had to take positive action. To Kurtz's nasty, twisted mind it would be a great victory if Dan were to beg him not to tell the story of Nina Lewis; and humiliating as it would be, Dan knew in his heart that he would beg if he thought it would do any good. Not only would an account of that affair wreck forever any chance of getting Ginny back, even if he could win her over, but he was beginning to see Herbert Lewis in a new light. The little man would be dangerous under emotional stress.

Noon had become dusk under the drizzly, rain-laden sky, and a light was burning in the cabin. The black car that Kurtz had been renting was parked in front. Dan hadn't realized that Kurtz would continue to keep the car and he immediately revised his estimate of Kurtz's bank roll. Twenty-five dollars was closer to it. A cheap radio with a tinny, constricted throat was blasting at full volume inside the cabin. The girl who was singing the recorded song sounded like a host of wailing banshees.

Dan stepped lightly across the narrow porch and rapped on the door. The singer drowned him out. He rapped louder. After a moment, a redhead came to stare out at him sullenly. She was a big-boned, ugly woman with crooked teeth and a loose mouth, and her black-rooted red hair looked as if it had recently been through a hurricane. She was dressed in a dirty, rumpled slip, stockings that sagged around her ankles, and no shoes. The left strap of her slip fell off her shoulder. She let it hang. Elsie was as unattractive as a woman could be, but she was probably the best that Kurtz's money could buy.

"I want to see Kurtz," Dan said.

Elsie couldn't hear him above the blaring radio. "Turn down the damn thing," she yelled over her shoulder.

"Turn it down yourself," Kurtz roared back.

Dan pushed Elsie aside and stepped into the drab room. Kurtz was sprawled sloppily in an old chair, his bald head reflecting the light of the naked bulb that was suspended on a long cord from the ceiling. He was stripped to the waist and rolls of fat tumbled downward from his lower chin to his belt. His flabby chest was as hairless as the crown of his head, but he made up for that with a three- or four-day growth of whiskers.

"What do you want?" he asked sharply, drawing his feet under the chair.

"I came to ask you—"

"Hear that, Elsie? He came to *ask* me!" He glowered at Dan. "You came to ask me nothing, that's what you came to ask me." He pointed his forefinger. "I'll tell you what's wrong with you. You got itchy. You didn't see me around like I said I'd be and you got to worryning about it." He had to scream to be heard. "Elsie, turn the radio down!"

"Turn it down yourself," she said laconically.

"You tramp, you hear me? Turn it down!"

She hesitated a moment, then, muttering rebelliously, crossed the room to turn down the radio.

"Now get out of here and leave us talk," Kurtz ordered.

"And go where?" She looked around in disgust at the small room.

"In the can. Sit in there until I say to come out." Kurtz watched the girl go into the bathroom and close

the door. He grinned crookedly at Dan. "She does what I tell her."

She would as long as the money lasted, Dan thought, but when it was gone, Kurtz wouldn't even rate a passing glance from her. There was something to Anthony Maile's predicted pattern. He had said that Kurtz would use the money to make himself important for a little while. If the best Kurtz could impress was only a shop-worn doxy like Elsie, he at least had someone. He would be desperate when she left him.

"All right, Captain Taylor," Kurtz said, placing sarcastic emphasis on the name, "so you got itchy."

Dan nodded. "I was wondering what you were up to."

"I was still behind you all the time. Me, Ben Kurtz. Oh, maybe not in person, but I was behind you just the same, and I didn't even have to leave this place to do it."

"I don't get you."

Kurtz tapped the side of his head. "In the mind. I was there in your mind. You kept looking for me behind every tree and around every corner, and when you didn't spot me, you were pretty sure I was there all the same. You got tailed by your own imagination and I'll bet you behaved yourself, too." Laughing raucously, Kurtz leaned forward in the chair and pointed a grubby finger at Dan. "You're scared to death. God, I get a kick out of seeing you big boys scared and shaking in your boots. It ain't the kid you're afraid of."

"She thinks I let her down," Dan said grimly. "She hates me. But I think I could change her mind if I could get some of the pressure off me. I need time and room to move around in. I can't get either with this Nina Lewis thing hanging over my head."

"Hold up," Kurtz snapped. "Who the hell do you think you're kidding? The kid's only part of it. The main thing that's got you scared is Lewis. If he finds out about you and his wife, he'll flip his wig, and he's the kind of a guy who won't waste any time reaching for a gun. It's your precious hide you're worried about."

"I don't have much money, Kurtz, but I'll give you all I have to get out of town."

"How much could you scrape up?" Kurtz sneered. "Maybe five hundred cash. No more. If you could sell the boat for two thousand, say even twenty-five hundred, you'd still only have peanuts. Anyway, I ain't interested

in *your* money. I told you that already." Kurtz scrubbed his chin thoughtfully and looked at Dan with shrewd eyes. "I got a hunch you seen the kid away from the old man. Right?"

Dan said nothing.

"Sure you have. And it's a hundred-to-one bet he don't know anything about it yet." Kurtz got to his feet and went across the room to pour himself a drink of rye. He held the water tumbler in his hand and stared speculatively at Dan. "What the hell else have you been up to? Maybe I made a mistake. I should of been sticking closer to you, sweetheart."

"That's something I can look forward to from now on," Dan said harshly. "You're almost broke. I doubt if you have twenty-five dollars left. You'll have to come out of your hole to—"

"Shut up," Kurtz snarled. He glanced quickly at the bathroom door, and in that look he revealed more of himself than he would have wanted Dan to know. Kurtz knew the truth about himself and he was frightened. No woman, not even Elsie, would waste her time on him without being well paid for it. He was as loathsome as something that had crawled out from under a rock, and obviously it filled the sloppy little detective with bitter rage to see women go willingly to other men while the best he could do was to put the cash on the line to get a pig.

"You're nuts," Kurtz said in a grating whisper. His voice then rose to a loud bluster. "I've got more dough than you ever dreamed about."

The bathroom door opened creakily and Elsie came out.

"Go on back in," Kurtz commanded. "Stay in there like I told you."

Her eyes flicked over him disdainfully. With a little lift of her shoulder, she slid the loose strap back into place, then began to brush her hair in front of the mirror over the dresser, her heavy breasts threatening to tumble out of the top of the loose-fitting slip. She looked up with a leer at the gaping Kurtz.

"Take a good stare at them, fat boy," she said. "It's the last you'll see of them."

"Where are you going?" Kurtz screamed. "Go on back in there and stay until—"

"This is the end of the line. Two days of you and I lived a million years."

"You want more money?" Kurtz asked. There was a whine in his voice. "Is that it? I got plenty of money!"

"Let's see it," she said indifferently.

Kurtz rummaged in his pockets, came up with a tight ball of bills and some loose change. He held it out pathetically, trying to make it seem like a lot more.

Elsie looked at it with a practiced eye and laughed coarsely. She slipped her feet into run-over shoes and went across the room to take her dress from the back of a chair.

"I can get a lot more," Kurtz cried.

"You know where I work," she said flatly. "Look me up sometime. But it's got to be a hell of a lot more before it will interest me." She turned to Dan. "You wouldn't believe the things about this fat grease ball."

She kept staring at him, waiting for him to ask her about Kurtz, but when he made no reply, she shrugged her shoulders and put on the dress.

"Ten bucks," she said. She walked toward Kurtz with her hand outstretched.

He looked down at the hand. "For what?"

"That was the deal."

"You got all you're going to get." Kurtz was trembling with rage and frustration. He lashed out suddenly and hit Elsie on the face.

"Now it's fifteen," she said. "Fifteen or I call a cop. Assault."

"Oh, hell!" Kurtz moaned. He picked a ten and a five out of the damp ball and threw them at her. "Now get out. Get out!"

She picked up an overnight bag and walked to the door with her hips swinging like an oscillating fan. Dan had seen homeward-bound cows move more seductively than she. The door slammed shut behind her.

"You get out too!" Kurtz bellowed at Dan. "Damn you! Damn you to hell! You had to open your fat mouth about money!"

"Elsie wasn't so much."

"I'll make you pay for it. See if I don't." He trotted to the door and opened it. "Get out." There was a light so evil in his black eyes that it sent a shiver down Dan's spine.

He went past Kurtz and out into the rain. The coupé was parked in front of the office, and when he got to it, he saw Elsie waiting for a bus under a tree.

"I'll give you a lift," he called, and she came over to get into the car.

They were halfway to town before she spoke. "He couldn't do anything right," she said. "He couldn't even hit. Hell, I've been hit harder than that plenty of times. Oh, well, I got no squawk coming. He paid me the extra five."

Dan let her off near the café where she worked most of the time. It was still only a little after one o'clock and he had time to kill. He didn't want a drink. One would only lead to another and drunkenness was no solution. He went down the street to the moving-picture theatre. The movie was pretty bad, but he sat through it twice.

By the time he'd dawdled over dinner, dragging it out so that he would not have so long to sit alone on the boat before turning in, it was seven-thirty. He drove slowly to the Ginny T. and cursed the rain, which was now coming down much harder. There were times when rain was a lovely, relaxing thing; those were the times when you were with someone you loved in a parked car or on a living-room sofa or in the cabin of the boat, and you withdrew into a private world with that someone, listening to the rain patter on the roof and swish across the panes. There was a fine sense of warmth and security and you wanted the rain to last forever.

But there were other times when the rain was as solemnly depressing as a funeral dirge, reminding you with its incessant beat that you were lonely and alone; and those times were the now and the tomorrow.

He sat on the bunk, a pillow propping him, and tried to read a magazine. But he threw it down in disgust. It was no use. The boy always got the girl, and this, said the blurbs, was very true to life.

He heard a faint sound outside and at first thought that it was the wind. Then he heard it again and recognized it as the fall of footsteps.

The door opened and Constance stood there.

Chapter Fifteen

SHE WAS WEARING a black coat of water-repellent taffeta, and it belled out below the tightly drawn belt to emphasize her slim waist and full hips. She stood quietly with her back to the door and looked at him with a puzzled smile as he sat upright on the bunk. Then she slowly raised her right hand, brushed the hood back from her golden head, and began to unfasten the belt.

"Don't bother," Dan said. "You're not staying."

She continued to unfasten the belt. The only sounds then were the patter of rain on the cabin roof and the whisper of the taffeta as she took off the coat and hung it on the hook behind the door.

She turned toward him again and stood quietly, her eyes upon him. Now the only sound was that of the rain.

"Is it so difficult to talk to me, Dan?"

"You're damned right it is."

"Why?"

He stood up jerkily. He had plenty to say to her and now was as good a time as any to get it out of his system before it could spread through him like a malignant growth, but his cold anger was so great that he could find no words to express it.

"Why did you come here?" he asked finally. "Don't you have sense enough to—"

"No one is going to see us."

"That's what you think," he said.

"I want to know why you said what you did on the dock this morning. You blamed me for everything that—"

"You and Maile. The two of you make a fine pair."

"But, Dan," she protested gently, shaking her head, "you're wrong. I had nothing to do with any of it."

He laughed curtly. "You're the mother. You have the say-so on what Ginny does, don't you?"

"In most things," she admitted in a small voice.

"Then you could have let her come to visit me."

"Dan, I—"

"That isn't all," he said, cutting off her words with a chop of his hand. "You've known for almost two months that Anthony rented a house and that you'd be coming down. You never had any intention of letting her spend October with me. And then when you showed up to spend the winter in Sarasota— That was the cheapest, most vicious trick anyone ever pulled. You did it to rub in—"

"I've heard quite enough," she said icily.

"You haven't heard anything yet. It must give you quite a kick to show me up and humiliate me. But the more I think about it, the more I think you didn't have it so bad with me. Like forty-dollar shoes. Remember them?" He smiled coldly. "What did that convenient boy look like?"

"I don't understand what you're driving at, but if you're implying—"

"I'm not implying. I'm accusing." He fumbled a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it with a trembling hand. "And there's something else I'm beginning to see in a new light—this phony marriage of yours isn't for Ginny's sake."

She stared at him incredulously for a moment, then took her coat down from the hook behind the door. "Good night, Dan."

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Certainly. There are lots of things I could say, but I'd be wasting my breath. Your mind is made up."

He watched her impassively as she started to put on the coat. She slipped her left arm into it and was about to put the right arm into the sleeve when her strength seemed to leave her. The coat slid away from her and fell with a rustle to the floor. She buried her face in her hands and began to cry soundlessly, her shoulders shaking.

He made no move to go to her. He refused to be influenced by her tears. They were a woman's strongest weapon in the marital relationship, and he could recall many times when she had used them effectively on him. But let her take them home to Anthony. He was the boy who would now have to dry them by giving in to her wishes.

Constance looked up at him.

He returned the stare.

"Don't you see, Dan? It wouldn't have been any use."

He took a drag on the cigarette and said nothing. He knew he wouldn't have to. The woman had never lived who could leave a remark like that hanging in the air. He waited for the rest of it.

After a minute's hesitation, she said, "You saw how Ginny acted toward you the first time. You saw her yesterday too, didn't you?"

"Did she tell you?"

"After her attitude on the dock this morning, I asked her and she admitted it. But I'd suspected it last night. When she came home, she looked as if she'd been through a nightmare. I knew it would be like that between the two of you, but I couldn't have explained that to you in a letter. You wouldn't have believed it. I doubt if I could have made her come without throwing her into hysterics. But suppose I had been able to? Think how the visit would have been. She would have been afraid, you would have been terribly hurt. You would have sent her back to New York in less than three days."

Despite his anger, he had to admit that there was some truth to what she said. But he was still wary, remembering how easily her calm reasoning had always been able to bring him around to her point of view. A hothead himself, with the irrational impetuosity of all quick-tempered people, he had never been able to stand up against her brand of logic in an argument.

He listened intently as she continued:

"You're right. I did know Anthony had rented the house. I suggested it to him indirectly, though he thinks it was his own idea. But," she said, and her eyes met his levelly, "I didn't do it to hurt or embarrass you. I hoped something could be worked out. I thought if you could see Ginny once in a while she would eventually get over her feeling of rejection and all the fear that goes with it. . . . Well, that's the story, Dan. I don't have anything else to say."

She stooped and picked up the coat.

He took a faltering step toward her. Some instinct told him that she had not given him the complete story, and only by hearing all of it would he know whether or not to believe her. His emotions told him not to, but his intellect was whispering to hear her out.

"Are you sure you've told me all of it?"

She looked away with a wan smile. "Don't ask me to tell the rest of it."

"I have to know." He grabbed her roughly by the arm. "I want to hear it. It couldn't be any worse than the things you've already said."

"Everyone would be hurt."

His fingers tightened around her arm. "Tell me."

"Anthony thought it was his idea to spend the winter here. He—he has a vicious sense of humor. Making you squirm is the kind of joke that would appeal to him. I knew that. I encouraged him in it." Her violet eyes searched his face. "But not just because of Ginny. Oh, don't you understand? Don't make me say it."

He was beginning to see it clearly but he wanted to hear it from her own lips. He shook his head.

"I kept thinking that if you came to the house to see Ginny I would be there and you'd have to see me too. I've missed you so much this past year, Dan," she said candidly. "I didn't know it was possible to miss anyone so much. I had seven years with you. One year with a man old enough to be my father can't wipe out that memory."

"No one forced you to marry him," he said curtly. His grip on her arm relaxed.

"You know why I did it."

"And Ginny is miserable. She asked me questions yesterday I couldn't answer. She acted as if I'd beaten her."

"Anthony's fine hand," Constance said flatly.

"She hates him, too."

"Do you still think I wanted to hurt you?"

"Constance, I can't lose her without a fight."

"What about me?"

He laughed hollowly. "I lost you long ago."

"No, you haven't. There's a way we could be together if you think about it hard. You saw him this morning. You saw his coloring and heard his breathing when Herbert Lewis provoked him. I thought he was going to have an attack right on the spot. You have no idea how bad his heart really is. He's already had two attacks. The third could be fatal."

"Who is his doctor down here?"

"Vincain. He's good, isn't he?"

"One of the best on the east coast." He crushed out his

cigarette and lighted another. "There's something I want to know, and I want the truth."

"I've never lied, Dan."

"How much of this farce is for Ginny's sake and how much for your own?"

"You mentioned that before," she said quietly. "Didn't you believe me?"

He couldn't recall that she had given him an answer. "How much?"

"If I divorce him, he won't feel any responsibility toward Ginny."

"There's no reason he should," Dan snapped. "She's my daughter, not his."

"But if I stay married to him, his money may go to her someday."

"And to you."

"Dan! You don't honestly think I—"

"I want the truth."

"I am telling the truth." Her violet eyes rested gently upon him. "I don't know how to make you understand this, but I guess you're partly right. I don't suppose I am altruistic or self-sacrificing by nature." She paused a moment to give him a chance to take up her defense. He said nothing. "But when I married Anthony," she continued, "it was purely for Ginny's sake. Do you believe that?"

"Let me hear the rest of it first."

"No. Not until you tell me whether or not you believe that much. Everything else depends on it."

She was building a logical argument step by step. "All right. I'll go along that far."

Smiling gratefully, she said, "I've discovered there's nothing wrong with money. I've had a year of servants and silk sheets and good food and—"

"We never ate poorly."

"—and a couple of cars."

"You can only drive one at a time."

"I've had expensive clothes. I like the feel of mink against my neck. I get a thrill out of it when people look at me with eyes that say I'm beautiful."

"They looked at you the same way when you were wearing cotton wash dresses."

"I know," she said puzzledly, "and that's the part that's so hard to explain. Oh, don't think I'm greedy or selfish

—you don't, do you?—but I've had a taste of luxury and I like it. Is that so terrible of me? Anthony isn't an easy man to live with. He's harsh and domineering. He's had things his own way all his life and makes no effort to see the other person's point. Maybe you'll think it's mercenary of me—I hope you won't—but I've earned every cent he's given me and all he'll leave me someday."

He looked at her somberly. In her eyes was the painful embarrassment that had come of telling such a revealing story. It was her very candidness that convinced him in the end that Ginny was still her first consideration.

"I was just thinking," he said, "about something someone told me recently. The people who have the zest for living seldom have the money. The choice comes down to finding security with an elderly man or taking a chance on the future with youth."

"You certainly aren't classing us with Nina Lewis, are you?"

The unexpectedness of her question took his breath away. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come now, Dan." She smiled teasingly and cocked her head to one side. "Don't you think I know about the two of you?"

"Where did you hear about that?"

"From Ben Kurtz."

Stunned, Dan stared at her speechlessly for fully a half minute. "You mean he reported that to Maile?"

Constance laughed. "Of course not. Kurtz did all right for himself. Anthony and I were both paying him, though Anthony doesn't know about that. I paid for the things he didn't report to Anthony. The Nina interlude was one of them. That would have meant absolutely the end for you if Anthony had ever found out."

Dan drew a deep breath. "What did you think?"

"Not much of your taste, now that I've met her. She's cheap and obvious. But I suppose I was a little jealous."

"I hope you didn't expect me to remain faithful to you while you were married to another man," he snapped.

"Naturally not. I could understand your needing another woman. Oh, Dan, my poor Dan, it's been a horrible year for you. I know you so well." She held her hands out to him but he didn't take them. "No other woman could know you so well."

Now he was the one who wanted to talk. He had a

million questions buzzing through his head. "Constance—"

"Hush, darling." She moved toward him like a floating wraith in a slow-motion dream sequence, stopping only when she was close enough for him to feel her breath warm upon his cheek. But his arms remained rigidly at his sides as if they were strapped down by invisible bands. She turned up her face and her cheek brushed his. It was a contact so light that it might have been an illusion, and when she moved her head sensually, the touch of flesh on flesh was as delicate as the brush of a butterfly's wings. He felt the rise and fall of her breasts against his chest, heard the quickening of her breath, saw the beat of pulse at the base of her throat . . . but still he could not bring up his arms.

She took his hand and drew him toward the bunk. She sat down and pulled him down beside her. "Kiss me, Dan. Let's see if it's the way it used to be."

He stood up abruptly and walked across the cabin to lean against the bulkhead.

"It doesn't make sense," he said solemnly. "We were married for seven years. We shared laughs and tears, failures and successes. We knew all the intimacies of seven years. But now we can't meet without a chaperon and I feel as if I never knew you at all. If I come too close to you, it's— You know, sometimes I think marriage has become a crazy kind of dance with everyone changing partners from time to time, and then all the new couples sit down with each other and have a gay old party. No one is ever supposed to look across the table and see his ex-wife as he used to know her with her clothes off or with curlers in her hair or cooking his breakfast or putting an ice pack on his head when he's got a hang-over to end all hang-overs. No one is supposed to look at his ex-wife and say to himself, 'I still love her.' They call this the modern attitude."

"Do you still love me, Dan?" she asked quietly.

"I'm so thoroughly mixed up that I don't know what love is any more."

"I love you. I love you and that's all you should think about. I love you and want to come back to you. Nothing else is important."

"There are a dozen important things you haven't answered."

"Nothing else is important," she repeated. She reached behind her head to remove the black ribbon. Her golden hair tumbled to her shoulders. "You only want to take back what's yours. That's really all you want. Come here, darling, my darling." She was unbuttoning the big white buttons at the back of her dress. He went toward her slowly. "Take me back now."

She slipped her arms through the holes and the dress slid down to her waist. Reaching out swiftly to catch his hands, she drew him down to her side once more.

"Remember, darling?" she murmured.

Her arms bound him. Her hair fell around his head like a golden prison of softest silk. The remembered softness and strength of her arms, the remembered scent of her hair, the remembered warmth of her breath close to his ear . . .

All so familiar and all so strange. He had been away for a long time. He was not even sure if this was the woman to whom he had once been married or if she were only someone who bore a superficial resemblance to that other Constance.

She tried to tell him she was the same one. Love was an unspoken language. Each movement and gesture had more eloquence and meaning than a million words. Constance talked to him in the well-known phrases of their love-making. Love, too, was a pattern, yet always different, and she executed with delicious slowness the interweaving of familiar threads into a fabric that had once been of wondrous design.

"Darling, oh, my darling," she murmured. She twisted impatiently, eagerly, hungrily, aroused beyond delay. "Dan, Dan!" She clawed at him, beat upon him savagely.

In every way she was attempting to tell him that she was the same Constance. He believed her. She could persuade him as successfully with her body as she could with her calm logic and gentle manner, for in desire she was never the cool, detached woman. She was a savage, as if in love she found release for the animation she had been hiding behind a façade of reserve. Yet at the very moment when he should have been losing himself to crashing emotion, when he should have been spinning dizzily toward the downward pull of the vortex vacuum, he could not. He was an impassive witness standing apart from himself.

He heard a foreign sound and looked up quickly. A face was pressed against the port above the bunk. The face vanished as he jumped to his feet.

"What is it, Dan?" Constance asked.

He ran to the door. "Kurtz is out there."

He went outside and crossed over to the dock. The rain had stopped and the wind had died down. A menacing silence lay upon the bayou, but Kurtz was out there somewhere in the darkness beyond the yellow cone of light at the end of the dock. Dan walked slowly, pausing every step or so to cock his head and listen intently for a ripple in the stillness. He stopped under the light, then got away from it quickly, thinking that Kurtz might be armed.

Suddenly he heard someone splashing through the puddles on the far side of the lot and called out. Kurtz replied with a laugh that was as spine-chilling as the cry of a loon. A moment later a car door slammed, a motor roared, and the car sped down the street with its lights out. It screeched around the corner and was gone.

Dan returned grimly to the boat.

Constance stood with the rigidity of a statue. One hand resting for support on the stove, her eyes looked out at him from a face that was a bleached-white mask.

"He got away," Dan said.

"Are you sure it was Kurtz?"

"Positive. The man's insane."

"What do you think he'll do?"

"Go to Maile."

Constance let out a strangled cry. "Tonight?"

"I doubt it. He'll want us—especially me—to sweat first, and then he might even take a crack at getting some money from you. Where are you supposed to be tonight, incidentally?"

"Visiting Anne."

"She always manages to get into it one way or another."

Constance eyes narrowed shrewdly. "If he tries to contact me tomorrow, I have some money. I can buy him off."

"You don't have enough. He'll take all you can scrape up, and when you have no more to give him, he'll go to Anthony anyway. I think he's after revenge as much as anything else."

"Then you don't think I should pay him?"

"It wouldn't buy anything but a short delay. Waiting only makes the inevitable that much worse."

"What an awful mess for us to be in!"

"I'm not thinking of us right now," Dan said. "It's Ginny. Imagine how she'll feel if this winds up in a juicy scandal for the papers."

"Kurtz will go to Anthony when I won't pay." A light of grim intensity came into her eyes. "We can't let that happen, Dan."

"Nothing can stop it short of killing Kurtz."

Constance laughed. Leaning against the stove, she absent-mindedly rubbed it with the heels of her hands. "We have to stall for time. We can't let Kurtz get to Anthony tomorrow, and you're the one who can keep him from it by making Anthony unavailable. How is the weather going to be in the morning?"

"All right, I think."

"Then Anthony's going to get his fishing trip."

"He won't go out with me. After the way I talked to him this morning, he'll be suspicious if I suddenly change my mind."

"You don't know him the way I do," she said vehemently. "You heard him say that he never accepts anyone's refusal as final. If you change your mind, he won't think anything except that he made you back down. He'll gloat over the victory."

Dan nodded. "But how will we let him know the trip is on for tomorrow?" He thought a moment. "When you get home, maybe you can say that Anne told you I was sorry for—"

"No," Constance said firmly. "You phone him tonight. I don't care what reason you give him for changing your mind, but it had better be convincing."

"What good will it do? One day's postponement—"

"A day is enough. Think about it. Keep thinking about it. I have been for a long time." She brushed his lips with a kiss and danced away. She was completely relaxed. To look at her, one would never know she had been frightened almost out of her wits only a little while ago. She waved to him and left the cabin with her coat over her arm.

He stood rigidly until the tap of her heels on the dock faded away.

She apparently went along in the sublime faith that a

thing that could be stalled off for a short time could be put off forever. But one day's delay meant nothing to Kurtz. There was always Monday for him, and if not Monday, then any other day he cared to choose. He had all the time in the world. Time was running out only for those who would be enmired in his story.

Dan left the boat to make the phone call to Anthony Maile.

Chapter Sixteen

HE WAITED NERVOUSLY for the phone to be answered, wondering what approach to take to Anthony, wondering what he would do if Constance, who had certainly had time enough to get home, should answer the phone.

Maile's gruff voice said, "Hello?"

"This is Dan Taylor." He saw then that his best bet would be to match Maile's gruffness. Without further preamble, he said curtly, "Do you still want to go out tomorrow?"

"Well, well," Maile replied. "I thought you were the stubborn lad who wanted nothing to do with me. Why the change of mind?"

"I haven't changed my mind about you personally. But you once said that a dollar was a dollar, no matter where it came from. I'm interested in a hundred dollars if your first offer wasn't a lot of wind. If it was, forget it."

"What happened to that fellow Lewis' offer?"

"It fell through," Dan said, letting anger come into his voice. "He was just bluffing."

"Ummm," Maile murmured.

Dan could picture the thoughts sorting themselves and falling into their proper slots in Maile's mind. This was a triple triumph: Dan had backed down; Dan could be bought; and Herbert Lewis would also be shown up as a four-flusher without money, thus proving Maile's first opinion of him.

But Maile was still wary. "Why tomorrow and not Monday?"

"There's a rising barometer. Fish usually feed better after a storm. Tomorrow should be a good day."

"That's true." Any suspicion he might have had seemed gone. A note of eagerness came into his voice. "We'll make a family outing of it. I'll bring Ginny. You don't mind, of course."

"If you want the truth," Dan said grimly, "I'd just as soon you left her at home."

"Oh, I'd hate to do her out of a fishing trip," Maile said blandly, and Dan could picture the expression of triumph on his face.

"It's going to make it pretty awkward for me. I scare her to death, and it doesn't help my ego any to see my own daughter—"

"I'll bring her."

"Suit yourself," Dan said perversely. Yet it might not be too bad to have Ginny along. Even in this moment of crisis, or perhaps because of the crisis, he felt the need to see the youngster out on the water where the world was clean and uncomplicated. It might be his last chance. "If she'll come."

"Don't worry about that," Maile said with galling confidence. "She does what I tell her to. What time should we leave?"

"No later than seven-thirty."

"Fine," Maile said. The gloating rang out clearly in his voice, just as Constance had predicted. "Oh, and Dan, this change of mind doesn't come as any great surprise to me. I knew you'd give in."

"Just don't forget to bring your hundred dollars," Dan said curtly. He hung up.

He had done all he could. Constance now had her delay for whatever good it would do her. He returned disconsolately to the boat and tried to sleep. But it was a long time before he could shake the thought of Kurtz's leering face at the port. It was even more difficult to push to the back of his mind the memory of that crazed laugh which had come to him out of the darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

IT WAS A GLORIOUS DAY. The cloudless sky was an electric blue, and the morning sunlight danced on green foliage that was well scrubbed after two days of rain. Dan stood on the deck, a mug of coffee in his right hand, and looked beyond the mouth of the bayou to the broad expanse of bay. It lay as clean and unwrinkled as a turquoise counterpane on a well-made bed. The open Gulf would not be so calm, of course, but it would be smooth enough, and some ruffling of the water made the fishing better. Under almost any other circumstances, he would have looked forward to going out today; now he could feel only miserable futility.

He had always been aware of tomorrow and the need to face it. Today's problems and decisions could not be forever forestalled. They accumulated like logs behind a jam, and then there came the time when one of the logs, perhaps the smallest of the lot, was loosened by something perhaps no more significant than the gnawing of a beaver, and the entire mass was suddenly freed to toss and crush, and nothing could stop its force.

He had the stomach-wrenching feeling that he now stood directly in front of such a jam, knowing that it would rip loose at any moment and that he was powerless to get out of its way.

He heard a car door slam and he turned to look across the lot. Constance and Anthony were coming toward him. Maile was carrying the fishing tackle and she was laboring under the weight of a big picnic hamper. Ginny was not with them and Dan frowned puzzledly. But his frown was nothing compared with Anthony Maile's. Harsh lines were deeply etched between Maile's stormy gray eyes and around his razor-line mouth. He carried himself with the stiffness of rage, and he kept darting cold glances at Constance as they came down the dock.

It was Dan's first thought that Kurtz had managed to contact Maile, but if that were so, Maile wouldn't have come at all today.

Constance laughed, and her laughter seemed to convey to Dan the message that Maile knew nothing. The textile magnate's anger must stem from something else, Dan thought. He breathed easier.

"Oh, stop sulking," Constance said lightly to Maile. "We'll have a fine day just the same."

Maile snorted, then glared at Dan. "What are you gawking at?"

"Your friendly, smiling face. You look like a man whose taxes have been upped." Dan took the hamper from Constance. It was much heavier than he'd thought it would be. "What have you got in here—rocks?"

"A big lunch, including a couple of cans of broth. Dr. Vincain likes Anthony to have it in the middle of the day." She was standing close to him. She whispered, "Everything's all right."

"I'm not going," Anthony suddenly declared.

"Don't be foolish," said Constance.

"You heard me. I don't want to go."

Dan was about to put the hamper aboard. He turned, looked at Maile thoughtfully, then lifted the hamper to the dock again. "That suits me fine."

Constance forced a laugh but Dan caught the worry behind it. "Anthony is just being stubborn."

"And so am I," Dan said. "I've been thinking about this stupid outing. The money isn't worth it."

"Wait a minute," Maile growled. "You agreed to the charter and you're not going to squirm out of it. Put that basket aboard."

Winking at Constance behind Maile's back, Dan stowed the lunch under the stern seat.

"Broth!" Maile snapped. "I suppose you brought that foul medicine, too."

"In the basket," Constance said.

"God, you never forget anything! What about the digitalis?"

"With the medicine."

Anthony got aboard grumpily, settled himself on the seat, and looked irritably down the bayou. "The whole damn day is spoiled."

"He's in a stew because of Ginny," Constance explained

to Dan. "She has a cold. She must have picked it up in the rain yesterday. I thought she'd better stay home."

"She has about as much of a cold as I have," Maile said.

"You heard her sneeze."

"I heard nothing of the kind," Maile retorted sharply. "You're the one who heard it. And if she had a cold, the best place in the world for her would be out in the sunshine and salt air."

"She'll be better off with Anne," Constance said. "I'm tired of arguing about it."

Stubbornly, Anthony Maile said, "You know how much I'd been counting on Ginny's—"

"Anthony!" Constance cried.

The sharpness in her voice quieted him, but his expression became more sullen, more pouting.

Dan was beginning to get the picture. It was just one more example of Maile's desire, amounting to an obsession, to get his own way in everything; and when he failed to get it, he became childlike in his petulance. Dan had a hunch that Constance seldom bucked Maile, but she had obviously done so in this case and had insisted upon keeping Ginny ashore, spoiling her husband's chance to make Dan more miserable.

"Do you want me to handle the lines, Dan?" Constance asked.

"If you remember how to do it."

"I remember everything," she said, going gracefully toward the bow.

She had tossed the words off lightly but there was no doubt of her meaning and Dan looked around uneasily at Maile. Maile was still sulking, his steel-gray eyes fixed on the toes of his cork-soled shoes, and he seemed unmindful of anything except his own grievance. Dan turned back to watch Constance on the bow. She was wearing a pair of little-boy white shorts and an abbreviated halter that was hardly more than a narrow band of white ribbon cupping her high, firm breasts. Her skin was tanned to golden honey, and her sun-filled hair shone as if it had been sprinkled with gold dust.

She moved skillfully, sure-footedly, handling the lines without a wasted motion. She looked back at him once and the smile she threw to him was so carefree that he had to turn away from it. When he was feeling so tense,

he couldn't understand how she could be so relaxed, a twinkle lying in her violet eyes. It struck him then that Constance was a superb actress and he supposed he should be grateful for that. If she were to act as he felt, Maile would become immediately suspicious.

"All right, Dan," she called.

The motor was turning over. He backed the Ginny T. out while Constance protected the white paint by holding the boat off the dock with her foot. In the middle of the bayou, Dan came about and headed toward the bay. Constance remained on the bow in a sailor's squat and neatly coiled the lines.

When she finished, Dan called, "You'd better come back now."

She looked around at him with a toss of her head. "I like it here." Her voice seemed charged with a strange excitement.

"Come back here," Dan commanded sharply.

She laughed at him.

Anthony Maile promptly stood to his feet. He got up on the engine box, gripped the windshield, and said, "Constance, come back here immediately."

"Yes, Anthony." She started back.

"You see," Maile said in triumph to Dan. He was smiling now, his power having been proved. "You seem to forget you've lost all right to tell her what to do."

"Apparently," Dan said.

"So stop fighting it," Maile went on. "You'll never win."

"I don't follow your reasoning," Dan said, staring fixedly ahead.

"You're making the mistake all young, strong men make. But the older I get, the more I realize that youth is an old man's game. I have the capacity to appreciate its values without becoming embroiled in its stupid mawkishness and weaknesses. I'm far enough removed from it to see it for what it is and to take from it what I want. And there's another thing." Maile's gruff voice suddenly took on a note of shrill defiance. "I have the strength."

Dan stared at him a moment, then laughed curtly.

"You're thinking of my heart?" Maile asked. "Well, forget it. It's bad, I grant that. I could give you all the names for it. Cardiac arrhythmia. Auricular fibrillation. You know what that means?"

Dan shook his head. He was watching Constance as she jumped down into the cockpit.

"Sit down back there, Constance," Maile said abruptly. "I'm talking to Dan." He waited until she was seated in the stern, then turned back to Dan. "Well, I don't know either. I pay doctors to worry about that. They say my heart is twitching like frogs' legs in a hot pan and I'll take their word for it. But it's still twitching—that's my point. It's going to keep right on twitching for a long time. How old are you?"

"Thirty."

"And all you've got to show for it is a fishing boat," Maile said scornfully. "When I was thirty, I had a half-million dollars in cash and a string of cotton mills. Horatio Alger story, eh? Country boy climbs the ladder to success and all that? Bah! Do you think anyone gets anywhere with ideals, principles, and blind faith? Don't believe it. You take what you want in this world. No one's going to hand it over when you say, 'Pretty please.'"

"It depends on how much you want things."

"Everyone wants things," Maile snapped. "The only difference between people is that some want things more than others. If you want them badly enough, you'll do anything to get them."

"Anthony," Constance called from the stern, "are you going to stand there jabbering all day?"

"Just a moment, my dear." He got down from the box and took a step toward the stern. Then he stopped and came back to Dan. "Today I'm worth five million. I've got four houses. I've doubled the number of my mills."

"And you've got a bad heart."

Maile laughed harshly. "But I'm still alive. A dozen men who tried to stand in my way have been dead for years." He went to the stern and settled himself on the seat next to Constance. "I think I'm going to have a good time after all."

"Do you want to troll in the pass first?" Dan asked them.

"Let the fish have a holiday today," Constance said. "Can't we go out on the Gulf and enjoy the weather?"

"That's up to Maile," Dan said.

"I have no objection," said Maile.

Dan faced the bow again.

Constance was talking to Anthony in the low, throaty

voice that Dan remembered she had used on him when she was at her most loving. It angered him to hear her use that tone to a man she detested so much. He turned and saw her smiling sweetly at Anthony Maile while she hugged his arm.

Maile's eyes met Dan's. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," Dan mumbled. He sat around on the folding seat behind the wheel and listened in growing exasperation to the drivel Constance and Maile were passing back and forth. It was like neither of them. Constance was overdoing it, putting it on too thickly in her effort to keep Maile thinking this was just a happy frolic in the sunshine and that no Ben Kurtz was waiting on the shore.

Fish were jumping near the boat. There were a dozen signs that the fishing would be excellent today, and when Dan tuned in on the ship-to-shore, he heard other fishermen calling their friends to choice spots. It struck him as highly ridiculous to come out here and not drop a hook, and he said as much to Maile. "If all you wanted was a boat ride," he grumbled, "you could have had that for three dollars."

"Let me worry about the money," Maile replied, putting his arm around Constance. "You just steer the boat. Anyway," he went on with narrowed eyes, "what are you so jumpy about?"

"It's just that—"

"Turn around and face the front," Constance said. She giggled.

Flushing, Dan faced forward. He heard them kissing.

He cruised for a couple of hours, watching enviously as he saw the hauls some of the other boats were bringing in, but he was damned if he would mention it again to Anthony or Constance.

At eleven-thirty by the watch over the compass, Constance said, "Aren't you getting hungry, Anthony?"

"Not yet."

"Let me know when you're hungry. Promise?"

"I promise."

"Dan," she said, "can't we loaf along the shore? Why not to Manasota Key or something?"

"Whatever you say." He felt like a chauffeur in a limousine, a man who was just the back of a red neck to the passengers behind him. His sole job was to steer and follow new directions when they leaned forward to com-

mand him. He was about six miles offshore on a westerly course. He turned toward the south and gave the engine full power.

"Why so fast?" Maile asked. "I'm in no hurry."

Dan cut the speed.

"Well, I know I'm hungry," Constance declared. "How about a bowl of soup, Anthony?"

"I don't want any of that damned broth! What I'd like is some clam chowder with the pepper an inch thick on it, but the fool doctor— Oh, all right, I'll get the broth down somehow."

She came forward to the hatchway and stopped next to Dan. "Can I fix you something?"

"Just a sandwich."

She put her hand on his wrist and squeezed it. Her eyes held a reckless light.

"For the love of Pete, Constance—" Dan muttered uneasily, conscious of Maile watching.

Humming, she stepped down into the cabin and Dan heard the rattle of a pan as she took it out of the cupboard. A little later she looked out and smiled at Anthony. "Will you give me a hand, darling?"

"What do I know about cooking?"

"You can work a can opener. I'm clumsy at it."

Dan stared at her in surprise. She had always been proficient with an opener and he could remember an endless number of dinners that had come out of cans. Constance must have forgotten a good many things in a year of having someone to do the cooking for her.

"All right," Anthony said. "I can do that much, at least." He seemed proud of his little domestic skill and pleased that Constance needed him. As he passed Dan on his way to the cabin, he grinned triumphantly.

Dan relaxed on the seat and kept his eyes on the shoreline of the keys, whose scalloped edges stretched far to the south. Several people were strolling along the sand in that unmistakable crouch of shell-searchers. Their eyes were intent upon the billions of sea shells strewn along the beach, and in their minds they were classifying the countless varieties, respecting the common and defective. They would stoop suddenly and snatch up a rarity to cart home to the North with them. The shell would probably lie for a while on a parlor table to catch dust. Then it would be moved to a closet, where it would stay

until a spring house-cleaning sent it out with the trash. There must be enough sea shells in the Midwest dumps, he thought, to start a new beach. But someday if just one small boy who had never seen the ocean should pick up a shell and hear the roar of the sea, all this collecting would be worth the effort.

His mind on the collectors, he heard with only half an ear when Constance said, "Light the stove, Anthony."

"How do I do it?"

"Here," she said with a throaty laugh. "Hold the pan. I'll light it."

Dan's mind swung instantly to Anthony and Constance, and he was about to call out a warning. But then he remembered that Constance knew the peculiarities of the stove as well as he. She might have forgotten how to use a can opener in the past year, but she hadn't forgotten the stove. She had asked about it only the other day, had wondered if he had ever had it fixed, and he had told her no. He relaxed again.

At that moment, Constance screamed.

It began as a throttled cry, rose higher and higher with ear-splitting intensity, and the terror behind it made Dan's blood run cold. He looked quickly into the cabin and saw Constance standing by the stove. She was rigid with fear as she stared wide-eyed at the flames. They were over a foot high, seemed to be growing, seemed to be licking at the monk's-cloth curtains on the port above the stove. Constance's scream continued uncontrollably, and Anthony was gasping in pained horror. His face was as white as death itself and he was rocking on his feet. He lifted his right hand in a futile gesture and was about to say something. But suddenly he clawed over his heart, beads of perspiration popped out on his face, and he crumpled to the floor, his eyes closed.

Constance's scream stopped and she crouched over Maile and put her fingers on his pulse.

"For God's sake!" Dan shouted. He leaped into the cabin, turned off the burner, and stooped next to Constance. "The digitalis," he said. "Get it."

"The beat is growing fainter."

"Where's the digitalis?"

She turned and looked at him, smiling curiously while she continued to mark Maile's fading pulse beat. "I forgot it."

"But you said—"

"I did say that, didn't I?"

"Then what can we do for him?" Dan cried frantically.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"There must be something. Cold water or— There's *got* to be something! He'll die."

Constance laughed. She let go of Maile's wrist and, looking down at him calmly, she said, "He's dead already. The beat is gone." She stood up and drew Dan up with her. Her face peculiarly flushed and her eyes burning with elation, she threw her arms around him and thrust her body hard against him. "Didn't I tell you there was a way, darling? Didn't I say we could be together forever? I told you to think about it—to think about it hard."

He stared down at her stupidly for a moment, refusing to accept what her words implied. Yet he thought of the scream when she had known full well about the stove . . . of her helpless rigidity when she had been perfectly aware that a simple twist of the knob would have cut the flame . . . of the way her scream and helplessness had ended as soon as Maile keeled over . . . of the smile at having forgotten the digitalis. . . .

He gasped in horror and tried to push her away from him.

But she clung ferociously, pressing against him, and her fingers dug into his back. "The two of us," she moaned into his ear, and it was the same tone he had often heard in the dark of the night. "The two of us with all his money." There was no mention of Ginny. "We can *live*, Dan! Oh, my darling, my darling, my Dan!"

"It's murder." He jerked her arms from around his neck and shoved her away. She spun, stumbled across the cabin, and slammed against the bulkhead. She sat down hard and her golden hair tumbled over her face. "Murder," he repeated.

She swept back her hair and scrambled to her feet. "With a heart as bad as his? He was under a doctor's care. Who's to say it was mur—"

"No matter what it's called on the death certificate, it's still murder."

She came back and put her arms around him again, using the persuasion of her body.

He looked back at her with loathing eyes.

"You love me," she said. "You want me."

"The only thing I want is Ginny, and I'll get her away from you. She's not going to live with a murderess."

"Murder would have to be proved," she said coolly, "and I wouldn't advise you to stir up a fuss. You're in this as deeply as I am."

"The hell I am," he snapped. "I didn't have anything to do with it. But you've been planning it a long time, probably ever since you talked Maile into coming to Sarasota for the winter. You had it in mind when you asked about the stove. And now there's something else I understand—I couldn't see how keeping Kurtz away from Maile for one day would do any good. But"—he nodded toward the body on the floor—"that's what postponement bought."

"Think about the stove, Dan. You knew it was defective. You could have given a warning, but you didn't. People might begin to wonder why. And they'll wonder why you, charged with the responsibility for your passengers, stood calmly by and did nothing to help him. They'll think of the money and your ex-wife as the motive."

"And money was your motive. You didn't do it for me or Ginny. You did it for his money and nothing else."

"You didn't think I'd come back to the smell of fish, did you?" she asked. "Do you honestly think I liked living in a cheap house and pretending it was fun to go out on a foul, cramped boat? I married Anthony to get away from all that in the first place. You'll never get me back to that life. But with money, you and I—"

She left the rest unsaid. Her eyes shone greedily and he knew he was seeing a Constance he should have seen long before. She was still the same woman he had lived with for seven years. Her one year of luxurious living hadn't planted the seed of avarice. It had always been there, hidden behind a mask of sweetness. He remembered all the lies she'd lived in their marriage, and yet she'd had such a logical explanation for them he hadn't held them against her. She had fooled everyone, and him especially. He had continued to love her unreasonably even after the divorce and her remarriage.

"Keep his money," he said grimly. "All I want is Ginny."

She smiled and, reaching behind her, untied the knot in the bandeau to let the strip of cloth fall to the floor.

Then she pulled down the zipper at the side of the shorts and stepped out of them.

"Look at me," she commanded. "Look at me and tell me you don't want me!"

He surveyed her calmly.

"You're putting on weight, Constance."

He turned and went out to the wheel to steer a course for home. As he came about, he felt the breeze cool upon his back. It seemed to him to be the only clean and decent thing in all the world at the moment. But it couldn't blow hard enough to fan away the stink of corruption aboard the boat.

Constance cried out suddenly in fright. She wasn't going to fool him again with her screams, no matter how realistic she made them sound. But he leaned down from the seat to look into the cabin. He couldn't hold back a cry of his own.

Constance was staring in horror at Anthony Maile.

His eyes were open. He was clutching at his throat and the sound he made as he struggled to suck air was like something out of a nightmare.

Chapter Eighteen

AN OXYGEN TENT and an electrocardiograph machine had been rushed over from the hospital at Dr. Vincain's instructions. The doctor was in the bedroom with Anthony Maile now.

Dan stood in one corner of the living room and watched Constance pace the floor. "He looked so dead," she said tonelessly. "I can't understand it. He looked so dead. There wasn't any pulse or—" She stopped and glanced at Dan over her shoulder. "Do you have a cigarette?"

He tapped one from the pack and flipped it to her.

"What about Ginny?" he asked. "She can't stay here."

"Anne called and Lina talked to her." Lina was the cook. "Anne said she'd keep Ginny until she heard something further from me."

"Even then—" Dan began. He broke off with a feeling of futility. The child couldn't stay in this house with a very sick man and a woman who had done her best to kill him. On the other hand, he himself couldn't take the child. Feeling toward him as she did, Ginny would never live with him. "What's the youngster going to do?" He hadn't meant it as a question for Constance. He was simply thinking aloud.

"I can't see that that's any problem," she said. "She'll stay with me."

"She can't. I won't allow—"

"You don't have anything to say about it."

"After what you tried to do on the boat?"

"It's your word against mine." She smiled placidly. "And Anthony is alive, isn't he?"

"No thanks to you." He glanced toward the bedroom door. "He's far from out of this. He still might die."

"In that case," she said, speaking as calmly as if she were discussing a probable change in the weather, "you'd

be wise to keep quiet about everything that happened today. Just keep in mind the stove. . . . And if he pulls through, he's going to think that he would have died if I hadn't done everything in my power to save him. So you see, darling, there is really nothing for us to worry about."

"Us," he snorted.

"Certainly, dear." She blew a spear of smoke in his direction. "But with some co-operation from you, I'll do all I can to protect you."

He turned away from her in disgust and stared at the door to Anthony Maile's room. At that moment, the door opened quietly and Dr. Allen Vincain came out to the living room.

Dr. Vincain, a tall, heavy-set man in his middle forties, had made his name synonymous with heart trouble, and Florida, with a climate that attracted the ailing from all over the country, had need of a man of his caliber. He stood with his back to the door for a moment and looked solemnly across the room at Constance. Then he walked toward her.

"He had a close call, Mrs. Maile," he said in a deep, unhurried voice. "His P.R. is bad, but of course it would be. It has been for years."

"What's a P.R.?" Dan asked, coming toward them.

"A symbol for the time interval between the auricular and the ventricular contractions. It can be measured accurately on an electrocardiograph."

Dan's bewilderment must have shown on his face.

The doctor went on to say, "It isn't too difficult to grasp. Mr. Maile has a condition known as auricular fibrillation. It pops up when the auricles no longer contract rhythmically. Do you follow me?"

"I think so."

"Good." Dr. Vincain took a sterling cigarette case from his pocket, offered it around, then selected a cigarette with elaborate care. "There's no longer an orderly beat," he said after a moment, "but at the same time the musculature is in a continual state of—you might say confusion."

"Twitching?" Dan asked, remembering what Maile had told him on the boat.

"Exactly, and because of it the ventricles are not stimulated rhythmically from above. It comes down on them like a flood. Do you see?"

Dan nodded. "But there must be some way to control that."

Dr. Vincain hesitated a moment while his brown eyes moved from Dan to Constance and back to Dan again. "There is. What we have to do is depress the conductivity through the junctional tissues. In that way, only the most powerful stimuli can pass from auricle to ventricle. The ventricle beats more slowly, has time to rest between beats, and, as a result, beats more powerfully." Again he hesitated and his eyes wandered aimlessly around the room. "Naturally it takes a drug to do the job—digitalis." He looked suddenly at Constance. "I'm wondering why he didn't get any when he had this attack."

She was caught off balance, but only Dan would have guessed it. "I know it makes me sound like an utter idiot, Doctor," she said, looking at him squarely, "but in our rush to get off this morning, I forgot to take it along." Her tone of voice implied that she fully understood the enormity of her carelessness and that she would never forgive herself, even though she spent the rest of her life trying to make up for it. She should have been on the stage, Dan thought. There wasn't an actress living who could touch her.

Dr. Vincain frowned. "Your husband might have—"

"And," Constance went on to say with a puzzled smile, "I was amazed to find Anthony had none in his pocket. I remember that you warned him about ever leaving the house without it. But of course that's no excuse for my oversight."

"Well," Dr. Vincain said gravely, "you're a lucky woman; damned lucky, if you don't mind my saying so. With his history, it's a miracle he's alive."

"I know," she said, permitting a catch to come into her voice. "Will he be all right now?"

The doctor patted her arm reassuringly. "Don't worry yourself about that. Naturally I can't make any promises, but— Oh, the auricle will probably be in paroxysm for the rest of his life, and you can imagine how much disability there will be. But if he takes it easy, he'll have some living ahead of him. He will need the best of care, and that's where you come in, little lady. A while longer in the tent—a week to ten days, I'd say—and then several months of complete rest. No lifting, no strain of

any sort for the rest of his life. You'll have to help him walk when he can get out of bed, and then—"

"How long will he live?" she asked.

"That's another thing you shouldn't fret about. You'll have him a long time. A man his age—the late fifties—could live another ten or fifteen years."

Constance flinched as if he had struck her with a whip.

Misunderstanding, Dr. Vincain hastened to comfort her. "Why, with your husband's amazing determination to live, he might even go twenty or twenty-five years—or outlive you." He chuckled. "I've seen that happen many times before."

"I thought he was dead. I felt for his pulse. There wasn't any. I can't understand—"

"I know it must have been a great shock to you," Dr. Vincain said sympathetically, "and yet I've seen a good many cases in which the pulse seemed completely gone and even the breathing nonexistent. Sometimes recovery is brought about by a thing as simple as a cooling breeze across the flesh."

"There was a breeze," Dan said. "When I came about and headed for home, there was a following wind."

"It takes a great deal to kill the human heart. Well, he's sleeping now, when he wakes up, you'll be able to see him." The doctor started back to the bedroom, then stopped and looked around at Constance and Dan. "There's another amazing thing about this appearance of death. Quite often the patient isn't even blacked out. His eyes are closed, he looks dead or unconscious, but the mind"—he tapped the side of his head—"is wide awake."

"You mean," Constance asked, maintaining her poise with great difficulty, "he was conscious today and knew everything that was going on?"

"I really don't know. He hasn't said." The doctor smiled gently at her, then went into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

"Phone, Mrs. Maile," Lina said from the hall. "It's really for Mr. Maile."

Constance hadn't heard the cook. She was standing in a trance, staring fixedly at the closed door to Maile's bedroom.

"Who is it, Lina?" Dan asked.

"The same man who called about noon. When I told

him nobody was home, he wanted to know where everybody was, and when I told him that, he hung up. I didn't know his name but I recognized his voice. He's that kind of a dumpy man who come around one time to get money from Mr. Maile."

It could only be Kurtz, Dan thought grimly. "I'll take the call, Lina." He strode to the hall and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Mr. Maile?" The voice was pitched low but there was no hiding the whine that was as much a part of Ben Kurtz as his oily face and shining bald head. "I got to talk to you. There's something you should—"

"Forget it, Kurtz," Dan said. "He can't come to the phone. This is Dan Taylor."

"Put Maile on," Kurtz spat.

"I told you he can't come to the phone."

"Then I'll come out there."

"It won't do you any good. He's had a heart attack and no one can see him. In the shape he's in, I don't think he'd be interested in anything you have to say. Go on back to New York. You've caused all the trouble you can cause in Sarasota."

Kurtz laughed, and again it was the wild, hair-raising cry of the loon. Dan could picture the bared, stained teeth and the angry glitter of the deep-set black eyes. "I ain't near started to cause trouble," Kurtz said. "I'm going to grab you where the hair is short, and you'll wish you never heard of me." He laughed again. "Sure, I'll be going back to New York in the morning. But when I go, I'll be riding Pullman all the way with my pockets full of money and I'll leave behind me the stinkiest mess you ever rubbed your nose into."

"Kurtz! Listen, Kurtz—" But he was talking to a dead line. He pronged the phone and stared at it thoughtfully for a moment.

Kurtz was broke. The only place he could quickly get his hands on money and cause trouble at the same time was at Herbert Lewis' house. He wouldn't have to color his story much to make of it the shameful thing that it was. Dan could find no justification for Nina Lewis and himself. There had been a strong physical attraction between them and both had been trying to escape from something; but the consummation hadn't been inevitable. They could have fought against it just as other men

and women had fought and would continue to fight against relationships that they knew to be wrong.

But he felt that he owed Nina a debt he could never fully repay. He had taken his anger and bitterness out on her when she was not at fault; and she had been the first to point out to him the truth about Constance. If he had listened to her and had been less easily persuaded by Constance' logic soon after, this sordid mess might never have happened. And worse might yet happen if Kurtz had a chance to empty his filthy mind and send Herbert Lewis into a killing rage. Kurtz had to be stopped.

Dan turned from the phone and went out to the living room.

Constance was still staring at the door.

"Constance—" he began.

"I don't believe it," she said. "Vincain doesn't know what he's talking about. Anthony didn't hear anything."

"The doctor didn't say he did."

"Anthony didn't hear anything," she repeated in a flat voice.

Dan strode out of the house and set out on foot to get the coupé, which was parked across the lot from the boat.

Chapter Nineteen

A YELLOWISH LIGHT burned over the front door and Kurtz's rented car was parked on the gravel drive in front of the terrace steps. Its hood was warm to the touch.

Dan paused apprehensively at the foot of the steps, then, squaring his heavy shoulders, went up, crossed the terrace, and rang the bell.

The inner door opened.

"Oh, God," Nina muttered, peering through the screen at him. She was pale-faced and nervous and her fingers were tightly interlaced in an attitude of prayer. "Go away."

"No," he said firmly. "I know Kurtz is here."

"Why make it worse?"

"Has he said anything yet?"

"He got here only a minute ago, but I know what he—"

"I'm coming in."

"You've caused trouble enough."

"Maybe I can shut him up before—"

"Who is it, Matey?" Herbert Lewis called.

She let out a helpless sigh. "Captain Taylor."

"Wonderful!" Herbert Lewis exclaimed. "Tell him to come in. Come on in, Captain!"

Nina's shoulders drooped. She stepped aside and Dan went into the big living room. Herbert Lewis, wearing one of his flamboyant sports shirts and the same baggy-seated pants he had had on yesterday morning, was standing in front of the cold fireplace. He greeted Dan with his usual exuberance, his plump face shining delightedly. "Glad you dropped around, Captain. You're always welcome here."

Kurtz, standing in the corner with his head thrust forward pugnaciously, laughed raspingly. His gray seer-sucker suit hadn't been pressed since its dunking in the bayou and it was streaked with the oily dirt it had picked

up from the dock when he had lain there. His bloated belly pressed against the waistband of the trousers, rolling it over above the belt, and the two top buttons were missing from his filthy white shirt to expose a deep V of his hairless, pasty-white chest.

"Welcome as the flowers in May, as my daddy used to say," Kurtz said. He glowered at Dan.

"Do you know him, Dan?" Herbert Lewis asked.

"I should," Dan replied grimly.

"So he says. Well, sit down. I won't be a minute." Lewis waved Dan to a seat, then looked a little surprised when Dan remained on his feet. "Mr. Kurtz claims he has a story to tell me. All I have to do is pay him a thousand—no, he dropped the price—five hundred dollars."

"Don't buy it. He's a troublemaker." Dan started slowly across the room toward Kurtz. "Get out."

"Captain Taylor," Herbert Lewis said mildly, "don't you think it's my place to tell him when to leave?"

Dan glanced at him over his shoulder. "You won't like his story. I know the kind he tells."

"Let me be the judge."

"Oh, you'll like it, all right," Kurtz said. He sidled along the wall and came closer to Lewis. "I promise you that."

"Let's hear it. But you might as well know right from the start that I won't pay any five hundred dollars."

"How much will you pay?"

"I'll let you know after you finish it."

"Herbert," Nina cried, "why bother to listen to him? You can tell at a glance what kind of man he is—a dirty private detective—and you already know the trouble he's caused Captain Taylor."

"Now, Matey," Lewis said gently, smiling affectionately at her, "that shouldn't upset you so much, should it?" He turned to Kurtz. "Go ahead."

Kurtz rubbed his hands. "Well, you're wise to some of the scrapes Taylor there has got himself into, but—"

"Yes, I've heard about it," Lewis broke in impatiently.

"He's quite an operator, he is, and I should know all about that, because I've been on his tail. Drinking, fooling around with first one woman and then another."

"He isn't married. There's no reason why he shouldn't enjoy himself in his own way."

"Ah," Kurtz said slyly, "and there's just the point of all this I'm getting at. It depends on *who* he enjoys himself with."

"Mr. Kurtz," Lewis said sharply, "I'm not interested in hearing the story of Captain Taylor's life. Personally, I have always found him to be a decent—"

"A hero, a little tin god," Kurtz said with a sneer. "He pulled the wool over your eyes like he's done to everybody else. Nice, honest face and a flat belly. A tan and some muscles. Oh, he's quite the noble man." Kurtz looked around at Dan and Nina with a roll of his head. "Well, I ain't near finished."

"You haven't even started," said Herbert Lewis.

"You went to New York, or the North anyhow, for a couple of days. Right?" At Lewis' curt nod, Kurtz continued: "Leaving your wife here alone. Right again?"

"Yes," Lewis said slowly. A strange light came into his eyes. He patted his breast pocket for cigarettes, found none, and walked heavily across the room to pick up a pack of Camels from an end table. He lighted a cigarette with a trembling hand, then, leaning against the table for support, turned to look at Kurtz. "Go on."

"Well, now, suppose I was to tell you—"

"Please, Herbert!" Nina said in a voice that broke to a whimper. She buried her face in her hands and her shoulders shook as she cried soundlessly.

"I want to hear the rest of it," her husband said without looking at her. He was staring fixedly at Kurtz.

Kurtz flashed a look of triumph at Dan. "Suppose I was to say that while the cat's away the mice will play?"

"Never mind the adages. Be specific."

"I'll be specific enough for you," said Kurtz. "Meaning just this: Meaning that that very morning you left for the North the fine captain took your wife out fishing. Meaning they come in and the noble captain got a bad-news telegram and then him and your wife—now I hate to say anything against her—went fishing again, and when they come back that time, sure they had a fish. But it was the same one they had when they come in the first time. I'll make book on that."

"I'm not a betting man," Lewis said hollowly. He crushed out his cigarette, fumbled another from the pack, couldn't find a match with which to light it, and groped in the drawer of the end table for a fresh booklet. He

finally got the cigarette lit. During it all, his eyes had not left Kurtz. "Facts."

"Facts? Facts are what you'll get. That's my line, reporting the facts."

"Twisted to suit your purpose," Dan said. "Mr. Lewis, don't listen to this. Let me throw the bum—"

Lewis silenced him with a chop of the hand. "Go on, Mr. Kurtz."

"Facts," Kurtz said, grinning malevolently. "It was dark when they come back from going out that second time. It was dark when they got back here to the house, and then—well, I can only guess at this part of it—she finds a note or something like that from you saying you're going away for a couple of days. Now I know you don't like guesses," Kurtz went on hastily, "but the rest of it ain't no guess. They go out there on the patio." He indicated the patio with a bob of his head. "Her first, then him with the drinks. She don't have any clothes on. Nekked as a jay bird, like my daddy used to say. Ask them. They'll tell you."

Nina moaned and fell back into a chair, her face empty.

"Where were you when that happened?" Lewis asked in a barely audible voice.

"Where was I?" Kurtz rasped. "Why, I was right there just on the other side of the patio wall and kind of scrounged down behind a bush with thorns on it. Oh, I was close enough to hear every word, and even touch them if I had wanted to, if that's what's bothering you."

Herbert Lewis stiffened and his lips compressed to a thin white line. He leaned harder on the table and tried to speak but his words refused to come. He jerked his head a little to tell Kurtz to go on with the story.

"She went swimming. Captain Taylor, he didn't want to swim, so he had a couple of drinks while he waited for her to come back. When she come back, she told him to dry her off, and he started to do that, but then—" Kurtz's eyes rolled up and his tongue popped out of the corner of his mouth to squirm across his dry lips.

"F—from which I'm supposed to gather—?"

"You want me to come right out and say it with a lady sitting here in the room?"

Nina let out a hysterical peal of laughter. "God! Oh, my God! With a *lady* sitting here! He's said everything else about the lady but he can't say—" She sat abruptly

on the edge of her chair and stared at her husband's hand on the table. Her head wrenched around and she looked at Dan. She made an effort to speak but her vocal cords seemed paralyzed. Then she tried to tell him something with eyes stark with fear, but he couldn't understand her.

"And if you want more," Kurtz was saying, "they went out fishing again. That time they didn't even bother to catch a fish to bring back. I got a hunch there was a couple of other times in there between then and when you come back to town, but what with one thing and another," Kurtz said, averting his eyes, "I wasn't keeping the close watch on our fine captain I should of."

"Anything else?" Lewis asked frigidly.

"Ain't that enough?"

Herbert Lewis nodded and his hand dipped into the open drawer.

"No!" Nina screamed. She jumped out of her chair and took a stumbling step toward her husband.

But she was too late. His hand came out of the drawer and it held a gun.

Dan's heart stopped beating. He was a good ten feet from Lewis, too far to grab the gun before Lewis could squeeze off a shot.

"Herbert," Nina sobbed. "Herb . . ." Her voice trailed off. It was too late for talking.

The gun shook in his hand, and his knuckles whitened as he gripped the butt. He drew himself up, seemed to become eight feet tall, and the gun swung in a slow arc until it finally pointed at Kurtz's belly.

"I'll give you just thirty seconds," Lewis growled from deep in his throat. "If you aren't out of here in thirty seconds, I swear I'll kill you."

Kurtz stared at him in stupefaction for a moment, then tried on an uneasy grin as if he knew that this was some kind of crazy joke but was not sure who was to be the butt of it. "You're nuts!" he said with an attempt at bluster. "I just told you—"

"Twenty seconds." Herbert Lewis steadied his gun hand. "I don't know what you have against Captain Taylor—I'm not interested—but I wouldn't believe your filthy story if the Supreme Court backed you up on it."

"It was the truth, for God's sake!" Kurtz screamed. "You know it damn well. You ain't so stupid you—" He

took a step toward Lewis, then whirled to face Dan with insane fury. "You—guys like you!!" Saliva ran from the corner of his twisting mouth. "You play around with any woman, get away with it, and—"

"Ten seconds." Lewis cocked the revolver.

Kurtz's sweating face sagged like melted tallow. "I'll get you, Taylor," he said in a dead voice. "I'll get you where it hurts you most." He fled from the house. A moment later his car door slammed and the motor roared to life.

"I would have shot him," Lewis said, trembling. "I was that mad." He put the gun back in the drawer, fell wearily into a chair, and passed his hand over his eyes. "Matey, I wonder—would you mind making me a drink? I guess we could all use one. Right, Captain?"

"No, thanks. I—I've got a couple of things to do."

"One drink wouldn't hold you up much."

Dan needed a drink but this wasn't the place to have it. Yet he couldn't very well decline it under the circumstances.

"All right."

"Swell. And would you mind giving Nina a hand? I'm too wrung out to lift a finger."

Nina had already stumbled blindly to the kitchen. "Glad to help," Dan said grimly. In this day and age, it seemed inconceivable that anyone could be as naïve as Herbert Lewis.

He went uneasily to the kitchen. Nina was getting ice from the refrigerator. She kept her back to him while she pried a tray loose. He got three glasses down from the shelf and put them on the drainboard. When she came with the ice, she still wouldn't look at him. She kept her eyes down.

"Nina—" he began.

"Shut up."

"I've got to say this. I'm sorry for slapping you the other night and for causing what happened here to—"

"Just shut up. That's all I ask."

"No. There's something else. Herbert may be an idiot—another husband would have started shooting at us before Kurtz had half finished—but—"

"And it would have served us good and right."

"—but if he's an idiot," Dan went on, "he's a nice one. You'll find that out someday."

She looked up angrily. "When I saw that gun come out of the drawer, I thought, God! Here it comes, and I felt the bullet." She put both hands on her stomach and stared down at them in horror. "Felt it right here, tearing my insides out. I never felt such pain. I wanted to scream and be sick. . . . You think you're the first man I've horsed around with? Far from it. But you're the last, because I never felt that bullet before and I never want to feel it again. The next time might be real, and I never met the man yet worth taking a chance on that." She paused a moment, then shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I don't know. A guy like that might come along someday, but you aren't the one, buster, and I can tell you right now he's got to be the Bank of England with muscles and Errol Flynn's face to make me swap Herbert for him. I like the setup I've got and I damn near lost it because of you."

"Don't take all of it out on me," Dan snapped. "It takes two to—"

"Oh, I'm not so mad. One thing you showed me was to watch my step with Herbert." She picked up her drink. "I'll say another thing: I'm sorry about that two hundred dollars."

"That was rough."

"Sure. You were pretty good in bed." She grinned over the top of her glass. "Maybe I should have made it five." She walked quickly back to the living room. Dan followed her with his drink and Herbert's.

"Here's to the end of the Kurtzes," Lewis said, solemnly raising his glass in a toast. "The rest of us will be better off."

Dan nodded and tossed off his drink. "I've got to run along."

"I'll walk out to your car with you," Lewis said.

"There's no need to bother."

"The air will do me good." He smiled broadly. "It got pretty close in here for a couple of minutes."

Dan mumbled a good night to Nina and went out on the terrace with Herbert Lewis. Pausing to breathe in the soft night air, Lewis looked up at the star-lit sky. "Beautiful night, isn't it? You people who live here the year round are fortunate." He put his hand on Dan's elbow and they went down the steps side by side.

The night was still. The only sound was the crunch

of the gravel underfoot as they walked down the drive to Dan's car.

"I consider myself a lucky man, Captain Taylor," Lewis said pleasantly when they reached the side of the car. "When a man gets to his fifties, he can't put up much competition against the younger bucks, fellows like you, so he has to have something else to offer. I was lucky to get someone like Nina."

"She's a fine woman," Dan said cautiously.

"And lucky to keep her. I like nice things, pretty things, fragile things, but I'm a clumsy oaf, always barging into something and breaking it. I'm the man who is always saying 'Oops!' in the comic strips. Well, I've been afraid I'd break Nina one way or another. I wouldn't have been able to bear that."

"You don't have to worry," Dan said.

Lewis looked off reflectively toward the house. "Love is an amazing thing. You mellow under it. You learn understanding from it. You discover there is much you can excuse because there is so much left to love. You also find that some of the virtues you once prized above everything else aren't as important as the person you love and want to love you."

"You mean," Dan began falteringly, dragging out the words with great effort, "you believed Kurtz's story?"

"Not at all," Lewis said blandly. "I would have thought considerably less of myself if I had. . . . Well, I don't want to detain you any longer, Captain. Good night."

He was humming tunelessly as he turned and walked back to the house.

Dan watched the chubby little man stroll jauntily through the silvery night with his arms swinging and his head held high. He crossed the terrace, opened the screen door, and waved to Dan. Dan waved jerkily in return. Lewis was not the gullible, naive man he appeared to be.

Dan got in the coupé and started back toward the Mailes' house on Indian Beach, but he slowed up as he approached the south entrance to Harbor Acres, where Anne Knowles lived. The chances of Ginny's talking to him were remote, but if there was any chance at all, he was willing to take it. The child would be overwrought as she faced the prospect of spending the night in a strange house.

He turned toward Harbor Acres and drove to the

Knowles house on the bay. Mrs. Knowles, a tall, gray-haired woman with a gracious manner, answered his knock.

"Dan!" she exclaimed. "You certainly are a stranger around here."

"I was afraid to show my nose. I haven't been the best company in the world for Anne."

"You're always welcome and you know it."

"Has Ginny gone to bed yet?"

She looked at him puzzledly. "She and Anne left about ten minutes ago. I thought you knew all about it."

"Where did they go?"

"Constance sent that man—you know, Kurtz—to pick up Ginny and bring her home. Anne has always disliked him. She said she thought she'd better go along to make sure everything was all right."

Dan's stomach shrank. Kurtz had called the Mailes at noon and had learned from Lina that Ginny was here. This was his last chance to get back at Dan. God alone knew what he would make of it.

"Dan," Mrs. Knowles said worriedly, "Constance did send him, didn't she?"

"No," he said grimly. "You'd better call the police. Tell them to be on the lookout for him. They have his description." He started on the run for his car.

"Where will you be?" Mrs. Knowles called.

"The Gunny Motel," he shouted over his shoulder.

Chapter Twenty

HE WAS HALFWAY to Gunny's place when it occurred to him that he might be making a big mistake. The blondined Mickey at the motel was smart. She kept an eye on the cabins, if only for her own information, and she would see Kurtz come in with a child and a young woman who was obviously not a chippy. She might even know Anne, having seen her around town. The Gunny Motel tolerated many things, but Mickey would not be able to ignore the stench of this. She would head for the police before they could come to her.

Kurtz would forsee all that.

Someplace else, then. It would have to offer not only a hideout but the opportunity for escape. Dan considered a dozen such places, rejecting them one by one. Finally just one possibility emerged strongly from the welter of thoughts: the bayou. Kurtz could use a boat for his get-away as a last resort. It was a long shot but he had to take the gamble. There was no time for anything else.

He whipped around in a U turn, tires screaming, and sped back to the bayou.

He first began to think that the gamble would pay off when he parked the coupé and saw that the lights were out on his and Anne's docks. One burned-out bulb meant nothing, but two at once, and on the docks with which he was most concerned, defied the law of probability. He knew he was right when, after a brief search, he found Kurtz's car behind a hedge of Brazilian peppers.

He moved quietly across the lot, hugging the shadows of the tall, splintered pines and running in a crouch across the patches of moonlight. At the water's edge he sprawled flat behind a scraggly hibiscus and studied the Ginny T. and the Seaborne, which lay three docks apart. Both were dark and seemingly unoccupied but Kurtz was on one of them and there was a good chance that

Kurtz had seen him cross the lot. At this very moment, Kurtz might be grinning viciously down the blue steel barrel of a gun.

A leaping fish fell back in the water with a splash and Dan jerked instinctively. A car—so near, so far away—rumbled over the bridge to the west. The bayou lapsed once more into intense silence, broken only now and then by the creak of a boat straining against moorings and the gentle slap-slap of water lapping hulls and pilings. Dan looked to the sky and saw a cloud sailing toward the moon. He took off his shoes and socks and waited tensely, watching the cloud. When it was no more than a hand's breadth from the clean, silver edge, he came up to his hands and one knee in a sprinter's crouch.

The cloud touched, spread over the moon, and the light faded. It did not bring total darkness to the bayou, for there were lights burning palely on other docks, but there was some cover, at least, and he had to take the chance. He left the hibiscus bush and darted toward the Ginny T., his bare feet padding soundlessly on the dock, but as he leaped across to the deck, he knew from a single glance at the cabin door that he had guessed the wrong boat. He had locked the door and the only way to have got in would have been to smash it, but it was intact.

At the same instant, he heard Ginny's wail coming from the Seaborne. The sound broke off abruptly. Kurtz must have clamped a rough hand over the youngster's mouth.

"Dan!" Anne screamed. "He's got a gun! He—"

A dull thud brought an end to her cry. Dan's muscles corded. After everything else, he had brought this to Anne.

There was no longer any doubt that Kurtz had seen him. He had been counting heavily upon the element of surprise, but that was now out of the question, and a frontal assault upon a crazy fool with a gun would have been dumb. But Kurtz didn't have eyes in the back of his head.

Dan yanked off his shirt, then fumbled in the tackle box for his sheath knife and slipped it down into the waistband of his trousers. He crawled over the side of the boat and eased himself quietly into the tepid water. There was an outgoing tide and he dog-paddled with it, keeping to the cover of the boats and docks between him and the Seaborne. When he reached the last dock, he

paused under it and listened intently. Feet scuffed nervously on the Seaborne's bow. That would be Kurtz lying in wait. There was another sound, a muted note like the mewling of a kitten in a closet, and it took him only an instant to identify it as Ginny's sobbing in the cabin. He could hear nothing that could be connected with Anne; she was probably still unconscious, struck down by either Kurtz's fist or the butt of his gun.

A fury beyond any he had ever before experienced seized him and shook him. It was all he could do to keep from bellowing in rage. He bit his lower lip to hold back an outburst and waited for the spasm to pass. He would be licked before he started if he launched an attack in blind anger. When he had his emotions under control, he surface-dived and swam along the bottom to a point he guessed to be close to the Seaborne's stern. He floated up. His head broke water a few yards from the stern and a scissor kick brought him to it. The moon was on his side. It huddled behind the cloud as he groped overhead and grasped the edge of the fantail. He pulled himself up cautiously, quietly, but when water dripped from him and splashed back into the bayou, the noise sounded to him like the rumble of nearby thunder. He couldn't see how Kurtz could fail to hear it, but it brought no answer.

He climbed aboard and his hand dropped toward the knife. It was gone! He felt a moment's panic and his mind churned in a desperate effort to remember where he might have lost the knife. It must have worked out of his trousers when he scraped over a crossbeam on one of the docks. It made no difference now. The knife was on the bottom, lost forever, and he had only his fists with which to meet Kurtz's gun.

There was a sudden rustling not three feet from him and he stiffened. The rustling continued, then a faint moan. He dropped to his hands and knees and felt across the deck until he touched smooth flesh. Anne gasped. His fingers quickly left her arm and moved to her face. He put his hand over her mouth and leaned down to whisper, "It's Dan." He took the hand away.

She sat up then. "Thank God," she said into his ear.

"Are you all right?"

"A lump on the head where he punched me."

He sensed from the emptiness in her voice that that was not all.

"What else did he do to you?"

She took his hand and guided it. Her dress had been ripped from shoulder to waist and her side was bare.

His rage grew and he was unable to speak for a moment. If he'd had any doubt of Kurtz's insanity, it was gone now.

"What about Ginny?"

"He slapped her around a bit. He said he was going to dirty up everything you loved. But you came soon enough to—"

"Anne, Anne. I'll make it all up to you somehow." She was shaking. He put his arms around her until her trembling stopped.

"Don't let him hurt you, Dan," she whispered.

He stood up and peered over the top of the cabin. He thought he could make out a deeper shadow against the dark trees on the shore beyond. Climbing to the roof, he slid sure-footedly to the forward edge.

"Kurtz."

The shadow moved and Dan jumped at it.

He landed on Kurtz's back and rode with him to the deck and when Kurtz tried to squirm free, hacking with the barrel of the gun, Dan drove a knee sharply against the side of his head. Kurtz grunted and his obese body sagged momentarily. He recovered, wrenched around, and slugged wildly with the gun. It caught Dan a glancing blow on the jaw and staggered him. He stumbled forward, wrapped his arms around Kurtz, and held on grimly until his head cleared.

The moon was coming out from behind the cloud. A line of light marched across the lot, across the dock, and fell full upon the Seaborne. Dan could see Kurtz clearly now. His froglike face was an ugly, contorted gargoyle from a medieval building. The lips were bared below flared nostrils and insane cruelty was carved with harsh lines into the face. He struggled to free himself from Dan's embrace, kicking wildly and seemingly unaware that the water he feared so much lay no more than a misstep away.

Dan twisted Kurtz's body at the waist and bent the bloated head from the thick neck. "Look down, Kurtz," he muttered. The water shone luminously a few feet away. "Look at it."

Kurtz swayed away from it in horror. .

"You're going in," Dan said. "No one's going to pull you out this time."

Fear gave Kurtz a superhuman strength. He tore away from Dan and leaped to the dock. He brought the gun up and fired. The bullet creased Dan's left arm and spun him around. The burning began then, the burning and the intense pain. He jumped to the dock after Kurtz. Kurtz fired again. The bullet whined off into the night. Dan slammed into him before he could shoot a third time and twisted the gun out of his hand. He threw it into the water.

He drove his knee into Kurtz's groin, caught him under the chin with the knee again when Kurtz doubled up. Kurtz went down and writhed in pain. Dan kicked him in the side of the head. Kurtz made a frantic effort to scramble away on his hands and knees. Dan knocked him sprawling with a kick in the side, then stood over him and battered the back of his head. He hit Kurtz time after time, unable to stop even when he knew Kurtz no longer had any fight left in him.

He was beating him, clubbing him, kicking him, cursing him when someone grabbed him by the arms and pulled him away. He turned in a daze and saw two policemen. One of them was holding a gun and a flashlight. The other was standing ready to grab him again if he should take it into his head to attack Kurtz again. He looked from the officers and saw their patrol car parked close to the end of the dock. The red bulb in the little lighthouse on the roof was turning and the big spotlight on the side of the car was beamed at the dock and the Seaborne. They must have bumped across the lot with the siren shrieking and the spot shining on him, but he had neither seen nor heard anything. Even Kurtz, he realized now, had ceased to be a human being. He had become an object of blind hate, something to strike and kick again and again.

"My God, Dan," one of the policemen said, and Dan recognized him fuzzily as Jarvis Kree. "You might have killed him."

Dan nodded. The desire to kill Kurtz had been there. "You got here too soon."

The other officer, Luke Onteal, rolled Kurtz over and gasped at the sight of the battered, insensible face.

"Too soon," Dan mumbled. Shaking his head groggily,

he tried to lift his left arm to wipe his brow. The arm refused to function. He remembered then that Kurtz had put a bullet through the fleshy part. He looked down curiously at the hand that dangled at his side. The palm was full of blood. A red ribbon ran down his arm.

"What happened here?" Kree asked. "Mrs. Knowles called us and gave us a little dope, and we went out to Gunny's. No luck there. We were headed back to the Knowles' when the dispatcher radioed us that someone had reported shooting down here. Now what the hell is—"

"Ginny. Anne. Are they all right?" He snatched the light out of Onteal's hand and stumbled down the dock to shine it into the cockpit of the Seaborne. Anne was sitting on the dock and rocking Ginny in her arms. He jumped down to stand over them. "Are you all right?"

Ginny seemed to shiver at the sound of his voice and his heart sank.

"We're all right," Anne said, looking at him over the youngster's head. "But your arm—"

"Don't worry about it. It's only a flesh wound." He stared longingly at the back of Ginny's head. He wanted to hold her and comfort her, just as he had done so many times in the old days when she had taken all the tumbles and knocks of active youth, but that would never be for him to do again. If only he could explain this so that she would understand . . .

She turned slowly and looked at him with sober intensity. He wondered if she were waiting for him to say something. He made up his mind he wouldn't. He had learned his lesson on that score.

Suddenly she grinned and, twisting out of Anne's arms, she darted to him and hugged his legs. "Daddy," she said eagerly, "did you hop him?"

A tremendous weight lifted from his heart. It was all right. Everything was all right as far as he and she were concerned, and there would be no need to explain anything. This adventure was something she could understand. He had come along like the cavalry in a grade-B Western or her private Hopalong Cassidy.

"You've been listening to too many radio serials," he said.

"Sometimes they get clabbered, or something like that."

"Clobbered. Kurtz is thoroughly clobbered." He crouched down, put his good arm around her, and pressed his lips to her straw-colored hair. "You don't have to worry now."

"I wasn't so worried," she said. "I cried because he hit me and it hurt, but it's better, and he called you names too."

Luke Onteal came up just then and saw Anne, who was trying to gather her torn dress together. He looked away in embarrassment.

"Sorry, miss," he mumbled. He turned to Dan. "I get your point. I guess we did get here too soon. What was his point? Kidnaping? He must have known he couldn't get away with it. Not only that, it's the death penalty in Florida for—"

"He's crazy."

"He must be," Onteal said. "Well, we'll take him in. Anything we can do for you first, Dan?"

"Not a thing, thanks."

"Your arm—" Kree said. "You ought to see a doctor."

"It doesn't amount to anything. I'll be all right."

"Just the same, a doctor should take a—"

"After I settle something else. Not until."

"Drop in at headquarters the first chance you get," Luke said. He and Kree went back to Kurtz and hauled him to his feet. They hustled him to the car and drove away with him.

With a woman's ingenuity, Anne had managed to fasten her dress with bobby pins. Dan watched her as she started to fix her hair.

Her reward for having stuck by him when everyone else, himself included, had given him up for lost was humiliation at the hands of Ben Kurtz. Superficially she still appeared to be the nineteen-year-old girl with the elfin face, the trim, athletic figure, and the dance programs stuck in the frame of her mirror. But the weight of disappointment and disillusionment lay heavily upon her and was reflected in her eyes. She had grown up too fast and had seen too much sordidness in too little time. He was solely responsible.

She finished putting her black curls in place.

"Any better?" she asked.

"You look fine. Let's go."

"To the doctor?" she asked hopefully.

"No. I want to see Constance. Anthony may be dead." He shuddered at the thought of what it could mean to him if Maile were to die.

"I don't want to go home, Daddy," Ginny protested. "I don't like it at that place. I want to stay with you. Why can't I stay with you?"

"We'll see if we can work something out."

That was one of the reasons he wanted to see Constance, but he had serious doubts that he would get anywhere with her. Constance would not surrender the child without a fight. His only legal hope would be to ask the court to declare Constance unfit. But it would take Maile's death to provide grounds for that, and even then it would be impossible to prove her part in it; and if he stood witness against her to establish her guilt, she would incriminate him. It seemed to him that though he and Ginny had at last found each other, he was no closer to having her than he had been at any time in the past year.

Anne came to his side and looked at him soberly.

"You'll never get Constance out of your system, will you?"

He hadn't told her what had brought on Anthony's attack. He didn't think he ever would.

He left her question unanswered.

"Come on," he said. "You'll have to drive."

Chapter Twenty-one

ANNE DREW TO A STOP in front of the Mailes' house and Dan got out of the car. "I won't be long," he said.

She looked at him dubiously and put her arm around Ginny to make a pillow for the sleeping child.

It seemed to him that he had left this house a hundred years ago, but when he glanced at his watch on the way up the walk, he was surprised to see that only a little more than an hour had passed. The front door was open and he stepped inside. Constance was sitting on the sofa. The ash tray on the end table next to her was mounded with lipstick-smeared, half-smoked butts.

"Has Anthony stirred yet?" he asked.

"Not yet. The doctor is sitting in there with him."

"We've got to settle this business of what's to happen to Ginny."

"There's nothing to settle. She belongs with me and she's going to stay with me." She looked at him speculatively. "Have you just seen her?"

"She's out in the car with Anne."

Constance stood up and started to the door. "I'll bring her in."

"No, you won't." Dan grabbed her arm and held her back. "I won't let her step foot in this place."

"The court—" She became aware of his arm for the first time. "What happened to you?"

"Kurtz tried to kidnap her. He shot me when I was getting her back."

Constance took the news calmly. "I'm sorry, pet, but heroics aren't going to do you a bit of good. Ginny still stays with me."

"Why?"

"I'm her mother. Isn't that enough?"

"Not for me."

She touched his arm and looked up at him with a

gentle smile. "Wouldn't you like me to clean the wound for you? I'm good at things like that. Remember? You always said I was the best—"

"Constance," he said, stepping away from her, "we were talking about Ginny."

"But I thought you understood," she said patiently, "there isn't anything more to say about it. Let me get a pan of warm water. I'll be gentle, I promise."

"You're always so gentle," he said sarcastically.

"You always thought so," she replied. "Do you remember the night we were married? We were both so gentle one would have thought we were trying to tap eggs without breaking the shells. That was the first night. But on the second night we—"

"You've got ice water in your veins."

"Far from it, darling. You know that only too well." She turned quickly as Anthony's door opened and Dr. Vincain came out. "Is he awake, Doctor?"

"Yes. He just—"

"And are you still clinging to the theory that Anthony was conscious when I thought he was dead?" she asked with a teasing laugh.

"I didn't say that was true in your husband's case, Mrs. Maile. In fact, I doubt if he was conscious. He would have given some indication of it to me. He'd like to see you now—both of you." The doctor picked up his hat. "I'll stop by in the morning," he said, and he left the house.

Constance walked lithely into the bedroom, Dan following.

"My dear," Anthony Maile said. He smiled faintly at Constance through the transparent canopy that formed a tent over his bed. The motor on the floor purred evenly and the oxygen was a gentle hiss as it flowed through the vent.

Constance apparently took encouragement from her husband's smile. He certainly wouldn't have attempted one if he had heard anything on the boat.

"I've been so worried, Anthony."

"Come, come. You shouldn't worry about me." He spoke slowly, conserving the little strength he had, and he paused frequently to breathe deeply of the precious oxygen. His voice sounded strangely hollow, muffled by the canopy.

"I'm not worried now," she said confidently. "But I thought you were dead."

"Old coots like me don't die easily." His eyes moved to Dan. "I told you I was tough."

Dan nodded.

"I'll live a long time yet," Maile said. His eyes shifted back to Constance. He was as pink as a newborn babe and the coloring gave him the deceptive appearance of good health, but he was a sick man and very tired. He seemed unable to move anything but his mouth and his gray eyes. "A long time."

"That's wonderful news, Anthony," Constance said with an elation that sickened Dan.

"They used to say—"

"Should you talk so much?" Constance asked concernedly. "Won't it take too much out of you?"

"It's a fine thing to have such a loving wife. No, talking isn't going to hurt me. . . . They used to say that the Model T was so rugged it would keep running even when it was out of gasoline. Ran on its reputation, I suppose." Maile paused to take a couple of deep breaths. "I'm that way. My motor will run for years because I'm not going to let it stop. You see, I have something to live for."

Constance became as radiant as a bride. "For me?"

"For you, my dear," Maile said solemnly.

"You make me very proud." Constance' confidence was now completely restored and she cast a smug glance at Dan.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Maile said. "You'll need your pride." His hand rose slowly from the bed and he pointed his forefinger at her. "I have in mind for you a special hell on earth."

The motor by the bed continued to purr. The oxygen hissed on. There was no other sound in the room for at least twenty seconds.

Finally, in a voice that was deadly calm, Constance said, "You heard what went on?"

"Certainly, my dear."

Constance shuddered, a long sigh escaping her compressed lips, and she gripped the back of a chair to brace herself. Then it seemed to Dan that an expression akin to relief swept over her face.

"Of course you'll give me a divorce."

"I think not," Maile replied. "I'll want you at my side. I expect you to be a great comfort to me in taking care of all my needs. An invalid has many, you know."

"I'm not going to spend my life nursing you. I'll get the divorce myself."

"Have you ever heard of manslaughter through willful neglect? What you did today was attempted manslaughter. The law could make you pay for it, but I'd rather take care of that myself." His eyes locked bitterly with hers. "You'll stay married to me. You have no other choice."

"You're insane."

A cold smile crept across Maile's face. "Hardly that. My mind may be vindictive, perhaps even vicious, but I'm certainly not insane. There's another legal term: *mens rea*. It means a guilty or evil mind. Yours is evil."

"You're a fine one to talk," Constance said.

"Yours is evil," Maile repeated.

They were figures in a Greek tragedy, Dan thought, himself included, and the end would only bring the destruction of them all. Constance and Maile would be held together by hate and reprisal and he would be inextricably bound up with them. Worse, Ginny would still be the helpless figure in the middle, involved through the transgressions of others, torn by greed and passions she could not understand.

"What about Ginny?" he demanded. "Is she supposed to stay here and watch the two of you claw each other apart?"

"Naturally not," Maile said with an icy smile. "She is to go with you."

"She is not!" Constance said sharply.

"Dr. Vincain is telephoning my lawyer to fly down with the necessary papers immediately. You, my dear Constance, will sign them as soon as he arrives. Dr. Vincain agrees that I'm in no physical condition to have a child romping and screaming through the house. And I need your undivided attention. You might even consider this a part of your punishment—if surrendering the child is really the hardship you claim it to be."

"But what does that leave me with?" Constance asked.

"With me, my dear," Maile replied, "and I with you." The soft light that spread across his face from the lamp on the bedside table seemed to mellow him and make his

smile one of infinite patience and understanding. But it was an optical illusion. Nothing could soften his chilly countenance or erase the bitterness of the twisted smile. He turned his eyes to Dan. "Constance is a generous woman. She will willingly let you have the child now."

"I won't," she said.

"Perhaps money concerns you," said Maile. "Forget it. It was never my intention for the child to get a cent of my money." His eyes swung to Dan and he chuckled nastily. "Oh, yes, you may have her for whatever good it will do you. I've had Ginny for a year. I've molded her like clay in my hand and she despises you. If you work at it for the rest of your life, you will never offset what I succeeded in doing in just one year."

Dan started to speak, then hesitated as he realized that neither Constance nor Anthony knew that he and Ginny already had found each other once more. He chose his words carefully. "Ginny was mine for five years before she ever saw you."

"Even the memory of those years has been turned against you. No, you'll try and fail, then turn to the high-ball glass, and fail even more miserably the next time you try. It's the predicted pattern—but you can start trying if you like." He dismissed Dan with a feeble wave of the hand. His eyes turned to Constance. "Well, my dear, which is it to be? The law or me?"

Dan waited with bated breath for her answer, knowing that if he were in her position he would tell Maile to go to hell. Her expression was inscrutable but he could guess her inner turmoil.

She folded her arms across her chest and turned her back to Dan and Maile.

Maile chuckled mirthlessly. "I've been married to her only a year, Dan, but I know her better than you do. Permit her the theatrics. You see the role she's playing? The helpless mother whose child is about to be ripped from her loving arms. Shed a few tears, Constance. And where are those anguished sobs? Come, come, you can do better than this."

She turned slowly and looked down with cold eyes at her husband. "You'll die someday," she said in a level voice. "I can wait while you die a little bit at a time, each day a little more. And after you're dead, I'll still get your money." The flat, unemotional quality in her

voice and the suggestion of a smile that went with it served to intensify the horror of her words. "Oh, yes, Anthony, I can wait for that."

"But how much money? Just the widow's third, my dear."

"That will be enough for me."

"I wonder. I'm planning to synchronize life and money and make them both run out at the same time. But even if your share amounted to a considerable sum, it wouldn't do you any good."

"We'll see."

"No good at all. You will be too broken to enjoy it. Youth and beauty will be gone. Your charm will have become the buzz of a drone. To find anything close to love, you will have to barter the money for a young man's arms." He looked wearily at Dan. "The papers for the child should be delivered to you tonight with everything in order."

"I haven't heard that from her." Dan said.

She smiled at him. "Take her, Dan."

He nodded curtly and, turning on his heels, started out of the bedroom.

"Wait," she called, and he turned again to face her.

She had never looked more beautiful as she walked toward him in a limber, long-legged stride. It was a walk of grace and poise, of calm assurance and studied aloofness; and yet it was more provocative than a hip-switching display of sex, for it was surcharged with a sense of carefully controlled passion that was a challenge to every man. Like a fine perfume packaged with low-keyed dignity, her manner seemed to say, "Here is seduction—but quality—for the right person: you."

"Do you think you can walk out of here and that's all there will be to it?" she asked. Excitement had brought fresh color to her cheeks. Her violet eyes sparkled with gemlike brilliance.

"I know it won't be that easy," he said.

"When Ginny is with you, you'll think of me and want me with you too." She looked back and laughed at Maile, who was lying helpless under the canopy. Then she leaned toward Dan and brushed his lips with cool fingers. "You won't be able to forget me. It still isn't too late for us."

He stepped back and studied her intently.

She misunderstood and the smile grew on her face. "You see? You can't leave me even now. You're trying to take a picture of me with you."

"I've got all the pictures of you I want. I have one of you doing your best to goad me into thinking of murder, the same way you made Anthony believe it was his idea to come to Sarasota for the season. You did everything possible to make me angry enough to kill him. The stories you told me about him—the way you threw yourself at me, then virginally withdrew—and then that business of my first meeting with Ginny . . . You knew how I would react to it. You probably hoped I would explode in Maile's face right then and excite him into a fatal attack."

"Dan—" she began, and he sensed she was going to try to defeat him with calm reasoning as she had done so often before.

"I've fallen for your kind of logic too many times. Well," he went on, "my mind didn't work along the right lines, so then came the second picture I have of you. You're undressing over Maile's body in the cabin. Those are the only pictures I have of you. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget them completely, but I'll try."

"I only did it for you. With his money you could have bought a few new boats, expanded the busi—"

"I thought the whole thing was supposed to be for Ginny's sake."

"Yes, yes. For her, too."

"Yet a little while ago you said you wanted his money for yourself."

She pawed at his chest with nervous hands. "You misunderstood me."

"You'll wait on him hand and foot to get that money. You'll jump when he says jump, crawl when he tells you to crawl."

"That's wrong. I'm not going to be his—"

"Constance," Maile said, his voice coming like an echo from beneath the tent, "come here."

"I'll come when I'm ready." She clutched Dan's arm and looked up at him earnestly. "You see? I won't be his slave."

"Come here immediately," Maile snapped. "I don't like to repeat my orders."

"What do you want?"

"My medicine. Dr. Vincain would be more than suspicious if you forgot it a second time."

She trembled as if shaken by a battle that raged within her, and for a fleeting moment Dan caught an ugly picture of the future in her eyes. But then she drew herself up and smiled serenely. "Certainly, Anthony." She went to the side of the bed and looked down at him.

"You're such a comfort to me, my dear," he sneered. "A lovely, faithful wife."

She held the steady Mona Lisa smile. "Don't count too heavily on that, Anthony. You're going to sit helplessly on a reviewing stand and watch a parade of men."

The air in the bedroom seemed suddenly foul and Dan had to get out of it. At the door, he stopped and glanced back. Neither of them had noticed his leaving. Their eyes were locked in battle, the transparent canopy between them. Both of them were smiling, Constance in placid, deadly assurance, Anthony in vicious, bitter determination. They made a tableau of hate and vindictiveness, frozen at the moment before friction exploded into violence. Satan himself could have posed them no better.

With a feeling of nausea, Dan rushed outside into the clean, cool air and breathed deeply as he walked to the car.

"Did you talk to Constance?" Anne asked. Ginny was still sleeping at her side.

Dan nodded. He got into the car and eased away so that her weight would not rest against his wounded arm. "We can go to the hospital now."

Anne started the car. She was silent for a few blocks. "I suppose everything is just the way it always was. You'll keep on carrying a torch for her. She'll get Ginny."

"Ginny is going to stay with me," he said quietly, not wanting to awaken the youngster. "As for loving Constance, no. I guess I never did. Funny, isn't it? You're married to a woman for seven years. You think you know all about her, think you love her, and then suddenly you find out that you never knew her and that the woman you loved was an illusion. Maybe I saw the flaws in her—I don't know and I'm too thoroughly confused to figure it out now—but if I did, I covered them up with virtues that weren't there."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I still have a few weeks left on the house I rented. That will give me time to look around for a permanent place."

"That's that, then. You're all set."

Her voice was unexpectedly harsh and he looked curiously at her profile by the pale glow of the dashboard light. There was an angry set to her chin, yet her lower lip was trembling. Grim though the year had been for her, she hadn't minded; she had worked hard for the moment when he would find himself and have Ginny with him. The moment was here and there was nothing more for her to do. She faced the emptiness of tomorrow.

He saw the long tear in her dress. It had been the rip from shoulder to waist and the realization of what Kurtz had had in mind for her that had put him in a killing rage. He must have known subconsciously then what he was just beginning to see in sharp focus.

Kurtz's motive: ". . . to dirty up everything you loved."

Not just Ginny. Anne, too.

He sat back in the seat and stared grimly ahead. It was too soon to say anything to her. Or perhaps it was too late. Always too late.

Anne brought the car to a stop at the curb in front of the hospital. "There's an extra bed at my house, Dan. Ginny could tumble into it. I think it would be better if I took her there for tonight."

"Good idea." He kissed Ginny on the brow and got out to walk around the car.

"I'll take her now and come back for you," Anne said.

"I don't know how long I'll be in there."

"I'll wait."

"It may take a long time to put me in shape again."

"There isn't so much patching to do."

"Anne, I—" He broke off and looked helplessly at her. He had made such a botch of love the last time, he wondered if he would ever be sure of it or of himself again. "I don't know how to say it. There are so many things I—"

"What is there to say that I don't know already?"

He stared at her a moment, then leaned into the car to kiss her.

She let out a small cry and threw her arms around his neck. She was all the passion of all women at first

kindling. Then the kiss became hunger and demand, became maturity in itself, and he knew that the difference in their ages would never be important. She clung to him fiercely, drawing herself up against him at the open window, while he held her with his right arm. After a minute, she sank back on the seat.

"I've been waiting a long while for that," she said.

"Am I too late, Anne?"

"You're just in time." Smiling at him, she started the motor.

Ginny stirred at the sound of the engine. She leaned forward and looked out at him as he stood on the curb. "Where are you going, Daddy?" she asked in alarm. She made a move to get out of the car to join him. "I don't want to go back to—"

"Don't worry, honey. You'll be staying with me from now on. We're going to have some wonderful times."

"And Anne, too?"

"We'll see," he said gravely.

He wasn't going to rush into it, he thought as he watched the car drive off. A man who had been in love with an illusion for years was emotionally bankrupt, for he had poured everything out and had taken nothing in. It took time to replenish the depleted man. It took time to give him the faith in himself that he needed before he could have faith in love. But with Ginny and Anne to help him, love might make sense once more, taking on a solidarity he had never known it to have.

He waited until the coupé was out of sight, and then he went up the walk to the hospital steps.

THE END

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