

EXCERPT FROM

THE SEA BITCH

BY

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I stayed at the fish-haven for about a week while I debated which way to go next. I'd gone down to the waterfront where the real yachts tied up and talked to some people who'd just returned from Venezuela. They warned me of the difficulties of cruising in Venezuela, including having to get written permission to sail from one port to another, with attendant "fees."

I had just about decided to head east toward the Leeward Islands when I was approached by a middle-aged man in a flower-print shirt and alligator loafers. I was lying on my mattress in the cockpit, rereading *The Guns of August*, when he walked into sight around the corner of the co-op.

Not many tourists made it to the fish-haven, so I watched him over the book as he approached. He had a heavy red face that looked like it would burn and burn and never tan, and bushy brown eyebrows over watery blue eyes. The backs of his thick forearms were covered with tawny fur.

He went down the next pier and looked around casually. He gave the *Bitch* a long glance, then walked up to the end of the pier and came back. When he came alongside the *Bitch* I put the book down.

"Say," he said, "My name's Ted Hurley. Mind if I come aboard?"

I put my feet down and waved toward the other seat. "Not at all."

The tide was out, and he had to step down to the low gunwale before he could get into the cockpit. We shook hands and he settled himself onto the seat. "I was thinking," he began. He had a clipped Canadian accent. "You must be a hell of a sailor, sailing this thing all the way down from the States. I know. . . I own a sailboat myself. Sailed her down from Miami."

"I see."

He gave me a frank stare. It was the same look Mr. Grant had given me the first time he came onboard. Ted said, "In fact, that's why I'm here. I'm trying to get my boat back."

"Back from whom?"

"A damned thief," he said with sudden anger. "A Venezuelan rip-off. Isn't that what you kids call a thief? A rip-off?"

"I guess so."

"I sold my boat to a guy from Maracaibo," he went on quickly. "I even agreed to deliver it for almost nothing. He was gonna pay half up front and half when I delivered it."

"And he never paid the second half."

He gave me a sharp look. "That's right. When I got to Maracaibo, he'd doctored up the contract to make it look like I'd been paid in full. He refused to pay the rest, and when I tried to take my boat back, he had me arrested."

His face flushed. "Arrested! The police came to the dock and hustled me off my own boat. If I'd had a spare key I would've been long gone, but I couldn't get her hot-wired in time. Anyway, they kept me in jail a whole day—never even let me make a phone call—then they took me to the airport and put me on a plane to Miami."

"And now you're on your way back to your boat."

"They wrote something in my passport so I can't enter Venezuela legally. I came to Aruba to find someone to help me get my boat out."

I frowned at him. "Get it out how? Steal it out?"

"That's right."

"But if this Venezuelan rip-off has something that says he paid you, you'll be arrested if you get caught. Whoever takes you there could get arrested as well."

He started to get up. "Sorry, kid. I made a mistake. Forget I said anything."

"Sit down," I said. "I just wanted to make sure I understood the situation."

He sat back down. "Well, that's the situation. I'm willing to pay well. All you have to do is sail into the marina at night and drop me off at my boat. It's at a private dock with a fence and a guard dog, so the only way I can get to it is by boat."

"How much?"

“How much what? Oh, how much would I pay?” His friendly grin slipped a little. “I can pay. . . a thousand dollars American. Half up front.”

“On, no,” I said, “that’s not enough. We’re talking about years in a Venezuelan jail if I get caught. I’d have to get at least three grand.”

He looked shocked. “Three thousand! That’s way too much. It’s only a day across.” He gestured to the southwest. “Two days and you’ll be right back here. I’ll pay two thousand, that’s all. There’s a bunch of cruisers on the waterfront downtown. I’ll find somebody else.”

“Yeah,” I said, “that makes good sense, going around advertising for help stealing a boat. Two thousand is my final offer.”

“Damn, you look like a schoolkid but you bargain like a pro. Okay, two thousand. One thousand up front and the other when you deliver me to the marina.”

“Why not everything up front?”

“Maybe you don’t deliver me. Maybe your boat sinks.” He looked around. “That looks like a distinct possibility. Anyway, if we don’t make it, you still get the thou.”

“Fair enough,” I admitted. “Where are you taking your boat? Miami?”

“Yeah.”

“What about a clearance? How will you explain that?”

His grin reasserted itself. “No problem. I’ve got a blank clearance from Panama that I can fill out on the way home. The U.S. won’t care if I don’t have an exit stamp from Aruba in my passport. They don’t always do that down here, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know. Can I get a copy of that blank clearance? If we get in trouble in Venezuela, I might need it.”

“Sure. I’ll make a couple of copies at the hotel.”

“Thanks. So where’s the boat?”

“At the south end of Maracaibo Bay. About a mile north of the channel that leads down to the lake. It’s an open bay all the way. The marina’s on the eastern shore. It belongs to a housing development called La Habana Real. The Royal Harbor.” He spat overboard. “Vacation houses for oil barons.”

I gave him a long look. “What kind of boat is this?”

He leaned back against the coaming. “Fifty-two footer. Formosa ketch. Paid a hundred grand for her in Taiwan and spent another eleven bringing her across. Now I’m retired and got a new wife. Got other things to spend money on.”

He gave a rueful chuckle and took out his wallet to withdraw a plastic-laminated studio photograph. It showed a fortyish blonde woman in a low-cut evening dress, with a diamond choker around her sagging neck and small, round breasts that sat in their cups like soft-boiled eggs. She gave the camera a hard-edged smile that denied everything.

“Charlene,” he said proudly. “Maybe I’m an old fool for getting married again, but this woman does it to me.”

I muttered something about how pretty she was.

He put the photo away. “The kids think I’m crazy. They don’t know her. They think she’s after my money. They don’t know what a hard life she’s had.” A flicker of self-disgust crossed his heavy face. “Anyway, I don’t need a fifty-foot sailboat. Didn’t need it when I bought it, except that everybody in North Beach has a big sailboat. You ain’t got class there unless you’ve got a big sailboat.”

He got a far-away look and stuck a finger up one leg of his shorts to scratch his testicles. He did it without a shred of self-consciousness. I have noticed that the very rich are sometimes like that. I shifted my weight on the planked seat. He came back to the present. “So you’ll take me to Maracaibo?”

“Give me a thousand before we leave and a thousand when we get there, and I’ll take you.”

“Got a chart of Maracaibo?”

I shook my head.

He stood up. “My hotel’s down the road. Be right back.” He bounded off, leaving the boat rocking against its ropes, and strode down the pier to disappear around the co-op building.

I took my water cans to the spigot at the side of the office and filled them up. As soon as I had them secured in the forepeak, Hurley was back with a rolled-up chart under his arm. We sat on the pier and he spread the chart between us. It was a new chart, unmarked.

Maracaibo Bay is a huge, open estuary between Aruba and the Santa Marta peninsula of Colombia. It was about a hundred miles to the west from where we sat. The bay narrows like a funnel to a ten-mile channel that zig-zags south to Lake Maracaibo. Without touching the chart, Ted pointed the lead of a pencil at a shallow cove on the eastern shore of the bay, just north of the channel.

“This is La Habana Real,” he said. “It’s a ritzy housing development. About thirty houses inside an eight-foot, cement-block wall. This is

where Armando Pereda lives. He says he's with the government, but I never learned what part. He's got pull, though. When I tried to take my boat out, he had the cops there in five minutes."

"You said there's a guard at the marina?"

He nodded. "There's two piers. About twenty slips in total, but they're big ones. My *Doublewide* is one of the smallest boats there."

"*Doublewide*?"

He looked embarrassed. "I own a chain of mobile-home dealerships in Florida."

"So?"

"*Doublewide*. It's a new kind of mobile home, twice as wide as normal."

"Oh."

"I know," he said, "stupid name. When I get her back, I'll change it." He pulled the chart closer. "So all you got to do is sail me into the marina and let me take your dinghy to my boat. We can't count on you being able to sail right alongside my boat, and if you have to start your engine, the guard'll probably hear it. It's pretty quiet around there at night." He chuckled ruefully. "That's how I got caught. The guard heard me trying to hotwire the engine."

"Then how're you going to get out if you can't start your engine?"

"You can sail up close to the marina and put me in your dinghy. I'll row up to my boat. We'll do it between sunset and moonrise, so it'll be pitch-black. If the wind's right—and I think it will be, because it's been out of the east for a couple of days—then I can sail out without making any noise. If not, I'll hot-wire the engine at the last moment. There's no guard boat there. In five minutes I can be out of the marina and into the bay."

"And if a patrol boat comes out from Maracaibo?"

He smiled. "Remember, it'll be black as a pawnbroker's heart. The patrol boat would have to find us by radar, which can't see either of our boats. *Doublewide* is fiberglass and your boat is wood. Hell, you've even got a wooden mast. They couldn't see you on radar if they were running you down. As far as the *Doublewide*, well, my boat's mast might show up at close range, but I've only got to make it twelve miles."

"To international water, you mean?"

"Yeah, the territorial limit. Beyond that, if you're flying a foreign flag, a Venezuelan patrol boat can't stop you."

"Hmm. About three hours for me in a good wind."

"What? You're that slow? Well, you'll make it before dawn. That's what counts. If you're going north instead of northwest, it'll take longer. Maybe five or six hours."

"Daybreak is at six. We have to do it before eleven—that's moonrise. Should be plenty of time unless the wind dies." I stood up. "Alright, it looks straightforward enough. What about my dinghy? You going to take it onboard?"

"I'll tie it on the stern and bring it to you when I sail out."

"You'll have to pay extra for that. You might lose it and then I'd be up shit creek without a dinghy."

"All right, all right," he growled. "Can we go tonight? The moon comes up about midnight."

"How many miles is it altogether?"

"About a hundred-and-fifty."

"Then we need to leave as soon as possible. This boat is very slow."

He nodded. "Yeah, she looks it. No offense. Okay, I'll go get my stuff. So you aren't gonna clear out, right? If everything goes okay, you'll come back here?"

"That's right. Aruba doesn't require a cruising permit. That way I can get a real clearance when I leave. But I still want that blank clearance just in case."

"Sure. Okay, see you in half-an-hour."

He stood up, stepped across to the pier, and turned back. "You know what I thought when I first saw this boat? I said to myself, 'This guy's either a glutton for punishment or a genius in disguise.' Know what I mean?"

I was about to go below. "No," I said, "I don't know what you mean. By the way, you'll need to bring some food. Enough for two people for two days. And bring some beer, if you don't mind."

"Sure," he said. "I believe in eating well. And I'll get plenty of beer, believe you me." He ambled off toward the parking lot.

I arranged the spare sails on the port berth, organized my supplies in their boxes forward, and secured the boxes with Spanish windlasses of twisted rope. I put the anchor in its chock, tied it off, and coiled the rode under the forward hatch. Then I took the boat's registration and my passport, wrapped them in plastic, and hid them in a crevice between the aft starboard chainplate and the next-forward hull frame. You couldn't see the package without sticking your head down into the bunk compartment, but you could feel it if you reached in with your fingers. I

was hoping nobody would have any reason to do that.

At five o'clock, just before the co-op closed, I bought another thirty-pound block of ice. Then I took a taxi to the Supermarket van Welt at the edge of town and stocked up on food. A few minutes after I got back onboard, Ted appeared on the quay carrying a large plastic bag of groceries and a nylon duffle-bag with a Playboy bunny on the side.

After he'd handed the groceries over and stepped aboard, I said, "You can go down in the cabin to get my money. I don't want the guy in the sportfisherman seeing you give it to me."

A shadow crossed his face. "Let's cast off. I can pay you after we get underway."

I shook my head. "Negative. You've got to stow your bag anyway. I'll take the first thou now, like we agreed."

He gave an impatient sigh. "All right." He climbed down and sat with his back to the hatch. He fumbled in his bag and slid a sheaf of bills up on the cockpit sole. I counted them out. Ten U.S. hundreds.

I put them in my shirt pocket and buttoned it. "Thankee, sir, thankee. How about those Panamanian clearances?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." He pulled an envelope out of his bag and handed it to me. I put it in the folder with my blank Jamaican clearances and said, "Ready to go?"

He nodded. I had the engine on the bracket, but with a fair wind out of the east I was able to cast off and let the wind carry us away from the slip. The wind on the spars brought the head around gently and blew us out into the narrow estuary.

At 1908 hours, according to the log, we cleared the last islet and the channel opened up into the vast mouth of the Gulf of Venezuela. I hoisted sail and turned the bow to the southwest. Ted sat on the starboard seat with a cold Polar in his fist, a long-billed baseball cap shading his broad forehead.

It was a long night sail down the bay. Early the next morning we raised the low, rocky coast of Venezuela on the port side, the northwest point of the Paraguana Peninsula. A few hours later we passed the ghostly towers and spires of an oil refinery in the distance, with a big tanker docked against the shore. Then the Paraguana Peninsula fell away and the horizon began to fill with boats. As we approached Maracaibo Bay we could see squat fishing boats under their patched sails, rusty supply boats belching black smoke, and small, fast crewboats

throwing up rooster-tails as they plunged through the low seas.

We continued on a broad reach along the low, rocky coast throughout the day. Just south of the marina, the chart showed a long bridge spanning the bay at its throat. Ted had marked the position of the marina as north of its eastern end, and just before nightfall the bridge appeared, a dim white streak in the failing light.

We still couldn't see the Habana Real, but I was able to take its bearing from the point where the channel to Lake Maracaibo crossed under the causeway. The wind continued out of the east, strong enough to make the bow wave chuckle under the *Bitch's* forefoot. Knowing we couldn't tack upwind, I kept the boat as close to the wind as I could.

At 1930 hours we were able to see sailboat masts against the brown hillside, a half-dozen bare poles illuminated by the setting sun, standing north of a low headland. The sun shone on the cream-colored walls and red tile roofs of the haciendas on the rocky hillside above the marina.

Ted pointed with his beer bottle. "See the stakes for the channel?"

I lifted the binoculars. A half-dozen pilings were sticking out of the water in a line, each with a white dot at the top. "Yeah, I see 'em." I swung the binoculars to the marina. Long hulls of mega-yachts were lined up at the two finger piers. I handed the binocs to Ted. "Can you see your boat?"

He studied the marina in the glasses, then lowered them and shook his head. "Not from here." He threw his bottle in the water. "Damn. I wonder if Armando figures I might try it from the sea." He scratched his testicles and furrowed his brow. I studied the eastern shore.

A few hundred yards south of the marina, close enough to the causeway to see the drivers' heads in their cars, I gybed about and sailed north again, carefully plotting the channel as we passed the line of pilings. It ran due east. The lights of the houses above the marina and the headlights on the causeway all gave me good reference for finding my way later, in total darkness.

The stars came out. We continued north. I handed the tiller over to Ted and went below to fix supper. He had bought some fresh Salisbury steaks, and they were delicious over rice, washed down with cold Polars. It was too dark for us to see each other, but I could hear him breathing through his nose as he ate.

I washed the pots and dishes and stowed everything away forward. It was a cool night, with a faint smell of desert on the fading wind. We continued north at about three knots. The breeze from the forward hatch cooled my temples. I held up the watch-jar to check the luminous hands of my watch. Nine-thirty. I went topside.

“Another couple of hours,” I said. “We should be off the last piling at about eleven-thirty. I’ve got to stay close because I can’t go to windward.”

“Yeah,” he said, “the wind’s still out of the east. If it holds, I’ll be able to sail out.”

“True enough,” I said. “Ready about.” I turned the boat around and tacked back toward the headlights on the causeway. A low cloud cover was moving in, still broken and showing faint stars in the holes, but thickening. A good sign.

The wind continued to fall off, and by the time we pulled abreast of the marina again, the boat was ghosting along at about one knot, rolling easily in the wavelets off the shore. I could see with the binoculars the white jugs that were stuck on the tops of the pilings, but not the pilings themselves. I could also see the sailboats’ aluminum masts in the marina, and the white spots of their hulls. A few lights showed in the houses above them.

I turned around again just short of the causeway. Rubber tires rumbled on the concrete and mingled with the murmur of engine exhausts. I gybed about, easing the boom to the other side with my hand, and turned the bow north. I sailed her as close to the wind as possible, since my slippage was worst in light air. Although I had my bowsprit pointed at the marina, I was making good a course roughly parallel to the shore.

“Don’t run ashore,” Ted said. “Rocks dead ahead.”

“You’ll see,” I said shortly.

“Damn,” he finally said, “I see what you mean. You ain’t got a keel on this thing?”

“Yeah,” I said, “she’s got a little keel. But she’s a converted lifeboat. She’s got a flat bottom, and in light air she slides sideways like a dinner plate.”

“You really can’t sail to windward,” he said in awe. “I thought you were exaggerating. How the hell do you get around if you can’t sail to windward?”

“Just like Columbus. I wait for the wind to change.”

“Huh. You can’t sail to windward, eh?” There was an odd, calculating note in his voice. Later I would remember that.

“Nope. That’s why I’m going to drop anchor right here. If we keep tacking and lose ground, we might have a hard time getting back.” I let the bow round into the wind, slacked the sheets, and lowered the anchor silently into the water. We were about fifty feet off the nearest piling. The current had a slight northward set to it, so the *Bitch* lay with the marina off her port bow, rocking slightly. The desert wind was cool enough that I went below for a long-sleeved shirt.

I scanned the bay with the binoculars. A couple of native fishing boats were sailing out from the overpass in the middle of the causeway, slipping silently northward. They were low, lateen-rigged boats with long, vee-shaped sails that made tiny white triangles against the dark western shore.

I spread the dinghy on the cabin-top and inflated it, then slid it into the water. I lowered the Big Chief onto the motor bracket and put the half-full tank in the bottom. I gave it a couple of yards of tether and let it drift astern.

At eleven-thirty, I asked Ted, “You ’bout ready?”

“Yeah. Is it time?” He leaned into the cabin and lifted his bag.

“You gonna pay me now?”

“Sure,” he said absently. I heard the bag unzip. I got a queasy feeling.

He took out something out of the bag. I heard the slide of an automatic pistol work. He said, “Red, you’re gonna have to give me that thousand bucks back.”

“You’re nothing but a thief, then.”

“Yeah,” he said, “Hand it over. I don’t have much time. It’s in your shirt pocket.”

“You don’t even own that boat, do you? All that bullshit about *Doublewide*—that’s all it was.”

“Oh, no,” he said steadily, “that’s really the boat’s name. Won’t be her name long, though. Now give me the money.”

I unbuttoned my pocket and handed him the folded bills. His hand fumbled for mine and snatched them away. “Turn around.”

“So you can shoot me in the back?”

“No, stupid, I’m going to tie your hands. You’ll get free soon enough. Then you can do what you want.”

He put a hard hand on my shoulder and turned me. A braided rope went around my wrists, maybe the end of the mainsheet. It jerked

tight. "If I was you," he growled in my ear, "I wouldn't be going to the Venezuelan police. They might not like your part in this."

Nothing occurred to me to say that would do any good. I bit my lip and sat hunched forward on the port seat. I had about six inches of slack in the mainsheet.

Ted pulled the dinghy up and stepped into it, the *Sea Bitch's* stern rising as his weight came off. He pulled the cord once and the steadfast old Big Chief caught with a purr. He put it in gear.

I thought he would turn straight for land, but instead he drove up along the port side to the bow. He must've cut the anchor rode, because a moment later the boat started falling off downwind. That's why he was interested in the *Bitch's* inability to sail to windward.

He turned the dinghy in a wide arc and headed for the shore. The outboard's mutter drifted to me on the wind. I was already struggling with the mainsheet, and didn't look up again.

I started pulling at the rope around my wrist, and got some slack in it. A fiery streak of pain burned through my neck. I tore my hands free and crawled forward. I hauled out the spare anchor, threw it overboard, and securing the rode to the port bow cleat. The anchor bit and the bow swung back toward shore.

Everything was very clear to me at that moment. I felt like I was looking down from above. . . the *Bitch*, the last piling, the dinghy motoring east, the brooding hills above the marina, the long open vee to the north leading to the open sea. . .

The open sea. I had to get to sea.

But not yet. I heard a flicker of my mother's voice, calling plaintively from my adolescence, "Why are you so almighty stubborn, child?" And I remembered in flickers, like scenes from a newsreel, the times my stubbornness had cost me. But there was only one course, and I was set on it. I was going to get my money back.

I had to do it at the mouth of the channel. Under inboard power and in unrestricted water—and me with no engine at all—Ted would disappear in moments and I'd never find him again.

I stood on the foredeck and searched the shadows under the brow of the hill, but the darkness hid the dinghy. I had to suppress my blind fury in order to think. How to get upwind? Could I pole the boat back to the piling?

The lifeboat oar! I could scull upwind! I had only used it a couple of times since leaving New Orleans, but it was still tied to the port side of the house. I tore it loose and shoved it aft over the starboard gunwale. Its varnish was long gone, and the wood was rough in my hands. I found the oar-lock under the starboard cockpit seat, thrust it into the thole, and laid the scull into it.

Sculling came naturally to me. I stood with my feet on the cockpit seats and sculled steadily upwind. Still no alarm from shore. It took only a few minutes to scull up to the last piling, its inverted milk jug a white dot in the black sky, and another five minutes to maneuver the bowsprit close enough so that I could run forward and tie onto the piling. It was a wrist-sized sapling, wet and mossy, with the bark nearly all fallen off, and the weight of the *Bitch* pulled it heavily to leeward when she rounded into the wind.

I dug out the army-drab tarp that I sometimes used as a sunshade and draped it over the house, so the *Bitch's* fresh white sides wouldn't show. Her blue hull was dark and low enough that I didn't think Ted could see it, especially from bow-on.

I put the 25mm. flare gun in the cockpit—the biggest one I had—and loaded it, then loaded two more pistols and put them on the seat. I took out the binoculars and studied the marina. The wind was still slight and steady out of the east, so he was going to be able to sail out.

It'd been twenty minutes since Ted had cast off. Say five minutes for him to reach his boat, five minutes to check it out. . . he should be hoisting sail now.

The sailboats' masts waved in the wind in the glasses, their flags fluttering in the floodlights. I saw what looked like the marina's guardhouse, a small building with large, softly lit windows overlooking the boats. I could see no movement in its windows.

Then I saw a white line rise against the black hill and widen into a triangle. The *Doublewide's* mainsail. It began to move, crossing behind the other masts as it headed for the channel. The jib went up. My heart started bumping. Ted was on the move.

I found my old knit cap—it stank horribly—and pulled it low over my red hair and white ears. I tied a dark bandana under my eyes. Then I crouched behind the cabin with the binoculars steadied on the hatch-cover.

The white prow of the sailboat ghosted into view from behind the other hulls, then its

profile narrowed as Ted turned into the channel and directly toward me. The marina was still dark and quiet. The guard was probably sleeping comfortably.

*Doublewide's* sails blossomed as Ted steadied her before the wind. Her high bow pointed directly at me. The moon was still down, and in the sky above the hills a low overcast was moving in. When the clouds closed together, the night would be as black as my thoughts.

I ran forward to the bowsprit to look back at the *Bitch*. She was well-hidden, though, with the forward deck and cabin covered by the dark tarp. The mast has been white at one time, but time and neglect had darkened it, and it was somewhat hidden from Ted's view by the piling, anyway.

I went back to the cockpit. The sailboat reached the channel. The boat's sails gleamed white, getting larger. I could hear the gurgling of water under her forefoot. I crawled onto the foredeck and took out my third anchor, a fisherman. Its thin tines, perfect for hooking into coral-rocks, would also serve as grapnel-hooks. I tied the anchor's rode to a stern cleat and laid it on deck. The sailboat was still coming straight on. No sign that Ted had seen me.

Then the *Doublewide's* bow loomed over the little *Bitch*. "What the hell!" Ted yelled, and the boat veered to starboard. It's high, white side ghosted past. As the cockpit came up, I stood up and threw the fisherman anchor into it. The tines crashed into the fiberglass sole. I tied the bitter end of the rope to a stern cleat.

Ted's head rose above the coaming, his face a white mask in the dark. The anchor rode jumped up tight and slewed the stern around. I snatched up the 25mm. pistol and fired a flare at the billowing mainsail.

"You crazy mother, I'll blow your ass away," Ted yelled from behind the coaming.

The flare hit the Dacron and stuck to it, burning fiercely. I grabbed another pistol and shot a second flare into the sail, just above the boom, as I ran forward to throw off the bow-line. By the time I got back to the cockpit, the *Doublewide's* mainsail was already burning in two places, sending hundreds of fire droplets showering to the deck. Ted howled in pain. I grabbed the anchor-rode, hauled my stern up to his transom, and jumped across.

Ted was crouching in the cockpit. He had his pistol in his hand, but his hair was on fire and his eyes were screwed shut. I swung my leg over his stern rail and kicked the pistol out of his hand. It flew into the water.

He pulled a strip of burning Dacron off his shoulder with his bare hand, yelping, and threw it overboard. His smoking hair stank.

"Jesus, you burned me," he cried. "You crazy kid."

I trained the flare-gun on him. "Give me my damned money, you son of a bitch. All two thousand. Otherwise I'll burn you up, I swear to God."

He cut a glance toward shore. Still no alarm. "Jesus, you didn't have to set me on fire," he whimpered.

"Give me my money, you damned thief, or I'll kill you."

"I've only got fifteen hundred, I swear."

I cocked the flare gun.

"Plus a few hundred more," He added hurriedly. "It's true, I swear. I left my money in the hotel safe back in Aruba, in case I got caught."

"Give me what you've got, then."

"It's in my bag."

I looked around. We were making way westward with the *Bitch* being dragged through the water stern-first. With his mainsail almost burned away, our speed was only about one knot. "Get your bag," I ordered.

He went down the ladder. I stayed right behind him with the flare gun trained on the back of his head. It was a deep boat. It must have drawn seven feet. The ladder went down eight or nine feet into a luxurious saloon done in oiled wood and brown tweeds. The Playboy bag was sitting on a settee. I reached for it.

He tried to fight me for it, but I clubbed him above the ear with the barrel of the gun, and he staggered against the bulkhead. "Damn you!" he cried, putting a hand to his head. "By God, I'll . . ."

"Shut the hell up," I rasped. "Open your mouth again and I'll put a flare down it."

I ran up the ladder to the cockpit. The mainsail was still on fire, sending scraps of burning Dacron fluttering down around me. I yanked the anchor up with my left hand and swung it across to the *Bitch*, where it crashed onto the lazarette cover. I uncleated my dinghy's painter from the *Doublewide's* transom and carried it across to the *Bitch's* low stern.

Both boats were drifting westward. With the press of the wind on her jib and tattered mainsail, Ted's boat quickly pulled away from the *Bitch*. I kept the flare gun trained on her stern, with the light from shore painting it bright white against the sheer blackness, but Ted's face never showed above the transom.

When we were a hundred feet apart, I cleated-off the dinghy painter, raised my sails, and cut across his track to the north. A few minutes later I heard his engine start. By then, the *Doublewide* was a vague white spot in the darkness. With the tarp still over my house and deck, I figured the *Bitch* was invisible. Well, there has to be something good about a boat with her midships deck only a foot above the water.

I thought he might try to run me down—maybe he had another pistol onboard—but the white spot began to move to the northwest, toward the middle of the bay, and within half-an-hour it had disappeared. By then, the overcast had thickened into a solid cover, so the moon never showed its face, and I never saw *Doublewide* again.